

*we said no more.
we lied.*

BOUND BY SIN SERIES

REVENGE

ANNA ARGENTO

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Chapter One

GIA

MY NEW FAVORITE SONG CAME ON SATELLITE RADIO AS I drove. Cranking the volume, I sang along while debating shoe choices for my engagement party.

Satin heels or white Chuck Taylors? If I wore sneakers under my floor-length ball gown, maybe no one would notice. I'd be way more comfortable, and it would be easier to dance.

I snorted out loud and practically retch at the thought of what's about to happen. *Engagement party, my ass.*

Gah. Was I really going through with this? An arranged marriage to my father's business associate? Was this really my life?

As the day loomed like the bruise-colored sky overhead, the less sure I was of the one thing I've been groomed for my entire twenty-one years. Fucking patriarchal society bullshit.

That was when I hit a patch of wet leaves on Cemetery Road. I zagged left when I should have zigged right and *woosh*.

The silver Mercedes SUV slid off the asphalt. I shrieked, braked, and somehow landed with a hard stop on an angle of the steep embankment. The car, and I, were sideways in the steep ditch.

I slowly turned my head to the right. Crap. Climbing out of the passenger side was impossible; there wasn't much room

and only about two feet from the dirt. Plus, what if the car rolled on top of me? I'd be crushed to death.

With slow, precise moves, I gingerly opened the driver's side latch and pushed the door open. Okay, so far so good. But the hard part was still to come: getting out of the car.

Poking my head out the door, the steady rain hit my face. Everything was wet and slick and muddy, which made me dread what I was about to do even more.

Okay, here goes...

I'd intended to delicately ease out, one cute, black ballet flat, then another, but instead I panicked and hurled myself onto the wet grass, hands and face first, like a particularly uncoordinated swimmer.

I landed with a grunt. Or maybe more of a squeak. Crawling up the embankment in the rain, I made it to level ground and rose to standing. Dirt covered my leather shoes, mud sprayed across the front of my jean skirt and white t-shirt. Ugh, but I was alive.

My palms were pink and pockmarked with dirt, and I brushed them against one another, the rain washing them clean. Then I gathered my long, black hair in my hands and twisted it into a loose, damp bun. Letting out a groan, I turned to stare at my SUV, and it looked even more precarious now that I was out.

Oh, shit.

The cream-colored vinyl dress cover, with the gown inside, fluttered behind the rain-streaked back window. It was an apt metaphor for my future.

Trapped.

Trapped in a life I didn't want, marrying a man I didn't know.

Daddy was going to kill me. Not because I'd probably totaled the car. He wouldn't care about that. No, it's the dress, the symbol of his little princess' virginity.

I had to retrieve it. Otherwise, what was I going to wear? Probably too late to buy another ornate, silver ball gown. I'm supposed to look perfect tomorrow night. This party's taken up all of my time since coming home. Since graduating with a degree in communications from a prestigious, all-girls college in New England last month.

That had been the deal with my father. I could major in whatever I wanted — even that “feminist agenda,” as Daddy called it, and trust me, I was tempted — and then I'd carry on the family tradition. He vowed to find me a progressive husband, one that wouldn't have a problem with me going to graduate school.

But as the day grew closer, I had grave doubts.

Was there such a thing as a liberal Mafia boss?

This was the event of the season for my family, the party where I'd dress in an expensive gown and meet my allegedly enlightened husband-to-be. Daddy hasn't told me who he'd chosen, as it's tradition to find out right before the ball. That's how it's always been in the Amato family, when my ancestors lived in Italy and later in New York at the turn of the century. Mafia ties were forged from blood, loyalty and marriage, and I have a dark legacy to uphold, even here in modern-day Florida.

The biggest night of your life, Gia darling, Daddy said. No pressure there. I didn't need more reasons to be anxious. But now, the car was wrecked and the dress might have gotten wet. I'd convinced my father that I could drive the few miles to the dressmaker, that I didn't need a chauffeur or an assistant. And now this.

I swore out loud and glanced around. The only things on the road were rain and fog. I'd stupidly left my cell, and purse, inside the car. Maybe I should try to grab the dress. And my purse. And the phone. How hard could it be?

The SUV's frame let out a high-pitched creak and slid a few inches in the dirt, toward the ditch, which made me jump back, practically into the road. No, I couldn't retrieve anything inside without risking my life.

I pressed my hand to my chest, feeling the wind pick up and chill my skin. Cemetery Road was one of the most deserted streets in town, and I often used it instead of the busier Highway 7 to get home, mostly because I could speed and listen to loud music.

I heaved a sigh. It was about five miles from my family's estate, and two from the nearest gas station. Better start walking. The loose gravel on the side of the road crunched under my shoes. Fortunately, the rain let up a bit, but the thick fog lingered.

Normally I loved this kind of weather because it was so rare in this part of Florida. It made the rolling hills of the horse ranches look otherworldly and moody instead of cheerful and bright. Until today, I'd enjoyed these uncommon days from the warmth of my family's sprawling estate, with a cup of coffee in hand. I glanced to my right and saw the edge of Hope Cemetery up ahead.

I was well familiar with that graveyard, because it was where Mama was buried. As I was pondering whether to turn into the cemetery to visit the mausoleum — I did that weekly, and in fact had stopped by just yesterday, under a sunny Florida sky — my foot sunk into a puddle and I yelped. The day was getting more craptastic by the second.

None of this would have happened had Mama survived.

Daddy wouldn't have shipped me off to a private all-girls' college, and I'd have stayed in Florida, riding horses with Mama on the show jumping circuit. I'd have gone to the nearby University of Florida and studied there.

Mama and I would have picked out a dress for my party. She'd have whispered the identity of my husband-to-be days ago and given me tips on how to handle an arranged marriage. I wouldn't have crashed in a ditch and wouldn't be marching along a desolate country road, alone, in the fog.

I wouldn't be alone, period.

But this was my life, I guess. *The butterfly effect*. A butterfly could flutter its wings against a blue sky in Tierra del

Fuego and cause a hurricane in Florida. I'd studied chaos theory in school, along with genderqueer theory and fourth wave politics. Admittedly, if Mama had lived, it was possible that worse things would have unfolded in my family's life. But after all the grief and anguish of the past several years, it's hard to imagine how things could have been *more* terrible for my family.

My flats squooshed uncomfortably, and I let another swear slip from my mouth. I dreaded facing Daddy's wrath. When I was home from university, which wasn't often, he rarely let me out of his sight. Today he'd relented because I needed to pick up the dress. Since he was working, and everyone in our household was readying the property for the ball, I'd talked him into allowing me to go alone.

This is small-town Ocala, I'd said. Not New York City. He'd finally kissed my forehead and relented. In turn, I'd been happy to get out of my velvet coffin for a few hours, and until the crash, had a pretty good day, shopping and drinking coffee at the mall.

A low purr of an engine loomed behind me in the distance, and I edged away from the asphalt and into the grass on the shallow channel along the side of the road. All I needed was to get splashed by a car — or run over.

I was at the cemetery gate now. Sadness, combined with the fear I felt over telling Daddy about the crash, widened that ever-present black hole of grief in my chest.

Talking with Mama was what I needed right now. I'd sit by her crypt and cry and—

A car roared next to me. It was sleek and black. A Maserati, I believed. I knew this only because my uncle had one.

The passenger window glided down and through the misty shadows, I could only see the lower half of the person's face. Full lips, sharp jaw, a crisp white shirt collar. A man.

“That your SUV back there? C'mon, get in.” The voice was a growly baritone, with a touch of a New York attitude

and a hint of a foreign accent.

Never had I climbed in a car with a stranger. And yet, I didn't feel like walking a few miles to the nearest phone. Hesitant, I approached. My lips parted when I spied his large, brutal hand, casually caressing the top of the leather steering wheel. There was a flash of a French cuff, and a platinum knot for a cufflink glinted in the wan light.

“Don't worry, I'm not a serial killer.”

“That's what they all say, right?”

He chuckled, and his laugh was the auditory equivalent of smoke and whiskey, honey and danger.

I wasn't deterred. I stuck my head in the window and the skin on my damp arms prickled. He looked older than me by at least five years, maybe ten. A shock of black hair, the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen, and lips that would make an angel sin. He cracked a lopsided grin, and it lit up his face, as if the sun had burst through the clouds. That's when I noticed his nose was a bit crooked. Most likely a fight. Or three. He looked like the kind who'd been in fights. A liberal sprinkling of dark stubble graced his sharp jawline.

I was instantly soothed. Men like this were familiar. I'd seen them around the house my entire life. It came with the territory of being the daughter of one of Florida's top Mafia bosses. Which is probably why I squared my shoulders and returned the smile. I wasn't afraid, because I was Antonio Amato's daughter.

Living in my velvet coffin had its advantages. No one would ever fuck with me. If they did, hellfire would rain down.

By the looks of this guy, all I'd have to do is drop Daddy's name and he'd be a sniveling mess. Hell, he was probably here to meet with Daddy. I'd keep my identity secret, though. No need to cause trouble.

“Sure.” My voice was confident and casual. As if I did this all the time. As if I wasn't a geek who spent more time

studying chaos theory than flirting with guys. I'd just turned twenty-one, and it was time I acted like a woman.

Well, shit. Women — especially women in my family — didn't walk miles in wet shoes.

They let men in Maseratis solve their problems. As a feminist, it killed me, absolutely killed me to do this, but right now, I had a problem. A couple of them, actually. Maybe I could talk this guy into grabbing my dress out of the back of my wrecked car...

He leaned over and popped the lock. "Such a gentleman," I murmured as I gracefully slid in, settling into the black leather seats that felt like butter against my bare legs. I pulled the door shut and a beat later, locks on his car made a smooth yet ominous *tha-thunk* sound.

I didn't know that one decision — getting into a stranger's car on a rainy day — would reverberate through the rest of my life.

Chapter Two

ALESSANDRO

THESE RICH COUNTRY GIRLS. SO NAÏVE. NEVER IN A MILLION years would a sweet young thing from the city climb in a Maserati with a stranger who wore a wolfish grin and David Yurman cufflinks. Oh, they'd want to, those city girls. But they'd know better.

They'd know the potential threat of sitting in a car alone with a guy who looked like me.

This one? She's clueless. Her giant dark eyes are filled with innocence. Sugar and spice and all that shit. It's been years since I've seen a woman like this. Christ. I didn't even know they still existed outside of The Disney Channel.

This one's also lucky, because I didn't have time to fuck around, literally or figuratively. I had a meeting in two hours, one I couldn't miss. It would be bad form to show up late and disheveled after screwing some country girl in a parked car like a high school kid after prom.

No, giving this girl a ride was an altruistic move on my part. No one that beautiful should be alone on a foggy road in the middle of nowhere. I slid a glance to her. "That's your car back there, right?"

"Why? You worried I'm the serial killer?" She grinned, revealing dimples. Aww. Adorable and feisty.

I chuckled. Oh, the irony.

“Yes, it’s my car. And my cell’s inside.”

I plucked mine out of the console. “Here. Use mine.”

I turned my car around and drove a few yards down the road. We came upon her SUV and I parked on the side of the road. She was staring at the phone, her lips pressed together.

“I don’t have a number for a tow truck.” Her voice was soft.

“Forget about it. I’ll find someone. You live here in Ocala?”

She nodded and glanced out the window with wonder etched on her face. The rolling green hills were entirely shrouded in grey. “Look at that fog. It’s almost never this thick here. Amazing.”

I swiped at my smartphone and found the number of a local tow company, all while checking out her long legs. Christ, she was young.

Before I dialed, I turned to her. “Where the fu...hell are we, anyway? I’m not from around here.”

“So I gathered.” She angled her body toward me, her dark eyes drawing me in. “Cemetery Road. Near the Hope graveyard.”

I nodded and dialed. It took a couple of minutes to arrange — I think the rube on the other end didn’t quite grasp my Italian accent at first — but we worked it out.

“They said they’d be here in a few minutes.” I raked my gaze down her body. She was fucking gorgeous, even with dirty shoes and wet hair. The messy hair and smeared mascara on her face made her look like a little broken doll, one who’d been defiled and dragged through the mud. Which made her even sexier, in my opinion. Made me think of what she’d look like after a night of sex.

I studied her while brushing my thumb against my bottom lip. The innocence in her expression slayed me. She was probably the kind of girl who didn’t know her own power. Girls that age often didn’t.

“Well, thanks a bunch. You don’t need to stay and wait with me.” Her voice was bright and I noticed her hand trembling as she reached for the door handle. She was either nervous or turned on, and probably both. I’ve been told I have that effect on women.

I reached for her arm, and when my fingers made contact with her skin, I felt a shock of electricity. She whipped her head around, jerking her arm away.

“Hey,” I spoke softly, like I was talking with an injured animal, “sorry to startle you. I don’t mind waiting. Why don’t you stay inside the car here, where it’s warm and dry? Don’t want you out here alone. There’s a lot of bad guys out there.”

Her eyes widened. “Like you?”

We stared at each other for a beat, and she licked those pouty pink lips of hers. I grinned. “I’m only bad if you want me to be. Promise.”

I held out my hand, like we were in a business meeting.

“Nice to meet you,” she unsuccessfully fought back a smile, slipping her little hand into mine. We shook.

“You live around here?” To my dismay, she pulled out of my grasp. I was already fantasizing about those little hands around my shaft.

“Yeah. I do. Well, I did. I just got back from college.”

Probably there’s some community college around here. I waited for her to give more details. About country clubs, tennis, riding horses, whatever the fuck rich girls in these parts do.

“You?” She asked as if she didn’t care to know the answer. She definitely had a different air about her, and I wondered if she was less innocent than she let on.

“Nah. Just here on business. I live down in Miami.”

Her gaze was straight ahead, at the road. “How do you like life there?”

Scenes from the last few weeks ran through my mind. Whiskey-laced meetings with New York bosses at the Mandarin Oriental. A blowjob from a stripper in the VIP of The Dollhouse. A beatdown on a trial witness at a storage place near the airport. The kind of stuff I'd never in a million years imagined I'd be part of.

I shrugged. "Living the dream. And you? You like it up here in horse country?"

She again turned her guileless gaze on me. "Dreams sometimes turn to nightmares, you know."

A cynical chuckle escaped my mouth. "Don't I know it."

"You ever want to wake up from your dream? Or your nightmare? Or are you like everyone else — sleepwalking?"

Jesus. Were all college girls this dramatic? The ones I've met lately have been on the streets too long to allow themselves such a luxury. Might as well humor this sweet, theatrical princess. If I had to guess, she'd been active in high school theater, then volunteered for her university's Greenpeace chapter. Now that I studied her, she looked to be about twenty, or twenty-one. She had the sexiest turned-up nose, sprinkled with freckles.

Still innocent, although she did carry herself with a whiff of haughtiness. Like all rich girls do.

She grinned shyly then cast her eyes on the center console, where my phone was vibrating. I should respond, but was enjoying this moment too much.

What were the chances I could arrange to meet up with this sweet young thing later tonight?

"How old are you, anyway?" I ignored her inane question.

"Twenty-one." Her voice was almost triumphant.

I gazed openly at her tits. Since her T-shirt was wet and her lacy bra thin, I could practically see the outline of her nipples, which was sending all the blood to my dick. She was six years younger than me. Normally I wasn't into younger chicks. But this one was awakening an appetite I never knew I had.

She'd be a nice diversion tonight. And my boss, Michele "Mickey" Salerno, being the guy he is, well, he'd respect that I'd scored some pussy and would leave me the fuck alone. A bonus.

"I think we haven't known each other that long to answer such a philosophical question. But if you want to know the truth," I leaned in and swept a damp lock of hair out of her eyes, "the answer is, I'm wide awake."

A triumphant smile spread across her face. "I figured as much just by looking at you."

"You did, huh?" I shifted in her direction. I was used to quick hookups, but this? It felt different. Maybe because we were so confined to this car, but the air was thick with sexual tension. "Know something else?"

She shook her head and licked her lips again. If she did that one more time, she'd be licking something else.

"I'd love to wake up next to you. In a dream or a nightmare."

Her grin turned salacious.

"You're fucking gorgeous," I whispered. Then she leaned in and swiftly claimed my mouth. It seemed like an impulsive gesture on her part. A shock of pure surprise took me off guard and for a split second, I didn't kiss her back.

We've got a vixen on our hands here, folks. And I was down for every erotic second of it.

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and roughly drew her close. That's when her mouth started to move, devouring mine.

She tasted like coffee and chocolate, surprisingly dark and dusky for such an innocent-looking little thing. I wondered what other secrets she held under that pretty, stuck-up façade. A shame I wouldn't find out...or maybe I would. I was here in Ocala for a few nights at Mickey's request.

Beautiful. We could hook up after my meeting. Ask her to my hotel room and fuck her all night long. It would be better

than spending hours in the bar with Mickey and the guys. I smiled against her lips, then kissed her savagely. It was a punishing kiss, and she took it all. Wanted more, because she bit my bottom lip in response. Fierce kitten.

As she let out a soft sigh, the rumble of an oncoming truck jolted us apart.

“Oh, there’s the tow truck.” Her hand flew to the door. “Thanks again for stopping.”

I clamped my hand on her fragile forearm. “Can I see you tonight?”

She paused, and I could almost see the machinations going on in her head. How she’d sneak out of her McMansion, away from her overprotective parents. She’d be grounded because of the car. Have to get a friend to drive her to the Hilton in downtown Ocala, since Daddy’s Mercedes was wrecked.

She snatched her arm out of my grip, her dark eyes a glittering obsidian hue. “Absolutely not.”

With her head held high and her spine as straight as royalty, she climbed out of my Maserati and went to the driver’s side of the tow truck. She didn’t look in my direction as she gestured to her SUV. Christ, I’d never even gotten her name.

Well, fuck her. I roared off without a wave goodbye.

Chapter Three

GIA

I SANK INTO THE OVERSTUFFED SOFA CUSHIONS THAT WERE THE color of a kalamata olive. My right hand clutched a mug of coffee and my left held the cell that had been retrieved from the wrecked SUV.

Finally I was clean, dry, and home. Safe, in all but my thoughts. Still, I needed was to tell Daddy everything that happened. Well, everything but that random, incredible kiss with the stranger. Precisely what I shouldn't tell Daddy. He'd send security out to deliver a message to every man in this county with a Maserati.

I had to let it go. Let him go. He might as well have been a mirage.

The sofa faced a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, and the view of my family's hundred-acre ranch was stunning. The vibrant green horse pasture rolled as far as the eye could see, and Lancelot, my Westphalian show jumper, grazed in the fog that still lingered. He looked like a plastic toy from this distance, and I sipped my coffee and watched him for several long minutes. I adored that horse, and was hoping to ride him after this whole party crap died down. Maybe next week...

Soon my mind wandered from the horse to what had happened just a few hours earlier.

That kiss.

Why had I done that? I'd never been so bold with anyone. I'd never felt so electrified by a simple kiss. All the kisses I'd had prior to today were soft and slippery. Warm and, well, *nice*.

There had been nothing *nice* about that kiss.

That interlude with the stranger was in a whole other galaxy of kisses, one that I hadn't known existed. And now I wanted more. Figured. Just when I was about to be married off to God knows who, I'd taken charge of my desires.

I huffed a little laugh, thinking about what my women's studies professors would say about all this. It had taken some cognitive dissonance over the years, studying feminism and being the daughter of a Mafia boss. As rebellious as I'd been in my studies, I was normally reserved and quiet in my personal life. Probably because my family was so storied, so infamous.

Today's kiss marked a turning point, though. Even then, I'd chickened out — a fact that disappointed me deeply and left a ball of shame and longing in my stomach. When the man asked if he could see me tonight, I panicked and practically flew out of his car. I didn't want to think what would've happened had I said yes...

Well, actually, I did want to think about it. Quite a lot. I'd watched enough porn for my sexual health classes to know exactly what I'd be doing tonight if I'd given the man my number. I imagined going to a beautiful house — maybe one of those new ones my dad had told me about, over near where that famous actor has his horse ranch — and the guy would've pulled me inside. He'd have kissed me the moment I stepped through the door. Pressed me against the wall and slid his hand up my skirt—

“My dear.”

Startled, I sat up straighter, almost spilling my coffee on my white sweatshirt and khaki shorts. I hurriedly set the mug and my phone on a nearby end table. “Daddy! I didn't hear you come in.”

My face grew hot as he leaned to kiss my cheek. Was there anything more embarrassing than having a sexual fantasy interrupted by one's father? Ick. That time I read Oedipus Rex in poetry class and applied a feminist lens to the poem danced through my head.

I winced, which made my father look at me with alarm.

“Giada, what in God’s name happened today? I thought you were going to the mall. Are you sure you’re not hurt?” He eased himself next to me with a soft grunt, his knees cracking along the way. My father had been a college football player, and over the years his large frame had gotten bigger, and more solid. All that bulk, and the years of training, had been hard on his joints.

I licked my lips. “I skidded on a path of wet leaves on my way back to the mall. I’m so sorry about the SUV. I’m totally fine.”

“But why were you on Cemetery Road—” He stopped himself and his shoulders sagged. “Oh. Were you visiting your mother?”

I intertwined my fingers and squeezed. “The thought crossed my mind.”

He sighed. “I’m just glad you’re okay. It’s probably for the best that I didn’t find out until you were at the auto body shop with the tow truck. I’d probably have had a heart attack if I’d gotten a call from one of the local boys.”

That’s what Daddy called the rural police force — the “local boys.” The ones that weren’t taking money directly from him were, at the very least, the recipients of a generous fruit basket at Christmas. Daddy had never told me this himself; Mama had.

“I’m totally fine. The dress is okay, too.”

I feel silent, and his big hand covered mine. “The car will be fine. It’ll be ready in a couple of days and you can use one of the others if you need. But I think I’ll let one of the drivers take you if needed. It’s no wonder you got in a crash. You’re nervous, I can tell.”

For so many reasons. One of which I couldn't breathe a word about. *Yes, I'm all aflutter because my world was rocked by a sinfully handsome man who shoved his tongue down my throat. Oh, no, I don't know his name...*

"Of course I'm nervous," I cried. "I'm meeting my future husband tomorrow night. Who wouldn't be nervous? I'm actually a little angry with myself that I agreed to this entire, outdated institution and wish I could get out of it. I just want to go back to New York and be a college student and live my life surrounded by books. Is that asking too much?"

He chuckled, an easy, rich sound. "My dearest. By outdated institution do you mean marriage, or arranged marriage?"

I pulled my hand from under his and folded my arms across my chest. "Both."

He made a *tsk* sound with his tongue. "You'll grow accustomed to marriage. Your mother and I did. We didn't know each other. I was in love with her within, oh, seventy-two hours."

I rolled my eyes because we'd had this conversation a million times. "She said you were in love with her within twenty four hours of meeting her."

"Yes, that's probably true. She was a beauty. And feisty. Like you." He reached out and booped my nose with his index finger.

"Whatever. You and Mom were married like three decades ago. Before cellphones. Before the internet. I'm just not sure I want to go through with this. I wish you'd tell me who I'm marrying. At least let me sit with the knowledge. Google him. A photo. Something. Help me out here. Just whisper his name in my ear."

He looked at me with benevolent reproach. "That's not the way our family operates, and you know it."

"Tradition is the corpse of wisdom," I muttered, quoting a video game I once played.

“Unlike most girls, er, *women*, in your situation, I allowed you to get a degree.”

I arched my brow. “Thank you, *signore*.”

He snickered. Even though he was one of Florida’s top mafia bosses, I could sass him something fierce because I was his only child. Probably the only person on the planet who could, other than Mama.

“I have missed your humor, Giada. While I can’t tell you who you’re marrying, I can assure you that he’s a decent man. I wouldn’t hand you over to just anyone.”

“Great.” Even a tornado couldn’t wipe the smirk from my face. “Thanks.”

“I can let you in on one little secret if you stop being snarky.”

My eyes flitted to Dad, and I studied his face. For the first time, I noticed the lines fanning from the corners of his eyes. He was getting older. I worried about him, going into his sixties alone.

“Do you want to hear it?”

“I guess.” My tone was still petulant, and I was going to scream if he said something about the party decor or my dress.

“I’ve told your husband-to-be that it’s your wish to attend grad school.”

My eyes widened. “Really? And what did he say?”

“He was perfectly fine with it. The clause was inserted into the prenuptial agreement today.”

“So he’s okay with me going to grad school for whatever I want? He’s not going to pull some heavy handed bullshit with me and try to force me to get an MBA or something to help the family business?”

Daddy laughed. “No. You can attend whatever school you’d like, for whatever subject you desire. I informed him that you’ve been accepted to NYU’s fall term. He’s fine with that. He has a place up there where you can stay. He actually

said that timing might work better for him, too, with you attending school for a couple of years before the wedding. He's got some business deals in the works."

He cleared his throat twice, the signal that the conversation was turning down a path he didn't want me going down.

"Interesting." I stared straight out the window, at the fog and rolling green hills. This was a semi- acceptable compromise in what was ending up as a business transaction. I could live with it, I supposed. It bought me some time before reality kicked in. And I guessed I could slowly get to know my fiancé, a concept that was difficult to stomach. "Thank you."

"I'm just trying to do what your mother would've requested. She wanted you to get a good education."

A lump settled in my throat. "Daddy?" I whispered, my eyes welling with tears at the thought of my mother's final days. The disappearance. How he found her in a hotel in Miami, barely breathing after taking all those pills. The hospital, the removal of life support. The funeral, when I was only fourteen.

"Yes, my dear?"

"If you and Mom were so in love," I was sniffing when I turned to look at him. I'd never asked him this question before, never had put it all together until recently. "Why did she turn to pills?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Giada, I don't think we'll ever know."

I leaned into my father, his strong citrusy aftershave settling over me like a comforting blanket. He wrapped his arms around me.

"Why can't life be more certain?" I whispered in between soft sobs.

"I've tried to make it that way for you. Tried to take out all the uncertainty and doubt."

His words should have been soothing. It should have been a comfort that a powerful man laid the groundwork for my life

of privilege. But the same had been afforded to my mother, and she ended up dead, killed right in her very own velvet coffin.

That realization, and the uneasy feeling that lingered after that stranger's kiss, stayed with me all afternoon like the fog that shrouded our property.

Chapter Four

GIA

“CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT IT DIDN’T GET A SINGLE DROP OF water on it?” Carefully, I slid one corner of the ivory silk hanger, then the other, out of the plastic garment bag then pulled the dress from its sheath.

Tulle and lace in sparkling silver exploded around me, and I set the gown on the bed, skimming my hand over pearlescent beads on the bodice and fluffing the skirt. While I loved the ensemble — especially in tandem with my grandmother’s diamond tiara — my anxiety was ratcheting up by the hour.

Within twenty-four hours, I would be engaged to a man I didn’t know.

I’d spent a lifetime anticipating this moment. Spent years debating with my father, long hours anguishing whether I wanted to cut ties with my family and buck tradition by saying no to the whole thing.

And just as I was poised to meet the man of my father’s choosing, I couldn’t escape the memory of a stranger in a sleek black car who stole a kiss under a grey spring sky...

My best friend Ashley took the tulle hem between a perfectly French manicured thumb and forefinger.

“It’s so gorgeous.” She let out a sigh, then flopped on the other side of my king-size bed, far from the dress. “Here’s what I can’t believe: that your dad didn’t kill you for crashing the SUV. What a nightmare. Did you have to stand out in the

rain for a long time, or what? That must've sucked. You could've called me."

A knock on the door prevented me from reminding my slightly ditzy best friend that my phone had been in the car. Crap. I wanted to tell Ashley about what happened with that random guy this afternoon. I hadn't dared to text her and kept the secret inside me for hours, feeling like I was going to explode if I didn't tell someone.

Judith, my father's employee, padded into the room. Employee wasn't exactly the right word — she was actually my father's *consigliere*, his attorney. They'd known each other since they were children, and other than me, was the only person on earth Daddy truly trusted. A couple of years after Mama died, I wondered if she and Daddy would marry because they had such a close bond. I wouldn't have minded, because she was like the tough, funny aunt I'd never had. Daddy could do way worse, and I adored Judith.

But no, Judith was lesbian, so she wouldn't be marrying my father. She had a girlfriend, a kind woman about her age, someone local. I wasn't sure how she explained her job to Susan, but it wasn't any of my business.

Since I was fourteen, she'd been a surrogate mom to me. She'd been the one to help me pack for boarding school and college, had listened to me sob on the phone when I was homesick, and had pulled this engagement party together.

Tonight, her thin face was pinched with worry, and her white track suit seemed to swallow her tiny frame. Odd, since she'd handled years of our family's problems for years without blinking an eye. My engagement ball shouldn't be that big of a deal.

"Let me have the dress, Snacky." That was her nickname for me: Snacky. It had been one of my first words, and she'd thought it so hilarious it stuck. She was the only one who called me by the nickname, and I didn't mind.

She spotted my dress on the bed and gave a little groan. "Giada Maria Amato. This gown needs to be hanging up at all

times so it doesn't wrinkle. I'm going to arrange to have the wrinkles steamed out."

She swooped it up in her graceful, twig-like arm. "And you need to be in bed early tonight. Tomorrow's going to be a long day. Which means you, Ashley, need to get on home."

"I know Ma, I'm going," Ashley joked, sitting up and tossing a small throw pillow in her direction. Judith wasn't her mother, but since we'd been friends our entire lives, she'd come to view the older lady as a friend and second mother, as I had.

Judith pursed her lips, fighting a smile. "I'm serious. Everything needs to be on point tomorrow. Every one of your father's associates will be here. This is a big deal, kiddos. I'll come up later with some chamomile tea and a sleeping pill. It will help you relax."

Between the anticipation of meeting my future husband and the encounter I'd had with the stranger today, it was unlikely that a pill and tea would be enough. My mind spun with excitement. I rolled my eyes but kissed her cheek. Deep down, I liked being fussed over. It was what Mama would have done, and Judith knew it. "Thanks."

She and the dress swept out of the room in a cloud of frothy fabric, shutting the door behind her.

"It's nine-thirty. Your last night as a truly single woman," Ashley scooped her mane of red hair into a messy topknot. "Maybe I should call Liam and we can sneak out with him and his crew."

I flung myself on the bed with a grunt. My oldest and dearest friend was hell-bent on going against the tradition of our Italian families, and since she was fourteen, dated the WASP-iest non-Italian guys she could find. Unlike me, she hadn't gone to boarding school or away for college. Her father was far stricter than mine, and had chosen a local day school and community college, which is why she knew so many people. I knew no one here, save for a few people from elementary school and the odd guy Ashley had introduced me to during school breaks.

“Oh, God, that’s the last thing I want. I’m actually exhausted.” I glanced around my room, decorated in shades of white and pale pink, with expensive, framed art from original Disney animators lining the walls. It was the room of a girl, not a woman. Frozen in time from when I was younger. I’d barely slept here these past eight years. And yet, I was going to miss it when I left later this summer.

Ashley leaned back, resting her head on one of my throw pillows that said I LIKE MAYBE THREE PEOPLE AND COFFEE. “Liam’s friend has a huge crush on you. You know. Sam. You met him when we were at Starbucks last week.”

“Sam.” A vague memory of a skinny boy with floppy hair came to mind. I grinned, thinking about the man I’d randomly kissed today. Sam was like warmed over oatmeal compared to the guy in the Maserati. And if Sam was anything like Liam — always drunk, obnoxious, and slightly too controlling of Ashley — I wanted nothing to do with him. “Whatever. Something incredible happened today.”

“Something other than crashing your SUV in a rainstorm?” She inspected her thumbnail.

“A hot guy in an expensive car picked me up while I was walking into town and we made out.” I laughed aloud because it sounded so absurd.

“What?” Ashley shrieked, sitting up. Shock twisted her face. “Come the fuck on. You’re not serious.”

“I am. Serious as a heart attack. He had stubble on his jaw. I think I got beard burn.” I touched my fingers to my chin. The spot felt raw and I wondered if I should do a sheet mask to soothe the area. Or perhaps the rawness was from within.

“No. Shut up. You’re not the type. I don’t believe you. You’re little miss feminist. And still a virgin, last time I checked. Well, I didn’t check, but you know what I mean.”

I pelted her with a small blue pillow.

“Feminism has nothing to do with this. An opportunity presented itself, and I took it. Simple as that.” My entire body warmed as I told her about the kiss in the calmest of voices.

As I spoke, it sounded like something that would happen to someone else. Someone more daring. Someone whose future wasn't preordained.

"You are still a virgin, right?"

My shoulders lifted. "Maybe. Maybe not."

Ashley's squeal could probably be heard three states away. The bed quaked, and I opened my eyes to see her bouncing on her knees. "Did you do it with him right there in the car? You whore. Tell me everything."

"There's nothing to tell. I'm still a virgin. It was just a kiss. Anyway, I tried to find a decent guy at college, but since I was at a school with only women, the opportunity wasn't readily available..."

"You could have hooked up with a girl. Maybe you're gay. Nothing wrong with that."

We locked eyes and I thought of all my halfhearted hookups during the past couple of years in college. I'd never wanted to actually have sex with anyone I'd kissed. Well, until today. "Tried that. Kissed a couple of girls in my dorm. Didn't feel anything. Same with the guys I made out with. Everything was just, I dunno. A letdown."

"Sex is not supposed to be a letdown." She acted like she was an expert in sexual psychology. Compared to me, I guess she was.

I flopped back down, grinning. "Obviously. I discovered that today."

"Discovered what?" Ashley was looking at me as if I'd sprouted a third arm.

"That kissing is not a letdown. That it's pretty awesome, in fact." I sighed dreamily. "I guess I should have taken him up on his offer to hang out tonight."

"Whaaat?" she screeched. "Look at you. Your cheeks are actually flushing pink. I can't believe this. You let Mister Beard Burn kiss you? I'd have slapped him. Pig. At least Liam asks me what I want. Consent is a thing, you know."

“No, you wouldn’t have slapped him. Not if you’d seen how gorgeous he was. He also smelled good. Like spice and limes.” I allowed my eyes to flutter shut, recalling how he’d bitten my bottom lip then let out a masculine growl. “And, anyway. I gave consent. I didn’t *let* him do anything. I was in control. Did you not hear me? I kissed him *first*. I think he was actually pretty shocked.”

“Why did you do such a stupid fucking thing? Do you know how dangerous that could have been? You could’ve been raped, or killed. He could have been one of your father’s enemies. Jesus, Gia. Did you tell him who you are?” Her voice quivered with fear. “You know you can’t do that shit after tomorrow. You shouldn’t have been doing that shit today, or ever. You should’ve gotten this all out of your system when you were in school up north. Wasn’t that why you went?”

“Well, I thought I went up north to get a good education,” I said sharply. There was that searing, anxious feeling in my stomach again. “I guess I wanted to do something crazy before everything happened. Just for myself. You know?”

“Gia, I’ve been doing crazy shit for years.”

“And you’ve only got a few months until your dad matches you with your husband. You’d better get it out of your system.” I held up my fingers and made air quotes.

She heaved a sigh. “Fuck. I hate that we were born into this.”

I did too, and it had been a constant topic of discussion between us in recent weeks, ever since I’d returned home. One that was well-trod and pointless to even rehash. “Here’s the thing,” I whispered. “I wanted him to kiss me. In my mind, I was begging him to kiss me, sending him subliminal signals. It was the strangest thing, the pull I had toward him. Magnetic. So I decided to make the first move.”

She gaped, open-mouthed. I don’t think I’d ever seen her speechless, and I laughed.

“Ash, I didn’t tell him my name. He didn’t tell me his. I just made out with him and climbed out of his car. It was over

in like two minutes. I'm sure he's already forgotten about it."

Two minutes that somehow had rocked my world off its axis.

"He kissed you without knowing your name? What kind of man does that? Was he raised by wolves?"

"Do you need to yell? Shush. My dad can probably hear you in the other wing of the house."

"What if he got your license plate and tracks you down?"

"Doubtful. He wanted to hang out tonight but I said no. He peeled away and his tires made that screeching noise as he left. I was really firm about it. It was a kiss, and nothing more. A couple minutes of stupid fun before the real shit goes down."

As Ashley sputtered her disapproval, I couldn't stop grinning. Today was anything but stupid. It seemed monumental. The memory of that magical kiss would last a lifetime. It was like a dream, pure and rarer than a unicorn, and just as ethereal and fleeting.

Chapter Five

ALESSANDRO

FUCKING GARBAGE.

The whole evening had been garbage. *About* garbage, that is. Yeah, I know it's a cliché, the Mafia and trash hauling. But for all the drug dealing, numbers rackets, and murders, the Mafia's always, always, been about garbage. It's the core of our business. Big money. Bigger than you'd think.

Collecting it. Hauling it. Burning it. This business ain't all fun and games, kids. Money's gotta be made somehow, and it's not at all glamorous.

Tonight, in the suite at the Hilton Hotel in Ocala, was no exception. For one thing, the boss was already in a pissy mood. He hated the place, but this was the best hotel we could find up here in bumfuckville. He was used to the Mandarin Oriental and the Setai in Miami, and here we were, alongside traveling salesmen and families on their way to theme parks.

With a bit of flirting and a hundred dollars in cash, I'd talked the cute desk clerk into rearranging the reservations so we could take the hotel's only two suites. But even then, Mickey was grumpy. He liked certain pillows, specific minibar offerings of particular top-shelf spirits, a goddamned chocolate on his pillow. He was fussy like that. And this place didn't have anything he enjoyed. He even complained about the style of the lamps, for fuck's sake. I'd gone to the liquor store and picked up three bottles of Macallan and he calmed down.

I didn't give a fuck about the hotel because we were only here two nights — one for business, one for the party — and then we'd be back to the luxury of Miami. I'd be comfortable in my car, for Chrissakes. I'd slept in far worse than the Ocala Hilton.

I shifted on the overstuffed gold loveseat and listened to Joey Palermo, a flabby underboss in an ill-fitting suit from an Atlanta family, drone on about a deal involving trash hauling. Several crime families had put aside their differences to run a property-rights scheme. We'd divvied up customers and companies under our control, branched out into recycling (like I said, exciting stuff), and strong-arm smaller haulers into being shell corporations for us. The Salerno Family — of which Mickey was the head and I was the underboss — controlled all the garbage collection in the southeast. Tonnage equaled money and totals were padded with ease.

Things had been going smoothly until some small-time fucks in Atlanta got involved. Joey Palermo was supposed to be in charge of those guys, but I suspected he was trying to screw us over. His knee jiggled as he earnestly explained how he tried to set the financial terms, upon which the previous 'owner' of the company could be bought out. It was bullshit, and Mickey knew it. Still, we had to sit through Joey's assessment of the matter, made all the more weird because his accent had a touch of Georgia twang.

That was the thing about that Atlanta crew. They were Italian-Americans, but had been in the south so long that they somehow sounded like good old boys instead of New York-New Jersey goodfellas. Like a Goodfellas-Deliverance mashup. Christ.

"We've all been busier'n a one-legged cowboy in a butt-kickin' contest," Joey said, and I stifled a smile. What a fucking lunatic. Mickey, who had lived his entire life in Miami, didn't register emotion on his face.

Being the number-cruncher he was, Mickey was willing to hear him out on every painful detail. I wasn't used to this kind of thing, to be honest. I was born in Italy and moved to New York when I was a kid, and had come up in New York under a

different family, one that controlled the city's diamond district. Three years ago, I'd been sent to Miami, and then the head of my family had, shall we say, suffered an untimely death. I thought I was toast.

I found myself at the mercy of the powerful Salerno family in Florida. Fortunately, my reputation as a hitman preceded me, and Mickey trusted my levelheadedness. Once he became capo, he named me as his right-hand man. I owed my luck to Mickey.

Finally Joey Palermo stopped talking. I drained my Scotch and locked eyes with Mickey.

He raised an eyebrow. I raised an eyebrow. The show was over. After three hours of discussing garbage, Mickey was done.

"I'll take all this under advisement," Mickey said quietly. Had to hand it to him, he wasn't hotheaded like the previous boss of the Salerno family. Mickey was as cold and calculating as any hitman I'd known, with the added ruthlessness of a hedge fund manager who was about to layoff tens of thousands of people in a corporate merger.

Joey Palermo stood and hitched up his pants. "Thanks all y'all meeting with me while you're in the area. I didn't mind the drive in the least."

He's going to try to wrangle an invitation for tomorrow night...

Mickey extended his hand. "You're welcome. Have a safe drive back to Atlanta."

"And congratulations on your upcoming engagement," Joey said eagerly, pumping his hand. "I'm sure you'll have a great time at tomorrow's party. Amato's ranch is something else, I've heard."

There it is. Trying to worm his way into the inner circle. Mickey dropped his hand and nodded. I could tell his patience had evaporated and this was my cue.

"Good seeing you again, Joey," I said roughly, clapping him on the shoulder. I left my hand there and nudged him

towards the door.

“Make sure the boss knows I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make this deal work,” he said in a low voice.

“Then tell those cocksuckers in Atlanta to stay in line and don’t tell us how to do our jobs. We know what the fuck we’re doing. And don’t let the Russians take an inch.” I glared at him.

He swallowed and nodded. “Gotcha.”

I watched him waddle down the hall, then shut the door.

Mickey was on his feet, stretching. “Goddamn,” he muttered. “That guy can talk.”

I refreshed his glass with a splash of Scotch, and did the same for me. While he paced, I sank into the chair and took a long sip while checking my watch. I was fucking exhausted. Last night in Miami I’d moderated some bullshit spat between bouncers at our club and some Russian oligarchs until about four, gotten three hours sleep, then driven seven hours north to get here. My all-too-brief interlude with that hot little tease on the side of the road left me edgy and horny as fuck.

All I wanted was to jerk off in the shower at the memory of her lips and legs and fall into bed.

“Think I’m gonna call it a night,” I said.

Mickey grinned, pressing his phone to his ear. “Naw. Party’s just getting started.” He paused, then spoke into the cell. “Yeah. Room 1010.”

Oh, Christ.

“Dude, we’ll have the official bachelor party before the wedding,” I groaned.

“Yeah, but why not have a warmup tonight?” He stripped off his tie and tossed it on an end table.

When the knock on the door came, he gestured with his head. With a smirk, I rose and checked the peephole. Two women were on the other side. I fucking hated when Mickey did shit like this. First off, it was dangerous, and someday, his

recklessness with women was going to get us in trouble. Second, I'd have preferred to vet any whores. But now wasn't the time for a lecture.

I swung the door open, and a painfully young, skinny blonde in a tight black dress grinned at me. She was obviously here for Mickey — he liked those girls without curves. *I'm a dog and I love bones*, he always joked.

She slipped past me. "Mickey, baby, I can't believe it's been so long," she cooed, opening her arms.

So they knew each other. Wasn't surprising, given his track record with women. I wasn't sure how it was going to work with him being married to Amato's daughter because he never met a pussy he didn't want to fuck.

I'd never laid eyes on Mickey's soon-to-be wife. Few people had, because Amato had shipped her off to a private college like all good Mafia princesses. She'd better be the forgiving kind, that's all I knew.

The other woman in the room, the one meant for me, wasn't bad. She had to be a little older than me, around thirty. She unfurled a glittering smile. Pretty, yet appropriately predatory, probably because she knew she and her girlfriend were making bank tonight. She was short, dark-haired and curvy. A little on the fat side, but that didn't bother me. I was a dog, and I liked meat.

"I'm Joanie," she said, holding out her hand.

"A pleasure. I'm Alessandro." I smiled at her, and my eyes raked over her stretchy pink dress and bare legs. She looked a little like the girl in the car today, if I didn't focus too hard.

"Love that name. Love that accent. You from Italy?"

"Originally."

She stood on her tiptoes — even in heels she had to, in order to reach my cheek — and pressed her lips to my jaw. I inched toward her so I could feel the warmth of her big tits on my body. She took that as a cue to rub lasciviously against me, and I put my hand on the small of her back, just above her

ample ass. It didn't stay there for long, though, because I wanted to feel her flesh in my hands.

I inhaled and caught a noseful of her strawberry-scented hair. When I shut my eyes, I imagined gripping the girl from the car instead. My dick twitched to life. Too bad that haughty small-town bitch left me high and dry this afternoon. I'd rather be with her tonight, but you know what they say. Love the one you're with, and all that shit.

My hand drifted lower, under her dress. No panties. Like a heat-seeking missile, my fingers found her pussy. Shaved. Wet. Not bad.

"You smell good, Alessandro," Joanie said in a breathy voice. "You ready to have some fun tonight? I'm gonna make you feel so good."

Yeah, she'd do.

By now, Mickey and his whore had gone into the bedroom area and shut the door, leaving me and Joanie in the living room of the suite. I settled back, spreading my legs, while she sank to her knees and undid my belt and zipper.

It didn't take long to cum. I was already worked up from that girl this afternoon, and I coated the inside of Joanie's mouth. When I was finished, she wiped her mouth and grinned at me.

"Want a drink?" she purred.

I reached for her face and brushed her cheek with my thumb, a tender motion. "No. I'm good. I'm sorry to cut the night short, but I'm fuckin' beat."

She looked disappointed, at least until I took out a wad of cash and handed it to her. "You have a good night, honey," I said. "Feel free to use the minibar. And there's also a good bottle of scotch over there on the counter."

I stood up, zipping my pants along the way. We kissed each other's cheeks and I left, making my way to the other suite. I was bone fucking tired, and walked the few steps to the door of my room.

I flicked on the light. After I double-locked the door, I noticed an envelope on the floor near my feet. I reached to scoop it up, and pulled it open. Probably one of those “how is your stay” letters. Or the bill.

I unfolded the paper and a business card fell out. Maybe it was the cute desk clerk’s number? I was in no mood for that shit. All I wanted was a shower and a few hours of sleep.

Groaning, I picked up the business card. When I turned it over, my exhaustion fell away.

US Department of Justice

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Gabriel Williams

Special Agent

Slowly, I turned the card over. *Call me*, it said in handwritten black ink on the back. I studied the phone number. Like Mickey, I was good with figures. Had a photographic memory for them, in fact, so it only took me a couple of seconds to memorize the digits. It was old habit, remembering phone numbers. That way you never needed to save a contact in your phone — it was all in the head.

I slumped against the door. Oh, Christ. This again? They’d tried to get me as an informant a few months ago, and I told them to go fuck themselves. Should I interrupt Mickey’s fun with the whore to tell him? Or wait until morning?

We’d heard the feds were prowling around some of the garbage schemes. But to reach out to me as a potential informant now? Here, in a shitty hotel the night before Mickey’s engagement party?

And to do it with a card casually slipped under my hotel room door? Fuck them. We’d deal with it tomorrow. The feds knew the game and so did we — tonight’s meeting with Joey Palermo had been legitimate business. And I wasn’t about to turn on Mickey, not when he’d saved my ass.

I crushed the card in my hand and tossed it in the garbage.

Chapter Six

GIA

DADDY HAD SPARED NO EXPENSE FOR THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY. He'd flown an event planner from New York to Florida, and rented a luxury party tent, the kind that fashion designers use for shows during Miami Swim Week. It sat like a behemoth on our south lawn, a sleek, white structure against the vibrant green grass and adjacent to the Olympic-size swimming pool, awaiting the fifteen hundred guests.

I hadn't been allowed inside the tent to see the decorations. As much as I yearned to — I'd chosen gold and white as the party's colors, with an accent of gold-tinged butterfly images — I was more anxious about the bigger reveal.

My husband.

I sat at my white, wood vanity, staring into the mirror, pressing my lips together, then relaxing them. Press, relax. Press, relax. They were a shade of scarlet I normally didn't wear, but the makeup artist who spent two hours on my face said this hue was, in her words, "beyond extra."

I'd have probably agreed, had I not been so anxious. Who had Daddy chosen for me? For weeks, I'd racked my brain, trying to remember all of his business associates. It was a difficult task, since I'd been away for most of the last eight years, first at an all-girls' boarding school, then at a women's college. Even when I returned during holidays and summers, I goofed off with Ashley or rode horses. Paying attention to my father's friends wasn't a priority.

Turns out, it should have been. Last night I'd been haunted in my nightmares by the few possibilities I could conjure in my mind. I awoke angry at my fate, and had simmered all day. As a girl, I thought this day would be exciting, would be the moment I became a woman.

As a younger teenager, I took it for granted and didn't think much about it, because time is elastic when you're young and everything seems like the distant future.

Now that it was here? After studying feminist theory and the patriarchy? I wanted to smash everything in sight. I felt like grabbing one of my father's golf clubs downstairs and methodically smashing every window in our estate. Now that the moment was upon me, I realized exactly how much was about to be taken from my life.

My freedom.

I'd chosen women's studies as a fuck you to my family, almost as a lark. And now, I was a walking, talking, living, breathing dichotomy.

Fuck my life.

The sparkly beading on the bodice of the gown pressed heavy on my chest. My breathing came in shallow, sharp inhales, as if I was being crushed to death by the weight of a billion Swarovski crystals and my family's legacy.

No. Focus. Focus on the good. I'd always be cared for. I'd live a life of privilege. I'd be going to grad school. Later, I'd be able to work with charities that were important to me — things like battered women's shelters and literacy programs for girls. Daddy had promised to write all that into the contract.

Still, a tiny piece of my heart splintered. What about love? What about desire? What about marrying a man different than my father, one who wasn't, essentially, a criminal?

Were there any such men left?

My lips twitched. Press, relax. Press, relax. I fiddled with a strand of hair that had already come loose from my updo. Thank God I hadn't been forced to marry right at eighteen; my father wasn't like other Mafia bosses. He believed women

should have an education, thanks to my mother's strong opinions. Any husband-to-be would have to agree that the wedding wouldn't take place at least until I was finished with my master's degree, which could be four years from now, if I played my cards right.

Daddy had found someone to agree to my demands, so the guy couldn't be all bad, could he?

Restlessness invaded every pore. I felt as though I wanted to claw my way out of my skin.

I partially blamed the guy from yesterday, too. The stranger in the car. I blamed his piercing blue eyes and his spicy cologne. The way his hand possessively claimed my neck. The way his lips —

The door to my room swung open. Judith fluttered in, wearing a tasteful scarlet silk organza dress and matching shoes. I blinked, startled. I'd been fantasizing about a total stranger on the day, no, the hour, that I'd discover the identity of my husband. This needed to stop, today.

"Hey," I said, mustering a smile.

"Dear, it's time." She stood near me and held out her hand. "You look so beautiful. Your dress, your hair, your makeup. Everything's perfect. As I knew it would be."

I rose to my feet. My legs were rubbery and felt like they might not hold me up. "Thanks," I whispered.

She wrapped her thin arms around my shoulders. "Your mother would have been so proud of you."

That was all it took for the tears to well in my eyes. Today, I missed her more than ever. Since her union with my father had been arranged, she'd have surely put this all in perspective. She'd have been able to talk my fears away.

I nodded into Judith's neck.

"Oh, Gia. Don't ruin that beautiful makeup. Here." She extracted herself from my arms and plucked a tissue off the vanity. "Don't move."

She carefully dabbed at my eyes. “There. Perfect once again. Come.”

My feet were frozen to the plush carpet. I’d decided to wear the heels after all, and from the pinch in my toes, I was already regretting the choice.

Judith glanced at me. “I know you’re nervous, but you don’t want to be late for your first meeting.”

“Is he here?”

She nodded, and the shadow of sadness in her eyes made me all the more anxious. “In the study, with one of his men. And your father, of course.”

All the liquid in my mouth evaporated. I nodded. It was time. I followed her out of my room, through the hall, and carefully hoisted my skirts as I picked my way down the ornate marble staircase. We crossed the foyer and went to the other wing of the house, the one my father used for his business.

We passed one of the estate’s two kitchens, where at least a dozen workers buzzed like bees.

We swept past a living room, which was empty. The windows were open, and I could see the golden light of the fading Florida sun. It had been stormy and overcast all day to match my mood, and now, slivers of light broke through the late-day clouds.

“It’s stopped raining.” My voice sounded far away, disembodied.

“Fortune is shining on you,” Judith responded. “It’s a perfect sign that this is meant to be, Snacky.”

The walk to Daddy’s study seemed as though it went on for miles, and with each step, my chest drew tighter. *I don’t think I can go through with this...*

At the end of the hall was a closed, heavy wood door. It was actually bulletproof, a panel of steel between the elegant carved mahogany facade. All of our doors were like this, firewalls upon firewalls.

An enormous man in a suit stood outside the door, a Bluetooth clipped to his ear. I recognized him as one of my father's bodyguards. He nodded at us, and I tried to smile.

He pressed a finger to the device attached to his ear.

"Your daughter's here, sir."

Such benign words. Ones that would condemn my fate for the rest of my life. Who awaited me behind the door?

After five seconds, I was almost gasping. After ten, I was sweating. By the time the door swung open, I was almost hyperventilating.

"Pumpkin," my father said, opening his arms and stepping into the hall. Judith slipped past him and into the room, probably so we could have one final private moment. She kept the door open a crack. The bodyguard stationed himself a respectful distance from us.

I stepped into Daddy's arms, scrunching my eyes shut. My head rested on his shoulder. I inhaled and was soothed by his cologne. It reminded me of childhood, of the days before we came to this house, when he'd leave in the morning, smelling fresh and spicy and come home in the small hours of the night, smelling of rust and dirt and dark things that I knew nothing about.

Tonight he wore a tuxedo, which made him look so handsome with his silver hair. If only Mama was here to see this, she might fall in love with him again.

"My little girl," he said. There was genuine feeling in his voice. I'd last heard that tone, tinged with both love and regret, when my mother was laid to rest in a fresh grave.

"Your mother..."

I interrupted him, unable to bear the emotion coming off him in waves. "I know, Daddy. I know."

"Brave girl. I love you. You know I haven't always been the best father..."

"Stop. You have. I love you too."

We stared at each other, absorbing all of the grief and hurt, and yes, love. Both my parents had been deeply flawed, especially to each other. But my love for them was pure.

“I think I’ve chosen the best man for you, my love. You’ll see. You’ll be happy.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice evaporating into the air.

He took my hand and threaded his fingers through mine. We stepped through the door and into his study, which was lined with mahogany bookcases and heavy hardback volumes. Our feet hit the scarlet-and-gold Oriental rug and I had to focus on putting one foot in front of the other. I was incapable of anything else.

We passed the wet bar, and I saw a bottle of champagne in a silver ice bucket, flanked by five crystal glasses.

At the far end of the room — and it was a long, narrow L-shaped space, with bulletproof floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall — was Daddy’s desk. Four chairs were arranged around the desk, and two were empty.

The other two were occupied by men in black. One seemed far larger than the other, and I quickly studied backs of their heads. Both had ink-black hair, not surprising because they were Italian, just like us.

They rose in tandem, and turned.

My gaze landed on the taller man. The one with powerful, broad shoulders. The one with piercing blue eyes. I stifled a gasp.

It was the man from yesterday. The one who had captured my imagination with a kiss. My lips parted. What was he doing here? Was he my husband-to-be? What was going on?

“Gia, precious, I’d like you to meet your husband,” Daddy said in a reverent, serious tone. “This is Michelangelo Salerno. You can call him Mickey.”

Daddy led me to the shorter man and squeezed his shoulder. “Signore, this is my daughter. My heart. I am

honored to join our families by giving you her hand in marriage.”

No. This isn't happening.

I looked to my fiancé, whose nose resembled a long, lumpy potato. He grinned wide. Then I glanced to the other man. The one I knew. His gorgeous face, now shaved clean, was a granite mask, filled with sharp lines. He showed no emotion, no flicker of recognition in those icy blue eyes. Had I dreamt that kiss? Had I dreamt those sensual moments in his car?

Mickey leaned forward, pressing cool, slimy lips to my cheek. He whispered something against my skin, but the blood whooshing in my ears drowned out his voice.

I can't do this. I won't.

“You’re shaking, love,” Mickey said, trailing his fingers down my bare arm. Goosebumps flared across my skin, but not in a delicious, want-more-of-that touch kind of way.

He pressed his hand on the curve of my waist and stared at me, still with the creepy grin dancing on his lips. I could feel the burn of the other man’s stare as my legs quaked under the long gown.

“That’s my second in command.” He pointed to Mickey. “His name’s Alessandro.”

This was my husband-to-be’s underboss?

“We’re acq—” I started to murmur without thinking, my brain short-circuiting.

“Champagne, anyone?” barked Alessandro, shutting me up with a harsh glare. His dusky, spice-laced cologne hit my nostrils. A visceral memory of his tongue in my mouth, his full lips devouring mine, raced through my brain.

My immediate reaction should have been shame, or fear. Instead it was pure lust. I wanted to kiss him again. Had to. Every cell in my body yearned for his mouth. The need for him was sinful, dangerous and downright wrong.

To think of that when I should be plotting my escape. How stupid was I?

Mortified by my own thoughts, my gaze went to the floor, and the rug's pattern undulated. My stomach did somersaults, and I probably would have vomited had I eaten anything today.

That's when my knees buckled and I crumpled to the floor.

Chapter Seven

ALESSANDRO

WHAT THE FUCK?

She was Mickey's fiancée?

Was this a set-up? My mind spun with a thousand questions as I paced Antonio Amato's office, drink in hand. Was it a loyalty test? Did it have something to do with the FBI agent slipping his card under my door? What the fuck did it all mean? I didn't believe in coincidences or fate.

There wasn't enough Scotch to get me through tonight.

Amato had called for a doctor friend of his that had been outside at the party, and the guy had rushed into the room to attend to the little princess, who had crumpled to the floor like a rag.

Just anxiety over the big night, the doc said.

Bullshit.

Her father was in the corner, chatting amiably with the doc. This was the first time I'd met Amato — I hadn't been in Florida long enough to know all the players personally — and he seemed to kowtow to Mickey way too much for someone who was supposed to be an equal. Also, who the fuck would choose Mickey for his daughter's husband?

Maybe that was jealousy talking, but I sure as shit wouldn't choose Mickey for my daughter, if I had one.

This was a weird fucking scene, made all the stranger by the fact that I was filled with seething rage for the hothouse flower over there on the leather sofa.

Gia reclined on a black leather couch at the far end of the room. Her skin was milk-white, her lips scarlet red. Gorgeous as fuck, but now I knew that she was as dangerous as a viper. If Mickey knew I'd kissed his girl, he'd kill me on the spot.

I glanced in her direction, recalling how she'd softly sighed against my mouth when I devoured her mouth in my car. She couldn't take her eyes off me. Now? She was unable to meet my gaze.

Amato's lawyer, Judith, knelt on the floor, dabbing Gia's forehead with a washcloth. "Are you better? How about some water?" the older woman asked.

"Yes, please. It's just nerves," Gia whispered, easing to a sitting position.

I sipped my Scotch. Nerves, my ass. All of my senses were heightened. This was a bad scene, and I should've stayed back in Miami. But I'd had no choice, as Mickey's right hand man.

He hustled over with a glass of water and slid next to her. "Here you go, my sweetheart," he said, simultaneously handing her the water and sliding his arm around her. I hated how he was calling her pet names already, probably because I heard him call that whore last night the same thing, right before he explained, in great detail, how he wanted her to do things to a part of his body that should remain private.

Gia sipped from the glass and he pressed a kiss to her temple. I raked in a long breath.

Mine.

The word flashed in my brain like a neon sign. What the fuck? This wasn't the time to lust after a woman I couldn't have.

She wasn't mine, and never would be. What the fuck was I saying? I didn't want to touch her with a ten-foot pole.

Of course Mickey was feeling her skin. Kissing her. She was his soon-to-be wife. And an untrustworthy little bitch, too. They were probably in cahoots, trying to trap me for reasons I hadn't yet figured out. I didn't come up through Mickey's crew, and yet, he'd invited me into the fold. I was younger than him by more than a decade, and more than once, his men questioned why I'd vaulted into a coveted spot in the family.

Maybe I could fake some crisis and head back to Miami early...

Gia wasn't mine. Never was, never will be. I didn't know what pissed me off more — that I'd never get to fuck her, or that she'd put my life in jeopardy. What if I'd told Mickey what happened? Thank fuck I didn't ever kiss and tell, and that I kept my mouth shut.

I hadn't ruled out the possibility that Mickey had somehow planted her there to test my loyalty. I was new to his crew, after all. And from what I'd heard about him over the years, he liked to fuck with his men.

"Baby," he cooed, and I almost retched, "Maybe a little champagne would help you feel better? Don't you want to celebrate?"

He swept a lock of her hair out of her face, and it was all I could do not to slam my fist in his face. I'd done the same thing to her in the car, and she sure as shit didn't look vacant and terrified then. Like she did right now. No, she'd wanted me to touch her.

I turned away, unable to watch. Setting my glass on the wet bar, I clenched my fists. My chest was filled with rage, kind of like when someone screwed me out of money. Which didn't happen often. Fuck. Why did I have such a visceral reaction to seeing him touch her? My chest felt like it was between a vise grip.

"Alessandro, let's pop the Dom," Mickey called out.

Who the hell gives a woman who just fainted a glass of champagne?

I unclenched my molars. "Sure thing, boss."

Amato joined me as I took the champagne out of the bucket and carefully wiped the condensation off with a bar cloth. I tore off the foil cap with a savage flick of my fingers. The last thing I wanted was to toast this relationship. They were fucking doomed to hell.

I grabbed two glasses in one hand and the bottle in the other. Amato picked up the other three glasses. We walked to the sofa. Judith stood nearby, wringing her hands. Jesus, Mickey was laying it on thick, pulling Gia's little body into his beefy chest. I nearly gagged.

I'll bet he couldn't wait to fuck her. To deflower her.

If she was even a virgin, which was seriously in question after she'd kissed me like she was auditioning for PornHub.

Still, she sure wasn't responding to him the way she did with me. Tonight, Gia's skin still looked pallid, like she might vomit at any second. Those moments in the car, she'd had a rosy flush to her cheeks and a brightness in her eyes.

"Champagne will fix you up," Mickey said, grinning like a fool.

What kind of fucking man would give a woman who looked like that a glass of champagne?

Wordlessly, I handed Gia and Mickey the glasses. Amato, Judith and I stood in a semi-circle around the two, and I eased the cork out of the bottle. It made a muffled pop, and Mickey held up his glass to catch the bubbly that erupted. Amato and Judith clapped softly. Gia stared at the carpet with a watery smile.

I poured everyone their champagne, then set the bottle on a nearby table. I raised my glass and looked straight into Gia's big, dark eyes. As I spoke in Italian, I noticed two things.

She was trembling, and she couldn't tear her giant, dark eyes away from me.

"May God be with you and bless you in this marriage with love and long life," I said in a grim voice. "May you both have good luck, and may trouble be always a stranger."

Chapter Eight

ALESSANDRO

MICKEY AND I WALKED OUT OF THE OFFICE, WITH AMATO between us. Gia's fainting, my shaky toast, our awkward champagne drinking — it all seemed surreal.

Amato slapped us both on our shoulders and grinned. "We'll be out in a little while, guys. Gia needs some time to get used to all this, and I want to have a father-daughter moment with her. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, I totally understand," Mickey said in an excited tone. "She's just a girl, and this is a lot."

I nod once. Why the fuck did Mickey sound so thrilled?

"Thanks again," Amato said, clapping our backs again when we were at the door, sounding more like a car salesman than a man who was about to give his daughter to a mafia boss. "And Alessandro, that was a stupendous toast. You've got a real asset here, Mickey."

"Don't I know it." Mickey smirked in my direction.

Amato continued in his booming voice. "We'll see you down at the festivities. Make sure to take a look around the garden and the pool while you're at it. I'm sure you and Gia will be spending a lot of time here. I told you how she loves this ranch, and her horse. Make sure to talk to her about her horse, she loves that pony more than anything."

Amato opened the door, and two massive bodyguards were standing on the other side. He instructed one of them to show us to the party.

The guy nodded and lumbered off. We followed, down a long hall, into a soaring foyer with a staircase that's out of some old, dramatic movie, and through French doors. We found ourselves standing on a stone balcony overlooking a large property that included a pool, a smaller building and, in the distance, a large, white party tent. Further afield looked to be rolling hills, green grass, sweeping vistas.

This was a world away from where I grew up in Naples.

The bodyguard walked down the sloping stone stairs, and I followed.

Mickey halted, his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo trousers. "Would you look at all this? Quite the spread here. Fit for a king."

I paused on the first step and looked back and up. "It's something."

All I wanted was a stiff drink, and the quicker we got to that goddamned tent, the better.

Mickey steps toward me and we walk in tandem, about ten paces behind the bodyguard. "So what did you think of her?"

I think she's dangerous as fuck, a vixen who knows more than she's letting on, a gorgeous woman who is probably more cunning than you know.

"She comes from a great family. That's a blessing."

Mickey chuckles as we walk. "You and that family values crap. That was the thing with those old school New York bosses, wasn't it?"

"Yes." I don't elaborate, but he's right. I was taught by my elders to play the field while I'm young. To screw as many women as I want, any way I want. But the minute I enter into an arranged marriage — or if I happen to marry someone for love — I stay faithful. Because family and the partnership with a good woman, means more than anything.

More than the Mafia.

Augusto, my old boss, used to say this: “If you treat your wife right, she will stand by you through anything.”

“You’re a good man, Alessandro. I’m glad to have you with me. But you gotta loosen up a bit. It’s a new world, you know?”

I huffed out a laugh. “And you? What did you think of Giada?” I used her full name because it seems more respectful, more distant. Also because I wanted to feel how her name lingered on my lips, like a kiss.

“Aww, hell. I like ‘em young. I prefer them over sixteen but under twenty-one, so she’s on the cusp. She’ll do, though.”

Hair stood on the back of my neck. I had no clue about Mickey’s perverse desires with young girls. I’d always known him as a womanizer, but hadn’t noticed that any of the women he’d been with were particularly young. Then again, I’d been pretty busy dealing with business shit since I joined his family.

He continued sputtering about something, but I wasn’t paying much attention. The thought that Mickey liked girls so young turned my stomach. I’d aligned myself with his family because they had the best business sense. The biggest contracts with unions. Sold the fewest drugs, did more white-collar crime. Securities fraud. Mortgage fraud. Medicare fraud. Crap like that.

“Yeah, I agreed to all of her bullshit demands,” Mickey added.

We were past the pool now, on our way to the tent, where it sounded like a thousand people were laughing and clinking glasses inside. The muted strains of a jazz band wafted through the air, and a headache bloomed in my temple. This fucking night.

“Demands?” What the fuck was Mickey talking about? What did a princess like Giada demand? Shopping trips to Paris? Shoes? A private jet? The corner of my mouth quirks up.

“She should be fucking thrilled I’m marrying into her family. But yeah, she wants to go to graduate school in New York. And get this, she’s studying feminism. Women’s studies. Can you believe that?” He let out a genuine laugh.

“Women’s studies?” I cough-laughed. This was getting weirder by the minute.

“Fuckin-a. Hilarious, right? Oh and she’s going to volunteer or get some low-paying job at a non-profit after we’re married. At least until the kids come. Which I’ll make sure happens sooner rather than later, because I can’t wait to get my hands on that one.”

When we stepped into the tent we were immediately assaulted by the noise and clamor of a crowded room. Thank Christ, because the thought of Mickey touching Gia made my skin flare with heat. Made my fists clench at my side. It was hot in here, with all the people and the humidity of the night.

Hopefully my face wasn’t flushed with anger, but it probably was. It’s always been difficult for me to hide strong emotions.

“I’m headed to the bar,” I shouted over the din. “What do you want?”

“I’ll wait for more champagne, toast with my bride-to-be.” His face broke out into a brutal grin. “Don’t want to get too drunk in case she wants to get to know each other later, you know? Oh, hey, I gotta say hello to that guy over there. I’ll catch up with you in a bit. Go get yourself a drink.”

He clapped me on the back and disappeared into the crowd. I held my breath as I pushed my way to the bar.

Emotions swirled in my chest. Anger at Mickey, fear for Gia, confusion about why she’d kissed me yesterday. None of this was my business, but I felt as though I was somehow at the center of it all. What the fuck could I do? Rescue Gia from Mickey and ride off into the sunset?

Yeah, right. Like that was possible, even if she wasn’t somehow trying to trap me. I owed my life to Mickey. He could’ve easily had me killed after Augusto passed.

“What’ll it be, sir?” The young bartender asked.

“Scotch. A double.” I finally exhaled all the stale, foul air inside my lungs, but the negative emotions remained inside.

I stayed close to the bar while I drank my Scotch, knowing that I’d down it quickly and want another. I nodded and smiled at people as they passed by, ignoring the looks of interested women. The last thing I wanted tonight was to get laid. It was a night to forget about those carnal pleasures of the flesh.

“Nice tuxedo,” one lady purred, patting my lapel. I tilted my glass toward her and said thanks.

Just as I was about to finish my drink, a hush fell over the crowd. Those who were sitting stood, and all heads turned to the entrance of the luxury tent.

Thunderous applause broke out, and I realized it was for Gia, who was arm-in-arm with her father.

“Thank you for coming,” Amato said.

He added something else, but I didn’t hear the words. I was too busy staring at Gia, who wore a haughty, flinty expression. She sure didn’t look happy. *Well, that makes two of us, babe.*

What the fuck was her story? What was she thinking right now? And how was she going to endure marriage to a guy like Mickey? All I knew was that if Amato had arranged a marriage with me, she’d be grinning with anticipation right now.

The band broke into a version of That’s Amore and I almost gagged.

As Gia and her father swept down the red carpet bisecting the room, I made a beeline back to the bar and ordered another drink, my mood plummeting with every beat of the band.

Chapter Nine

GIA

AS WE MADE OUR WAY OUTDOORS, PAST THE GLITTERING BLUE pool to the party tent, I could barely believe this was my life. Daddy had betrayed me. He'd given me away to a man almost as old as him. The thought of kissing Mickey, let alone anything else, made me want to vomit all of my internal organs on the lawn.

Maybe I should have expected this. Maybe I'd been blinded by my parents' marriage.

How had I ignored this possibility during my years in college? I'd sailed along, oblivious. Like the day would never come.

The day was here, and I hated every second. This was a throwback to a different era, another century. My right arm was linked in my father's, and my left in Mickey's grip. I was well and good screwed because of these two men, and I needed to find a way out of this situation.

We strode into the tent and the fifteen hundred people inside momentarily came to a hush. Everywhere I looked was a portrait of elegance. White roses in hundreds of vases sat on every surface, and gold-accented candles flickered on every table. The goblets matched the candles, the Greco-Roman statues matched the roses, and beauty surrounded us. Even the floor, a temporary parquet, glowed a soft amber.

The men wore black tuxedos, and the women, in jewel-hued designer gowns. But I didn't care about any of them. Or the beautiful decor.

I cared about the heat of one man's stare. Alessandro was standing by the bar. I sensed he was there; I didn't need to look directly at him.

His gaze singed the bare skin of my shoulders. His lips still lingered in my memory. He'd glowered at me in my father's study as we drank champagne and the one who uttered a toast in Italian that was so lyrical that my virginal white lace panties nearly melted off my body.

I hated him, too. He was part of this world, and I wanted to burn it all down.

After a still beat, the crowd broke into raucous applause and cheers. My father slipped his arm from mine, and gestured theatrically toward Mickey, who had materialized from the crowd like a human pile of ooze. The clapping died down and my father's voice boomed through the tent.

"I'd like to introduce my daughter, Gia, and her fiancé, Michele Salerno. Please join me in congratulating them on their engagement."

There were more cheers, and Mickey steered me toward the long table at the front of the room. We were halted by several people wanting to shake hands and kiss our cheeks, and I was forced into smiling as if I was happy.

When I was anything but.

There was an opera singer in the corner, and as planned, she opened with "Un Bel di Vedremo," a Puccini aria from *Madama Butterfly*. Her haunting voice sliced through my heart, and with every step I took, my sense of doom increased.

I was marrying a man I didn't know and didn't love. Why hadn't I fought this harder? Never mind Alessandro — what was my life truly going to be like from here on in? How stupid I had been for accepting this as my fate. For thinking this was all part of a normal life.

There was no turning back now. Or was there? I had a couple of years before the actual wedding. Anything could happen during that time. Like maybe I'd be hit by a bus, which seemed like a reasonable alternative to spending the rest of my life being groped by a man who resembled a fireplug.

My limbs felt wobbly. Time slowed and stretched, and I hugged and kissed dozens of people. It was all a blur.

Just as we were about to sit at the table facing the crowd — thank God the smirking, arrogant-looking Alessandro was on the other side of Mickey so I wouldn't have to face him — Ashley bopped out of nowhere, grinning from ear to ear. I wound my way around chairs and went to her. Her pretty, heart-shaped face and mischievous grin soothed my raw nerves.

I hugged her tight.

“Why are you shaking? Jesus,” she whispered. “This is a lot, isn't it?”

I pulled away and nodded.

“What? You look weird.”

“Can't imagine why.”

I glanced around and briefly caught Alessandro's eye. He and my husband-to-be were already sitting at the table. He stared at me for a beat too long, then sipped from a gold goblet as Mickey spoke and gestured wildly.

My fingers dug into Ashley's forearm. “Let's go to the bathroom.”

“Why...ow? Okay. Ease up.”

I dragged her past where the two men sat and gave a little wave. Mickey stood. “Where are you going?”

Oh, Christ. It was a little soon to be this demanding, wasn't it?

“Bathroom,” I said.

“We need to touch up her makeup,” Ashley called out, taking my hand and dragging me out a side door of the tent.

She was quick on her feet with the lies after deceiving her father for so long.

On the lawn, we picked up our skirts and walked quickly to the pool house. As big as most people's homes, it was where my mother used to host garden parties for her friends.

Oh, if only we could just keep going. Past the pool house, down the sloping lawn and gentle rolling hills.

There was a bodyguard at the pool house and I stopped. "Is anyone inside?"

"No, miss."

"Can you make sure no one comes in? Direct anyone who needs to use the restrooms to the main building? We need privacy."

He nodded. "Of course," he replied.

I locked the door behind us, and sank onto a chaise. "Do you have a cigarette in your purse?"

Ashley's brow wrinkled and she popped open her clutch. "You don't smoke."

"I do tonight. Gimme."

She pulled out a pack of Marlboro lights and lit one, handing it to me. While reclining, I took a long drag, then started coughing violently. My entire body was wracked with spasms, and I clutched the cigarette between two perfectly manicured red nails. My dress was a cloud of silver tulle around the lower half of my body.

"That's what you get for trying to be dramatic. Jesus. Move over and give me that. You're going to light your dress on fire." She snatched the cigarette out of my hand and took a long drag. "What the hell's going on with you? It's Mickey, right? I mean, he's not so bad. He's got a great body. A tight ass, I checked him out. Sorry."

"I don't care if you were looking at his ass." I waved my hand.

“So what is it? You don’t like him? Don’t get a good vibe?” She plucked at the bodice of her tight, red lace dress.

I snorted. “I don’t get a good vibe at all. Plus, there’s his underboss. He’s one of many problems tonight.”

She blew smoke rings in the air. “Hmm. I don’t think I saw him. Don’t tell me: he looks like an extra from *The Sopranos*.”

Wearily, I sat up. “His underboss is the guy I kissed in the car on the side of the road yesterday.”

Her eyes popped. “No. Shut up.”

“Yep.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. It’s not like I kiss a lot of dudes, Ash. When I met him and Mickey up in my dad’s office, I fainted. Just collapsed from shock.”

She handed me the cigarette and we sat in silence, smoking.

“Fuck. What are you going to do?”

I huffed out a bitter laugh. “What can I do? Nothing. He seems pissed at me. I can’t tell.”

“I’m sure he’s worried you’ll say something to Mickey.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I wouldn’t say anything, not to anyone.”

“What do you think of your husband-to-be? Maybe he and his tight butt will take your mind of what’s his name.” She giggled.

“Alessandro. His name is Alessandro.”

“Sexy.”

This wasn’t a joke to me. “Mickey whispered something in my ear about how he was happy I’m a virgin. I hate him already.”

She winced. “Gross.”

“I know, right? I hate this part of that tradition.” I blew out a breath. “I wish I’d been more like you all these years.”

“Hey, my fate’s the same as yours. We both end up in the same place.” We stared at each other. We knew our future: wives of rich criminals. It was written in the stars from birth. It didn’t matter that I’d written a senior project titled: Bound by Blood: Opera, Narrative, and Sisterhood. it didn’t matter that I’d graduated cum laude from Smith College or that I’d volunteered at a battered women’s shelter.

Fate was fate. Family was family. And now I was being used to seal both my fate and my family’s fortune.

“But you got to explore. It’s something I never thought I wanted to do, until...” a thick lump formed in my throat.

“Until you kissed Alessandro,” she whispered.

I nodded.

“Ah, shit. You’re just going to have to forget about him. That’s all. There’s nothing you can do.”

I swallowed hard. Ashley was right. This was my life, like it or not. “We’d better get back to the party.”

She rubbed my back. “Yeah, they’re going to be serving appetizers soon. You don’t want to miss those little bacon scallops. You were looking forward to those.”

The irony. I’d been so excited to choose the menu for the party, and I’d texted Ashley with every excruciating detail. I climbed to my feet, my toes squashed and raw in the heels. Should’ve worn the sneakers, but I should’ve done a lot of things, obviously. I let out a bitter laugh.

Now, the entire evening stretched ahead of me, and I was terrified to see how it would all unfold.

Chapter Ten

GIA

THE NEXT TWO HOURS WERE THE SLOWEST OF MY LIFE. EVEN though I hadn't eaten all day, I barely touched my dinner, the exquisite dishes that I'd carefully chosen all those months ago.

Mickey dove in, and provided a running commentary to me about everything from the people he knew at the party to the Italian band that had taken the stage to the quality of the caprese crostini. The man wouldn't shut up. I picked at my food.

"You don't eat much," he said, spearing a forkful of steak. "I like that. You'll lose that baby fat in no time if you keep it up."

It was then that I started to truly hate him, and imagined smashing one of the china plates in his face then slicing his jugular with a sharp shard. Normally, I wasn't a violent type. No, usually I was calm and quiet. This guy inspired a simmering rage.

All the more reason to use the next two years to figure out how not to marry him.

I set all my dark thoughts aside and tried to make small talk with my father, who was already a bit drunk. Daddy got like this at gatherings, and I remembered Mother being angry with him for his antics. Just as I was about to go down into a spiral of despair about how much I missed her, the band

started playing and the singer — a well-known Italian singer — called Mickey and I onto the floor.

Ugh. I hated being the center of attention. I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment as Mickey took me in his muscular arms and spun me around gently to the strains of Santa Lucia. This had been his only request for the party, this song, and I could see why — he was an excellent dancer. Much better than me. It might have been his most redeeming quality, and I'd been dreading this moment. But he mercifully didn't talk, and he deftly guided me through the short, traditional song without being creepy.

When it ended, he kissed me primly on the cheek and propelled me to my father as guests cheered. I relaxed as Daddy and I swayed to *Volare*, which was my grandfather's favorite song.

"Having fun, princess?" Dad's breath was laced with gin.

"I guess." I mustered a smile for him. I had so many questions for my father. Chief among them: how could you do this to me? But I kept my mouth shut. It wasn't the time, or the place.

"You'll get used to it. To him. Your mother got used to me."

I didn't want to ruin the moment and argue, so instead, I allowed Daddy to dramatically spin and dip me. The people around us clapped. My father was such a ham — it was something most people didn't know. Although he was a feared Mafia boss, he was kind of a goofball in private, and tonight, he was really letting that side show. I couldn't help but smile. For all of his flaws — and tonight he had many — I loved him with a fierce loyalty.

When the song ended, my dad took a deep bow, and I curtsied. The band struck up the first bars of "*Con Te Partiro*," and I whirled to look for my uncle, because surely he'd want a dance — and promptly ran smack into Alessandro's broad chest. Oh, shit.

“This one’s mine,” he growled, and before I could protest, one of his hands was at my waist, and the other had grabbed my wrist. He drew me close, but not too close, as if he was mindful of appearances.

Oh, God. His scent. Just like yesterday in the car, it washed over me. Left me drunk. All I wanted was to press myself against him, rub my cheek against the fine fabric of his suit. Cradle his face in my hands. Kiss those lips. I wobbled in my heels, and he lifted me up. This was entirely inappropriate, here, in front of fifteen hundred guests. Sweat bloomed on the backs of my knees, and my breathing was shallow.

“Care to explain about yesterday?” His voice was low, and threatening.

My heart was beating so fast I thought it would pound out of my chest. I caught Mickey’s eye and he grinned, giving a thumbs up.

“You have some balls, dancing with your boss’ fiancée.” I said this through a hard, fixed smile.

“Who me? Nah. I asked him if I could have this dance, and he graciously said yes. Wants us to get to know each other, in fact,” Alessandro said, his blue eyes mirthful. Why did his voice sound so menacing? Was he angry? I didn’t understand, and so I kept silent. Heat from his body radiated to mine, and I soaked it up as if I’d been in a snowstorm and was warming myself near a fire.

“Well? You’re not going to say anything about—”

“Hush,” I hissed. “I don’t want to ever talk about it again.”

“Why not?” His voice was a murmur, and he propelled us away from another two couples. I shivered, in part from the tone, and because of the possessive way he was holding me. He wasn’t as good of a dancer as Mickey. But the way he touched me was pure dominance. Which made my insides tremble something fierce.

“Because it’s not appropriate, that’s why.”

“That’s such a proper way of putting it. Sticking your tongue down the throat of your husband-to-be’s business

associate isn't just inappropriate, it's downright dangerous, *princess*." He said the last word in a sneering tone.

"It won't happen again. Believe me."

He snorted, and that's when I caught Ashley staring at us from across the room. I quickly looked away, not wanting guilt to shadow my expression.

"You do that often?"

"Do what?" I contemplated breaking the dance, but truthfully, being in his arms felt too incredible. His warmth had turned to pure fire, and every inch of my exposed skin — neck, shoulders, arms, back — were covered in goosebumps. I was also slippery between my legs, but was trying hard to ignore that particular sensation.

He drew me an inch closer and a fresh rush of wetness flooded my core. "Kiss strange men in cars?"

His eyes darted over my left shoulder. He seemed briefly distracted, and I could have sworn his blue eyes darkened for a second. It was difficult to tell because he already seemed so annoyed. No, *angry*.

I opened my mouth to answer his absurd question, but no words came out, because he roughly yanked me into his body. I squawked a noise of protest. "Alessandro, what the—"

"Fuck," he muttered.

Everything happened so fast. While clutching me tight against his massive chest, I watched him pull a gun out of his waistband.

He pulled the trigger once, the sound of the shot drowning out everything else.

It unleashed a hell like I'd never seen, and I clung to Alessandro. He shot, again and again, while keeping an unyielding arm around my torso and dragging me towards the exit.

"I've got you, Gia. I've got you. Hold tight to me," Alessandro shouted.

Guests rushed past us, trampling those who had fallen. I could barely hear anything from the sound of the bullets, and the screams of my family and friends. Broken glass and broken bodies littered the parquet dance floor. I watched a woman face down, writhe in pain, a dark stain soaking her opulent gown. Was that Judith? I couldn't tell. *Please, no...*

A primal noise escaped my mouth, but my cry was drowned out by gunshots, screams of fear, shouts of anger. Bullets soared past my head and crimson blood splattered on my pristine silver dress.

Not knowing where to go, or what to do, I wriggled out of Alessandro's grip and started to make my way to the exit. Where was Daddy? I had to find him. Had to make sure he was unhurt.

Alessandro snatched me back, and pressed me against his chest.

"Don't you fucking leave my side," he growled, then pulled me behind a bar and shoved me onto my knees, at his feet.

Chapter Eleven

ALESSANDRO

“GIVE ME THE GIRL,” A GUY THE SIZE OF A LINEBACKER yelled.

The acrid smell of gun smoke, combined with the scent of terror, triggered all of my senses to operate on high alert.

“Fuck you,” I shouted back, keeping my hand on Gia’s head. The exit was too crowded with people, and we had to take cover in case bullets started flying again.

Thank Christ the shooting had stopped momentarily, and Mickey and I had taken down those three Russians who had somehow infiltrated the party. They’d done some damage though; I spotted at least three dead and four others who were wounded. And dozens of others who would forever associate Mickey’s engagement announcement with chaos and violence.

Motherfucker. I’d warned Mickey against inviting the Russians. He hadn’t listened.

“I’m her father’s bodyguard. Give her to me,” the guy hollered in my ear. Many of the guests were out of the tent by now, but not all. The muted cries of the wounded were the only sounds. I took that as a good sign, because it meant shootout might be over.

I crouched behind the bar next to Gia. A server was also cowering behind the wooden podium. This couldn’t provide much cover, but it was something.

“Move over,” I growled at the server, a guy who had folded herself into a little ball. He did, about an inch. I shoved Gia’s head further down, and she crouched, clutching my legs.

Gia poked me in the calf. “Hey. Hey.” Her voice was sharp, and she pinched my leg. She was surprisingly fierce for such a little thing during this critical moment. I glared at her. I’d fucking saved her life, and here she was, copping an attitude.

Shit, I was still ready to save her life. Anticipating another strike. The beefy guy came closer and I rose, pointing my gun at him.

“Stay the fuck away,” I shouted.

He lifted his hands in the air. “Don’t shoot, man. I’m with the family. The Amato family.”

Yeah, right. I wasn’t about to trust anyone with Gia.

“Alessandro. That’s my father’s guy. Let me go with him.” Gia stood. “We have a protocol for this kind of thing.”

A protocol. The words almost made me laugh. Spoken like a true Mafia princess. Still, I wasn’t going to let her out of my sight. Especially when I couldn’t find Mickey. The Russians had been aiming for him, and for her.

Had he been killed? This fucking tent was so big that I couldn’t tell one body from the next, and I wasn’t about to go on a fishing expedition with Gia on my arm. She didn’t deserve to see any of this.

Moans from the wounded wafted through the air. Who knew if the Russians were going to attack again — did they have someone working on the inside, one of the servers? Were there hitmen outside? Who the fuck knew?

Now that I looked at the beefy guy a third time, I recognized him from earlier in the evening as the man standing outside the door to Amato’s study.

“Fine. We’ll all go together. Stay down until I say so.”

I rose from behind the bar to survey the scene. I spotted two of the Russians, dead. Where was the third? I didn’t see

him, which meant he might still be a threat.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here. C’mon.” I pulled Gia up by the arm, and she tried to wrest her limb away.

“Stay with me,” I barked.

Gia started to walk into the chaos and I clamped my hand around her wrist. She tried to wriggle free but I tightened my grip.

“No fucking way, princess,” I growled.

Probably because of the bodyguard’s size, he was able to part the remainder of the panicked crowd tending to the injured so we could exit the tent. On the lawn, older men clasped their chests while women sobbed. The bodyguard and I broke into a dash to the main building, but Gia stumbled in her blood-stained heels. Before she tumbled to the lawn, I swept her up.

“Fuck’s sake,” I bit out, hoisting her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes while hoping there wasn’t a sniper hiding in the trees beyond the pool.

“Stop. Put me down!” she cried.

She wriggled and beat on my back with her fist, but I ignored her and batted her voluminous dress out of my face. We ran into the main building — the bodyguard had the key code to get in — and ended up at Amato’s office, where we’d drunk champagne just a few hours ago. I plunked Gia down none too gently in the hall, and she shot daggers with her eyes at me as she gasped for breath.

“She can stay in here,” the bodyguard said.

“Is this a safe room?” I glanced around as anxiety rose in my chest.

“That’s what it was designed for, genius,” she said in a snotty voice.

The bodyguard unlocked the door and held a muscular arm in the air. “Wait here.”

Gia turned away and took a step, and I yanked her back. “You don’t go anywhere.”

“This is my house,” she hissed.

“Yeah, and it’s under attack. So shut the fuck up.”

“All clear,” the bodyguard boomed. “Come in.”

I shoved Gia through the door and followed her inside. The heavy door clicked to lock behind us. That’s when I noticed she was shaking, and her face, tear-stained. As tough as her words had been, this had clearly been an ordeal. My heart softened, a little. She looked so young, in her blood-soaked silver gown, the hem of which had torn to shreds. Too young to deal with this shit. And yet, she had to know this was a risk of being part of a family like hers.

Hell, she’d probably anticipated this day for years.

“You stay here, Giada,” the bodyguard said to her in a gentle voice. “I’m going to find your father. Do not open the door for anyone. Please.”

“I’m going to look for Mickey,” I added. “I need the keycode, though. If I find him, he needs to be brought in here.”

She gave me a withering look. “Can one of you also bring back my purse, with my phone? And if you see Ashley, bring her too.”

“Not my top priority,” I said. So much for her caring about the well-being of her husband-to-be.

“We’ll try,” the bodyguard responded. He looked at me, stone-faced. “C’mon. We’ll sweep the place together. I know the layout. Gia. Do *not* open the door. Do you hear me? No rebelling right now. This is serious shit.”

She nodded.

“What’s your name?” I asked the guy.

He turned in my direction. “Donnie.”

“Donnie, I’m Alessandro.”

We shook hands, and I realized we were both panting. Fuck, that was close back in the tent. The closest call I'd had in a while.

“Okay, enough with the bromance,” Gia said, putting her little hands on her hips. “Find my father. Find Judith. And find Ashley. I need to know they're okay.”

“Yes, *signorina*,” I said, fixing her with a hard gaze.

She stared back at me, defiant, then wiped the tears off her face with her fingers. Her dark eyes flashed with fury in my direction. She was no longer trembling. *Hunh*. Maybe she wasn't as fragile as I'd thought.

“May I remind you,” she said pointedly while folding her thin arms across her breasts, “That never in this history of my family has anything like this happened. It was only when your boss, and you, came here, that this...” she sputtered, waving her hand in the air, “This *massacre* happened. For you to be nasty to me at this moment is completely uncalled for. I'd appreciate if you find my family and then get the fuck out of my house.”

Chapter Twelve

GIA

THE DOOR CLICKED BEHIND DONNIE AND ALESSANDRO, AND I shakily made my way onto the leather sofa, the same one that I'd reclined on when I'd fainted just hours before. I wanted to scream, vomit, sob. Shame mixed with horror washed over me.

Was my father alive? Judith? Ashley? I could barely catch my breath as the images of blood and mayhem raced through my brain. Who fired the first shot? Why had someone caused trouble at the party? What had my father done — or worse, what had my husband-to-be done?

And, another unsettling thought. This one wasn't a question, though. It was a statement, as sure as they sky was ink-black at this very moment.

Alessandro had saved my life. Maybe I should have been a little kinder to him. But how could I be kind to either him, or Mickey? Violence had never crossed our threshold in our family. They had to be the cause of this nightmare.

I shut my eyes and tried to regulate my breathing. It was difficult because the bodice of my dress was so tight. Dammit, I needed to get out of this contraption, if not for comfort, then for safety. How could I run for cover in heels and a ball gown? We'd barely made it out of that tent alive.

I stayed like this for what felt like an hour, but time made little sense tonight. Maybe it had only been fifteen minutes. If

only I had my phone, but it was back in the tent, on a table probably stained with blood.

Hauling myself to my feet, I whimpered as I felt the skin on the backs of my heels rub raw. It was as if a cheese grater had attached itself to the insides of my shoes. I crossed the room and hobbled to the door. No one could stop me from going to my own bedroom and changing. My hand was on the door handle when I heard a soft beeping, and the lock clicked open.

The door swung in and I staggered back. It was Judith, followed by my father and Mickey. Donnie the bodyguard made up the rear of the group, and he slammed the door shut.

“Daddy. Judith,” I cried, launching myself into my father’s arms. Judith rubbed my back.

“Oh, my dearest,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

He kept repeating the word *sorry*, over and over, like a mantra. The crack in his tone, combined with his aftershave, fractured my heart. He sounded defeated, broken. He hadn’t even sounded this way after Mama died, and that frightened me even more.

We held each other for a few long minutes, then he gently released me, and held my shoulders with his hands. “We haven’t got much time. I’m going with Mickey to discuss what happened with some associates. We have to meet with the authorities, then go to Atlanta, though.”

“Atlanta? Discuss what, and with who? What’s going on?” I yelped.

Mickey stepped to me, took my hand and kissed my palm. I felt like I’d been covered with a thousand live cockroaches, and shivered.

“You’re a curious little thing, aren’t you? Don’t you worry your beautiful head about this. Your father and I have arranged for you to go to a safe house. Nice and secure.”

“You’ll be just fine,” Daddy said.

I didn't think it was possible for me to hate Mickey even more than I already did, but here we were. Deciding to ignore him, I focused on Judith and Daddy. "Where's Ashley? Is she okay?"

Daddy swallowed. "We haven't accounted for everyone. As soon as we find out that she's safe, we'll let you know. Judith or I will call you."

"What are you not telling me? Is Ashley hurt?"

"Gia." Judith's voice was strong, and steady, far more than either my father's or Mickey. She had an inner fortitude that couldn't be matched by most human beings. "I packed you a bag. We need to get you out of here. Right. Now. It's just not safe for you to be here, since you're a high value target."

High value target. That meant someone possibly wanted to kidnap me. Daddy had always been concerned for my safety, but nothing to this degree.

She held out my pink and black gym duffel bag. It was stuffed full, and I stared at it like it was radioactive. "Where are we going?"

Judith handed me the bag, and Donnie reached for it, slinging it over his beefy shoulder. "Just follow Donnie through the tunnel."

I gasped. Years ago, my father had built a tunnel between his office and the adjacent property. I'd never used it or seen it, but was aware he kept it for extreme emergencies. He and Mama told me about its existence, in case we needed to flee our estate without being detected by authorities.

"But...but," I stammered, not quite grasping why I needed to leave my own home. I looked at him, then Judith, with pleading eyes. "You're coming with me, right?"

"No, Gia. I have to stay with your father. He might need my help in court."

That's when I flipped out, screaming. "Are you being arrested? What's going on? Are the police here already? How many people died out there?"

“Get her outta here,” Mickey said in a cold voice. Judith pulled on my arm, and all of us walked to a nondescript, dark wood panel in the wall hiding the entrance to the tunnel.

“Fuck you,” I spat in Mickey’s direction. “If it wasn’t for you, everything would be peaceful. You brought this evil here. Daddy, I’m staying here. This is my home too.”

“Gia, it’s beyond my control. I’m sorry, dear heart.” He pressed a button and the wood wall slid to the right, revealing a steel door. Donnie gave the panel a further push, and Daddy fiddled with a control panel. The sound of gears clanging filled the air, and he pulled on the handle.

I wrapped my arms around my father. “Don’t make me go,” I whispered.

“This is for the best. For your own good. I need to know you’re safe, and this is the best solution. I talked it over with Mickey—”

“Why didn’t you talk it over with me? I’m your blood. He’s not,” I hissed.

Daddy didn’t say anything, and that’s when I realized: just like my past, my future was decided by my father and my soon-to-be husband. I was as trapped as a lioness in a cage.

“Now just follow Donnie and I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. This shouldn’t be long. A week or two at most.”

“A week or two?” I sobbed. “Where am I going?”

He squeezed me tight. “I love you more than life itself, Giada.”

“If you love me, why are you sending me away? Why are you listening to that douche bag?” I wailed.

“Bye, kiddo,” Judith whispered, planting a kiss on top of my head. It was then that I realized she was still in her ball gown, which was streaked with blood.

Somehow between ugly crying and Donnie grabbing my hand to step through the door, I managed to shoot Mickey a nasty glare.

He reached out and caressed my cheek. I shrunk back and snarled at him.

“See you soon, Gia. We’ll get through this and have a beautiful wedding,” he said.

“Over my dead body, fuckface,” I shot back.

“She doesn’t mean that,” Daddy leaned into Mickey. “She’s clearly in shock.”

Donnie pulled me through the door and clicked on a flashlight. How had he gotten a flashlight so quickly? Why was he so prepared? Clearly everyone but me had been in on this plan to ... to do what? Where was Daddy going? Would he be safe?

What about my best friend? Fresh tears ran down my face. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to Ashley.

The bodyguard clasped my hand in his big one, and we marched down a narrow, dank tunnel. It smelled of mildew and earth, and my tall heels echoed with every step. Since I was wearing four-inch-high heels, my speed wasn’t the best. Donnie, on the other hand, seemed to want to move at a rapid clip, and every few paces, I almost tripped on my skirt.

“Wait,” I said sharply, yanking on Donnie’s hand.

“What? You okay? What’s wrong?”

“My stupid fucking heels are killing me. Can I put some better shoes on?”

Sighing, Donnie stopped and dropped the duffel onto the cement floor. He aimed the powerful beam of the flashlight on the zipper. I plopped down and undid the bag. Thank God Judith had packed my black Nikes.

I felt my flesh sticking to the backs of the heels when I tore them out of the shoes, and dug around for a pair of black socks. “If I’m going into hiding, I’m doing it with comfortable shoes, dammit,” I muttered.

Donnie let out a little laugh. “You’re crazy, Gia.”

I slipped on the socks, then the sneakers, and zipped up the bag.

“You gonna take those with you?” he aimed the flashlight at the silver stilettos.

“Hell no. I’m leaving them here.”

“Dunno if your dad’s going to like that.” He hoisted the bag up, disapproval crossing his heavy-set brow.

“I don’t give a crap.” I scrambled to my feet, and kicked one heel to the side. “And anyway, maybe my Prince Charming will come along and find them. Then take me away from all this stupidity.”

“Whatever.” Donnie grabbed for my hand. “Let’s get a move on.”

“I can walk on my own. Lead the way. Where are we going, anyway?”

“You’ll find out soon,” he said, gruffly.

We made far better progress now that I wasn’t hindered by the heels. I lifted my skirts and practically had to run to keep up with Donnie, as the tunnel wound its way further and further through the reinforced Florida earth. The air was increasingly stifling, and the mildew smell threatened to make me gag if I thought about it too much. A rising feeling of panic welled inside me — what if we were trapped in here, somehow? We’d be essentially buried alive.

I started to sweat. If only I could claw this stupid, bloodstained dress off me. If only I could turn back time. If only I could be born into another family... a wave of anger at Daddy washed over me. Why had he chosen Mickey? I ruminated on this as we hustled through the semi-darkness. I tried not to think about whether the earthen walls were secure, or if they’d collapse in on us with Donnie’s heavy footsteps.

“How long is this freaking tunnel?” I asked, after we’d been run-walking for fifteen minutes. “Are we going to end up in Miami, or what?”

“It’s exactly a mile.”

“A mile?”

Donnie didn't respond. After another ten minutes, we came to the end. An iron staircase led upward to a round metal cover.

“Here we go. Hold this,” Donnie said, handing me the flashlight. “Shine it up there.”

I did what I was told, my heart slamming against my ribs. Donnie climbed the stairs easily, then somehow undid the cover — I couldn't see exactly how. I felt a woosh of air, and the smell of freshly cut grass hit my nostrils.

Somehow, this was even scarier than being in the tunnel. What awaited us at the top?

From my vantage point, I could see the lower half of Donnie's body. His top half was stuck outside of the hole. I watched as he made his way back down the ladder, and hopped onto the ground next to me. He no longer had the duffel bag on his shoulder, and grabbed the flashlight out of my hands.

“Okay, you're going up now. Just be careful. Go slow. I'll be right behind you if anything happens. One foot, one step.”

I gathered my skirt and pulled it to the side, stepping my right foot on the lowest rung. I followed with my left foot. Thank goodness I'd been doing Pilates and yoga, because I could easily lift myself up. The rungs of the ladder were cool to the touch, and I counted each as I climbed.

One. Two. Three. Four.

What was outside? Maybe Donnie's armored SUV. That had to be it. He'd drive me to safety somewhere. Maybe Daddy's apartment on the beach near Fort Lauderdale. That wouldn't be so awful, staying there for a while.

Five. Six. Seven.

But what if this was a setup? What if the people who had ambushed my party were waiting to kill me? Or kidnap me?

Eight. Nine. Ten.

I spotted the strap of my duffel. The ladder ended just before the lip of the hole, and I carefully lifted a knee to the ground and crawled onto the grass, further staining my poor dress. The night sky was clear, beautiful even, with its sparkling stars. I spotted the familiar rolling green hills and wanted to cry, thinking about my horse who was somewhere in the distance. A firefly flitted by.

Donnie followed, only he somehow was able to step out of the hole far more gracefully. He offered me his hand, and I stood. My dress was disgusting, a mixture of blood and grass stains and dirt.

“This way,” he said, taking my upper arm.

I turned. There, parked by the trees, was a black Maserati.

Chapter Thirteen

ALESSANDRO

GIA TURNED AND STARED SQUARELY AT MY CAR. SHE probably couldn't see me because of the angle I'd parked in the trees, and the tinted windows. But her fury was unmistakable, even from this distance. Even though her dress was wrinkled and her dark hair was flying everywhere like a Medusa, she was fucking gorgeous.

Her skin glowed in the moonlight. I had to admire both her grit and her beauty. Someday, she'd be my boss' wife. What a fucking waste. Or maybe they'd be a power couple and would rule the world. Who the fuck knew?

She put her hands on her hips and looked down at Donnie, who was emerging from the hole in the ground.

And then, she took off.

With her poufy silver skirt flying behind her, she looked like a bolt of lightning against the green grass.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

Donnie tore off after her, and because he was both hulking and athletic — while looking for Mickey and Amato he'd slipped into the conversation that he'd been a high school football player, a fact that I didn't think I'd ever use or remember — he caught her easily.

God bless that girl. She could really put up a fight. He wrapped his arms tight around her torso and she kicked and

screamed. I hustled out of the car and opened the passenger door. It was the least I could do for Donnie.

“I hate you,” she yelled. “Take me back. I’m not going with him. No fucking way!”

“Please, kiddo. Calm down. I know you’re in shock.” Donnie was a prince of a man and I had to hand it to him — most guys wouldn’t be so polite. I guess they’d known each other from way back, though. Or he was so loyal to her father that he’d endure anything.

I stepped aside as he wrangled her into the passenger seat. She writhed and sputtered and flailed a bit more, and in a flash, her little fist made contact with Donnie’s nose. I grimaced at the sound of his septum cracking.

Fierce little thing. Then again, I was certain Donnie had withstood much worse, considering that scar down his right cheek.

He slammed the door, trapping the dirty hem of her dress, and I pressed the lock on the key fob in my hand. “Quite a night,” I said drily.

Donnie wiped his nose, which had a spot of blood. “No shit. She called your boss a fuckface when we were saying goodbye.”

Whoa. No one disrespected Mickey like that. I almost wanted to chuckle. Instead, I raised an eyebrow and took a handkerchief out of my pocket. He accepted it with a sigh.

“Thanks. I just don’t know what’s gotten into her.” He pressed the cloth to his nose. “She used to be such a calm girl. Guess it was college or something. All that women’s lib stuff.”

Or she doesn’t want to be alone with me. Or she doesn’t want to marry Mickey. Understandable on both counts.

I nodded. “We’ll make it work. I’m sure we’ve both been through worse.”

He snorted. “Lemme get her bag. Can you pop the trunk?”

I did, making sure I didn’t let that little wild cat escape. Donnie walked a few paces and grabbed a duffel, then tossed it

like a sack of potatoes in the back of the Maserati.

“You might want to use those on her,” he said, pointing at something in the trunk. I walked to see what he was talking about.

“Oh, the zip ties?” I frowned. I kept those there for various jobs. Just in case. “Really? You think she’ll be that out of control on the drive south?”

“I dunno, bro. Maybe. She’s pretty pissed.”

“If we tie her up, we’d better do it now, while there’s two of us.” I scratched the back of my head. “Tell you what. I’ll go on the driver side, you come in from the passenger door.”

“Let’s do it.”

Thank fuck we were on a back road, because if anyone had come across two hulking guys wrestling a wisp of a young woman in a car, we’d be in the county lockup quicker than you could blink. Exactly what we didn’t need after the shitshow back at the party.

When we were done binding her wrists and ankles with the zip ties, I climbed out of the car and faced Donnie, who’d shut the passenger door. He slumped over the roof of the car. We were both winded. The muffled sound of her tiny fists hitting the passenger window were like a bass drum beat. The car had bullet-proof glass, so she could thump on it as much as she wanted.

“Christ,” he muttered.

“No shit. So, we’re outta here. Should take us only two hours.”

“Cool. Cool. And you’ll be all set at the dock. Someone’ll meet you with supplies.”

We each gave each other a one finger wave and he made his way to the hole. I climbed back into the car and watched him slip back into the earth and replace the manhole cover. My gaze shifted to Gia, who was still breathing hard.

“You ready for a road trip, Princess?”

“Fuck. You.” And I’ll be damned if she didn’t spit at me. It didn’t quite make my face, but landed on the center console. In the span of a heartbeat, I clutched her jaw and turned her head toward me.

“I understand that you’re emotional right now. It’s been a long fucking night and I’m sorry you had to see all that bloodshed. But I’m on your side. I’m here to protect you, and keep you safe. I will not have you disrespect me in my own car. Got it?”

Her eyes didn’t just shoot daggers at me. They shot Teflon-coated bullets.

Not gonna lie; her attitude and insolence was a shock. I squeezed her jaw a little harder. “Got it, princess?”

She nodded, once, and I let her go. I reached for a tissue in the side door pocket and wiped her spit off the console.

“Good girl,” I muttered, and drove away, down an unpaved, dirt path. This sure was in the middle of nowhere out here, nothing but farms and horses and shit. After a blissfully silent five-minute drive, we came to a T in the road. I slowed for the stop sign and was about to turn left to take the road to the Interstate when Gia twisted her body and somehow got both her bound hands on the door latch. She pulled, and the door swung open.

Dammit! I hadn’t activated the in-motion child lock.

My foot stomped on the brake and she was thrown back. I reached over her, inadvertently elbowing her breasts, and slammed the door shut. I clamped my hand around her arm.

“What the fuck are you doing? You could be killed if you throw yourself out of a moving car!”

“Exactly. Better to die than be with you and your idiot boss.”

I let out a groan. This was what I’d worried about when Mickey informed me that I’d be keeping Gia safe for a few weeks. I was a glorified babysitter, and now I had to deal with a tantrum. Fucking wonderful.

“Look, we need to come to a truce here. We’ve got to get on the road, and I can’t be worried about you flinging yourself out the door and killing yourself. So let’s get it all out. Scream. Yell. Tell me to go fuck myself. Whatever. Let’s just do it once and for all. You want to hit me? Fine. I’ll untie your hands and you can punch me. I saw what you did to Donnie back there. Take a swing at my nose. It’s already been broken twice, I can handle it.”

Her nostrils flared. “I’ll shut up if you tell me where we’re going.”

Okay, I could work with this. “We’re going south, to one of Mickey’s properties. It’s very safe. Someone’s meeting us with groceries and other supplies. Enough for a couple of weeks. There’s a tv, and cable. Maybe even some books. A pool and a beach. It’ll be like you’re on vacation.”

She snorted. “A vacation? With you? Fat fucking chance, asshole.”

A lock of her hair fell into her face and she tried to blow it away. I was tempted to sweep it out of her face, but since she was my boss’ fiancé, I had to keep my hands to myself.

“Yes. With me. Trust me, princess. I’m just as pissed as you about this situation. Maybe more. I’m not used to babysitting. Can we go now?”

She grunted and I put the car in gear and made the turn onto the road. We’d no sooner reached the speed limit when my cell rang. I glanced at the screen in the center console.

“It’s your husband to be,” I said, as I punched a button on the steering wheel.

Gia groaned and rolled her head so her temple rested against the glass. “Fuckface,” she muttered.

“How’re things?” Mickey didn’t even bother with a salutation.

“Better now. We’re on the road. You’re on speakerphone, so Gia can hear you.”

“Good. Good. I wanted to talk to you both. Gia? You there?”

She let out a strangled noise. It sounded like a spitting mad, feral kitten.

“I’ll take that as a yes, babe. Listen, I want you to obey Alessandro, okay?”

My stomach clenched at the thought.

“Fuck you,” she said.

Oh shit, this was getting bad. I pulled over. Thank Christ this road was also deserted. I put the car in park and stared at Gia.

Mickey made a clicking noise with his tongue. “Gia. I’m going to cut you some slack because your pretty party was ruined. But you’re going to have to cut the shit with this attitude. I don’t want a wife who acts ungrateful.”

“Probably better than one who will cut off your nuts while you sleep, which is what I’m going to do to you when we’re married, so you’d better sleep with one eye open, dear heart,” she said in a saccharine voice. “And did you know that your under—”

A jolt of fear went through me. Was she about to tell Mickey about our kiss yesterday? My hand shot out and covered her mouth. SHUT UP, I mouthed. The temperature in the car rose about ten degrees, and sweat pricked the back of my neck.

Mickey sighed. “Alessandro? I’m too tired for this girl shit right now. Amato and I are still waiting on the lawyers here to finish up with the cops, then we’re going to get on the road.”

“Don’t you worry. We’ll be in place soon, boss.” Gia tried to bite my palm, but I was holding her too tight for her lips to move much. I glared at her. She glared back. It was a glare contest, and I wasn’t entirely sure if I was winning. Fuck me.

“Excellent. I’m glad. Listen, A. If Gia gives you any problem, feel free to punish her any way you see fit. In fact, I’d like you to break her in for me. Teach her how to give suck

cock, okay? You have my blessing for that. It's gonna be a long two weeks for you two."

My hand dropped from Gia's mouth and we both gasped a little. Did he just say what I thought he did? I knew he was depraved, but this was next-level shit. Her face turned ashen.

"Uh, boss? I didn't quite catch what you said. You broke up there."

Mickey chuckled. "Don't act so surprised. I'm happy to share. You know that. Pussy's pussy. Just don't fuck her — I want that honor. Paid a lot for her virginal snatch. I'll admit, it turns me on to think about her getting an oral lesson from you. Have fun, you freaky fucker. Gia, do whatever Alessandro tells you. Have fun. Gotta go."

He hung up and his words hung heavy in the air of the car. I scrubbed my face with my hands and turned to Gia. I felt dizzy — not because I wanted her sexually, but because her husband to be was so, incredibly, crazy fucking inappropriate. So perverse. So...wrong.

The New York bosses I'd known would've never disrespected their wives-to-be like that.

Shocking, even for me.

"I'm not blowing you here, or anywhere, so don't even think about asking. You'll have to kill me first, otherwise I'll bite your dick off," she ground out. But the fear in her eyes made my heart crack. She'd just watched a massacre unfold at her engagement party and now her fiancé was pimping her out to his underboss. Sweet chocolate Christ.

None of this was her fault.

Or her choice.

"Listen, Gia?" I said in a soft voice. "I want you to know that I'd never make you do that. I don't rape women. I don't fuck with another man's wife or fiancée. I'm a pretty terrible guy, but I do have boundaries. And in my opinion, my boss is a shitbag for even suggesting that. He doesn't deserve you for even a minute, much less the rest of your life."

Dammit. Had I just said too much?

Tears pooled in Gia's brown eyes, and she stared straight ahead. "Just drive, okay?"

Chapter Fourteen

GIA

I STARED OUT THE WINDOW TO SEE A McDONALD'S, A SONIC, and a Taco Bell whiz past. We were only about ten minutes from my home. Sometimes I came to Sonic on a shake run for me and Daddy. We both loved the Oreo Cheesecake concoctions. All fat and sugar, totally delicious.

A sob threatened to claw its way up my throat. How could he do this to me? I knew my future husband would have to pay a substantial dowry, but knowing that my father had essentially sold me — bartered my virginity — to a man as vile as Mickey absolutely shattered my heart.

Daddy had led me to believe Mickey was one of the good guys. Like him.

One thing was crystal clear: I had to get out of this marriage, this car, this life. Fuck all men.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and angled my body away from Alessandro. I hated him too. For binding my wrists and ankles. For calling me princess. For existing. It no longer mattered how hot he was, or how attracted I'd been to him.

He was the enemy.

Think.

We were close to the Interstate, and Alessandro eased his luxury car into the left lane. We were headed south, to Tampa.

“Want some music?” His voice was as smooth as velvet.

I lifted a shoulder and grunted.

“There’s no reason we can’t be nice to each other, Gia. We’re stuck in this situation together for a few weeks.” The way he said my name, drew it out in his Italian accent, set my teeth on edge.

“Don’t remind me, please.” I glanced his way and watched the corners of his full mouth quirk upward. He was still wearing a tuxedo, and it pissed me off that he was so stupidly handsome. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Think.

“I’ve got satellite radio. Do you have a favorite station?”

Somehow it enraged me even more that he was asking my opinion. As if he cared. No man in his world cared what a woman thought, whether it be about a choice in radio stations or her own agency.

There was no way in hell this guy would sweet-talk me into submission. I squirmed in my seat, the plastic zip tie around my wrists cutting into my skin. “Anything’s fine.”

“How about...here we go.” He punched a few buttons on his steering wheel and the word CHILL came up on the center console. The strains of “Don’t Call Me Angel,” a downtempo Lana Del Rey song filled the car.

If there was a more appropriate song, I couldn’t think of one.

He turned left, onto the interstate ramp, then accelerated. The car was shockingly quick, and for a second, I felt myself pinned to the seat. Once we were on the freeway, I snuck glances at his profile. Then he grinned, and I averted my eyes. I’d been caught. Damn him. Was he subtly flirting? After what Mickey said, he probably expected something of me. Something dark and depraved.

No way in hell.

“Where’d you go to school?”

Why was he trying to make pointless small talk? I sighed. “Smith College in Massachusetts.”

He nodded slowly. “You like it?”

I paused to collect my emotions, because the rush of memories — crisp leaves in a New England autumn, the smell of books in the library, the hush of fresh snow — threatened to overwhelm. I’d been my best self there, unburdened by my family and its bloody legacy. Of course, that same legacy had allowed me to exist in privilege in that world, a fact I’d never forgotten.

“I did. A lot.”

“Someone told me you majored in, what was it? Sociology?”

To my surprise, he wasn’t snickering when he talked about my schooling. Usually the men in Daddy’s orbit did.

“Feminist studies.”

He glided the car, which was going a cool eighty mph, into the left lane so we could pass a truck. “That’s pretty unusual, a Mafia boss’ daughter majoring in feminism.”

I snorted. “Well, until tonight I thought my family was a pretty unusual Mafia family. We’d successfully avoided scandal and stupidity. My dad’s not entirely a criminal. Or wasn’t, until tonight. He has some legitimate businesses. Many of them, in fact.”

“They all do, princess. Who the hell do you think works on Wall Street? Monks? Priests? Buddhist nuns? They’re all crooks.”

“That’s the truth,” I muttered.

We rode in silence for five minutes, or the length of one sensual song. It was too slow and sexy, a tropical house song like something I’d heard during a visit to a club in Miami. Combined with Alessandro’s spicy cologne, parts of my body hummed. It was as if the beat ticked through my veins, making the cells in my body pulse and throb.

Which was completely ridiculous since I was here against my will and quite literally, restrained.

Think.

Perhaps when we stopped at our destination, I could ask him to remove these zip ties. Then I could run. I sighed aloud. He was incredibly strong, though, and I didn't doubt he could outrun and capture me. Or I could somehow get my hands on a phone and call Judith. That was probably a better idea.

Surely she didn't know how dire things were for me. She'd have Mickey's balls fed to him if she knew what he'd said on the phone.

How dare he suggest Alessandro break me in? Pricks. I needed more ammunition against both of them. More details. They'd help me out of this, somehow.

"How long have you been working for Mickey?" I tried to keep my tone steady, a touch bored. I didn't want him to think I was fishing for information to eventually use it against him.

"Only a couple of years. I was with another family." He mentioned a boss in New York, a respected man, one I'd heard of.

"I remember when he died," I said. "Daddy and I went to his funeral."

Alessandro nodded. "We must've crossed paths there. He was an excellent man. My mentor."

"And then you fell in with Mickey?"

"Yeah. In Miami."

"You're kind of young for an underboss, no?"

"I'm twenty-seven."

He wasn't giving up much about himself. I'd have to pry harder. "Your accent. It's a little bit New York, a little something else. Where are you from?"

"Born in Naples. Italy, not Florida."

"Ahh, that's it."

"Where's your family from? Originally, I mean." He turned the radio down, until only a faint beat remained.

“On my father’s side, Sicily. Mom’s side, Naples. Caserta, to be exact. But both their families came to America like a hundred years ago.”

“No shit? I was born right near Caserta. Maybe we’re distant cousins.”

I laughed, genuinely this time. He laughed too, a rich, sumptuous sound. Gah. This man had the potential to be more dangerous than I expected. I had to neutralize the threat. But how? How was I going to get out of his clutches?

And where was I going to go? This was what my father wanted. He could’ve stepped in, but hadn’t. I think I hated Daddy most of all, possibly more than Mickey.

“Any word on my cell phone? Or about my friend Ashley?”

“Once we get to our destination, I’ll try to find out about Ashley. I promise.”

“And my cell? Will we have internet where we’re going?”

“No on both counts.”

I flopped my body so I was facing him, which wasn’t easy considering the zip ties and the seat belts. “But...but. Why? This is ridiculous.”

“It’s for our safety. You know that.”

I did know that, actually, and I hated that, too.

“So where is this place we’re going? The one that will be like a spa vacation?”

“An island.” He took one hand off the steering wheel and dragged the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip, all the while staring straight ahead at the road. “It’s about an hour and a half away. We’re taking a boat there.”

An island! Fuck me. I’d have no chance of escaping. Visions of me swimming to freedom soared through my head. Which was ridiculous. I was an okay swimmer, but the island would have to be pretty close to the mainland for me to make it to safety.

“Hmm,” I said, trying to sound vaguely noncommittal. “Guess I’ll work on my tan. Just what I wanted on my summer vacation.”

“Yeah, there’s a pool. Mickey built this little place so he could fish. But he’s thinking about developing the rest of the island into a golf course or some shit.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Once, when he was showing some investors around.”

“Is it nice?”

He nodded once. “Nice enough.”

“Well, that’s a ringing endorsement. Can’t wait to see it.”

He chuckled. “You’ll be just fine. If I remember correctly, there’s a wall of books.”

“Mickey reads?” I couldn’t hide the astonishment in my voice.

“I have no fucking clue. I don’t think so. They were probably just for show. The house is like a model home, to show investors what the others could look like.”

“They’re most likely fake books.” Then I realized — when I put my sneakers on in that godforsaken tunnel, I’d spotted my e-reader in my duffel. Judith had slipped it inside. At least I had that. I squirmed to face the front. Did the e-reader have internet access? Could I somehow send a message to Judith that way? I pondered this for a few long minutes, then yawned.

It felt like all of the evening’s adrenaline was leaking out of my body. My eyelids grew heavy, and I rested my temple against the cool glass of the passenger window and drifted off.

My sleep was troubled, and I kept jerking awake, as if I were falling. Exhausted and mentally spent, I finally drifted into a deep slumber, where I dreamed of forbidden kisses with a blue-eyed devil, and blood all around us.

* * *

I WAS ALONE IN THE CAR WHEN I AWOKE IN A PANIC.

“W-what?” I said, glancing around wildly. It was pitch black outside, and I thought I heard male voices in the distance. Still half asleep, I tried to scoot down in the seat. What was going on? Where had we parked? Were we in danger? I scrunched my eyes shut, hoping this was all a dream. I tried to draw in a breath but this ridiculous dress was corset-tight. And of course, I was still bound at my wrists and feet, and every time I moved, the plastic sliced into my skin.

I let out a soft groan but squelched it when the male voices came back within earshot.

“Thanks for loading all that stuff up. I’m gonna grab the girl and put her on board.” That velvety voice. It was unmistakably Alessandro’s.

“You need help?”

“Nah, she’s sleeping. I’ll just carry her aboard.”

Aboard? Oh, right. Alessandro said we’d be taking a boat. I peeled my eyes open to see a dock. The moonlight was so bright that it reflected off the water in a single column, like a spotlight.

The crunch of footsteps came closer, and the passenger door opened. Humid air assaulted my skin, which made me a thousand times more uncomfortable than I already was.

“Ah, the princess is awake.”

Without asking, Alessandro reached in and scooped me up, one strong arm under my knees and the other around the middle of my back.

“Wait, what? Stop. Why don’t you just untie me and I’ll walk? Put me down?” My squawk echoed into the night, and the other guy — I didn’t see his face because he was somewhere behind Alessandro, snickered.

“Shut up,” Alessandro hissed. “I’d rather this entire marina not know what we’re doing.”

I pondered whether to scream, but something about his grip on my body, and how he was holding me close to his

chest, gave me pause. It was strangely intimate, but also a little threatening. He was strong, and could probably crush me instantly.

My sleep-addled mind whirred to life. He carried me down a dock and with a surprising amount of grace for someone so muscular, stepped aboard a power boat.

“You sit right here.” He set me down on a bench in the back of the boat, near the wheel. I spotted dozens of grocery bags. Our food?

It was then that I noticed Alessandro had taken off his tuxedo jacket and black tie, and had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. I squirmed in my seat to watch as he used his long legs to hop from the boat to the dock. The other man was standing there, shrouded in a hoodie. I couldn’t make out his face from where I sat, but I did spot Alessandro handing him a set of keys.

The men shook, and Alessandro came back aboard.

“Hey,” I called out sharply. “You should untie me. What if we get in an accident? I’ll drown.”

Alessandro came to me and crouched, so we were at eye level with one another. “I’m not going to let you drown. Okay, princess?”

I glared at him.

He stood and went to the wheel of the boat, turning a key. We chugged off, and after a few minutes, his large hand gripped a lever. He pushed it down, and we rocketed forward, into the moonlit-water.

I’d be lying if I said the breeze didn’t feel amazing against my fever-hot skin. The salt spray on my face stung, but in a way that made me feel alive. And the sight of Alessandro’s muscular, veined forearms wasn’t miserable, either. We skimmed fast over the water, the roar of the engines drowning out all possible conversation. We had to be in the Gulf of Mexico, somewhere off Florida’s west coast.

Could I hurl myself overboard? I’d surely die at this speed, and if I didn’t, I’d drown because of my bound arms and legs.

No, that wasn't what I wanted. Not yet, at least.

We rode like this for what seemed like hours, skimming and bumping against the waves, but it was probably only thirty or so minutes. Finally, we approached land. As Alessandro slowed the boat, I twisted in my seat to get a better view. For a private island, it was pretty big.

The boat sputtered to a dock, and Alessandro jumped off and tied the boat down with thick ropes.

"Don't move," he said, walking off.

"As if I could move. I'm freaking restrained," I said into the night air.

He returned with an oversized cart, and I watched him step back onto the boat and lift each bag to the dock. Then he piled the bags into the cart.

"You know, I could help with that if you untie me."

"I've got it. Stay there." He walked off, hauling the cart.

He did this two more times, filling the cart with the bags. I stared at him wordlessly, my bound hands in my lap. Rather, I stared at his muscular arms, which strained the fabric of his white shirt.

"Like what you see?" He tossed my duffel and a second duffel onto the dock.

"Just great. Trapped with a macho jerk," I whispered, making a disgusted huffing noise and turning away. Then he came back onto the boat and knelt at my feet, a knife in hand.

"I'm going to undo your ankles."

The ridiculous silver dress that was now filthy and torn fell around my legs. With both his hands, he pushed the dress to my knees. The act seemed almost lewd, and my face flared hot. But I couldn't look away. I tried to suppress a shiver at the sight of him near my bare legs, and lifted my Nike-clad feet. He wrapped one hand around my left calf, then snipped at the plastic zip tie. He stood.

I let out a breath and kicked my feet, tapping them on the boat's deck.

“Better?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“Here, let me help you off the boat.” He pointed where I should step up, then off, the boat, and guided me by taking my elbow. Why did I feel tingles every time he touched me? A flash of us kissing in the car — which seemed like a million years ago at this point — came to mind. I shoved it away.

He tugged the cart and I walked behind. My legs felt as though they'd been filled with cement.

The dock ended at a stone path, and I followed Alessandro the short distance to the house. Well, house wasn't the best word. Modern cabin was probably better. It was wooden, and looked like a box. Like something you'd see in some architectural magazine. I squinted at the angular shape and the unusual, floor-to-ceiling windows spanning one entire wall. The lights were on inside, revealing a stark yet beautiful interior.

I realized that he'd probably turned on the lamps when bringing a wagon load inside.

He held the door open, and I stepped in. I heard the wagon's wheels on the wood floor, and the door lock click. I whirled in time to watch him press a button on a remote, and a mechanical blind lowered over the windows. Suddenly, the place seemed even smaller, taken up with Alessandro's muscular body. It was as if there was barely any room for me here, and I took a few steps into the middle of the room. Away from him. I bumped my shin into a low glass coffee table.

“This is it?”

“Have a look around. I'm going to put this stuff away.”

“Uh, excuse me?” I held out my bound hands.

“Oh. Yeah. Here.” He took the knife out of his pocket and came next to me. Close enough that I could smell his cologne, and his unique man scent. His eyes flickered to mine and my

heart rate shot up. Why was my body having this reaction to him? It made no sense.

He snipped the tie off and quickly moved away, into the kitchen area. Rubbing my wrists, I studied my place of captivity. It was luxurious, that much was clear, with expensive appliances in the kitchen and sumptuous leather and cotton fabrics on the furniture.

“This is super small. What the hell?” I frowned. I was in the living room and Alessandro was about ten paces away, in the kitchen. They were both one giant room. We’d be here for two weeks?

I spotted a hallway and made my way there. This must be where the bedrooms were.

I poked my head in the room, then frowned. There was a sleek, modern bed with a blonde wood headboard and footboard, with a soft-looking white duvet. The furniture was sparse and matched the headboard, and a large, framed abstract painting done in blue hues splashed across the wall. It looked like a hotel room — comfortable and minimalist. I let out a sigh.

I walked to the far side of the room. There was a floor-to-ceiling panel of windows here, too, covered by the same mechanical blinds. I wondered what was outside the panel of glass? Perhaps a route to my freedom? A canoe? I’d have to explore in the daylight.

I had a chance of getting a little sleep here, I guess. Until I figured out how to escape.

“I’ll take this room,” I yelled. “Where’s the second bedroom?”

Picking up my dirty ball gown skirt, I padded in my sneakers around the bed. There was another door, and I pushed it open to reveal a large, modern bathroom with a glass walled shower stall, a free standing tub, a sink that looked like a hand-forged, cast iron bowl, and another little room with a separate door for the toilet.

There were no windows in the bathroom, just a skylight over the tub. Normally, I'd be impressed — it looked like something out of a high end spa. But tonight, I wasn't humored. I stalked out to the minuscule living room-slash-kitchen, scowling at the bed on the way.

Alessandro slid a box of pasta into a cabinet. Had to hand it to him, he was one organized mafioso.

“Where's the other bedroom?” I demanded, slapping my hand on the sparkly white granite counter.

He shut the white cabinet door. “There isn't one.”

“There's only one bedroom?” I made a snorting noise. “Well, I guess you'll have to get comfy on the couch. Or the recliner.”

I looked to the sofa. It was a pale yellow leather thing, more the size of a loveseat than a sofa. There was no way he'd fit, but maybe it was a pull out. Not my problem.

A matching recliner sat nearby. Both pointed toward a large flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. Next to it was a built-in bookcase filled with books. I was too exhausted to check out the titles.

He yanked open the stainless steel fridge door and slid at least eight bottles inside. Juice, soda, sparkling water, water, more juice. Guess he wanted us to stay hydrated.

I looked at Alessandro, expecting an answer to my question. His silence was maddening, and I contemplated a hunger strike.

“Okay, then,” I said, plucking my duffel out of the wagon. “I'm going to shower and go to bed. Don't wake me when you use the bathroom or when you have to get blankets or whatever for the sofa.”

I turned in a huff.

“Princess?”

I whirled. “Stop calling me that.”

He licked away the smile that danced on his full lips. “About the sleeping arrangements? I can’t take the chance that you won’t try to escape. We’re going to be sharing that nice king bed so I can keep an eye on you. Which side do you want?”

Chapter Fifteen

ALESSANDRO

GIA CLENCHED HER LITTLE HANDS INTO FISTS. “CAN’T YOU sleep on the floor or something?”

I slammed the cabinet door. “Do you see a spot on the floor in that dollhouse-sized bedroom for me? The bed takes up the entire room.”

Her nostrils flared, and I chewed on the inside of my cheek, trying not to smile. She looked like she’d been through hell. She had been through hell — both of us had. Eye makeup smudged her upper and lower lids, and her plump lips were a faded scarlet. A corresponding color spread across her cheeks. Even disheveled, she was gorgeous. Maybe even more so.

“If you touch me while I’m sleeping, I swear to God I’ll cut your nuts off. I don’t give a crap who you are.”

I laughed. Couldn’t help it. Which made her angrier, from the expression in her dark eyes. “Listen, princess. I don’t touch what’s not mine. You’re Mickey’s fiancé. I don’t care how fucking incredible our kiss yesterday was—”

“Shut up,” she hissed. “Don’t ever talk about that again. And I’m not Mickey’s property.”

She stomped into the bedroom in a cloud of silver fabric. There was no door between the bedroom and living room, just an archway. I heard the slam of the bathroom door and sagged against the kitchen counter.

How the fuck was I supposed to handle two weeks with this woman? She was obviously pissed and scared, and with good reason. It was annoying how Mickey appointed me babysitter, when I should be on my way to Atlanta with him to handle the Russians.

Fuck me. Was this all some sort of elaborate set-up on Mickey's part? Some jacked up loyalty test? Tell me that it was okay to fool around with his fiancée, then see if I'd do it? Was Gia in on the whole plan? I doubted that latter question, though. She was too raw, too emotional, to scheme against me.

No, she hated me, and Mickey. And probably her father. Couldn't really blame her, either.

I heard the pipes in this little place clank as the bathroom shower came on. My mind drifted, thinking about how she'd peel off that dirty silver gown. Was she wearing lacy lingerie? She looked like the type to wear something really frilly and girlish. Super fucking sexy. I let out a groan.

Yeah, that was the last thing I needed, thinking about Gia in lingerie. Or naked in the shower. It didn't help matters that she was stunning. I had to put her, and that kiss yesterday, out of my mind.

This situation demanded all of my focus, and the sooner I figured out what the fuck was really going on, the better. That was the thing about the Mafia — we could spout shit all day long about la famiglia, but when it came down to it, we were a bunch of distrustful assholes. Oh, maybe guys in Italy had loyalty to each other, or mobsters thirty, forty years ago.

But these days, guys were loyal only to themselves. I guess I wasn't much different, although I tried to overlook Mickey's quirks and stay on the straight and narrow with him and our crew. I wasn't going to call that FBI guy, for instance. I was loyal in that sense. But babysitting this chick? It seemed like a slap in the face. But what could I do? Fucking nothing.

I opened the fridge door and reached for a beer, popping the cap open. I took a long pull, then stood there sipping for several long seconds. My muscles ached, as if I'd bench-

pressed two-fifty. I couldn't wait to shower, either, to shuck off this damned tuxedo shirt and these stupid pants.

Was she done in the bathroom? I tilted my head, straining to hear the shower. It was quiet. I bet she was high maintenance. The kind of woman who took hours getting ready. I sighed aloud then finished the beer. If she was in there any longer I'd have to step outside to piss.

I couldn't hear any activity coming from the bedroom. Dammit. There was a skylight in the bathroom. Would she be crazy enough to try to climb on the teak stool in there and attempt an escape? I scratched my head, then noisily threw the bottle into a trash can, hoping she'd hear and be reminded of my presence. I listened for movement. Nothing.

She'd tried to fling herself out of a moving car, so anything was possible. I could easily imagine her trying to hoist herself onto the roof, then jump off. We were on an island, but still. I wouldn't put anything past her.

Swearing under my breath, I strode into the bedroom. The bathroom door was still shut. I approached and pressed my ear to the wooden door.

That's when it flung open, and I almost fell into her. She wore only a white, fluffy towel around her body, and her hair was slicked back and damp. Her long eyelashes were still wet, and her lips thinned in anger.

"What the fuck are you doing? Listening to me shower? Pervert." In a flash, her hand whizzed in the air, her palm connecting with my cheek with a crack.

She slammed the door and engaged the lock.

"Christ," I muttered, then turned to the door. "I need to get in there. Hurry up."

A muffled *fuck you* came from behind the door, and I rubbed my cheek. She hadn't hit that hard, but the lingering sting stirred both annoyance and desire in my body. As gorgeous as she was, she was also difficult. I wandered back into the living room and paced for a bit, inspecting the books on the shelf. She was a little hellcat.

The sound of the bathroom door opening filled the tiny house.

“I’m out of the bathroom and going to bed. It’s all yours.”

I turned out the lights in the living room and kitchen, pausing to make sure the door was locked. One of the other reasons why I felt like I had to sleep near Gia was because — unbeknownst to her — there was a door to the pool and deck in the bedroom. She probably hadn’t seen it because the blinds were down. Not only was I worried about her escaping, but I was also concerned about someone coming inside and hurting her. Fucking with us.

I needed to be near the door, and thankfully when I went into the bedroom, she’d taken the side away from the windows. She’d also lined the middle of the bed with pillows and had rolled herself in a blanket like a burrito, so only her nose and one eye were visible. The overhead light was on, a harsh, white glare.

“I wasn’t listening to you shower,” I said, pausing near her side of the bed. “I wanted to make sure you weren’t escaping.”

“You see that line of pillows,” she said, her voice muted from being under the white duvet. “You’re on one side. I’m on the other. Do not fucking touch me. If you don’t touch me, I won’t escape.”

“Deal,” I muttered, walking beyond bed with my duffel. Christ it was cramped in here. I went into the bathroom. Just as I’d stripped my shirt off, one of my burner phones rang. It was Mickey.

“Hey. You two make it okay?”

“Yeah. We’re fine. Everything’s okay. Vito met me at the dock with the food, we had no issues getting here on the boat, Gia’s in bed.”

I winced. Probably best if I didn’t mention Gia and bed in the same sentence. I didn’t want Mickey to urge me to touch her.

“Good. We’re still here. I’m outside of the cop shop, waiting for Amato. The lawyers are grilling him good. We

should be able to leave for Atlanta tomorrow, though. We'll see."

"Gotcha." I paused. "Listen, Gia's been asking about her friend. Allison? Ashley? Is she okay?"

"Oh yeah. Giorgio's girl. She's fine. Saw her with her father an hour ago, back at Amato's house. Pretty little thing. Nice tits. Listen, can you put Gia on speakerphone?"

"I think she's sleeping."

"Well, wake her up."

Rolling my eyes, I went into the bedroom.

"Oh, Gia," I said. "Mickey's on the phone and I'm putting him on speaker."

There was a rustling in the bed, and her hand shot out from under the covers. She extended a perfectly manicured, red middle finger in my direction.

"Hey, sweetheart," Mickey said. "How you holding up?"

Gia shot up to a seated position, pure hatred in her eyes. She looked younger now that she didn't have on a lick of makeup, but her damp, tousled hair, along with the plain, white-T-shirt, somehow was even more alluring than her bangin' body in a ball gown.

"I'm sleeping," she said in an icy voice. Her eyes roamed down my naked chest, and a little surge of triumph shot through me. I grinned.

She folded her arms and glared at my stomach. Probably shitty to admit, but I was glad I'd been working out a lot lately. I took the phone off speaker and held it to my ear, while rubbing a hand over my abs. I was wearing only black tuxedo pants.

"Listen. Mickey, Gia's in a mood. Probably exhausted. And honestly, I gotta take a crap. Let's talk tomorrow, okay?"

Gia rolled her eyes and I turned, pretended to study something on the wall, giving her an eyeful of my back muscles.

He chuckled. “Fine. Fine. Don’t have too much fun without me, okay? Keep in mind what I said earlier, how you should break her in.”

I turned from the wall and fought the urge to sneer, since Gia was staring at me. I didn’t want her to know that I thought my boss was sometimes the worst human alive.

“Yeah. Gotcha. Thanks, Mickey.” We hung up, my gaze slid to Gia.

“I am not marrying him,” she said in a low voice.

“Hey, that’s up to the two of you.” I held up my hand, palm facing her.

“You’re a pig for talking like that on the phone. But I guess I shouldn’t have expected otherwise.” She sneered at me and smoothed the blankets over her legs.

I sighed. “Oh, hey. He said something you’ll be interested in.”

“What? That he’s going to pimp me out to all his business associates?” She made a gagging expression.

“No. It’s about your friend. Ashley. He says she’s fine, and wasn’t hurt. I thought you should know. I asked him about her, because I thought you deserved to know.”

She froze, and turned her face away from me. When her shoulders began to shake, I realized what was going on.

She was crying. I went to the edge of the bed and sat a respectful distance. She turned in my direction, her eyes puffy and red.

“Um. Thanks for telling me. I’m really glad she’s okay. It’s a big relief, after everything tonight.” She sniffled.

I nodded. Usually women’s tears didn’t have much of an effect on me, but the way sadness seeped from every pore in her body, made my heart clench.

“Get some sleep,” I said in a gruff voice, climbing to my feet. She burrowed into the blankets, so deep that she wasn’t visible.

When I was finally in the shower, under the hot spray, I couldn't stop thinking about her giant dark eyes. About how the faint outline of her nipples was visible under her white T-shirt. About how she'd kissed me fast and fierce. My dick grew hard, thinking of that kiss. Feeling only slightly ashamed, I lathered up, stroking myself in the shower. It was too much, thinking about how I'd love to run the tip of my dick over her tits. Christ. Maybe I was a pervert. I came quick, pushing out my breath and hoping she hadn't heard anything.

Was I any better than Mickey? Lusting after my boss' fiancée?

It wasn't my best moment, but I couldn't stop myself. Still. Better to jack off now and release all this tension and stress. It was going to be a long couple of weeks.

Chapter Sixteen

GIA

I AWOKE TO SUNSHINE. AT FIRST, IT WAS A WELCOME FEELING, warm and comforting. The Florida sun had never let me down.

Then I realized where I was: a strange bed, on an island, with a Mafia underboss. Whose job it was to keep me safe. Or not. I hadn't figured out which, and my sleep-addled mind was immediately jumbled with thoughts.

I blinked several times, taking in the room. It seemed larger, somehow, than it did the previous night. I flipped over on my side. Oh. That was why. The blinds were up, and outside the window was a turquoise blue pool. Intriguing. Beautiful, even. It did look like a spa from this vantage point.

What was missing was Alessandro. His side of the bed was neat and seemingly untouched. While I remembered him climbing into bed — how could I not with the smell of his cologne and freshly showered skin — I didn't recall him getting up or leaving the room. For such a muscular, large guy, he sure was stealthy. That scared me.

I'd fallen into a deep sleep the moment he shut out the light. Which was stupid; he could've done anything to me. I'd been that exhausted, though. Even now, I felt a little drained and tense. How could I not? I had to be on guard every moment in this pretty island hellhole.

The wall of pillows I'd constructed down the middle of the bed still was intact, and I was cocooned deep in the comforter.

My hand went to my chest, then my thigh.

My clothes were still on. He hadn't tried anything with me. My muscles relaxed, and I took a deep inhale. Was that smell...coffee?

My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten for hours. Nearly a day. I'd barely had more than a few bites at the party, which seemed like a year ago. I flipped over, away from the windows and the stunning view, to face the closet. I'd hung my dress there the night before, and I'd neglected to shut the door. Why had I even bothered? I should've burned the damned thing. My eyes landed on the bloodstains on the delicate tulle, and tears sprang to my eyes.

The previous night had been the worst of my life. Even though I knew what my father did, and we had all those contingencies and safe rooms, I'd never been around gunfire before.

At least Ashley is okay...

Shuddering in a breath, I untangled myself from the comforter and went to my duffel, which sat in the corner. For a few minutes I pawed around, beating back tears while checking what Judith had packed. Lots of T-shirts and shorts. Cotton underwear. A couple of bathing suits. Flip flops. She had thought of everything. I grabbed the one light sweatshirt — my favorite, white zip-up hoodie — and a makeup bag. Then I stuffed my feet into the flip flops and went into the bathroom.

I nearly startled myself when I looked in the mirror. Not only was my long, dark hair a rat's nest, but there were deep circles under my eyes. I looked like hell. Possibly the worst I'd ever looked in my life.

I freshened up, brushed my hair, and tied it back into a high ponytail. Feeling marginally better, I shuffled out into the other room.

I was not prepared, in any way, shape or form, for what greeted me: a shirtless Alessandro. He wore what looked like plain blue swim trunks, and was barefoot while standing at the

stove. His back was to me. For a moment, I didn't move because I was so struck by his olive-hued skin. And his muscles. Good lord. How had he gotten so muscular? Had he been in prison? That must be it. How would he find the time otherwise?

I also spied tattoos snaking around his biceps, and on his shoulder blades, but I wasn't close enough to decipher them.

"Do you always cook without a shirt?" I slipped into a chair at the small kitchen table. "I think that's a little dangerous."

He turned, and a feral smile unfurled on his face. Last night his hair had been slicked back, but today it was ruffled and messy. One dark lock flopped down his forehead. "Good morning, princess."

I zipped my hoodie all the way to my throat and swallowed hard. Something about the way he looked at me made me feel exposed. He was the enemy. I couldn't ever forget that.

"Would you like an espresso?" He pointed to a small, silver stovetop coffee maker, the kind my grandfather used back when he was alive. The thought of quality coffee almost made me moan with happiness, but I stifled my reaction because I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of pleasing me.

"Yes, please." My voice was thin, prissy even.

He poured the coffee into a small, white espresso cup and set it in front of me with a small spoon. "Sugar's there on the table."

"Thanks." I heaped three spoons of sugar in, and stirred, then raised the cup to my lips and took a sip. It was heavenly, and I sighed with satisfaction.

"You like?" He stirred the eggs in the pan with a spatula.

"I do. This is a welcome change from the craziness of yesterday."

He nodded once and scooped eggs onto a plate. "Yesterday was a lot. Even for me. I hope we can start fresh today. Here's

my peace offering.”

He put the plate near my espresso. “You need to eat. I noticed you didn’t touch your food during the party last night. You must be starving.”

Good lord, he was observant. I picked up a fork, then hesitated. Why was he being so nice? What was going on? For a moment I wondered if he was going to poison me, but then I saw him eating eggs from a separate plate while leaning casually against the counter. No, he wouldn’t try to kill his boss’ fiancé. At least I didn’t think so.

I tucked into the eggs. They were creamy and delicious. It didn’t take me long to finish.

“Oh, I have toast, too. If you want.”

I dabbed my mouth with a napkin. “Well aren’t you a gracious host-slash-kidnapper?”

He smirked and took my plate. “We’re being nice today, remember? No snark, no punching people, no escaping?”

I bit back a grin. “I’ll admit that coffee and eggs are a nice gesture. And the eggs are delicious. I’ll have more, please. And I promise not to punch you.”

He paused before giving me the plate. “Do you promise not to escape?”

Hell no. “Of course,” I replied sweetly.

“I’m on your side, princess. Think of me as your bodyguard. It’s my job to make sure you’re happy and safe.” He set the plate down.

If that was the case, why did he seem so dangerous? I mulled this as I ate. Realistically, there wasn’t any way to get off this island. That boat ride from the mainland had been pretty long. What if I killed him? Surely he had a gun. I could find the gun and shoot him. And then what?

His boss, my fiancée, would likely kill me. Bad plan. Plus, I wasn’t the violent type, that punch to Donnie’s nose last night notwithstanding.

Alessandro interrupted my thoughts by sliding into the seat across from me. My gaze skittered from the faint hint of stubble on his jaw to the tattoo on his left bicep. I identified a couple of words in Italian.

“I was thinking we could go on a little walk today around the island. So you could see the beach.” He brushed his hair back with his hand.

“Well aren’t you a gracious host.” I fluttered my eyelashes.

His jaw ticked. “We’re going to be here for a couple of weeks, Gia. Might as well get comfortable with each other. Get to know each other. As friends. Only friends. Forget what my boss said.”

No way did I want to get too comfortable with him. Not after kissing him like I did. I didn’t trust the way my body reacted around him.

“Okay. Sounds good. Maybe we should go soon, before it gets too hot? I’ll put on my sneakers.” It was June in Florida, and I guessed it was already pretty steamy out.

I rose and went back into the bedroom — why did this stupid house have to be so small — and slipped on my shoes. Alessandro came into the bedroom. He was wearing a faded grey T-shirt now. It stretched across his broad chest. He seemed to consume all the space in the room.

“We can go out this door. I’ll show you the pool.”

He brushed past me, leaving behind that spicy scent in his wake, one that smelled like something deeply carnal, mixed with terrible decisions. Heat pooled between my legs. Gah. Why did I have this reaction to him?

I studied him as he slid open a glass door. Hunh. There were two exits in the house, a fact that I mentally filed away.

“C’mon.” He beckoned with his hand. I stepped outside and the morning’s humid air slapped me in the face. He slid the door shut then tapped on a keypad on the wall. Everything here was state of the art, controlled electronically. I was trapped.

Alessandro slipped on a pair of sunglasses as he trotted across a wooden deck dotted with tasteful teak lounge chairs.

“The pool’s practically larger than the house,” I said.

He let out a little snort. “No kidding.”

We marched past the pool, down a gravel path, through lush tropical foliage — and ended at a stunning, sugar-sand beach. The electric blue water beckoned, and there was even a red hammock strung between two palm trees.

I had to admit, this was impressively beautiful. Or would be, if I was here on my own accord.

“Nice,” I murmured.

“Mickey bought this entire island. There are ten of these plots, with beach front. He’s planning on building a bunch of little houses. And a golf course in the middle. We found some great investors. Legit ones.”

I winced at the mention of Mickey’s name.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Alessandro said.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know him at all. But what I’ve seen, I’m not impressed.”

“He’s not a bad guy. You could do worse for a husband.”

I shifted away from the water to look at Alessandro. Because of the dark sunglasses, I couldn’t read his expression.

“Could I? I’m not so sure. I think there are plenty of other worthy men my father could have chosen. Instead he picked a man who brought shame and violence on our family.”

Alessandro inhaled. “You know our business. You know anything can happen, at any time. Anyway, if you didn’t want to marry Mickey, why did you go along with it all?”

A question that I’d asked myself a million times. “I didn’t want my father to disown me. It’s tradition. Blah, blah, blah.”

“You mean, you didn’t want to give up your lifestyle. Your monthly allowance.”

I put my hands on my hips and stepped closer. “Hey. It’s not like I spend weekends at clubs and use Daddy’s money for clothes and parties and cars. I got a degree. I did two internships. I volunteered at a shelter for domestic violence victims.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. Even if it’s difficult.”

We stood there for a beat. I glared at him, but he remained impassive, looming over me with his ridiculously big body. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I walked to the edge of the water, stooped down and skimmed my fingers across the surface. It was deliciously warm.

I needed a plan. I needed to figure out how to get out of marrying Mickey. Alessandro was right. I might have to cross my father, risk being disowned, even. Start fresh, with nothing. It would be better than this lifestyle. Until last night, my father’s mafia ties always seemed abstract.

When in reality, they were horrific.

The good news was, I was in a place where I had nothing but time to think. I rose and marched to Alessandro, who was standing near a palm tree, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

He slipped off his sunglasses. Unsettlingly, his eyes were the color of the water. “I have a younger sister.”

“Would you want her marrying Mickey?”

His pause said everything I needed to know. “Gia, I can’t answer that.”

“How come?” I prodded.

“He’s my boss. I have obligations.” He slid the sunglasses back on.

Aha. A fracture in the loyalty. He knew that Mickey was a prick. But didn’t want to admit it out loud to me. Perhaps I could use this to my advantage somehow...

“What? You want to be in charge someday? You want to be the boss of a family? Is that why you have to placate him and his disgusting comments like the ones he made on the phone last night?”

The muscles in his jaw bunched. “Let’s put it this way. If I were a boss, I wouldn’t force a woman who didn’t love me to spend the rest of her life with me. Tradition or not. That’s just me, though. I’m not against arranged marriages, but I believe that if you’re going to marry, you have to do everything in your power to make your wife happy, even if you don’t know her well. But whatever Mickey wants to do is fine. What the two of us do is none of my goddamn business. You’re his property.”

Like hell I am.

A small, triumphant smile crept on my face as an idea formed. Alessandro and his muscles and electric blue eyes might just be the ammunition I needed against Mickey. I could exploit Alessandro’s latent desire for power and skepticism of his boss to my advantage.

A devious plan started to bloom, like a red rose opening in slow-motion. I smiled sweetly. “I think I’d like to get some sun next to the pool and read.”

“Okay.” He sauntered off the beach, and I followed. My brain spun with ideas. What would Mickey do if he knew I slept with Alessandro? During that awful phone call last night, Mickey seemed to encourage Alessandro to “break me in” and be my sex teacher. My virginity was supposed to remain intact, that silly, elusive concept.

So fucking sexist. There was no difference if Alessandro stuck his fingers or his dick into me. The thought sent tingles across my skin.

But what if it went further than just fooling around? What if we slept together? And what if, when we left this stupid island, I told Mickey and my father that I was desperately in love with Mickey’s underboss?

Hmm. Mickey probably wouldn't want to marry me if I was no longer a virgin. That was my bargaining chip. *So gross and patriarchal.* And he certainly wouldn't want the complication of his wife being involved with his second in command. He'd probably kill Alessandro, or at the very least, demote him.

But what did I care? Alessandro wasn't a saint. Without a doubt, he was a killer and a terrible person, just like Mickey. Even if he had a dazzling smile and made great coffee.

My self-preservation was top priority. Alessandro surely would eventually be murdered by another gangster, or he'd end up in prison eventually. Not my problem. He chose this life, just like he'd said.

As disgusting and anti-feminist as it sounded, my options were few, and all came down to sex. By seducing Alessandro now, I'd be taking action that would possibly ensure my freedom later. Was it worth the risk? What were the risks? Hmm. I needed to think.

We arrived back at the house and he unlocked the door.

"I'm going to change into my bathing suit," I said, heading for my duffel. Judith had packed a tropical print one-piece, and a pink bikini. Grabbing my e-reader, I chose the bikini and a flimsy white beach coverup, and went into the bathroom to change.

For good measure, I swiped pink gloss on my lips, and piled my long hair atop my head. If this was going to work, I'd have to be less sullen and tomboyish, and more like a sex kitten. I nearly laughed out loud at the thought — I was so far from that it wasn't even funny.

I wandered out the sliding glass door and made my way to one of the chaises near the pool. I settled in, arranging a towel over the wood seat and setting my e-reader on a matching teak side table. Alessandro was staring at the water, and turned.

"You want a soda?"

I smiled up at him, shielding my eyes from the sun. "Sure. That would be great, thanks. Diet Coke if you have it."

“I think we do. Be right back.”

His smile was so affable, so gentlemanly, so genuine, that I almost felt sorry for what I was about to do. He might be a feared gangster, a Mafia underboss, a murderer.

He was also a man, and most men were weak. It was a gamble, but I wanted to try to exploit that weakness. It was my only chance of getting out of this situation.

Reaching around to my back, I undid the clasp of my bikini top and let it fall to the deck. The sun warmed my naked breasts, and my nipples instantly hardened, in part from the fresh air and the sheer audacity of what I was doing.

A smile crept on my lips as I settled back into the chair, waiting for Alessandro's reaction.

Chapter Seventeen

ALESSANDRO

I POPPED OPEN A CAN OF DIET COKE AND LET OUT A RELIEVED sigh. This wasn't too bad. I could handle this.

Last night as I drifted to sleep, I had serious fucking doubts because of Gia's outbursts, and her sadness. It wasn't something I wanted to deal with. I was an underboss, not a caregiver. Not that I blamed her for being pissed at Mickey and her father. She had every right.

That she was scared and confused? Totally understandable. *This shouldn't be my problem.*

I'd stayed awake half the night, hyperaware of every creak and cricket sound. And of her presence in bed, just feet away (although barricaded in pillows and blankets).

By the morning, the situation had greatly improved, starting with those little grins of hers. She'd woken in a good mood. Sure, she'd displayed a few flashes of feistiness, like when she asked if I was interested in being boss — hell yes I was interested, who wouldn't be — but other than that, she'd been cool.

She was a funny, smart chick. Stunningly gorgeous, too, but I was trying to ignore that part. While we were walking to the beach, I'd made a pact with myself: I was going to treat her like one of the guys. A dude. You know, joke, eat, sit around and shoot the shit. The more I thought of her like a buddy, the less I'd remember about that kiss in my car the

other day. Or about her long, tan legs. Or her giant, espresso-colored eyes.

I cracked open a bottle of water for me, then carried that and her soda out of the kitchen and through the bedroom. This really was a jacked up floor plan, having to go through the bedroom to get to the pool. I'd have to mention something to Mickey about how stupidly small this place was. People needed space. Christ. This place was barely big enough for one, never mind two.

On my way out I grabbed a couple of towels and slung them over my shoulder.

I slid the door closed behind me and turned toward the pool deck. What I saw next stopped me in my tracks.

Gia was stretched out on a lounge chair, her smooth legs extended and one arm casually arranged above her head. Sunglasses covered her eyes, and her pink lips glistened in the sun.

She was also topless. As in, wearing only a tiny little bikini bottom. It matched the color of her lips. For all intents and purposes, she was fucking naked. Her tits were full and round, and her nipples a sexy dusky brown, her string bikini barely covering her snatch.

I swore under my breath in Italian and stalked over to her, standing above her. Christ on a bike, her body was perfect.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” I spat, fighting the urge to dump the bottle of water on her. Then I imagined what she'd look like wet, and my dick stiffened. Which made me even more pissed. I deposited one towel on her midsection, averting my eyes, which were drawn to her chest like magnets.

She removed her sunglasses and set them near her hip on the chair. Her eyes fluttered open and she shielded her face with her hand. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. What the fuck is this?” I gestured to her chest, then sank into the lounge chair next to her, setting the drinks on the small wooden table in between. At least I don't have to stare directly at her. Dammit. I'd left my sunglasses

inside. I focused on the pool water, hoping my erection wasn't visible.

In my periphery, Gia squirmed in her seat, her tits bouncing. I couldn't help my slide my gaze to her. My mind immediately went to the obscene. I let out a grunt. "Put some damn clothes on."

"You know, I spent a couple of summers in Europe and I got in the habit of sunbathing topless. I simply can't be near a pool or beach and wear a full bathing suit. I'm sure you understand, being from Italy and all. For one thing, I hate tan lines. For another—"

"Shut up." I took a long swig of my water. "Shut up and put on your top."

She shifted on her side so her tits were practically eye level. I turned my head in the other direction and studied a palm tree. Then she slung one leg onto the ground so her legs were spread a little. Enough to see that she'd gotten an excellent wax job at some point.

"There's no need to be rude. Why do you have a problem with the female body, Alessandro? Let's discuss."

"I have no problem with the female body." I scrubbed my face with my hand. So much for getting along.

She sighed dramatically. "If you took off your shirt I'd have to tolerate your bare skin. I wouldn't sexualize your chest. So I don't understand why you have to sexualize mine. If you've seen one set of breasts, you've seen them all. It's no different than my legs or arms."

"Yeah, right," I muttered. I snuck a glance at her. Her nipples were little stiff peaks. My mouth began to water.

She blinked slowly, her long, dark eyelashes grazing the tops of her cheekbones. "You really need to chill. They're just boobs."

"Me taking off my shirt is not the same and you know it. Now put on your top."

She took a sip of her soda, then settled back into the lounge chair, sliding her glasses on again. At least her legs were closed now. “There are a lot of interesting legal arguments for allowing women to go topless in public, you know. We discussed this in school.”

I didn’t respond. Probably because my brain was crammed with images of her luscious tits.

“It’s an infringement of women’s constitutional rights not to be discriminated against on the basis of gender. Did you know that?”

No, but I do know that I’d like to take your right nipple into my mouth. Then your left.

She went on for a while about the law, politics, gender and some other stuff. I had to admit that her arguments were impressive and sounded solid. Or maybe all the blood in my brain had drained to my dick and I wasn’t thinking straight.

“Why should I be prohibited from going topless when you’re not?” She waved her hand in the air and her tits jiggled. I licked my lips, but she didn’t seem to notice the agony I was in because she continued. “We actually formed a group at school and held some protests on campus. Topless, of course. Our slogan was, free your boobs, free your mind.”

“Great.” Images of her parading around topless in public came into my mind.

“Interestingly, Florida has ambiguous laws about the issue. But I’m sure you’re over there sexually objectifying me, while I simply want to be comfortable. You try wearing a string bikini in the heat, all those straps and fabric cutting into your skin. See how you like it.” She toyed with the straps of her bikini bottoms at her hips.

How onerous was it to wear a bikini? What was she talking about? I let out a groan. “Listen. It makes me...uncomfortable. I think it’s a little inappropriate, given that you’re Mickey’s fiancée and all.” I swallowed hard. Her scent, which was musky and vanilla, soared straight into my nose and right into

the pleasure center in my brain. I ground my molars together, wondering what her tits would feel like in my hands.

She slid her glasses off and set them on the table next to the drinks. “Aww. I didn’t take you for an old-fashioned gentleman. I’ll just take a quick swim and go inside. Thanks for the soda.” She reached for the glass and took a sip, then gracefully stood up. “In the meantime, just don’t look at me. I’m sure you can refrain. Then again, I’m sure Mickey won’t mind if you do ogle me a little.”

With that, she walked around to the far end of the pool, her ass swaying from side to side. I rubbed my temple with my thumb. She dove off the side into the deep end, leaving barely a splash. Damn her. I stared as she swam below the surface for a few seconds, the flash of her pink bikini shimmering against the bright blue of the water. She popped up and slicked back her hair, then floated on her back. Her tits pointed straight up in the sky, and she bobbed there for a while, eyes closed, soaking in the rays like a sun goddess.

I didn’t even bother trying not to stare. She was just too sexy. Juicy and curvy and everything I loved in a woman. It was as if she was begging me to look at her.

“The water feels so good. Nice and refreshing. You should try it. Might relax you,” she called out, eyes still closed.

That’s when it hit me: the little vixen was teasing me. She *wanted* me to stare. Well, fuck it. Two could play this game. I stood and peeled off my T-shirt, letting it drop to the ground. I took a step toward the pool, locking eyes with her. She turned and swam away from me, doing a flirty little move where she dove underwater and her ass bobbed up for a second.

My hands went to the waistband of my swim trunks, and I tugged them down, past my hips and my hard-on. I went to the pool steps and put one foot on the first step, then the other. When she came up for air, she glanced to me. Her gaze landed on my cock, which was like an iron rod.

The shock on her face left me with a smirk on mine, and I dove in.

Chapter Eighteen

GIA

OH MY GOD.

Alessandro stood at the far end of the pool without a stitch of clothing. The speed with which he'd pulled off his clothes was like something out of a magician's playbook. Then again, I was certain he'd had a lot of practice getting naked around women. Still, I swallowed hard. This wasn't part of the plan. I'd expected him to be so turned on by my body, that he'd do...*whatever*. That he'd do my bidding.

In retrospect, my idea was pretty rotten. Poorly planned. Executed without much thought. *Good going, Gia*. Now there was a sexy-as-hell, murderous mafioso looking at me like I had a tattoo on my chest: *Do Whatever You Want*.

And I wasn't prepared for that *whatever*. At. All. I had an inkling that Alessandro had a pretty good idea of his planned *whatever*, though. And that terrified the hell out of me. I wanted to run. But to where? We were on a freaking island.

He grinned, and heat pooled between my legs. I recalled our kiss in the car, and reminded myself that oxygen was a necessary thing to stay alive.

Everything about him was big and powerful. Muscular, with a sprinkling of dark hair on his chest. Somehow the hair made him seem more masculine and powerful, possibly the most virile human being I'd ever laid eyes on. In previous

years, I'd been attracted to boy band types with smooth faces and doe-like eyes.

Alessandro was the opposite. Feral. Savage. Dangerous. He had hair on his chest and legs and...oh God. There, too. I tried not to look below his waist, but I caught a glimpse for a few beats. I couldn't help it.

Is that what all men looked like? That...big? I'd never seen a man naked in real life before.

A fluttery, wriggly feeling bloomed in my stomach and I watched him dive into the pool, skimming through the water with a quick, stealthy movement. Was it uncomfortable to swim with an erection?

He was coming toward me, and my heart stopped.

What was he doing? What would he do when he reached me? I wanted to move, but couldn't. This part off the pool — deep enough to cover my breasts yet shallow enough for me to have my head and shoulders above water while flat-footed — felt like there was quicksand on the bottom. If only it would pull me under, deep into the earth and away from here.

Alessandro surfaced with a splash, the water hitting my face with a fine mist. I winced. He stood, seemingly looming over me. Although he was easily a respectable two feet away, I could practically feel the heat coming of his hard body.

I backed up.

“You had the right idea after all. There's nothing like being naked in the water, no?” He slicked back his dark hair with one hand and took a step toward me. I inched back, so my shoulder blades were flat against the side of the pool. He was now close enough that I spied the droplets of water on his eyelashes. “I'm not much of a swimmer but this feels pretty fucking amazing.”

When he said the word *fucking*, his gaze dropped to my chest. My eyes followed. Eep. My breasts were bobbing on the water's surface, the nipples so hard that the feel of the water made them almost ache. I bent my knees a little so I was up to my chin in the water. Of course, he could still see everything.

My body was so scorching that I was shocked the water we were standing in wasn't bubbling and boiling.

Should I climb out of the pool now? If I did, I'd have to walk the length of it topless to reach my cover-up, and my earlier bravado had evaporated.

Apparently I'd lost my ability to speak, too, because I couldn't think of a comeback to his statement about being naked. For all my chattiness about the rights of topless women, I was rendered mute by his penis. Okay, screw that. I had to say something.

"I was on the swim team," I lied. I'd taken a couple of summers worth of lessons when I was a kid. "Let's race."

He moved to the side and turned, so he was mimicking my stance against the wall of the pool. "A race?" He sounded dubious.

"I'm pretty fast." I tried to sound confident. Indeed, I swam all the time in my pool back home. I was like a fish, my mom always said. Surely Alessandro wasn't a swimmer. He'd been doing Mafia things most of his life, not training to be the next Michael Phelps.

"I think I'd have an advantage because I have longer arms." He scratched at his chest.

"Well, then give me a head start. It's a big pool." It really was, likely Olympic-sized.

"All right," he said casually. "I'll count down from three, then count another three."

"Deal."

I pressed one foot on the wall, hoping to propel myself far away from him. Once I reached the other side off the pool, I'd hoist myself out and reach for my towel, top and cover up. Still, I felt vaguely ridiculous, challenging him to a race.

"Three...two...one."

I pushed off the wall and tried to power through the water, crawling with my arms and kicking furiously. Every few strokes I tilted my head to the side to gulp in air, like I'd been

taught. I even tuned out Alessandro, who was likely far behind me. Being small had its advantages in the water. Maybe I was a better swimmer than I remembered. I *should've* been on the swim team, had there been one at my school. I was kicking butt.

After what seemed like an eternity, my right hand struck something hard and smooth. For a second I thought it was the wall on the far side of the pool, but the wall didn't have a hand that wrapped around my wrist and didn't have an arm that snaked around my waist.

I flailed about, taking in a bit of water while Alessandro hauled me up against his chest. I gasped, and he chuckled.

“What...what are you doing?” I cried. My heart was racing, both from the exertion and the nearness of him. I got in a soft, wet slap to his chest. “Let me go, you maniac.”

He pulled me tighter against his fever-hot body, his big hand spanning the small of my back. How had he maneuvered me so easily? I imagined him orchestrating my body like that while kissing.

“Relax. I'm not going to hurt you.” His voice was low and growly, his eyes a glittering, menacing blue. “You're a fierce little thing. You shot away like a cannon but I caught up with you immediately. Then you swam diagonally, right into me. I thought you were trying to attack me.”

While obviously trembling in his arms, I glanced around. We weren't at the far end of the pool. So much for my superior swimming skills. We were in the middle. Alessandro was easily able to stand, but I was over my head in water depth. And in other things, too. My naked breasts pressed against his naked chest and my mouth went dry. We were both so... unclothed. I'd teased this brute of a man, and now he'd caught me.

What do I do now?

He was even bigger up close, as if he was crowding me out of the pool with his sheer size. I tried not to think about his cock, all exposed and just inches away from me. I wriggled a

little and my thigh brushed up against something hard. I whimpered.

My chest felt as if it were in that ball gown again, tight and corseted, forcing all the air out of my lungs.

“You sure you were on the swim team?” he murmured. “You don’t seem all that coordinated.”

We stared into each other’s eyes. Gah. His smirk was so arrogant. His blue eyes so crystalline, so intense. He licked his lips as if he was ready to taste me, and I was close enough to feel his breath on my face.

“Princess, I guess I should’ve told you. I was a youth champion swimmer back in Naples, before I came to the States. Won a few medals and everything. There was talk of me training for the Olympics but I kind of fell into another line of work.” A lock of his wet hair flopped adorably on his forehead, and the smirk turned into a full, lascivious grin.

I caught a whiff of chlorine and his spicy aftershave. I despised his swimming ability. I hated his beauty. I also had an irrational urge to run my tongue over his bottom lip.

My nostrils flared and I wriggled out of his grip while letting out an unladylike, soft grunt. Mercifully, he allowed me back into the water like a catch-and-release fish, a move that was charitable on his part. He could’ve done anything with my body, but didn’t. Why? Was it his loyalty to Mickey? Or was he toying with me? The former meant he was a gentleman.

The latter meant I was in deep trouble.

Unsettled, I did a jerky, slow dog paddle to the other side, hauled my body out of the pool with as much dignity as I could. At the lounge chair, I wrapped the towel tight around my chest and gathered the rest of my stuff. My insides hummed with desire and fury.

Without saying a word to him, I walked inside the stupid tiny beach bungalow and barricaded myself in the bathroom. I needed to regroup.

Chapter Nineteen

GIA

I TRIED TO STEER CLEAR OF ALESSANDRO THE REST OF THE day. It wasn't easy, since we were basically staying in a shoebox. And because he was so big, he seemingly took up all the space so there was none left for me. We communicated in one-syllable words and grunts. I couldn't look him in the eye, because I was still scandalized by seeing his naked body.

I also could not get the image of his naked body out of my mind. Which meant I had a problem on my hands.

For a solid hour, I locked myself in the bathroom, washing my face three times, staring at my pores and plucking my eyebrows. I became absorbed in thought, trying to work out a plan of escape — from both this hell island and my predicament with Mickey.

My plan for seducing Alessandro by the pool had ended in failure. It was almost as if he anticipated that I was going to tease him. Or he enjoyed showing off his muscular body. That was it. He spent all that time in the gym and he was a narcissist. He wanted me to fawn over his six-pack abs and the V that framed his hips.

There would be no fawning, not from me. "What a jerk," I whispered into the mirror.

Yeah, I'd have to double down and get more aggressive with my seduction, or abandon that idea altogether. Which would it be? I squirted some vanilla perfume on my wrist.

There was a knock.

“You okay in there?” Alessandro’s growl wafted through the door.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“What are you doing?”

I feigned a loud sigh. “Girl stuff. God. Why are you all in my business?”

He didn’t respond.

When I emerged from the bathroom — I’d changed into a T-shirt and shorts — I grabbed the e-reader in my bag and poked my head into the small living room. He was on the sofa, watching TV, feet up on the coffee table.

“I’m going outside in the shade to read.”

He clicked the remote. “I’ll come with. You planning on getting naked again?”

I chose to ignore his question because I didn’t want him to shed *his* clothes again. Just thinking about him peeling off those swim trunks made my legs rubbery. “You don’t have to shadow me.”

“I do. Can’t have you running off.”

I snorted as I turned to walk back through the bedroom. This was ridiculous, having to pass by the bed to exit to the pool area. It was like a giant neon sign for the two of us, one that screamed, THIS WAY TO THE SEX BED.

“Where do you think I’m going to go? Swim back to the mainland? Try to start the boat and speed my way back?” I held the door for him. He must have a gun, or two, somewhere. Where did he hide them? In his bag? Somewhere else? Would he use it on me if I did try to escape?

“Dunno. Anything’s possible with you.”

“It must suck to have to look after me instead of doing badass mafia things.” With bare feet, I picked my way over a bed of smooth stones. I whispered an *ow*.

“It must suck to be trapped here on an island where you can’t go shopping with daddy’s money,” he retorted with a smile.

With a dramatic sigh, I settled onto a teak chair at a table and gave him the finger. He chuckled.

The table was shaded by a bright blue umbrella. I looked up at him. “You don’t have to sit right next to me, you know.” I waved my hand near the pool. “You can surveil me from over there. Please don’t stand there and loom over me. It makes me nervous.”

“I make you nervous?”

“When you act like that, yes,” I said crossly. “Now shoo.”

He studied me for a beat, and my face grew hot. “You’re really ungrateful to someone who’s just trying to keep you safe.”

I rolled my eyes. He obviously didn’t understand that I was done with it all: my father, my family’s legacy, the mafia princess life. *Him*.

Switching on my e-reader, I angled my body to the side and propped my feet on another chair. Out the corner of my eye I watched him stretch out on a lounger in the shade, like a big predator cat.

For a solid hour, I attempted to get into a thriller novel, but couldn’t. For one thing, it was infernally hot, even in the shade. Alessandro took off his shirt. I scowled in his direction.

“What?” He glanced at me.

I sneered at him, dragging my hand over my brow. Gross. The book didn’t hold my attention, and my eyes kept drifting to Alessandro’s muscular arms. His full lips. That trail of dark hair from his bellybutton downward. Why did he have to be so handsome? He didn’t appear to be sweating at all. Gah.

I stood up. “I’m going inside to nap,” I announced, then marched past him and inside, to the blissfully cool air conditioned house. The entire trip outdoors had been an exercise in futility. Was this how the entire two weeks would

unfold? Us insulting each other, a weird sexual tension hanging in the air? My stomach did somersaults whenever I thought about his smile, his laugh, his kiss.

I flung myself on the bed and burrowed into the covers.

“Want me to wake you for dinner?”

Why did he have to be so attentive? When did mafia guys become so thoughtful? And more importantly, why had my father paired me with a man like Mickey, and not one like Alessandro? No, he'd be worse in the long run. He'd trick a woman like me into thinking he really cared, then do stupid shit, like cheat or go to prison for racketeering. I was better off without a mafia husband, period.

Once I got out of his clutches I was going to run so far from this life that no one would ever find me.

“Gia? Did you hear me? Want me to wake you for dinner?”

I grunted a no and fell asleep.

* * *

IT WAS DARK WHEN I WOKE. IT WAS A DISORIENTING FEELING, knowing I'd slept so hard, for so long. The bedside clock read eight p.m. The exhaustion must have been from all the trauma from the previous day.

I shuffled into the living room-slash-tiny kitchen, where Alessandro was standing over a stove while drinking a beer. The aroma of garlic laced the air, and my stomach rumbled. I had to admit, it was impressive that he cooked twice today. At least he didn't expect me to serve him. Yeah, that wasn't happening.

He set a plate of spaghetti in front of me, then slipped into his chair. I murmured a thanks and looked over at him. “You're not eating?”

“I already ate. You said you didn't want me to wake you.”

I twirled the spaghetti on my fork. “Dunno why I slept so long.”

“Because yesterday was really fucking stressful, that’s why.” He took a swig from a beer.

I shoveled the pasta in my mouth. Goodness, it was amazing. Tangy red sauce that tasted bright and salty. I hadn’t had pasta this good since Mom was alive. I swallowed. “I guess.”

“It’s true. Whenever I’m involved with some, how should I say, incidents, like that, I’m exhausted for a couple of days after. It’s the adrenaline leaving your body.”

“You don’t seem tired now?” He appeared fresh and crisp. And gorgeous. Meanwhile, I must look a wreck.

He let out a low chuckle. “Oh, I’m plenty tired. Between what happened last night, and your sparkling personality, I’m beat to shit.”

I couldn’t help but grin between bites. “You think I’m difficult?”

He lifted one shoulder. “Not the worst I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, so you do spend a lot of time with the daughters of mafia bosses?” There was a subtext in my question: which families did he know, and had he dated any of their daughters.

“Actually, I don’t. Not anything this intimate, anyway. I’m usually doing other kinds of, ah, assignments.”

We locked eyes and my appetite for food vanished. He didn’t need to tell me which kinds of “assignments” I knew they were the deadly ones. This should’ve been a turnoff, and it was. Mostly. There was a little, perverse part of me, however, that was titillated. Probably some misguided and unresolved daddy issues. I resolved to work it out in therapy once I finally got settled.

I speared more pasta. “So you live in Miami, do Mickey’s bidding, and what else? Tell me more about you. Gym, beach, bimbos at clubs?”

He laughed. “Thank you for thinking so highly of me.”

“Am I wrong?”

He scratched his head. “Not entirely. But I will tell you this: I live with my younger sister. We share a big condo on South Beach.”

Ooh, now this was interesting. Better to quiz him about his sister than let the sexual tension hang in the air. “What’s her name?”

“Lucrezia. I call her Lucy. She’s three years younger than me. She’s a jewelry designer. You two would probably get along. Talk about feminism and shit.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “She knows what you do for a living?”

“Of course. I mean, I don’t tell her a lot of details. But it’s kind of in our blood, you know?” He eyed me, and I swallowed my pasta. “It’s in your blood, too, whether you like it or not. You can’t run from your heritage, Gia.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said, standing up to carry my plate to the sink. “Thanks for the pasta. It was really delicious.”

“Tomorrow night you cook.”

I turned to him. “Not sure if either one of us wants that.”

He let out an exaggerated sigh. “What kind of Italian wife are you going to be if you don’t cook?”

I grinned as I washed my dish. I wasn’t going to be anyone’s wife ever, so it wasn’t going to matter.

* * *

OUR DINNER CONVERSATION SEEMED TO DIFFUSE A BIT OF THE tension between us, and we settled on the sofa. I was on one end, he was on the other.

“Want to watch a movie?” He reached for the remote.

“Sure.”

“Any preferences?”

“Nah. I’m open.”

“I like this easygoing Gia.”

Was he flirting? I couldn't tell. So I kept my mouth shut as he found a movie that was just starting. It was called "Midsommar," and I immediately regretted allowing him to choose. It was gory and violent, a psychological head trip.

"This is freaking terrifying," I whispered halfway through. Somehow I'd squealed and squirmed enough to shift to the middle cushion, and Alessandro was sprawled out, taking up way more space than he should.

At one particularly disturbing scene, I moved closer, folding my knees into my body. "What the hell is this movie?" I muttered.

He extended his arm, allowing the back of his forefinger to graze my bare upper thigh. "Want to stop watching?"

"No, I need to find out how it ends."

He continued to stroke my leg. My heart raced in response, and soon I wasn't thinking about the terrifying movie. I was concentrating only on Alessandro's fingers, and how I wanted him to touch me everywhere like that. I figured that at any moment, he'd turn and kiss me. That's what guys did; they signaled that they were about to make a move with a pre-kiss caress.

Would I allow him to kiss me? My mind spun with possibilities as the movie ended. Yes, this was my only chance. I needed to get him on my side in order to escape. I shifted closer, and he covered my knee with his big hand. *Here we go.*

The movie's ending was disturbing, but I shut that out, too focused on my plan. As the credits rolled, I arched my back, pressing my breasts toward his arm. But he shot off the sofa so quickly that I nearly lost my balance and face-planted into the cushion.

"Well, I'm headed to bed." He stretched, and the hem of his T-shirt rode up, revealing his abs, then strode into the bathroom. No after-movie discussion? No banter? *No kiss?*

What the hell?

Similar to the previous night, I barricaded myself with pillows. But tonight was far different, because I lay awake, wondering why I felt so disappointed that he hadn't kissed me on the sofa. His touch had left me keyed up and needy. Making matters worse, he hadn't even said good night, just had slipped between the sheets and rested his forearm over his eyes.

I listened for what seemed like hours as his breathing became heavier. I was wide awake, of course, having slept most of the day and into the night. Stealthily, I shifted onto my side and eased one pillow down. He was on his back, his face in profile. Since it was dark, I couldn't see much of him. But I could feel his presence, an instinctual, primal sensation.

He let out a soft snore. I inhaled a silent, deep breath, then spent several long minutes thinking about my next move. It was time to execute the new plan.

I sat up and wailed, pretending to sob. As if I was woken by a nightmare.

Yep. I was the damsel in distress. Didn't all men love that? I was both shameless and ashamed.

"What? What's wrong?" His tone was fierce and protective, and that sent triumph and desire pinging around my brain. He sat up and pulled me into his chest. Ooh, he was *shirtless*. A detail that I'd somehow overlooked.

"I...I fell asleep and had a nightmare. It must have been the movie," I whimpered.

"It's okay. It was my fault. Bad choice for picking that after what happened at your party. I'm sorry." Tenderly he drew me close and eased us both down, so that he was lying on his back and I was on my side, folded into him. His body was hard and warm, and I melted into him like a caramel on a hot sidewalk.

I shuddered in a breath. "I'm sorry for waking you."

One of his arms snaked around my shoulders, and he worked his hand into my hair. Sparks shot through my body. I

snuggled into him and let out a little cry. “It’s just been a lot. You’re right. I think everything’s catching up with me.”

I even wiped my nose on his bare chest for dramatic effect. And because I wanted to get as close as possible to his spicy man scent. Shameless? You bet. Shameful? That too. But I was in survival mode. At least that’s what I told myself.

“Shh,” he whispered, his other hand skimming my thigh. His touch made me tremble for real, and his voice was drowsy and sexy. “You’re safe with me. Just go back to sleep, princess.”

If he knew what I was about to do, he didn’t let on. There in the darkness, I shifted so my mouth was near his chiseled jaw, and pressed my lips to his stubble-roughened skin.

Chapter Twenty

ALESSANDRO

“GIA?” MY VOICE WAS A HOARSE WHISPER. “WHAT ARE YOU doing?”

Is she kissing me? *Sweet baby Jesus, don't let her kiss me. I don't want any more challenges to my willpower. Not today.*

Her lips were cool against my cheek. “Thanking you for not getting upset that I woke you up.”

“That's quite a way of thanking me, princess.”

She hummed and snuggled closer to me, pressing her hips into my body. I was on my back, fully holding her in my arms now, while she was curled around my body on her side. Her delicious full tits pressed into my torso, with only a flimsy tank top separating us. I'd been thinking about those tits all day, ever since that little exhibition at the pool. This had been a hella exhausting day, filled with sexual tension and pent-up need. Truthfully, all I'd wanted was to sleep the night away, to have a pause from Gia's smart mouth and curvy body.

A pause wasn't in the cards, apparently.

Her bare right leg curved up and on top of my hips, her thigh settling softly on my dick. Which had turned into an iron rod of need. I groaned softly and subtly pressed my erection into her skin. She pressed back. I could almost come in my underwear if this kept up.

Against all logic, I tore my hand away from the back of her bare leg. She was wearing a pair of tiny shorts, and my fingers itched to slide my fingers all the way up and cup her ass, finger her pussy from behind. I deserved a medal for the self-control I was exhibiting right now. Christ. I attempted to inch away from her, but was trapped between the edge of the bed and her hot little body. She moved her thigh every so softly up, then down, up, then down, in a maddeningly slow cadence. It made me suck in a breath from sheer want.

There was no way Gia was a virgin. She was too focused, moved too sensually. She was in full-on seduction mode and frankly, I didn't know how to feel.

I adored sexually confident women, and her desire made me want her even more. Somehow, she'd picked up on that and was exploiting it by rubbing against me. She probably wanted to see how much I could take before I morphed into a dominant caveman. A man could only handle so much teasing, and she likely knew that. Evil little vixen. My horniness was in danger of beating my better judgment to death.

And then my boss would beat me to death...

The fact that it was so dark in this room made what was happening seem even more taboo. The attraction between us was wrong, pure and simple, and I tried to remind myself that. Repeated it in my mind. And then she brushed her lips over my jaw and all I could think was, *fuck, she's got the perfect mouth for sucking.*

"Um, Gia?"

"Yes, Alessandro?" Her tone was clear and innocent, but I'd bet money that was all an act. I didn't care. The combination of her guileless voice and the way she was stroking my dick with her leg was almost too dirty for words. Made me feel like a pervy old dude.

"You're too young for this. For a guy like me."

She giggled. "I'm twenty-one, and you're only like five or six years older."

I inhaled. “You’re a virgin. Or supposed to be a virgin. I have my doubts, though.”

She nuzzled my cheek with her nose. “That’s right. I am a virgin. What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m not prepared to take your virginity.” I swallowed hard, because I couldn’t deny that being her first held a certain perverse appeal.

“Why don’t you let me handle what I’m prepared for? It’s my body, not yours. Just because I haven’t had p-in-v sex doesn’t mean I haven’t done other things.” Her tone took on an edge, like it had earlier in the day.

“P in V?” I asked weakly.

“Penis in vagina.”

“Oh.” I felt a little dumb.

“I’m experienced in my own way. I have a vibrator, give myself orgasms. Just haven’t fucked a man. I choose who to fuck, and when. And I’ve chosen you. Deal with it.”

Had she been any other woman, I’d have flipped her over, pinned her wrists and rammed into her with everything I had. But she was my boss’ fiancée, and despite his perverted pleadings, she was off limits. I couldn’t fuck her, period. There was loyalty in the Mafia, and sharing a man’s fiancée wasn’t part of our code. Even if Mickey said all that shit, even if he gave his twisted blessing for some blow jobs, I was a better man than that.

Wasn’t I?

She exhaled, a breath that sounded more like a pleasurable sigh. My dick grew even harder, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Pure torture.

“Sleep,” I croaked. “Please. I beg you. Go over to your own side, stack up the pillows, and sleep.”

Her arm, which was previously resting at her side, snaked to my bare chest. Without thinking, I covered her hand with mine. She kissed my neck once. Twice. Three times. Small pinpricks of sweat formed on my forehead. I’d cranked the air

down before heading to bed. Was it not working? Suddenly the room seemed too warm, too small.

“Stop.” I tugged at her hair. “Now.”

She raised herself onto her elbow, the motion sending a little wave of vanilla-scented perfume in my direction. “Why? You don’t want me?”

“You know that’s not true.” I disentangled myself and rolled onto my side, facing her. There. A couple of inches of space. Maybe my dick would deflate. I exhaled the breath I didn’t know I was holding.

She softly traced my eyebrow with her thumb, skimming down to my cheekbone. “Then what is it?”

“Do I need to remind you? Never mind your age, or the fact you’re a virgin. You’re Mickey’s fiancée. That’s a big fucking deal. Do I need to remind you that he’s my boss?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not Mickey’s anything, and never will be,” she whispered, leaning in to kiss me.

At first I didn’t kiss back, but then I gave in. I was not a better man. I was weak in the wake of Gia’s assault on my mouth. Unlike our kiss in the car, this was soft and languid, sensual and erotic. I was in deep shit, because it felt fucking incredible. Even better than that first kiss. It was as if I never knew I needed a kiss like this, and now that I had it, never wanted it to end.

“I’m serious,” I protested in between kisses.

“I’m Gia. Nice to meet you.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, which then inspired me to draw her closer, my hand on the back of her neck. Our kiss grew deeper, with tongue, and soon our mouths turned fierce. She stroked my neck with those expert little fingers, and all I wanted was for her to do that on every square inch of my body. This was a war, one between my rational mind and my traitorous body.

I rolled her onto her back and she spread her legs. “Fuck, yeah,” I muttered, nestling in between, my cock straining at

my boxer briefs. She inhaled sharply when I ground my hard length into her, her small frame taking everything I could give. We kissed, deep, and our bodies writhed together, our movement filthy and animal-like. If we weren't separated by two layers of fabric, I'd be balls deep inside her by now.

"That's what you want, isn't it?" I growled.

She answered with a mewl and a savagely hard kiss. I shivered, ever so slightly.

My hand went up her shirt and cupped her breast roughly. Jesus, it felt even better than I imagined, firm flesh encased in velvet. She shimmied her tank top off, and my mouth went to her other nipple. I bit it softly. She let out a little cry, which made me want to bite harder. I didn't, though. Maybe later. How could one woman's skin smell so good? I licked her breast, then licked again.

To my surprise, she pushed her shorts down. Oh, fuck. Now I was in deep. Maybe too deep. I had to keep my briefs on. Sure, we'd fool around a bit. But I couldn't fuck her. Wouldn't. Already a pit of shame burned in my stomach. This was so fucking wrong. Sex was a bridge I couldn't cross.

I sucked on her nipple while she ran her nails down my back. No, this was so fucking *right*. I'd had a lot of women in my life, but never one I wanted so much. It was scary how much I wanted her. I wanted to control her, to dominate her, to make her mine. It was a heady, crazy feeling, one that sent my heart into overdrive. I wanted to imprint the feel of her skin in my brain so I could guard that sensation for years to come.

My hand spanned her stomach and went lower. Each new inch of skin I traveled racked up a greater sin.

"Fuck, I need you," I bit out, resting my body to the side so I'd have better access to her body.

"Then take me, because I need you, too." She spread her legs. In the dim light of the room, I could only see parts of her body. The good parts, like the curve of her hip, the swell of her breast. The perfectly groomed patch between her legs. My mouth watered. My brain screamed *no*.

“How wet are you?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Why don’t you touch me and find out?” Jesus, she was making this too easy. I didn’t care, though. Maybe I could give her *a little* of what she wanted...Just a touch, or a taste. For her pleasure and my own. I know — I could get her off and then stop. Maybe that would satisfy both of us.

My fingers delved lower, stroking the small patch of silky hair on her mound. As I skimmed my fingers over her pussy lips, my brain took a singular, tactile snapshot of the moment.

This was a huge fucking mistake. But I couldn’t stop, not when my fingers dipped between her folds, not when I found her clit and brushed against it, not when I savored all that perfect wetness. I stroked her clit with a little more pressure, burying my face in the hollow of her neck.

“Nice and wet. That’s going to feel real good when I slide my cock inside you.”

She ground her pussy into me, as if she couldn’t get enough. That’s what sent me over the edge. She was on board a hundred percent, Mickey be damned. There was no turning back now, only barreling forward with the attraction that burned since the moment we laid eyes on each other on that desolate road. I stopped rubbing her clit and plunged a finger into that hot, tight channel of hers. She gasped sharply, and cried my name, her desire-fogged tone evaporating in the dark of the bedroom.

Breathing heavy, blind with sexual hunger, I tilted my mouth to her ear. I barely had any control over what I was saying, much less what I was about to do.

“I’m going to make you come, and then I want to fuck you nice and hard, right...” I slid a second finger inside. Christ, she was tight and swollen, a perfect combination. “...right here. That’s what you want, too, isn’t it? You want me to be your first? Say it. I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want,” she said in a breathy voice. “For you to be my first.”

Okay, I guess I would fuck her after all. It would be a mistake, that was obvious. I'd go against the wishes of my boss, the morals of my *famiglia*, and my own solid conscience.

I didn't give a shit.

She was that perfect, that much of a rare creature. I'd lost all reason and common sense in the span of a half hour.

I was a man known for my control, and with Gia, I had none.

Chapter Twenty-One

GIA

FOR SOME CRAZY AND UNKNOWN REASON, I'M THINKING OF MY senior poetry seminar as Alessandro ravages my body with his hands and devours me with his kisses.

Rather, I'm thinking of a poem we studied in class, one that I hadn't understood until this very moment.

Go to the limits of your longing, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote.

Was I at my limit? It certainly felt like it. I imagined being atop a mountain, a high one, surrounded by air and clouds. Should I jump, into the unknown? Or should I carefully, slowly, find my way back to reality?

His fingers, exploring me, teasing me, driving me to the very edge, well, it was both sublime and terrifying. No guy had ever touched me there. Or at all. It was as if we'd accelerated in that Maserati of his, from zero to a hundred in two seconds. I was in over my head, I knew that much. Careening down a dark and dangerous road.

Part of me wanted to fling him off me, to scream and yell and tell him to fuck off, that I wasn't ready for a physical sensation this intense. Especially not with a brutal man like him.

But I'd courted this. Begged for it, even. I knew what I was doing when I wore a flimsy tank top and little shorts into bed, and was fully aware of what might happen when I kissed him first. The ends justified the means, I'd rationalized.

I hadn't anticipated this, though. Didn't think I'd actually enjoy what he would do to me. I assumed I'd take pleasure in his kisses but the rest would be too awkward and absurd. This was neither. This left me with a jumble of emotions and a hunger I'd never be able to sate.

"It feels good, doesn't it, princess?" he murmured in my ear, as if reading my thoughts.

Feels good? Feels incredible. Addictive. Perfect. It's downright terrifying.

"Princess?" he repeated. "You okay?"

I shuddered in a breath and gave an affirmative little squeak in response. His fingers circled my clit and I gasped. Good lord, he had big hands and thick fingers and he was touching me like he owned that part of my body. Exploring every fold and valley, even the deep, dark places I'd only ever touched myself.

"So fucking wet," he ground out. That's when he hauled me up to sitting, so I was on my knees. He was, too, and positioned himself to my side. Probably to give him better access to my body. With one of his big hands, he took my jaw and drew me to him, kissing me ferociously. He stopped, his lips an inch from mine. The room was silent save for my breathing. It was as if I was trying to drag more of his scent into my body.

He swept my hair from my front to my back, in a gesture that was so shockingly tender and intimate that it made my heart thrash in my chest even harder. There were many secrets inside this man, I just knew it. The question was: did I dare to uncover them?

I leaned to kiss him, so our tongues met and swirled. His fingers delved back into me, one hand teasing my clit and the other, cupping my ass and entering me from behind. I'd never felt so dirty, or so worshipped.

It was a good thing the room was dark.

"Oh," I whispered, over and over.

His mouth was pressed against my ear and I could feel both his hot breath and his smile on my skin. “You really like that, I can tell. Are you going to come for me?”

My mouth parted. I couldn't believe the things that were coming out of his mouth. Oh, sure, back in college I pretended to be a badass and swore like a sailor. But I never dreamed a man would say those things out loud to me while touching my most intimate places. He pulled his hand from between my legs. I whimpered, positively throbbing from his touch. Why had he stopped? I wasn't *through*.

“Yes, Alessandro. But don't stop. *Please*.”

His hand, covered in my own juices, was at my face. He jammed his two wet fingers into my mouth. “Taste yourself.”

I could do nothing but suck my own sweet-salty taste from his skin. My hand reached for him, groping the darkness, needing to feel the part of his body I'd seen earlier in the pool. Not really knowing what I was doing — for I'd never touched a man, either — I found his cock. Through the fabric of his boxer-briefs, I rubbed the best I could. He was giant, and hard.

He slipped his fingers out of my mouth and I turned to kiss him, wanting to tease him like he'd teased me. His breath grew heavy as I stroked. When I moved my hand up to his abs and touched the warm, taut skin around his bellybutton, he drew in a sharp breath.

“Gia.” His voice was strained, more so than before.

I trailed a finger back to the elastic of his underwear. If I tugged them down, he'd be naked. There would be no going back. I again stroked his cock through the fabric, and he groaned. I moved closer and nipped his bottom lip, kissed the smooth skin of his neck, my bare breasts brushing against his chest. The skin-to-skin contact sent a shower of sparks through my body and I nibbled and bit and licked all the way up to his ear.

In a flash, he pinned me to the bed. The move was so sudden and quick that I gasped. His hands were tight around

my wrists, too tight.

“That hurts,” I cried out.

“Gia. We cannot do this. We have to stop. Now.” His Italian accent was thicker now, his tone rough and menacing.

He released my hands. I remained still as he grabbed a pillow and climbed out of bed.

“Where are you going?” I propped myself up on my elbows, my mind reeling from sexual hunger, and confusion.

“Sofa,” he barked.

My gaze followed his silhouette out of the room, and I flopped back onto the bed.

What the hell just happened? I tried to regulate my breathing as I lay there, naked. My body still throbbed from his touch, my lips stung from his kisses. And my pride was battered. Why hadn't he wanted me? Why had he just rejected me?

I pondered whether I should go into the living room and hash it out. I could make tea, or we could share a beer, and talk. Hmm.

Alessandro didn't seem like the kind of man who would talk about his feelings over a cup of tea in the middle of the night. If he was finished with me, that was that.

Or...

Perhaps I'd unsettled him so much that he wasn't sure how to handle the situation. Any man without morals would've simply fucked me and rolled over to sleep. Alessandro had proved that he wasn't just any normal man. He was one with a conscience. Which meant that he might be able to help me escape from Mickey's clutches.

And I could lose my virginity to him, too. Seemed like a win-win for me — if I could keep a straight head and not do something stupid like develop a massive crush on him. Or not piss him off so much that he killed me. It would be a fine line with him, appealing to his better angels. I didn't think he would dare hurt me, but the way he pinned me on my back just

now meant that he wouldn't hesitate to use some force to get his point across.

Truthfully, I was a little scared of him.

I pulled the comforter over me and spread out in the big bed. Alessandro's scent was everywhere, and it made me feel weak, boneless. My eyes fluttered shut and I willed away the pulsing, needy feeling in my pussy.

Another line from that Rilke poem floated into my mind.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ALESSANDRO

I WOKE AT THE ASS CRACK OF DAWN.

Sleep had been impossible on this minuscule sofa. When my eyes peeled open, my body was already in agony, as if I'd been in the gym for hours. A cramp shot through my right calf, my left shoulder twinged with pain, and to top it off, I was horny as fuck. My dick was so hard that I groaned a little as I climbed to my feet.

First I tried distracting myself with coffee, TV and a bowl of cereal. That worked a little, for about an hour. I paced outdoors for fifteen minutes, listening to the birds and the nearby lull of the surf, trying to block out memories of running my hands over Gia's naked body. Dark thunderclouds lined the horizon, and I suspected we were in for a downpour. Which meant we'd be trapped inside that tiny house together today. Fucking great.

I checked my phone, steeling myself for a text from Mickey. Nothing. Part of me had hoped he'd gotten in touch, asking me to take Gia off this godforsaken island and back to where she belonged. Last night had been hot as hell, but I needed distance from her — exactly what I wouldn't get by being here in this tiny house on a goddamned island.

A larger part of me dreaded talking to him, because I suspected he'd ask if I'd touched his fiancée. Worse, it seemed as though he got off on that shit, a fact I hadn't previously known about him. The thought of him getting aroused by

knowing I'd touched his fiancée made my stomach churn with disgust.

Hey bro. How's it going? Any word on when we can get out of here? I texted. We'd been here two days, and it felt like two weeks already.

An hour later, I received a return text. It was a photo, of two young-looking women sleeping in a hotel bed. **We're still working this situation here in Atlanta. Might be a while. Enjoy yourself. Seriously, it's a shit show here. Sit tight.**

Goddammit. This was exactly what I didn't need: more evidence that Mickey would be a shitty husband for Gia. Why couldn't he have been instantly in love with her? Faithful and protective? Jealous and possessive?

That's how I'd be if she were mine. Never in a million fucking years would I leave her on an island with a guy like me. And I'd absolutely never give the go-ahead for another man to touch her. Hell, already I didn't like the idea of anyone else touching her.

Christ. More than anything, I wanted to be back in my Miami condo, lying on my expensive leather sofa and watching the Yankees on TV. Alone. Was that asking too much? Apparently it was. This was purgatory, being here with Gia.

Who I actually liked. If she wasn't Mickey's, I'd definitely fuck her. No, I'd want more, because she deserved it. Not that I'd ever had a real girlfriend. I was more the one-or-two night stand kind of guy.

But Gia, she was different. And she was the only other human being on this island.

Hilarious fucking joke, universe.

I stalked into the bathroom, trying not to look at her sleeping form in the bed along the way. Of course I beat off in the shower, and that helped my mood a little.

Still edgy, I emerged from the bathroom and passed by the bed. I paused for a second, pretending to search for something in my duffel that was on a chair. Gia was just feet away,

sprawled with a pillow over half her face, her plump pink lips parted. One of her tan legs snaked outside of the comforter and I wondered if she was as naked as when I left the bed. My dick grew hard when I thought about how I'd stroked her pussy.

She let out a soft grunt and pulled the pillow down. Her eyes fluttered open — something about those long, dark lashes made my stomach clench with desire — and her gaze landed on me.

“Are you watching me while I sleep? Creeper. Get the fuck outta here.” She burrowed into the covers.

I stifled a grin as I walked out of the bedroom. Oh, so despite the kissing and the dirty talk and the fingering last night we were back to *this*.

* * *

SHE STAYED IN BED FOR HOURS AND I REMAINED IN THE LIVING room, becoming absorbed in a western movie marathon. The sky turned dark and the rain made sharp taps on the tin roof of the little bungalow. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Yeah, we were trapped today.

I heard the shower run, then footsteps, then the faint creak of the bedsprings. She was really going out of her way to avoid me. I poked my head in and saw her lying up in bed with her e-reader.

“You want coffee?” I pointed with my thumb toward the kitchen.

She stared at me, a flush creeping over her cheekbones. “That would be nice, thanks. Maybe with a little splash of that Baileys I saw on the counter.”

I poured her a cup and spiked it with the cream liquor as she requested, then put a few of cookies on a plate.

By the time I returned to the bedroom she was sitting up. The bedsheet was pulled up and over her breasts, and she was wearing a long-sleeved, black T-shirt. I set the coffee and cookies on the nightstand.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

I paused and looked down at her. “Listen, about last night—”

She stared at me, hard. “What about it?”

“I feel like I should be chivalrous and apologize.”

She reached for the coffee and took a sip. “That’s a misguided sense of chivalry. I wanted it. Asked for it. Begged, even.”

“I just take tradition seriously.”

She snorted. “You know who else took tradition seriously? My dad. And he gave me away to Mickey. How do you think that makes me feel?”

Now I couldn’t meet her gaze, thinking of Mickey in bed with two women just this morning. What a prick. “Not great, I’m sure.”

“Not great. That’s an understatement. It makes me feel like hell, Alessandro, on so many levels. All I want is to have agency over my own choices. And I’m pissed at myself because I should’ve fought harder against the whole stupid arranged marriage thing. Then I’d be free to fuck you or whoever I wanted.” She let out a bitter laugh.

An irrational wave of jealousy washed over me at the thought of her fucking whoever she wanted. “Listen. I just wanted you to know that I’m not a total piece of shit who is trying to take advantage of you. That’s all.”

“Would it matter if you were?” Her stare was a challenge.

“It would to me.”

“Hmph.” She took another sip of her coffee. “You know...”

I sat on the edge of the bed. “What?”

“I mean, we could just continue where we left off last night. Why not?”

“I don’t think it works that way,” I muttered.

“Maybe we’d diffuse the tension and then we wouldn’t want each other anymore.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Why?”

I licked my lips and noticed her gaze dropped to my mouth. “Because something tells me that once I’m balls deep inside you, I’m going to probably want to do it more than once. Which would be a problem because of Mi—”

“Don’t say his name.” She grabbed a cookie. “Anyway, never mind. Watch your movie out in the living room. I’m going to read some more. Shoo.”

She waved me out of the bedroom.

Our conversation felt unresolved, but what could I do? My dick wanted to surrender. My brain was still somewhat functioning and told me not to give in.

A half hour later, just as it was getting dark because of the storm outside, she wandered out in that tight, black top and the tiniest pair of white shorts I’d ever seen. I shifted on the sofa, every cell in my body screaming to get up and kiss her. I tried to focus on the TV but my eyes kept drifting to her in the kitchen.

“You want a turkey sandwich?” she asked.

I grunted a no. “I’ll take a beer, though.”

The thunder sounded closer now. It was going to be a long night, and I might as well take the edge off. She brought the beer to me, twisting off the top while standing in front of me. Jesus Christ, she wasn’t wearing a bra. I took a sip as I watched her sashay back into the kitchen. She made her sandwich, cracked open a beer of her own, and sat at the table.

I pressed a button on the remote and tried to concentrate on the explosions and car chases. A little difficult when I kept getting whiffs of Gia’s vanilla-scented perfume, which made me think about last night. Which instantly turned me on.

Christ, this was some next-level torture, something that dictators and shit should deploy during wartime.

As I tried and failed to concentrate on the movie, Gia flitted around the room. First she sat next to me on the sofa. Then got up to grab a bowl of chips. She inched closer to me and offered me chips, and I declined. She went into the bedroom to find her e-reader, then sighed and wriggled on the sofa cushion next to me. I paused the movie and turned to her.

“Can’t you sit still?” I asked.

She shot me a withering look. “Jeez. You don’t need to be mean. I’m trying to get comfortable and find something to read.”

I pointed at the far wall, where the built-in shelves were lined with books.

“That’s a good idea.” She launched herself off the sofa and I stared at her ass while she bent over and stretched, looking at books. A loud boom of thunder rolled over the bungalow and she glanced over her shoulder at me.

“Oooh, scary,” she whispered in a fake, terrified voice, then slowly bent over to inspect a book at hip height.

Jesus, she was a tease.

“Look at this one.” She slid a slim book off the shelf and . “Twenty questions to fall in love.”

“Great. Just what we need.”

“You don’t believe in stuff like this?”

“Please. Of course not.” I took a slug of my beer.

“Okay, we’re doing this. I’ll ask you a group of questions now. And for the record,” her grin was positively devilish, “I don’t believe in crap like this either. But since I don’t see any board games, this will have to do.”

“I was watching this movie.” I pointed to the screen.

She sank next to me on the sofa, book in one hand and beer in another. “Pfft. You’ve probably seen movies like this a thousand times. How many explosions can you watch?”

“Plenty.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Okay, here goes. I’ll ask the questions, you answer, then I’ll answer. First one. If you could invite anyone over to dinner, living or dead, who would it be?”

“Ahh…”

“Answer quick. Off the top of your head.” She snapped her fingers.

“Jesus, you’re rushing me. Okay, Al Capone.”

“Not very inventive, but true to form. For me? Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”

Where the hell was Gia going with all this?

“Question two: would you like to be famous?”

“Hell no.”

“My answer exactly. Question three: before making a phone call, do you rehearse what you’re going say?”

I paused. “No.”

“I do.” She took a sip of her beer. “What is a perfect day for you?”

“Checking my bank account and seeing lots of zeros, a run on the beach at home in Miami, Yankees game, platter of stone crabs, an amazing blow job from a beautiful woman.”

Her eyes widened in shock.

“You asked, princess. What’s yours?”

“Exploring bookstores in New York in the morning, then brunch. It would be fall and chilly, but not too cold. Cold enough to wear a thick sweater and boots hold hands with someone who loves me.”

“That sounds pretty nice, too. If it ended in a blowjob.”

“Pig.” She laughed, and I swear to God, she looked radiant when she did.

“Okay, last question for today, Alessandro. Do you have a secret hunch on how you will die?”

My grin faded. “Don’t you think that’s a little close to home, after what happened the other night?”

The color drained from her face and she set the book and the beer down. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

I clenched my fist, then widened my fingers. “Honestly? I think someone will take me out.”

Her mouth dropped open as she studied me. “Don’t say that.”

I shrugged. “It’s true. You know the life I lead. Live by the sword...” I pushed the sleeve of my T-shirt up to show off the dagger tattoo on my bicep. “Die by the sword.”

She shook her head, as if disgusted.

“You?” I asked.

“I’ve never really thought about it.”

I flicked her little turned-up nose. “Nor should you, princess.”

I clicked the TV and we watched in silence. I stretched my arm around her shoulders, and she inched closer. There was electricity in the air, and not just because of the storm. It was as if we were drawn together like magnets. My mind spun with confusion. Why the fuck was I so attracted to her?

And, shit. That question she asked, about how I thought I’d die? Would I even live to see thirty? Life was fucking short. Why shouldn’t Gia and I do what we wanted: fuck each other senseless?

A giant boom of thunder rolled overhead, shaking the house. It was accompanied by a white-hot flash of lightning. The TV and every light in the bungalow powered down, plunging the place in darkness. Gia gasped, then laughed, a throaty, lusty sound.

The storm outside was nothing compared to the sexual tension in here. It crackled dangerously, and I was powerless to fight it. We were both breathing hard, and my heart felt like it was slamming against my ribs.

“You scared?” I murmured.

“Hell no,” she whispered.

I pulled her into my lap, so she was facing me. My hand went to her neck and roughly drew her close. I needed her mouth, her kiss, her body. *Now*.

Maybe I was weak and disloyal. It no longer mattered, because I was taking what I wanted.

Chapter Twenty-Three

GIA

HE DEVoured ME.

My lips were first, my tongue second. He didn't just taste. He bit and sucked on my neck as if my flesh were dinner, drinks and dessert.

Within seconds, he stripped off my top and pulled my body into his. He seemed so much bigger tonight, so much more powerful. Even through his downy cotton T-shirt I could feel the heat of his skin against my breasts, and the hardness of his muscles. He bit, I cried out. He asked if it hurt, and I could only reply with one word.

More.

Whatever this was, whatever I'd started, there was definitely no turning back. It felt different than the previous night, more urgent and way more carnal. Desperate, even.

Had I unleashed a savage creature? The question wasn't whether he'd hurt me. It was *how much*.

While still sitting on his lap, he shoved me a few inches from his torso so he could brush his thumb between my legs. I was so wet that I'd soaked through my lace panties and my thin shorts. His breath came in a hiss and I heard him say the Italian word for *wet*.

"I like that, a lot," I whispered.

He stroked a few times, using a firmer touch to rub my clit through my clothes. “That? When I touch your pussy? I like that a lot, too.”

I giggled. “That and when you speak Italian.”

“I didn’t realize you were fluent, princess.”

“Of course I am.” I fanned my hands on his chest, tracing the peaks and valleys through his T-shirt.

He chuckled, then drew me close, almost tenderly. He smoothed my hair away from my ear, tugging my head to one side. His tongue traced my earlobe, and he murmured a few deliciously filthy sentences in his native language. He described exactly what he wanted to do with his cock, which triggered a fresh rush of wetness between my legs.

“Is that what you want?” His tone was the audio equivalent of smoke and whiskey. “Are you sure?”

I had to appreciate his nod to consent. At least he wasn’t a total brute.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want. Tonight.”

His mouth found my nipple. His hands were everywhere, it seemed, and I melted into him. Oh, part of me rationalized this as a half-baked ploy to get out of here. But I wasn’t lying when I gave my consent to him. I wanted this. I wanted him.

He flipped me around, so I was sitting on the sofa. He knelt on the floor at my feet.

“Lift up your hips,” he demanded.

I did, and he tugged my shorts and underwear down. There was even a secret little spot deep inside of me that was triumphant that I’d succeeded in driving this man — this wild, tough Mafia man — a little crazy.

There was the sound of fabric moving against skin, and in the wan moonlight streaming through the window, I watched him pull off his shirt. He places his hands on my knees, but didn’t exert any pressure. “Open your legs. Now.”

Somehow, the fact that he was giving me subtle signals of consent made me want him even more. I spread myself for him and he touched me, rubbing my clit softly with his thumb. He leaned into me, his nose grazing my clit. My heart sped up even more because this was uncharted territory. He kissed my outer lips, slow and gentle.

Then he used his tongue in a long, slow movement up my slit. My breath was already coming in gasps, and when he put his tongue to my most sensitive spot, I cried out a little, surprised “Oh!” and sat straighter, wanting to press myself into his mouth.

This was nothing like I’d dreamed. The wetness wasn’t sloppy, and the rhythm of his tongue was firm yet teasing. I reveled in the sensation for many long minutes, and was dimly aware that he was not only giving me pleasure but making me feel cared for. This was the true surprise of it all.

And just as abruptly as the lights went out, they came back on. The TV flashed on, and the action movie was still playing. There was an explosion on the screen, and thunder overhead. Neither of us paid attention, because I was practically panting, and he was licking his lips, staring at my pussy.

He looked up at me from between my legs. I whimpered and tugged at his hair, realizing that he probably never let himself be this vulnerable, never knelt for anyone. This fact made me feel more powerful than I should have, and I smiled at him.

“Don’t stop.” I ran my index finger over his wet, full lips. Since he hadn’t shaved for a couple of days, my wetness coated his rough stubble, made it glisten. It was a detail that seemed too carnal to comprehend in my sex-fogged state.

He chuckled, then glanced down, between my legs. Holy hell, he was sinfully gorgeous when he did that, although I felt vulnerable and exposed, spread out for him like that. All signs pointed to danger. But I needed more.

He spread me apart with his fingers, giving my clit another long lick. Oh my God, this was so dirty. And perfect. I suspected there were dirtier things in store.

“I could eat you all night, princess. If you’d let me.”

“I’ll let you,” I murmured.

He stood, and clicked off the TV. He extended his hand. “I want you in the bed.”

On our way in, I caught a glimpse of us in a full-length mirror on the door. Him, shirtless and powerfully ripped, his dark hair messy. Me, naked and flushed. Holding his hand while he led me to the spot where I’d be defiled, and perhaps, reborn.

The lamps from the living room were still illuminated, so light leaked into the dark bedroom. It cast a soft, warm glow, almost like a dozen candles. He dropped my hand and moved toward the bed, shoving his shorts down and kicking them to the floor. Still in the doorway, I stared at him. This was a moment I’d always remember, a pause in the soundtrack of my life. A time when I found pleasure during the most difficult moments, a second when I decided what I wanted, and when, and with whom.

“Come here.” He held out his hand.

I obeyed, and walked a few paces to stand next to him. Now that we were both unclothed, shyness overtook me. He kissed my forehead and that seemed so intimate, so sensual, it was more shocking than when he’d gone down on me in the living room. How could this man be so rough one moment and so tender the next? It was incomprehensible to me. The probability that he had other, complex facets of his personality both frightened and intrigued me.

He gently ran his fingers up and down my arms until goosebumps covered my body. I shivered against him.

“Gia.”

I still couldn’t meet his gaze. He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted my head up.

“Look at me,” he said in Italian.

I swallowed hard.

“You have nothing to be afraid of. I’m not going to hurt you. You’re so fucking beautiful, Gia. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve this, don’t deserve these moments we’re sharing. I can’t stay away from you, even though I should. Even though common sense tells me that I shouldn’t even look at you, much less touch you.”

He was more descriptive and articulate in Italian, and it was terribly endearing. I didn’t know what to say to his words, so I wrapped my arms around him and kissed his mouth. Groaning, he eased me onto the bed, on my back. Caging me with his arms, he kissed me deeply, tasting my tongue with his. Then his hand snaked between my legs.

This time, I didn’t need to be told to open for him, I just did it out of instinct. His fingers found my clit and I sighed against his mouth. My entire body flashed hot, needing him. Needing the release that only he could deliver.

Somehow, he knew exactly where to touch me, and within a few minutes of rubbing, I was at the brink of an orgasm.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He kissed me again, sliding two fingers inside me. “I want you to come before I fuck you. That’s going to make you nice and relaxed. Will you come for me, Gia? Please?”

I managed to get out the word *okay* before I came against his fingers. It was an explosive orgasm, one that made my eyes scrunch shut and my whole body shudder on the inside. I bit his shoulder, hard, but he didn’t even flinch. He just encouraged me in whispered Italian, wringing more and more out of my body until I couldn’t give any more.

He kissed me gently while I recovered. My eyes fluttered open.

“Whoa,” I breathed.

He grinned. Goodness, he was so beautiful. That he was also employed by the man who was supposed to be my fiancé was a fleeting memory, a minor speedbump. I’d stopped caring about any of that days ago. If I ever did.

That one word turned over and over in my mind.

More.

My hand went to his chest, then roamed down his belly and between his legs. “So hard,” I murmured.

He sucked in a breath, then grabbed my wrist.

“I need to fuck,” he ground out. “I’m going to be your first cock, princess. Are you ready?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

ALESSANDRO

THE LAST THING I WANTED TO DO WAS LEAVE THE BED. LEAVE Gia's body or her kisses. But I had to, because the stash of condoms I always carried were in my duffel bag across the room.

I pressed a hard kiss to her mouth. "Don't move."

When I climbed out of bed she propped herself up on her elbows. Her eyes were wide. "Where are you going?"

Ah, shit. Was she really a virgin? Apparently so, because most women would understand what I was doing. But I pushed that and all the other obvious concerns out of my head. Every cell in my body needed to fuck her. Some primal urge to conquer her and spread my seed and all that biological shit was swirling in my brain. Even if I tried, I couldn't act rationally. My thoughts were like a caveman's.

Condom. Pussy. Now.

I unzipped my bag and found the foil packet, then held it up.

"Oh. Right." She eased back onto the bed.

While taking the few steps back to her, I ripped open the foil packet. Standing over her at the edge of the bed, I sheathed my dick, which was almost painfully hard.

She opened her arms and I eased on top of her, lowering my mouth to her left breast and tracing her dusky, perky nipple

with my tongue. Yeah, I craved being inside her, but I also wanted to take my sweet time and enjoy it. And because I wasn't an animal, I wanted her to enjoy it too. She'd had one orgasm, but I'd love it if she had a second. Or a third.

My hands roamed over her flesh, squeezing and stroking. Her body was so fucking perfect — soft and curvy. She ran her hands through my hair and I shivered from sheer pleasure.

I moved my hand over her right breast, pinching the nipple and going lower, caressing the smooth skin of her stomach and then lower. It was as if I couldn't keep my fingers out of her pussy. It was so warm and tight and, for the night, one other thing.

Mine.

“Alessandro,” she whispered.

I flicked my tongue over her nipple, then bit it lightly. “Yes, princess?”

“I think I want to come again.”

She was soaked. “I think I want you to, as well.”

I fingered her sweet pussy and kissed her until she was on the verge of coming. She whimpered when I took my hand away.

“Spread your legs for me, Gia.”

She complied, and I told her she was a good girl. When I rubbed the tip of my cock against her clit she exhaled a sensual groan. “My God,” she breathed.

She looked down. I looked down. She was glistening, wet and juicy, the folds of her plump pussy surrounding my rock-hard cock. I didn't believe in Heaven, but if I did, this moment was it. Even in the half-darkness I could see everything, and it nearly made me explode.

“Oh. *Oh*.” She was breathing heavy.

“Oh, what?” We locked eyes.

“It's so...sexy. Dirty. Dirty-sexy. Wow.”

“I think it’s fucking beautiful. And this will be, too.” I guided my cock to her entrance, and slid just the tip in. “I’m gonna try to go slow, okay? Just relax and breathe.”

She inhaled sharply.

“You need to tell me if it hurts too much, okay?” I didn’t enter her further because I wanted her to get used to the feeling of my dick.

She nodded. “Wow. I didn’t take you for the caring lover type.”

I slid my cock a few centimeters in. She was just perfection. I knew that she wasn’t tight because she was a virgin, but because she was swollen, wet and turned on.

“You thought I’d just pound you hard like we were in a porn and not care about your comfort?”

“Maybe.”

Unable to help myself, I entered a little deeper. “You think I’m a brute, don’t you?”

“Maybe.” She opened her legs wider.

“I think there’s a lot you don’t know about me.” I eased in a little more.

“What if I want to know more about you?”

I kissed her deep, then grinned against her mouth. “What if I want you to be quiet now so I can fuck you nice and slow?”

Her lips parted in surprise, then she laughed. “You are a brute.”

“Maybe,” I smirked against her cheek.

I slid all the way in and she cried out. I gently pumped a few times while she gripped my biceps. “Hurt?”

“A little.”

Fuck. All I wanted was to work up to a nice, grinding rhythm, to lose myself in her. But it also felt like I might split her in two, and the way she was digging her nails into my arms told me I needed to be a little more gentle.

“You know what?” I slowly moved my hips away from her — Christ, I didn’t want to at all — and held the condom at the base of my dick while I slid out.

“What? What’s wrong?”

I flopped on my back and tugged her to me. “Get on top of me. I want you to be in control. Come here.”

“Are you sure?” she straddled me.

“Never been surer of anything. Sit up.” I angled my cock up and she guessed what to do, sliding down, little by little. “Go as fast or as slow as you want.”

She rested her palms on my chest. “Just give me a couple minutes to get used to the feeling. You’re so...big.”

“That’s what she said.”

She laughed, then moved up, then down, slowly. “Like that? Is this what I’m supposed to be doing?”

“Fuck yeah, princess.”

“You’re sure you like this?” She licked her lips.

My cock was in all the way now, and I squeezed her thighs. Was she for real? This was amazing.

“I love it. I can watch your beautiful body and play with your tits while you ride me. How could it get any better? Does it feel good for you?”

She rocked and slid up and down. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Just do what you want, princess. I’m yours for tonight.”

“Am I going to make you come like this?”

“Oh, yeah. You are. You and that tight little pussy are going to make me fucking explode.”

She picked up the pace and our banter ceased. All of the need and tension of the past few days evaporated, leaving behind pure, carnal bliss. Whatever problems this would create with me and Mickey, in that moment, it was one hundred and ten percent worth it.

The sound of our bodies slapping together. The feel of her clit against my thumb. The sweet scent of her, and me, mixed together. The way her long, dark hair brushed against her tits, and how every few minutes I'd gently sweep it away.

And the way she cried out my name? Hearing it out loud was what sent me over the edge. Her pussy clamped around my cock and my orgasm slammed through my body, making my eyelids shut and a groan slip from my mouth.

I clutched her thighs so hard that she'd probably have bruises. She collapsed on top of me, our breaths coming in gasps. We were both sweating, but that didn't stop me from wrapping my arms around her. I buried my face in her neck, not wanting to ever let her go. I could sleep like this, with her on top of me, my dick still half-hard inside her.

We stayed like this for a while, with me caressing her hair and her kissing my cheek.

And that's when it hit me: I'd fucked a lot of women. But I always jumped out of bed immediately after to dress or to shower. Intimacy wasn't my strong point. At least that's what women had told me over the years.

But I didn't want this moment with Gia to end.

I was so, so fucked.

Chapter Twenty-Five

GIA

WITH A SWIFT, EFFICIENT MOTION, HE DISENTANGLED HIMSELF and rolled me onto my side. Then he climbed out of bed and stalked into the bathroom. It all felt abrupt and much too cold. Where was that attentive, caring, sensual guy from a few minutes ago?

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, I reached for the down duvet to cover myself.

“Be right back,” he grumbled.

I gulped in a few breaths. Although I never put much stock in my virginity — even though my family and culture did — it felt like the world had tilted off its axis. Having sex with Alessandro had been exciting. Amazing. Sublime. Even though it had hurt at first, I now wanted more.

But from the way he was acting, I wasn't sure he did. It seemed as though he'd liked it, a lot, while we were doing it. But now, the way he jumped out of bed without as much as a kiss? I wasn't so sure. There, under the covers, I shivered a little and thought about putting my clothes back on. Probably a good idea.

The bathroom door flung open and Alessandro emerged holding a washcloth. He stood next to the bed and flipped the duvet down.

“Hey, what the hell?” I protested, trying to cover my naked body with my arms.

“Sit up.”

“Why?”

“Stop asking questions. Sit up and open your legs.”

It dawned on me why he had the washcloth, and the corners of my lips turned up at his thoughtfulness. Still, I shot back a retort: “So bossy. You could use the word please, you know.”

“Whatever. Please.”

I did what I was told. He pressed the warm, damp cloth between my legs. Although his touch was gentle, I gasped a little from the sting.

“Sore?” His gravelly voice was finally soft.

“Mmm-hmm. A bit.”

“I’m sorry,” he said in Italian, a twinge of genuine remorse in his voice.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.” Ugh. I hoped he wasn’t going to launch into some sexist discussion about “taking” my virginity. Or, God forbid, use hack phrases like “woman flower” or “maidenhood,” or the worst of all, “innocence.” I’d probably retch if he did.

Fortunately, he kept quiet.

My gaze met his, and even though the light was low in the bedroom — we’d left the lamp on in the living room — I could detect the intensity of his eyes. My face felt suddenly too warm.

He took my hand and pressed it against the washcloth. “Hold this.”

Again he strode out of the room, all those back and ass muscles rippling and taut. He really did have an amazing body. I sighed contentedly. This time he went into the living room. I heard cabinet doors opening and slamming in the kitchen, and the fridge door. After a few minutes, he returned with a glass of water balanced on a plate. He paused at his bag, and rummaged around.

I shifted and moved the washcloth from my flesh, closing my legs and dropping the cloth to the floor. With him in the room, I felt too exposed in that position and snatched the covers up to my chest.

He sank on the edge of the bed and handed me the water. “Here. Drink this. And take this. *Please.*”

He offered me two pills. I narrowed my eyes. “What are they?”

Alessandro chuckled. “They’re only Tylenol. I have no need to drug you to have my way with you. I’ve already done that.”

Yes, he did. An image of him licking me came to mind. My face flared again and I gulped down the pills with the water.

“I also brought you some snacks.” He held up the plate to show off a stack of Oreos.

“Cookies?” This man was either much sweeter than I imagined or a bit of a goof. Either way, I liked him even more now. Dammit. This was not part of the plan.

He lifted a shoulder. “Thought we could use a little sustenance. Figured we’d need more energy for later in the night.”

So cheeky and arrogant, assuming I’d want to have sex again. Well, he assumed correctly. Fine. And I could never resist Oreos. I grinned and reached for one. Then another. And a third. He ate a few as well, and we sat there, him naked and me under the covers. I was munching cookies and sharing a glass of water with a made Mafia man on an island in the Gulf of Mexico. Cool, cool.

So weird and surreal. How was this my life? I was used to my brick-and-ivory college campus, my pumpkin spice lattes, my books.

When we were finished, he brought the dishes to the kitchen and shut out the light. In the dark, I felt the mattress dip under his weight when he climbed into bed. I flipped on my back as he slid between the covers.

“Listen,” he said.

I cut him off. “I don’t want to talk about Mickey. Or my virginity. Save the lectures and platitudes, please.”

Silence. “Okay.”

“Thank you. I just don’t believe virginity is a big deal.”

“Then why’d you wait?”

“I dunno,” I replied, irritated. “Because I was never in an optimal situation.”

He laughed. Hard. “And this is an optimal situation?”

I let out a little giggle, then a snort. I thought about my plan to seduce him, which of course would have to be revisited and reworked. Not tonight, though. Soon we were both laughing. “Oh my God. I cannot believe any of this, Alessandro.”

I pressed my face into his arm, and he rolled onto his side and pulled me into his body. “Believe it, Princess. It’s too strange to be anything but true. Strange and stupidly dangerous, but *cose della vita*.”

It’s life.

Our laughter died and we stayed like that, arms and legs tangled, for longer than I expected. I drifted into a light sleep while listening to him breathe deeply. But in my half-slumber, I caressed his muscular chest. His hands stroked my back, then my butt, then my leg. Soon we were kissing, slow and deep. I took his cock in my hand and was a little surprised that it was so damn hard again. As sensually as I could, I moved my hand up and down his shaft and was rewarded with a groan.

He grabbed my wrist, preventing me from moving. “I’m sorry, Princess. We need to stop.”

“Why?” My voice was a little too sharp. “You don’t want to?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Oh, trust me. I want to. Want has nothing to do with it. I promise that I’m going to fuck you

again if you keep that up. I was trying to give you a break since you're sore."

He let up on my wrist and I continued to stroke him, then fluttered a line of kisses across his neck. He sucked in an unsteady breath. That he was so agitated by me, so impacted, was a powerful drug that lit up my brain like a neon sign. Maybe I'd had this effect on other guys I'd kissed at college. If I did, I hadn't noticed or cared. With Alessandro, it was different.

I wanted to unsettle him, needed him to feel out of control. I wanted to find out what happened when he truly let go, for I had an inkling that he was a tightly wound person.

He was mine to explore, at least for tonight. Tomorrow, I'd come up with a new plot — if he was as enamored with me as I thought he was, I figured my chances of convincing him to get me out of here were high.

Plus, being with him was a massive turn-on. Once again, I was impossibly wet between my legs, and a needy, pulsing throb centered on my clit had overtaken all rational emotion.

I rubbed my naked body against his muscles, making sure my breasts lightly brushed his chest. "Would that be a bad thing if you wanted to fuck me again?" I whispered in his ear.

He growled, actually growled, like an animal, something feral and untamed. Then he flipped me onto my back and did exactly what he promised.

Chapter Twenty-Six

ALESSANDRO

I HAVE AN INTERNAL CLOCK THAT DOESN'T ALLOW ME TO SLEEP much past daybreak. This morning was no different, even though I hadn't gotten more than a couple hours of sleep because all we'd done was fuck for hours.

My eyelids peeled open and my gaze landed on Gia. She was on her side, facing me. Jesus Christ, she was gorgeous, with those long lashes and dark brows. Her plump lips were red and nearly chapped from all the kissing we'd done. There a pink tinge to the top of her cheekbones, one that hadn't been there yesterday. Some women in their sleep look different than when awake, especially those who wear a lot of makeup. Not bad-different, just different, like new people.

Gia looked like a fucking angel when she was asleep. When she was awake, she also looked like an angel, but it was easy to forget because of all that attitude and fire.

A fucking five-alarm fire last night, that's for sure. It had been evident she was a virgin because she was hesitant at first, but she was a quick student. Or maybe I'd been a particularly attentive teacher, showing her all the particulars of how to please me. Either way, she took my cues and ran with them, and had driven me wild in ways I hadn't felt in years. Maybe ever.

It was fucking terrifying.

I reached out and brushed a lock of her hair away from her face. Memories of all that we'd done came rushing back, and my dick grew hard. I had the urge to rip the covers off, (again). To roll her onto her back and spread her legs (again). To bury myself deep inside her (again, again, again).

She let out a little snore. Jesus, she even sounded adorable when she snored. I had to let her sleep. As much as I wanted more of her, I also felt a gnawing, nagging ball of shame in my chest.

What we'd done last night was wrong. No, what *I'd* done was wrong. It was all on me, because I was the one in charge here. I was older and her protector. I'd fucked up majorly and it needed to stop. No more Gia.

The sooner I got it through my thick skull that fucking my boss' fiancée was wrong, the sooner I harnessed some self-control, the better. I'd tell her that the fucking was over. We had our fun, got our fill off each other. Now it was time to return to reality.

Trying not to wake her, I slipped out of bed and used the bathroom, donning only swim trunks and nothing else. I figured a cup of coffee and some laps in the pool might clear my head. I went into the kitchen and turned on the coffeemaker. The house was so damned small that the trapped feeling was overwhelming, as if Mickey was somehow squeezing my guts from afar. Fresh air — that was what I needed.

I grabbed my phone and my mug of coffee, silently padding through the bedroom and out the back door to the table by the pool. I sat with my back to the house, as if I wanted to forget everything inside.

It wasn't fully light out yet, and the air was blissfully cool on my bare chest. At the sight of the dusky blue-and-pink sky, my shoulder muscles relaxed. For several long minutes I drank my coffee in peace, staring at the water and the palm trees, my mind blank.

Then my phone buzzed. Ah, hell, it was Mickey. He was a morning person, like me. I answered with an irritated, "Yeah?"

“What’s the latest?” he asked. No *hello*, no *how’s it going*.

“Eh, not much. Just sitting outside, drinking a cup of coffee. Enjoying the salt air. You?” I hoped my tone hid the guilt swirling inside me.

“You lucky fuck. It’s a shit show here in Atlanta. We’ve got a lot to sort out with the Russians. And Gia’s father, well, let’s just say we don’t see eye to eye on several issues. I’m up to my ass in alligators.”

He went on for a couple minutes about business, and I was glad. I asked a few pertinent questions, and conversation steered to some issues we’d been having at a club we owned in Miami.

“The liquor supplier’s screwing us out of product. We’ve gotta fix that,” Mickey said.

I cleared my throat and gripped the handle of the coffee mug. “You need me to go there? I’ll handle it.” *Please let him say yes*. I could drop Gia off at that mansion of hers up north and forget last night ever happened. I’d get back on the road, screw a few strippers, forget about Gia.

She’d go back to her beautiful life, marry Mickey, and we’d put all this behind us. Last night would be a secret we’d take to our graves.

“No. You need to keep Gia safe. The Russians would love to get their hands on her to get revenge both me and her father. So she needs to stay away from her dad’s place for the time being. How is she, anyway? She awake?”

Christ, why did he have to ask about her at all? Like he cared about her well-being. “Not sure. She’s sleeping in the bedroom. I’m on that damn couch in the living room. I try to let her do her own thing. We don’t talk much.”

Lies. All lies. We didn’t talk much last night because we were too busy fucking each other’s brains out. *I am the worst*.

“Aw, that’s too bad, Alessandro. I’d assumed you’d already have your dick in her mouth by now.”

Okay, maybe I’m not the worst.

He laughed, a hard, brittle sound, and I had to release the mug handle before I snapped it in two. How the fuck could he be so disrespectful of her? It made me look at him in a different light than before, made me hate him. Then again, maybe he'd always treated women that way. I was just too fucking stupid to pay attention until now.

“Yeah, no dude. Not my thing. She's yours.”

“I'm giving you permission. Jesus Christ. Have a little fun. Teach her how to give head. I'm ordering you. Anything but fucking her. I want to be the first to enjoy that pussy. I'll fucking kill you if I find out you've stuck your cock in her.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to will away the fear and the anger swirling in my chest. But all I could see against my lids were red, and I grunted and opened my eyes. “Whatever, bro. I wouldn't do that to you. And, uh, she's not my type.”

Did he know I was speaking through gritted teeth? That if he said that while standing in front of me that I'd slam my fist into his ugly face?

Again he laughed, then turned the subject back to business. I listened, but wasn't able to concentrate. Eventually, he was finished.

“Stay safe out there,” I said.

“I'll check in tomorrow. Have fun on that tropical island. Think of it as a vacation. Relax. Get some sun. Swim in the Gulf. Fuck, Alessandro. Don't take everything so seriously.”

We hung up. *Don't take everything so seriously.* Easy for him to say, because he was the son and the grandson of well-known Mafia bosses. He hadn't left his country and hadn't been forced to prove himself as the son of an Italian mafioso who went to prison, hadn't clawed his way to the top.

Mickey was similar to those rich New York developers who'd inherited all their wealth from their daddies — privileged, pampered and talentless.

And powerful.

Exactly the kind of guy I resented. I'd made my deal with the devil when I agreed to join Mickey's crew. Now I potentially had fucked things up by sleeping with Gia. But dammit, he didn't deserve her beauty, her brains, or her difficult, feisty soul.

I didn't, either. But I deserved her more than he did, that was for damned sure.

"Good morning." For a second, I startled when I felt her thin, soft arms around my shoulders, then I relaxed into her embrace.

Gia kissed my temple. "Is that coffee? It smells really good." Her voice, raspy from crying out during all the orgasms I gave her last night, cut through the still, cool air.

She came around to my front and reached for the mug in my hands. I watched as she took a long sip, then set it on the table behind me.

I pulled her into my lap. She was in another of her little tank top and shorts sets, and it looked like she'd brushed her hair because it was loose and soft.

She nuzzled her face into my neck, and her perfume hit my nose. Somehow her scent short circuited my brain and all I could think of was kissing her, touching her, fucking her. I slipped my hand under her top and rubbed her back. Then her front. Within seconds we were making out and I was pinching her nipple. I shoved my hand down her shorts and found that beautiful wet place of hers. We were sitting awkwardly, though, and I couldn't get a good angle on her clit.

"We need to move somewhere more comfortable," I murmured against her lips.

"Is this better?" She slid down my body and between my legs, finally settling on her knees onto the rough stone pool deck. She looked up at me with those big, button-like eyes and my heart melted into a puddle of lust and something else I couldn't quite comprehend.

"Is this what you want?" I shoved my shorts down. My dick was fully erect, and I stroked it a few times, my heart rate

spiking at the thought of her blowing me out here in the open air. This was what the boss wanted — but that didn't make me feel any better.

Gia licked her lips and nodded. When she took me in her mouth, I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, overcome with the sensation of her soft, wet mouth. My hands fisted her hair while she dug her nails into my legs.

“Is that okay?” Her eyes, wide and dark, met mine.

“It's perfect, princess.”

Holy fuck. I'd created a monster. One who knew the precise way to make me come undone. I should've been terrified, but instead, I gave everything to Gia.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

GIA

IN COLLEGE I'D HEARD ABOUT SEX FROM MY FRIENDS. Sometimes, sex was all they talked about, it seemed. Everyone had thought it odd that I was still a virgin, especially since I gave impassioned speeches in class about sex-positive feminism.

I believed in sex. Celebrated it. Supported people's right to have whatever kind of consensual sex they wanted, with whomever they desired.

The reality is, I'd never told anyone at school where I came from. Or about my family. Or how, technically, I was supposed to remain a virgin until my wedding night. It was a bendable rule, and one that many women in my situation ignored.

Ashley, for example, had deemed the tradition stupid, and had sex with the first guy she could, when she was sixteen.

Privately, I always wondered what I was missing. Or if it was really as amazing as everyone said. Somehow I doubted that another human could do all that for me. I had an active imagination and a vibrator, and that sated my physical needs pretty well.

Maybe there was a latent, traditional side of me. Or perhaps I remembered when Mom and Dad were happy back when I was little, and how they'd had an arranged marriage that seemingly worked out. I told myself that I hadn't had sex

yet because I hadn't met the right person, but a little, secret part inside my brain wanted to wait for my husband.

It made no sense, even to me.

Then, of course, I met Mickey — and Alessandro. My mind was blown at how Alessandro knew exactly what to whisper in my ear to get me wet, exactly where to touch me and exactly how to bring me to orgasm. How little I cared about marriage or commitment or tradition — and how much I wanted simply to fuck.

His prowess in bed was exciting and heady, yes. But it was also frustrating. Surely he'd learned all of his tricks from screwing dozens, maybe hundreds of women.

Two days after we first had sex, I fell into a slump while thinking about this. What the hell was I doing, having sex with him? There was also the obvious: he worked for the man I was supposed to marry. I tended to be impulsive with my decisions — I'd switched my major from communications to women's studies after about an hour of thought — but this was unprecedented.

If only I could talk it through with Ashley... although she'd probably tell me to have fun and fuck Alessandro as much as humanly possible.

Today he seemed distant for some reason, and combined with my funk, there was a strange tension in the air. Maybe the inertia and isolation of being on this island was getting to both of us. How much television could we watch? How many plates of pasta could he make? (Although I had to admit that he was an excellent cook, which impressed me almost as much as his sex skills).

“Hey, I want to go to the beach,” I said, standing in the doorway of the bathroom.

Alessandro was on the bed, scrolling through his phone. He glanced at me for a second and licked his lips before returning his gaze to the cell. “Okay.”

I expected him to get up, or tell me to wait.

“Okay?” I asked, dubious.

“Yeah, have fun. I’m doing some business stuff here. Mickey wants me to handle some port negotiations.”

Hmph. He normally was so attentive and protective. What had changed?

“You sure it’s okay for me to go alone?” The minute I said those words aloud, I cringed. Why was I asking permission? I was an adult. This was an island. I wasn’t going anywhere, and no one was coming here, that was certain.

He looked up. “Your swimming skills suck, so I don’t think you’re going to paddle to shore. I’ll be there in a few. You go on ahead.”

I snorted a little huff sound and flounced out the door. Having sex with him complicated everything, including my ability to be annoyed with him. Dammit. I’d wanted us to float around the blue water and kiss. My pride wouldn’t let me admit that to him, though.

While I shuffled down to the water, my thoughts turned to Alessandro’s past. He was a mobster. A killer. A womanizer. By the time I’d gotten to the water, doubts had crept in, and I felt a little ashamed that I’d had sex with him.

I spread the enormous beach towel under the shade of a palm tree and kicked off my flip-flops. I didn’t need to take off any clothes because I was wearing only a bikini. It didn’t make sense to even wear a cover-up anymore.

Why couldn’t I have been born into a normal family? Why didn’t I fall for one of the guys I met in college, like Jack Doyle, a handsome guy who went to Amherst and whose family summered on Nantucket?

Why had my father given me to Mickey...

With a sigh, I shuffled toward the impossibly blue water of the Gulf of Mexico. When it was hip deep, I dove in and swam underwater for a few seconds. When I surfaced, I slicked my hair back and turned toward the shore.

There, coming down the path, was Alessandro. I couldn’t help but grin at his casual, confident stride. He was shirtless, wearing only his blue swim trunks. My stomach did a little

flip-flop, which should've been a red flag that I was in serious trouble when it came to him.

The fact that my mood could change in a heartbeat from just his mere presence was unsettling.

I swam further from shore, ignoring him. Behind me, I heard a splash, and within a few seconds, a presence near me.

“Dun dun. Dun dun.” He hummed the theme song to *Jaws*, and smirked.

“Get away,” I said playfully. “Or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” He could touch bottom, and I couldn’t, and I floated toward him, as if the current was forcing me into his body.

He was so much larger, a difference that was obvious when we were next to each other, like we were here in the water. For a second, his nostrils flared, as if he was angry that I’d told him to leave me alone.

As if he thought of me as his possession, and that I shouldn’t dare to cross him. The thought titillated me, although rationally I probably should’ve been horrified.

“You’ll do what, *cara*?”

He looked so serious, so smoldering, that I couldn’t help but laugh. Sometimes he was just too serious.

He reached for me, and I yelped. “I’ll... I’ll... tickle you in the water!”

Nothing like being a giant goofball with a hot, muscular Mafia man. I grabbed his non-existent love handle area and made a silly noise.

“Wooja wooja wooja, rawr!” I called out in a silly sing-song, splashing him in the process.

I half-expected him to chide me, or give me a confused, haughty look. Instead, he laughed, a sound so light and wonderful that my stomach did more of those flip-flops. When Alessandro truly laughed — which was rare — he looked

younger, less menacing, more like a guy in his twenties who didn't have a care in the world.

"You want tickles? I'll give you tickles." He grabbed me and ran his fingers across my bare midsection.

We splashed and played in the water for several minutes, screeching with laughter. Like we were a normal couple on vacation and not...whatever this was. Finally he hoisted me over his shoulder and walked out of the water.

I made a weak protest by thumping on his back, like I had when he'd carried me to safety at the party. But I didn't want him to release me.

He set me on the towel and lowered himself, caging me with his arms and legs.

"More tickles?" he murmured.

I shook my head and ran my hands down his muscular chest, which was dripping with water onto my also wet skin.

"No? Then what?"

"Guess."

"Hmm." His tone was soft, and I studied his face in the bright Florida sun. Little droplets of water clung to his dark lashes and his hair, and his blue eyes positively blazed in the light.

He eased back, so he was resting on his heels. "Sit up."

I complied, mesmerized by his eyes and his voice. He reached around my body and untied both of my bikini top strings, and I whisked it off and flung it into the sand.

"Now lay back."

I did, and he dipped his head, trailing his tongue between my breasts.

"Salty?" I asked.

"Delicious."

His tongue continued its slow journey around both of my nipples, causing me to arch my back. I spread my legs to

accommodate him, and bit my lip as he devoured my breasts.

There was something urgent about the way he kissed and licked me this afternoon. Primitive. Our bodies were now damp from the water and our sweat, and between my legs was even more sopping.

He kissed and bit my flesh all the way to my bellybutton and below, then leaned back so he could strip my bikini bottoms off. His big hands cradled the delicate strings as I drew my knees up and together. When the bikini was fully off and I was naked, I opened my legs again.

“Fuck,” he hissed, diving for my flesh once again.

“No. Your shorts,” I commanded.

“Si, signorina.” He grinned wickedly and stripped them off, revealing his massive erection. His cock was hard and veiny, standing at attention just for me.

I assumed he’d lick me, but instead, he just stared at me in the broad, bold daylight. It made me feel so exposed that I began to squirm and sit up.

He splayed his hand on my chest and eased me back down. “Let me look. Let me watch.”

“Watch what?”

He made a clicking noise with his tongue and nodded in the direction my pussy. “Touch yourself.”

A sly smile spread on my face. “Out here? Like this?”

He nodded slowly.

I was so quick to touch myself that he chuckled. “Can’t wait to cum?”

I whimpered in response as I skimmed my fingers through my wetness. No, I couldn’t wait to orgasm. The sight of his hard, wet body and his diamond-hard erection was too alluring.

And when he began to stroke himself? I moaned. “I like that.”

“This?” He looked down at his cock. “You did this to me, Gia. This is all. Your. Fault.”

I spread myself open and he bit his lip, stroking slowly the entire time. “It is? I’m sorry. It looks painful.”

“It aches, Gia.” He angled his erection near my folds. So close. So dangerous.

“I’d like to feel you without a condom. Just once.” I circled my clit with my finger, my arousal building.

“That’s dangerous, princess.”

All rational thought had left my brain, obviously. “I know. But we’re dangerous together.”

“How close are you?”

“Close.” My voice was a whisper, nearly drowned out by the sound of the surf and the wind in the palm trees.

“You’re so fucking wet. Look at you.” His eyes were half-lidded, almost drugged-looking. When we had sex indoors I’d never noticed how completely swept away he looked. Here in the outdoors, he appeared to be a man who was completely captivated by my body.

“Touch me.” I spread myself wide again with my fingers.

He swiped a thumb over the tip of his cock, picking up a drop of fluid. Then he skimmed that same thumb over my clit, and I shuddered. He dipped his thumb into me, then released it and shoved it into my mouth.

“Make yourself cum.”

I sucked on his thumb and furiously stroked my clit in the place I loved, the spot I’d touched all those nights I was alone, all those nights when I fantasized about some future perfect day with a future, perfect partner.

There would be neither. No perfection, no perfect partner, no happy ending.

There would only be here, this island, the primeval attraction that I shared with Alessandro and the explosive

chemistry that we couldn't ignore. There was me. And him. And the craving in between.

His hand slid from my face to my neck. He didn't choke me, but he kept it there as I touched myself. As he stroked his cock with his other hand, his forearm muscles tensing and flexing.

I orgasmed and cried out, my skin covered with sweat and my mind wiped of all thoughts. This time my voice wasn't silenced by nature. I wrung the last of my orgasm out and watched as Alessandro again angled his cock toward my pussy. I stopped touching myself and he slipped the head between my lips, but didn't thrust into me.

Instead, he gently rubbed the tip against my clit, causing another orgasm wave to crash through me.

"Please, just once inside," I begged. A tiny, rational part of my brain told me to shut the hell up, but I ignored it. Fuck being a rational good girl.

Alessandro swore in Italian, then thrust inside of me, once. His eyes rolled upwards, his head lolled back, and I gasped.

He was hard and warm and...incredible. It was as if we fit perfectly, even more exquisite than when we used a condom.

This was *madness*.

"No, stop," I cried.

His head snapped up, his eyes opened, and he seemed to gather his bearings, too. He withdrew and took himself in his hand, and furiously pumped his cock until he came, spurting on my stomach in long, stringy white ropes while he growled filthy words in Italian.

When he was finished, he collapsed next to me, burying his face into the hollow of my neck.

"I can't believe we did that, princess. That was..."

"Was what?" I rolled over and hugged him, not caring that I was covered in salt water, sweat, and his fluid.

He scooted down so his face was between my breasts, and threw a leg over me.

“That was so good. So good. You’re always incredible,” he mumbled.

We stayed like that for longer than we should have, with the Florida sun burning bright. We both had olive skin and were getting more tan by the day, but even now I wondered if we’d had enough. I wanted to shower, or swim, and get the ick off, but I also didn’t want to let him go.

“Are you sleeping?” I asked after many moments of silence.

“No.”

My thoughts turned to earlier, when I had all those concerns about him. Dammit, I simply couldn’t let stuff go — I always had to be thinking. Worrying. Pondering.

“How many women have you been with? A lot?” I asked, totally out of the blue.

He didn’t seem to mind, because he didn’t move a muscle, just murmured into my skin. Maybe he’d been anticipating the question. “A lot? What do you consider a lot?”

“Mmm. A hundred?”

A chuckle slipped from his mouth and he kissed the side of my breast. “A hundred? No. *Dio*, when would I get anything done, Gia?”

He had a point. “I dunno. Then how many? Dozens?”

“No. Not dozens. Why do you ask?”

“I dunno.” Suddenly I felt shy, which was stupid considering we were naked in the open air in the middle of the day, with his literal semen coating our bodies. That should’ve been gross, but wasn’t. Everything with him was easy. Everything but the obvious.

We were silent for a few minutes. Then I piped up. “Are you usually this sexually compatible with women?”

He inhaled long, then exhaled. “No. Never.”

Thank God he couldn't see my grin. "Good."

"It's not good, Gia. It's not good at all. It's fucking scary."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

GIA

THE NEXT FOUR DAYS WENT LIKE THIS: WAKE UP, HAVE SEX, drink coffee, swim, kiss, nap, eat, movies, more sex, sleep.

So much sex. He turned me into his own personal fuck doll, and I loved every filthy second. He made no bones about using me for his own pleasure, but also made sure I was satisfied. As first lovers went, I realized I'd hit the jackpot.

“You're going to kill me,” he groaned, after I'd gotten on my knees and sucked him until he exploded in my mouth. Wiping my lips with my index finger — my nail polish for the party was starting to chip, but I'd long since stopped giving a fuck — I giggled in response and kissed his mouth.

I would be lying if I said I disliked our routine. But the problem was, I adored it. A lot. More so every day. It was like some twisted version of a honeymoon, one that was sun-drenched, wine-soaked, with no-strings attached sex.

While I privately schemed about ways to get out of marrying Mickey while sunning myself near the pool, I also allowed myself to enjoy the hours with Alessandro. Soon, I began to fantasize about the what ifs.

What if Alessandro and I were together, for real?

Would he grow to love me? (Probably. I suspected he was becoming more attached to me than he let on). Would we fight? (Definitely. We had a skirmish about the proper way to load the dishwasher, like a real couple would). Would we

marry and grow old together (Unlikely, given his career choice).

What if he were to give up the Mafia life for me? That was the biggest daydream of all.

When I wasn't fantasizing, I grilled him with questions.

For the first two days, he was guarded and silent. Gruff, even, when we weren't fucking. He wouldn't answer most of my queries about his life, and when he did, they involved one-syllable words and grunts. I couldn't help but be curious, though. He was too mysterious, with his smooth Italian accent tinged with a hint of New York edge. I wanted to know more about him, and about how he felt about me. About us. I rationalized with myself. I was merely asking so I could glean information to help me escape Mickey's clutches.

"So tell me about your childhood," I asked one day while we were lounging by the pool.

"What's there to tell?" he stripped off his shirt and reclined, the sun kissing his olive-hued skin. "Dad's in prison in Naples. He refused to testify against the bosses there. As a reward, I was sent to America to work for a boss in New York."

"How did you feel about that? How old were you?"

"Twenty. And that's all I'm going to say so stop asking questions, please."

"Mean. You are so mean and stingy with information."

He shut his eyes and grinned.

My gaze dropped to the muscles of his chest. To the sprinkling of hair south of his bellybutton. To the way his thumb tugged ever so slightly at the waistband of his swim trunks — a motion that made me recall the times he'd shoved his shorts down right before entering me. Just that little gesture was enough to silence my questions, and my annoyance at him, for a little while, at least.

Until some hours passed, and he dropped a breadcrumb of information about his life. Then I was curious all over again.

“My sister loves birds. She’s weird like that. Has bird books and apps and shit,” he remarked that night while we were drinking beer on the porch, watching a flock of skinny white birds on the lawn. A thunderstorm had passed, and the air smelled like rain and wet dirt.

“What’s your sister like? Tell me about her.”

“She’s nice. Funny. You’d like her.” He shrugged. “That’s about it.”

I rolled my eyes. So much for conversation.

One night we were lying under the stars, on the big lounge bed outdoors. The mattress was round and encased in a wicker frame, like something you’d see at a beach club in Miami. The cover was aqua, like all the other cushions and accents near the pool. We’d plowed through a bottle of wine at dinner and were stretched out, my head in the crook of his arm. The humid night air was laced with a hint of autumn, and I might have wanted a sweatshirt if it weren’t for the heat coming from Alessandro’s body.

I was sated, in every way.

“That was such a good dinner. You’re an amazing cook,” I said in a dreamy tone. “Where did you learn?”

“My mom,” he replied. “She owned a trattoria outside of Naples when I was a kid. She used to make the most incredible food, and my sister and I grew up in her kitchen, watching her cook. Funny thing is, my sister isn’t as good of a cook as me. She’s too impatient, and she forgets ingredient ratios. I’ve never forgotten those things, the measurements that our mother used.”

“Like you remember all the measurements?” I sat up so I could peer into his face in the semi-darkness. Since there was no moon in the sky, the only light came from the underwater illumination of the pool, which cast a shimmery blue hue over everything.

“I do. I have a photographic memory.”

“Really? Are you for real, or are you just saying that?”

“The day I met you, it was four-sixteen in the afternoon. I spotted you in front of the iron gate of the Hope Cemetery.” He went on to detail exactly what I was wearing that day, down to the dirt-stained shoes.

“Maybe you just remember everything because you were hoping I’d hop into bed with you,” I snuggled back into his body. “Plus it wasn’t that long ago. It only feels like we’ve known each other for years.”

He chuckled. God, I loved his laugh. “That’s probably true, and I was hoping to get you in bed. I also remember the name and the number of the tow truck company.”

He recited both, and the hair on my arms stood up. “That’s really impressive.”

“It’s a blessing. And maybe a curse, as I’m finding out.”

“Why would it be a curse?”

He turned his head and pressed his lips softly to my forehead, which turned my insides into a caramel goo. “Because I remember visual information. And I’m worried that I’ll always remember this. Remember you. Remember these days, for the rest of my life. I’d rather not.”

“Why would that worry you?” I tried to hide my triumphant little smile but couldn’t. In truth, I adored the fact that I affected him so much. “And why wouldn’t you want to? Aren’t you enjoying yourself? Sure seems like you are.”

“Well, because of the obvious. Eventually you and Mickey will get married and that’ll be an issue. I’ll have to keep this, keep us, a secret forever.”

“I’m not marrying Mickey.” My tone was harsh. “Don’t even say it. Not happening. No way.”

“You say that now that we’re in our little porn island bubble, princess. But when we get back to the real world and your father starts making demands, and Mickey is putting pressure on you, then we’ll see. I predict you’ll cave.”

How little he knew of my desires, when it came down to it. I sighed. “And how will you feel if I do marry Mickey? Which

won't happen, but let's just discuss it, for shits and giggles."

He raked in a breath. "How will I feel to sit in a pew in a church and watch you walk down the aisle toward him? Like shit, Gia. It will feel like shit. I'll probably want to punch something and will end up getting blind drunk on your wedding night. Or I'll go walk into the ocean or something."

Well. Now we were getting somewhere.

"I thought this was just sex," I said casually, while rolling onto my back to face the sky. His arm was my pillow.

"It is just sex." His voice was a little too strained for me to believe his words. "But that doesn't mean I like the idea of Mickey touching you."

"Oh. So you wouldn't mind if someone else touched me?"

He cleared his throat. "No. I highly doubt that. It's a guy thing. But especially not Mickey. Don't like the idea of that at all."

"Uh-huh," I replied, trying to contain my glee that he was finally opening up. "So what's the particular issue with Mickey? Do you not think he's worthy of me?"

"What do you fucking think? No, I don't think he's worthy of you. Not by a long shot. He loves young girls. He's a fucking pedophile, I only found that out at your party. It's disgusting. And you heard him — he's perfectly fine with me sticking my dick in your mouth. You deserve more respect as his fiancée. You deserve better. Christ, I can't believe I said that aloud. He makes me fucking sick."

I swallowed hard, trying to tamp down the bile in my throat. Mickey was an even worse person than I imagined, and Alessandro's visceral reaction was palpable. "Wow. Well. I guess it's a good thing that I won't be marrying him, no?"

"We'll see about that," Alessandro muttered. "He's powerful. And rich."

As if I cared about either of those things. He'd see. He and Mickey and my father would soon understand what I was capable of. I traced Alessandro's muscular forearm.

“Sometimes I wonder what would’ve happened if my father had made his deal with you instead of Mickey. He could have, you know. There was no rule saying he had to give me to another boss. He could’ve given me to a second in command, someone who was on the rise in the organization.” The fact that my father had to give me to anyone was even more offensive to me now than it was a week ago.

Alessandro huffed out a breath. “Christ,” he ground out. “You really are just a girl.”

“What? Answer me. What would you have done had my father approached you? What if he’d arranged for me to be your wife? What would you do with me?”

“Everything I’m doing with you now. I’d cook for you and I’d fuck you. And love every goddamned minute. I’d also respect you, unlike Mickey. Plus I’m not a pedophile.”

“Definitely an added bonus,” I said sarcastically.

But his words made me insanely happy, giddy even. I knew it was a dangerous path to go down, this conversation. But I couldn’t help myself.

“Well, unfortunately, I don’t want to marry a Mafia man at all. Too bad I’m going to avoid that kind of life. Because maybe we’d have been compatible.”

In a flash, he turned, reaching over and clamping his hand around the back of my neck to pull me closer to him. He seized my mouth in a kiss so hard that it stole the breath from my lungs. He tasted of this place — the bitterness of the wine, the freshness of the rain, and the darkness of the storms. The kiss made me fall a little bit harder for him, and jolted me awake. It was as if I was more alive in this moment than any other that came before it, and had I not been lying down, I might have toppled over from the dizzy, heady feeling he inspired within me.

He roughly ran his hand down my body — I was wearing a bikini top and shorts — and cupped my pussy. It was a possessive move, one that was loud and clear.

You’re mine.

“There’s no maybe, Gia. We *are* compatible. You know it, and I know it. And it’s a big, fat problem. Every day we’re here, every day that we do ... whatever it is we’re doing, we’re more and more screwed. Do you understand? Or are you too innocent? Do you merely want to toy with my emotions and pretend that I’m your knight on a white horse who will rescue you? Because I’m not. Not by a long shot. Just because I despise Mickey for how he’s treated you, and just because I love fucking you, doesn’t mean I’m willing to go to war with him, either.”

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes while my brain swirled with everything he’d just said. Then I couldn’t take it anymore, and had to pepper him with questions again.

“Why did you tell me all that? What’s really going on between you and Mickey? Usually you Mafia guys are loyal to each other, and no one else. What’s the deal? Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ALESSANDRO

I SIGHED AND SETTLED INTO THE LOUNGE CHAIR. GIA wouldn't stop asking questions, and it was time to tell her the truth. Rather, time to *remind* her of the truth.

“I'm exactly who you think I am, princess. I'm like your father. I'm like Mickey. No more, no less.” Not entirely accurate, of course. I was deadlier than those two. But that was a detail I normally didn't share with women. Something made me felt like telling Gia, though. I wanted to shock those good girl sensibilities right off her beautiful face.

Of all the men she could've chosen as her first lover, she'd picked the baddest of the bad boys. Me. The thought thrilled me to my core - it wasn't often I felt such triumph. Gia was like a trophy for men like me, ones who came up from the trenches.

“Liars? Criminals? Thugs?” She made a snorting sound as she sat up. We were clearly at that point in the evening where we'd drank a little too much wine, and there was an edge to her voice. It was difficult to understand why. We'd spent an excellent day swimming and napping and fucking. But tonight, Gia was restless, as if she were plagued with evil thoughts.

First I tried to distract her by pulling her back into my body and with a kiss, one that she didn't return. Oh, Jesus. We were going to have to talk. Women. “Whatever you want to call it. Just don't think I'm any different.”

“And yet you’re willing to break your precious omerta to screw me.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Some things are worth bending the rules for.”

Her nostrils flared. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Look so dangerous and brooding one minute and then so, so,” she sputtered for a minute. “Charming. You could charm the paint off a wall with that smile.”

“I’m trying to charm those little shorts off so I can fuck you again. Carpe diem and all that shit. Relax. It’s a beautiful night. Look at the stars.” I pointed to the sky.

“Asshole,” she hissed. “I’m trying to have a serious conversation and get to know you better and you’re patronizing me.”

“Seriously. I believe that. I believe in making the best of a shitty situation.”

That made her sit up again, and I knew we were spoiling for a fight. “That’s how you’d describe fucking me? A shitty situation?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. You know what I mean.”

“So why are you doing this? With me? Us?”

“Because you’re gorgeous.”

“*Pfft*. All men are the same. Pigs.”

I licked my lips. This was not a conversation I wanted to have. Why couldn’t we just fool around and kiss under the stars? “And because I think you’re hilarious. And smart. And feisty. I like you. I did from the moment I saw you. I’ll admit, having Mickey’s blessing to mess around with you doesn’t hurt.” Just saying those words made my chest tighten. Part of me was beginning to feel possessive of Gia, and the thought of getting anyone’s approval to do anything with her — hold her hand, have dinner with her, fuck her — made me rage.

The sneer on her face matched the way I felt inside. “Doesn’t that make you sick, though? How he pulls the strings? How he’s sexist and gross and maybe a pedophile? How can you work for someone like that? Where’s your self-respect?”

“I don’t expect you to understand the answer.” I clenched my jaw.

“Try me. I’m a big girl.”

When I tried to draw her against me she stiffened, so I gave up. Something about her stubbornness annoyed me. My anger flashed hot, exploding in a long string of Italian, a language I knew she understood. “I was just a kid. Sixteen. My dad was a soldier for the Camorra in Naples. He was a low-level guy, got arrested in a big drug bust. He had some information on the bosses. He could’ve made a deal with the prosecutor, but didn’t.”

“Oh,” her tone was soft and confused. “Okay.”

“In exchange for not testifying against them, the bosses agreed to send me to New York to work for a family there. My dad’s serving a twenty-year sentence.”

“God, I hate this life,” she whispered, picking at the fabric edge of the lounge with her chipped red fingernail. “So you went to New York like a dutiful soldier and you’re carrying out your mission.”

“Something like that. I was sent to live with one of the top bosses. Honestly, I thought I’d work in one of his restaurants as a busboy.” I paused, thinking of those crazy, blood soaked years.

“And?”

“I became a button man.”

She looked up and squinted at me, the blue light of the pool bouncing off her smooth skin. “Huh?”

“Hitman. When the boss said to push a button on a guy, I pushed it.”

Her jaw fell open and it took her a few long seconds to compose herself. “So you’re not like my father. At all. He doesn’t kill people.” She paused. “Not directly, anyway.”

I shrugged. “Now I handle more business and less, shall we say, direct action. I ended up with Mickey after the head of the New York family died.” I mentioned his name and Gia swallowed hard. She wasn’t as uninformed or naïve as I’d initially thought. “But like I said. I don’t expect you to understand. You’ve led a sheltered, privileged life, and probably a lot of what your father does is meaningless to you. You’re no different than the daughter of one of those Wall Street guys who screws people out of investments. No judgement. I’m just saying, none of us are innocent here.”

“Fuck. You. Speak for yourself.” She stood up and pointed at me. “My mother died because of this life. She became a pill addict because she hated being married to a made man. She was confined to a superficial world of luxury and turned to oxycontin to escape. She overdosed in an eight-hundred dollar a night hotel room in Miami and choked on her own puke. Don’t think you’re the only one with a tragic backstory. The difference between us is that I’m leaving this life, and you’re stuck in it. I’m not going to be like my mother, not with Mickey, and definitely not with you.”

With that, she stomped off, into the house.

The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

I allowed my head to fall back onto the chaise. Gia hadn’t yet accepted her fate in our world. I had. But I wasn’t the man to open her eyes on the matter, either. She was in for a rude awakening eventually, and I prayed I wasn’t around to witness it. She was a bomb waiting to detonate, and I feared her volatility and Mickey’s ruthlessness would end up in a war. One I wanted to stay out of. A vision of stroking her hair for ten minutes after having sex that afternoon came to mind, and that tight feeling in my chest unspooled.

Good job staying away from this drama, asshole.

If she was my wife...ah, hell. Why even think that way?

If she was my wife, what? How would I be able to encourage her to live the life she wanted?

I wouldn't, not as a made man.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, I hauled myself off the lounge chair and into the house. Gia was in the living room, reading a book. I poked my head in the door.

"I'm headed to bed," I said. Why was I being so charitable to her when she'd been such a bitch?

She responded with a glare.

After a quick shower, I turned out the lights and slipped naked between the sheets. Would she sleep next to me tonight? Christ, I hoped she kept her distance — and her clothes on. When we were in bed together, it was nearly impossible for me not to touch her.

Don't think about her. Just go to sleep and she'll be nicer in the morning. Maybe she's getting her period.

Still, her words stung. This wasn't the life I chose. Papa had always said I was smart enough for university, with my photographic memory. He'd said I'd have been a good economist, or a businessman. I was trying to move in that direction. But I couldn't erase the past, the bodies, the violence. They were a part of me, just as much as Italy was.

I slid my hand between the mattress and box spring, where I'd stashed one of my guns. It was still there. I exhaled and rolled onto my back.

Eventually I drifted off into a half-sleep. My eyes snapped open when I sensed another person next to me in bed.

Gia.

She was gloriously, beautifully, naked. Her scent wrapped me in all that was good and pure, and my dick sprang to life. She curled next to me, snaking her leg over mine. Fuck, yeah. Her skin felt like the softest, most luxurious velvet. I caressed her thigh and she pressed her scorching hot pussy into my hip.

"If you hate me so much, why are you here in bed, rubbing your naked body against me?" I grumbled.

“I have the exact same question. I don’t know why I can’t resist you, Alessandro. I want to hate you. I want to be repelled by you. But I’m not. Why can’t I leave you alone?”

I pulled her on top of me and grabbed two handfuls of her juicy ass. It wasn’t a fully conscious move, since I was half-awake. It was instinctual, as if my body knew what to do before my mind did.

“When you find out the answer, let me know, okay? In the meantime, stop being a cocktease and go to sleep.”

“I’m not tired,” she whispered.

She kissed up my neck and lightly bit my earlobe. Christ, that drove me insane. I squeezed her ass harder, then spanked one cheek. She let out a strangled gasp against my ear, which made me shiver with pleasure.

“Shut up and fuck me, Alessandro. Make me forget how much I hate you.”

“Now you’re finally making sense.” I roughly flipped her around, so she was on her stomach, then hauled her ass into the air. My palm cracked her ass again, harder this time, and she writhed and moaned. My fingers entered her from behind and she was sopping, her pussy walls swollen and inviting.

“You want to be fucked, princess? I don’t think I can be gentle tonight. You pissed me off earlier.”

She mewled into the pillow and taunted me by shimmying her ass. Little tease. I plunged my cock inside of her without thinking, without a condom, without another word. I clutched a handful of her hair and yanked her head up as I slammed into her. Tonight, I wasn’t asking whether I was gentle enough.

I knew I wasn’t, and didn’t care.

As usual, sex with her was out of this world. I’d never felt this chemistry with anyone. It was a feeling I should’ve been more wary of. But I could only concentrate on the here and now, and rammed into her tight cunt again and again.

I lost myself in the beauty and peril of Gia and I’ll be damned if I didn’t want it to ever end.

Chapter Thirty

GIA

THE NEXT DAY BLEED INTO THE NIGHT, AND THEN ANOTHER day, and another night. Alessandro and I grew closer, probably because of our intense physical attraction.

That's what I told myself, anyway.

The alternative — that we really were compatible, like he said — was too confusing. I didn't want to like him as much as I did. I didn't want to laugh at his jokes or the hilarious way he mimicked actors' accents. I didn't want to think his cooking was delicious or adore how he brought me coffee in bed. I didn't want to admire him for coming to America as a teenager, alone.

I wanted to hate him. For being part of my father's world, for working for Mickey, for being a made man.

But I couldn't.

He'd smile that little boyish grin and laugh when I said something funny. He'd kiss me on the cheek so sweetly that I felt like I was in a rom-com. He'd trail his nose against my cheek after we had sex and sigh or murmur something kind of cheesy, yet endearing.

“How can you be so fucking adorable and sexy at the same time?” he'd grumbled last night.

In truth, my feelings about him were becoming more confusing by the day. If we were at college, if he were a

regular guy from NYU or Columbia, I'd have sworn I was falling in love. Stupid, right? Especially under these circumstances, with me essentially his captive. With him being the underboss of my fiancé and not some finance major headed to an investment bank after graduation.

Stupid, because we'd known each other for what? Two weeks? But we'd been through a lot together in two weeks. More than many couples had been in two years. Maybe that's why I felt delirious, feverish, even, in his presence.

And so, on our tenth day on this Godforsaken island, I started to ask questions about our future. I'd abandoned any plan to coerce him into spiriting me to safety. It didn't seem right to use him like that.

Maybe he could flee with me, and we could save ourselves, together. It was worth a shot, right? The feeling I got from him was that he was resigned to his fate as a made man.

What if there was a different path?

I was in the kitchen and opened and closed several of the cabinet doors, then stared moodily out the window. The sky was the color of a pigeon and it was pouring, which meant we couldn't do our usual morning swim and sunbathe at the beach.

"So, what happens when we run out of Twizzlers and Diet Coke?" I grabbed the second-to-last pack of candy and ripped it open. Alessandro was sitting on the sofa watching a movie (the kind with explosions and car chases, his preferred genre), and I went to him and offered a red licorice rope.

Not that it mattered that we didn't have a ton of food. We'd been surviving on pasta and red sauce, beer and candy. Well, mostly I had. He seemed to exist on protein shakes and eggs.

He took the licorice from me. "I'll arrange something. Don't sweat it."

I sank on the far edge of the sofa. "Have you talked with fuckface?"

He jabbed at the remote, muting the TV. I noted that the muscles in his jaw bunched, and stayed tense, at my mention of Mickey.

“We text every other day or so.”

“Any word on when he’s going to show up? Or when we can leave?” I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arm around them, all while gnawing on my licorice.

He grunted a no.

“Can’t you give me any more than that? I mean, aren’t you worried about him busting in here while we’re in bed together? That would be pretty awkward, right? Or would he just want to watch or participate, given what a perv he is?”

He grimaced. “Highly unlikely that anyone will show up here without our knowing. The dock’s practically at the front door. What’s he going to do? Swim up, like he’s in a Bond movie?”

The imagery of that made me giggle. “More like slither like an eel.”

“Anyway, he said he’d let me know when it was safe to leave. I’m sure I’ll either bring you to your father’s, or to Mickey’s place in Miami.” He scratched his neck.

I squinted at him and angled my body so I was facing him. For some reason, his casual answer irked me. I stretched my legs out so my feet rested on his lap. “Guess you can’t wait to get back to your regular life. Screwing strippers or whatever.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Dunno. I’m probably boring you or something.” That was the thing, being here with him. Not knowing what would happen in the future made me cagey. Realizing that my future didn’t involve Alessandro made me want to punch something. I guess I was taking it all out on him.

His gaze met mine. It was difficult to concentrate on anything when he turned those electric blue eyes in my direction. I couldn’t figure out if they were menacing or sexy. Really, it was both.

“Come here.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions.”

I scrunched up my face. “Don’t be bossy.”

In a flash, he grabbed me by the ankle, yanking me toward him. I yelped, but didn’t feel in danger. I’d never admit it to anyone, but I liked when he chased me in these little ways. He pulled me into his lap, and I let out a playful growl while grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. He trapped my wrists in his hands.

“You’re so rough with me. Jerk.”

“You love it.” He released me so he could smooth my hair away from my face with his big hands, and I leaned in for a kiss.

“Unfortunately, you’re probably right. I do love it.”

We kissed for a few minutes, slow and sensual, until he pulled away. He cupped my face and we stared at each other. My heart sped up. Something about the steady rain pelting the nearby window made time slow and stretch. I didn’t want this moment to end.

“Do you think it’s going to be easy for me to let you go?” He said this in soft, dulcet-toned Italian, which made me melt.

“I dunno,” I muttered, my eyes downcast.

“Do you think I’d screw anyone else if I knew we were both free to do what we want, with no business repercussions, no Mickey, no drama?”

I lifted my shoulders.

“Look at me,” he said fiercely, the pressure of his hands on my face growing tighter.

I swallowed and studied his face. “You said this was just sex.”

“I was wrong. Okay? I’m not often wrong but I was wrong about you. And trust me, I’m not happy about the entire

situation. I don't like complications."

His statement hung in the air, heavy and ominous. Wave after wave of realization crashed through me. He was feeling this, *us*, too?

I pressed against his chest with my hands. Tonight he wore a deep blue T-shirt that matched his eyes, and shorts. "Let's run away together."

He snorted a laugh. "Come on. Get real."

"No, really. We could just leave here and go... somewhere."

He raised a dark eyebrow. "Somewhere. Like where? Out west, to work as bartenders at a ski resort? Or maybe we can go to Seattle and be baristas. Or, I've got it. We could work in a mall. Christ, Gia. I've never had an official paying job."

"You haven't?"

"No. I came here and the boss put me on his payroll at one of his restaurants, said I was a waiter. I've never worked a shift in my life."

I scrunched up my mouth and made a *hmm* noise.

"Gia, have *you* ever held a job?"

"Well, there was my internship..." Damn him for being so practical. "We get on a plane and go to Costa Rica. Buy a van and live near the beach."

He traced my cheek as a grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "Do you have your passport?"

I sighed. "No."

"Didn't think so. And I don't surf."

"But we have money. I have access to an emergency account in the Caymans."

He rolled his eyes. "Gia."

"We could use that and start over somewhere. No more of this life. Come on." The more I thought about it, the more I adored the idea. This was my way out. Our way out. I pinched

his muscular stomach, or tried to. “Look. It’s not a marriage proposal. We just get the hell out, together, and then decide what to do about us.”

He drew me into him and wrapped his arms around my body. I loved when he did this, because it made me feel safe and small. Surprising, really, since I didn’t think I’d ever like this part of being with a man. And by “this part,” I meant, the intimate, caring part, the one that made me all squishy and vulnerable inside.

“Gia, we can’t go anywhere. Mickey would find us, and kill us. He’s not a stupid man and he has far more resources than you know.”

“So what do we do? Let him dictate our lives?”

“Bide our time. You’re not even supposed to marry him right away, are you?”

The fact that Alessandro was planning ahead, and considering a future with me, thrilled me to my core. “No, I’m supposed to attend grad school starting in January. It’s a two-year program. I’m supposed to marry him after that. He gave his blessing to my education.” I snorted.

“A lot can happen in two years, princess.”

We stayed like that for a while, with me wrapped around his body, him stroking my hair.

“What happens if Mickey dies?” I ask in a hushed tone. It wasn’t an unreasonable question — men like him met terrible fates all the time. “Who takes over?”

It took him several breaths to respond, and his two words froze my heart.

“I do.”

I’d started my twenty-first year knowing that I’d be engaged to a mafia boss. What I didn’t know was that I might actually fall in love with one.

Chapter Thirty-One

ALESSANDRO

I HADN'T HEARD FROM MICKEY IN TWO NIGHTS, THE forecasters on The Weather Channel said a tropical storm was headed our way, and we were running out of Diet Coke.

“We’re also out of pasta and,” Gia shut the cabinet door and sighed dramatically, “canned tomatoes. But what I really need is more Diet Coke. Please don’t forget. Like if you have to get in the car to buy a couple extra cases, do it.”

“You live off that goddamned stuff,” I grumbled. We’d talked about this plan for provisions all day, and it made my head feel as though it was splitting in two.

“Just make sure your guy brings us enough. Can you text him before you leave?”

I paused at the door, eyeing her. She was in one of her little tank top-no bra-tiny shorts ensembles. Exactly what drove me wild. “I already did, princess. He knows what to get.”

“Then why do you look so worried? Don’t be concerned.” Gia came to me, opening her arms into an embrace.

Her perfume washed over me and I drew her into my body. My hands drifted down her back to her ass, and I squeezed. “I don’t like leaving you alone. Not for a minute.”

She fluttered kisses up my neck, then stood on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth into my cheek. “You’re going to be

gone, what? An hour? You left me a gun. You'll be back in no time. Who's going to reach me here? It's a freaking island."

I let out a growl. We'd done some target practice earlier in the day on the wild, undeveloped side of the island. She'd been pretty damned good, too. Claimed she'd never handled a weapon.

"Seriously. Don't worry, Alessandro. Okay? Just go, get our stuff, come back. Then we'll figure out our next move."

I clutched a fistful of her messy ponytail and tilted her head back so I could capture her mouth with mine. Silly girl still thought we were going to run away together or some shit. She didn't understand that I couldn't break with Mickey that easily. That I couldn't just kill him and expect our men to remain loyal to me — especially over a woman.

No, I had to proceed with caution. If my life had taught me anything, it was to slow down when everything and everyone was speeding up. It might mean keeping Gia at arm's length for a while. A year or two, even.

But eventually, she'd be mine. The more time I spent with her, the more we talked and laughed and fucked, the more certain I was that she was the woman for me. She was fierce and smart, and I appreciated that more than her beauty. The kind of woman who would stick by me, through everything.

Crazy, right? Certifiably insane.

I kissed her hard and she responded by biting my lower lip and grinding her hot body into me. "Don't do this to me," I groaned. "Don't wanna be in the boat with a hard-on."

She broke away and giggled, then cupped my face with her hands. "Okay. Go. Come back in one piece."

Why was my heart pounding so hard? Why did it feel like I was leaving her for good?

I grabbed her upper arms and shook her gently. "What are you going to do if I'm not back by ten? Tell me again."

"Use the burner cell to call you."

"And if you can't reach me?"

“I’m going to call your sister Lucy on speed dial and tell her that you need the recipe to Nonna’s tiramisu.” Gia laughed, and the entire room seemed to brighten. How the fuck did she do that with just a laugh? “I can’t believe that’s your code with your sister. It’s silly and sweet and kind of awesome.”

“Whatever. Don’t make fun.” I kissed her on the forehead. *I* couldn’t believe that I’d told her about my secret phrase with my sister. But in case of an emergency, it was the only way Lucy would pay attention if Gia called out of the blue.

“It’s going to be fine. Don’t sweat it. Please. I’m a big girl and I’m not letting anyone in here.” She leaned in and rubbed her nose to mine

I glanced at the table, which was about a foot from Gia’s hip. One of my three Glocks sat on the table, locked and loaded. “Okay. Lock up behind me.”

“Of course. Hey.” She reached for my wrist. “You be careful, okay?”

I kissed her again on the mouth. It was too fleeting, too much like an ending. *Goddammit*. “Bye,” I whispered.

We stared into each other’s eyes for a beat. The pause and the silence between us was too intense, and she swallowed hard.

“See you,” she said.

The second I was out the door, I heard the tumblers of the locks slide into place. It didn’t take me long to reach the boat, crank up the engine, and zoom away from the dock. A heavy feeling settled into my chest as the boat sliced through the water, the salt spray stinging like nettles on my cheeks.

I’d thought about bringing Gia with me. Thought long and hard. I had no reason to believe I was in danger in meeting up with Matteo, a foot soldier who was loyal to our operation. Matteo was an intense, fiftysomething Italian-American who ran a chain of bingo parlors for old folks in Southwest Florida. He also conveniently offered backroom poker games known

for high payouts. Guys from Miami to Jacksonville turned out for Matteo's tables. He gave a cut to me, and I kicked some up to Mickey. I'd known Matteo since my days in New York, and knew he wouldn't ask questions about why I needed three hundred bucks worth of groceries on a random Tuesday night.

I'd thought about not doing this at all, but we needed food. What the fuck else could we do? Catch fish? Forage for berries? Christ.

Within twenty minutes I was at the dock on the mainland, and tied up the boat. I made my way down the dock, my hand never far from the gun in my waistband. I trusted Matteo, but who the fuck knew what else might await in this redneck bumfuck seaside town.

The night was sticky and humid, and that stupid pounding of my heart wouldn't subside. I just wanted this to be over with — not that Mickey would object to my executive decision-making. He knew I might have to leave to resupply.

I didn't want to leave Gia alone for long. At all. Ever again, truth be told.

There was only one car in the parking lot, a giant BMW sedan. The flash of the headlights tipped me off that it was Matteo. The driver's door swung open, and his tall, wiry frame climbed out. He looked like one of those retirees, with his Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. He even wore the white sneakers and white socks. His unstylish fashion sense almost made me crack up, but I was in no mood for levity.

"Hey, bro." We shook hands.

"How'd the shopping trip go?"

"Got everything on the list. I felt like a fuckin' personal shopper, one of those Instacart guys." He let out a laugh, which evaporated in the still, humid air. "C'mon. Let's unload."

We went around to the back of his car, and he popped the trunk. It swung up to reveal six big insulated bags.

"Damn. You're organized." I lifted two in each hand, and he grabbed the other two. All the Diet Coke made for some

heavy bags.

We walked in silence down to the dock. That's what I liked about the guy. All business. No bullshit.

I set the groceries in the boat and Matteo did the same. My gaze swept around the marina. There was no one here, just row after row of sailboats that were probably owned by rich retirees who used them once a year. All the better.

I reached for my wallet and extracted a wad of cash, pressing it into Matteo's hand. "Thanks, Teo. I mean it. You've done me a solid."

He pocketed the cash and took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Listen. I need to tell you something I heard."

My stomach hardened. "What's that?"

"Word on the street is that the landscape in Florida's changing." He cracked a grin. "You probably already know that. But I'm hearing that Amato's out of the picture. Some shit went down in Atlanta yesterday. You know, with the Russians and Antonio Amato."

I nodded slowly, not wanting to tip him off that I was totally fucking clueless. Matteo didn't know I was protecting Gia.

Panic welled in my chest. *Enough*. I needed to get back to the island, throw Gia in this boat, and leave. Fuck Mickey. We could wait for him somewhere else. We were like sitting ducks on that island.

I clapped Matteo on the arm. "All will be revealed in time, my dude. Just keep up the good work with those bingo parlors of yours. You gotta goldmine there."

He chuckled. "You need to come by for a game someday."

I stepped into the boat and fired up the engine. "Someday, bro. Someday. Thanks again."

He watched me roar off, giving me a little salute as I maneuvered the speedboat away from the dock.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Gia's father, out of the picture. *Dead?* What had happened up there in Atlanta? My mind swirled as I sped full throttle, into the darkness of the Gulf of Mexico. I needed to get in touch with Mickey. Or did I?

Where the fuck is Mickey?

And, most importantly, what was I going to tell Gia?

Chapter Thirty-Two

GIA

THE SILENCE THAT DESCENDED ON THE CABIN WHEN Alessandro left made me nervous. I paced around the house, flipping on every light, hoping to quell my anxiety by driving out any darkness.

Was I feeling this way because of Alessandro's absence? Understandable. It was creepy being here on an island, all alone.

Or was I missing him, yearning for his presence? If that was behind my anxiety, it was stupid. As infatuated as I was — and as much as I'd implored him to start a new life with me — I had to get a grip. He was a Mafia guy through and through, just like my father and grandfather. He'd never leave the life, even if on the off chance we were to fall in love. I couldn't love a Mafia man. Out of the question.

I wanted goodness and light, law and order.

But holy crap, was I in love with him? This question unsettled me almost more than the silence. Yes, my heart, stomach and clit quivered when I looked at him. Sometimes all at once, which I didn't think physically possible. I admired his street smarts and his humor and I hated to admit it, but he made me feel protected. I'd never knew that was something I craved until now; perhaps my mother's death had hardened my heart against expressing that need.

Could a regular man, a professor or a lawyer or a doctor, make me feel as wanted and protected as Alessandro did?

Dammit, maybe I *was* in love. I let out a strangled, frustrated groan as I paced around the small cabin for a fifth time. My voice bounced off the walls. I had to get out of here, and soon. What I needed was time alone to think about all this. To process every crazy moment that had happened since I climbed in Alessandro's car all those days ago.

Sighing, I cracked open our last can of Diet Coke and brought it, Alessandro's second cellphone, and the loaded gun, to the sofa with me. I flipped through channels without registering what was on the screen, then clicked the television off when the chatter became too much.

Nothing seemed okay. Not the silence, not the noise, nothing. Uneasy, I took everything into the bedroom and shut the door. I climbed into bed, setting the gun next to me on top of the comforter and the soda on the nightstand. My e-reader was nearby, and it flickered to life. Because I wanted as much comfort as possible, I slipped under the covers, needing the reassuring weight of the blankets and sheets against my skin.

Over the years, whenever I'd been too stressed about family or school, reading had provided solace. Maybe tonight a book would work its magic. I checked the time. Alessandro had been gone fifteen minutes. He'd return soon. Hopefully.

I should've gone with him.

I navigated to a thriller novel I'd started, but it was too suspenseful and made my heart race a little too much under the circumstances. After closing that book, I started an erotic romance, but then my heart raced for a different reason — the characters had sex almost immediately, and my mind wandered to Alessandro. And Alessandro's fingers. His tongue. His cock. Heat pooled between my legs as I read, then I flipped back to the main screen to check the time.

Dammit. Only ten minutes had passed.

What if my infatuation with Alessandro was merely an intense sexual attraction? How would I know if that was the

case? It wasn't like I had experience with guys, so it would make sense that I'd think I was in love after all that fucking.

I powered my e-reader down, not wanting to read another sex scene. Maybe I should masturbate. But that seemed wrong. My gaze went to the phone and I bit my lip. It was Alessandro's burner phone, which likely meant he'd never actually used it.

What if I called Ashley? Or Judith? I needed to talk with a woman. Craved a female perspective. If I called one of them, would Alessandro find out? My mind raced with the possibilities. Was it dangerous? I scowled. How could it be? Alessandro didn't tell me not to use the phone, but he'd said to call him only if he hadn't returned by a certain time. He'd programmed his number into the speed dial.

I picked up the cell, my thumb stabbing the power button. But instead of dialing, I hesitated.

Crap. Unlike Alessandro and his photographic memory. I didn't know either Ashley or Judith's number by heart. I was all about words, not numbers.

"I'm an idiot," I whispered, tossing the phone onto the bed.

I flopped back against the pillows and shut my eyes. Instead of dwelling on my various problems — marrying Mickey, how to get Alessandro out of the Mafia life, running away to a place where no one would find and kill us — I thought about more pleasant things.

Like the way Alessandro had washed my hair last night in the shower. We were in the big tub and he'd taken the spray nozzle to wet my locks, then carefully worked shampoo into my hair. Somehow the sensation of his fingers working their way across my scalp made me feel cared for.

"You're so goddamned beautiful, Gia," he'd murmured. "I could take care of you forever."

Never did I think a man would say words like that to me. I just wished they were coming from the mouth of someone a

little less...criminal. I was ashamed to admit it, but Alessandro's profession...

My thoughts were interrupted by the rattle of the front door lock. He was back, and so soon! I exhaled with relief as the door hinge creaked, and tossed the comforter aside.

"Honey, I'm home."

I froze. That slightly nasal New York accent was most definitely *not* Alessandro's voice.

"Gia? Where are you, baby girl? I know you're here. Daddy Mickey's home to claim his little girl."

Oh, fuck. *Mickey*. My breath died in my throat. A million thoughts raced through my brain, all of them awful. Had he somehow intercepted Alessandro on the boat? Killed him? Was this a setup from Alessandro?

My eyes and my hand went to the gun, and my fingers reached the cool metal. I snuck it under the covers so I could muffle the sound of charging the round into the chamber. I pulled back on the top of the gun swiftly, just like I'd been taught by my dad and by Alessandro.

CH-CHACK

"Hey there. Mickey?" I called out in my fakest, sunniest tone, hoping my voice would drown out the clicking sound of the gun. I knew what I had to do. "I'm in the bedroom, big guy."

I angled my body toward the door. My hand, clasping the gun, was concealed under a corner of the white comforter.

"Just where I want you. The bedroom."

The door swung open, and there he was: the human equivalent of a throbbing head vein. Mickey stood in the doorway. He wore a green polo shirt and chino pants, an ensemble that accentuated his gut. "Hey, baby."

Seeing him in the flesh should've scared me. But it didn't. Anger was the only feeling inside me now, a humming, swirling, red-hot fog. Thick and toxic.

His piglike eyes went to the far nightstand, where Alessandro and I had discarded our condom wrappers. Mickey's smile faded.

"So I guess my bride-to-be isn't a virgin anymore." He turned to stare at me, a sneer on his face. "Fucking asshole. I told him not to screw you. I paid a lot for your pussy."

"Fuck. You. My pussy, my body, it'll never be yours. Ever." My voice was calm and steady. Never had I hated someone so much.

"Oh, I will fuck you." He stepped toward the bed.

"Like hell you will."

With controlled movement, I flipped the comforter away and raised the gun. Pointed it right at his head. He opened his lips to say something. My index finger squeezed the trigger before one word could escape his mouth.

The first shot hit him in the shoulder, hard enough to spin him into the wall. He let out a yell. The crack of the gun drowned out the hum of my anger and the force nearly blasted me back into the headboard.

But I was too strong, and too determined to kill that motherfucker. I stood up and walked to him, pointing the gun straight at him.

The second shot struck Mickey in the chest, making him scream in pain. *Good.*

The third shot sliced into his forehead and sprayed blood everywhere. It spattered the white walls, the down comforter, the condom wrappers.

"Fuck you," I whispered. My ears rang with an insistent *eeeeeeEEEEEEEE* from the shots, and I wondered if it would ever go away.

And then I sat, knowing the world was a slightly better place now that he was dead.

I stayed there, zombie-like, for I don't know how long, watching the blood pour out of Mickey's body and onto the wood floor. It didn't occur to me that I should call Alessandro,

didn't register that I should get out of bed and go in the other room. I sat, stone cold, until I heard the faraway creak of the front door hinges again.

“Gia? Gia! Baby? Why isn't the door unlocked?” The male voice sounded both panicked and distant. “Where the fuck are you?”

Unable to respond, I was frozen in the same spot on the bed. *Baby*. When Alessandro burst into the room, I barely recognized him. Probably because I was in shock. Or maybe he'd set me up, and I was ruminating on that.

I raised the gun and pointed it directly at Alessandro.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

ALESSANDRO

“Gia are you okay...” My voice faded when I saw the gun. When I saw the body. My panic that something had happened to her was replaced with incredulity. She'd shot Mickey? Holy fucking shit.

“Baby? Put the gun down.”

I tried to use my softest tone even though my heart was thrashing against my ribs. The bedroom looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood sprayed the walls, the floor, even Gia's cheek. *Fucking hell...*

I pressed my hands together in a prayer. I'd never begged anyone for anything. Staring down the barrel of my own gun changed that real quick. “Please, amore mio. Please?”

Her small hand shook, but she wouldn't lower the Glock. “You just called me baby. *He* called me baby. Don't ever fucking call me baby.”

Oh, shit. I took a slow step toward her, trying and failing to avoid the blood and chunks of flesh that covered the floor. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just surprised to see,” I waved my hand at Mickey, whose face was unrecognizable, “all this. Now give me the gun, okay? Everything's going to be fine. We're going to be cool and work through this together. It's going to be just fine.”

The only way I knew it was Mickey, in fact, was because of the gold ring wrapped around his right pinky. Well, that and his ridiculous brogues. They were brown Italian calf leather, with buckles. Even in death, the motherfucker was a cliché.

“No. You’re going to kill me. You set me up.” She inhaled deep, her nostrils flaring. Her black eyes were feral, and I guessed she was in shock. I swallowed a thickness in my throat. More than anything, I wanted to get the gun from her so I could wrap my arms around her. Reassure her.

“You set me up, didn’t you?”

“No, Gia, I swear to God, I didn’t.” I made a pleading gesture with my hands. “I’d never do that to you. I only want to protect you. Last I knew, Mickey was in Atlanta.”

She inhaled and glared at me. “You’re going to kill me for shooting your boss. But he was a pig and he deserved it.”

“I know he did, Gia. And I’m not going to do anything to you. I promise.” She deserved a goddamned medal, as far as I was concerned. Gia had just solved one of my biggest problems — although I knew that it also created a thousand more. But I didn’t have time to dwell on anything but getting the gun out of Gia’s hand. “I’m not angry, and not going to hurt you. I swear on my mother’s grave.”

She exhaled, shutting her eyes. As she did, she lowered her arm and set the gun on the comforter. I swiftly rounded the bed and snatched it up, taking care to remove the live round from the chamber. After setting the empty gun on the nightstand, I grabbed Gia and swiftly drew her into my body.

She trembled in my arms. I expected her to sob like a girl, but she didn’t shed one tear or even whimper.

“He came in. Used a key. I don’t know how he got here.” Her voice was muffled because she spoke against my chest. “I thought you sent him.”

A chill flowed down my spine. “I saw a canoe at the dock when I returned. I was so worried, Gia. So fucking worried about you. I didn’t send him. I didn’t want him around you

ever again. Didn't want him to touch you. Didn't want you to marry him..." My voice cracked.

"I killed him." Her tone was fierce.

"I know, princess. And that's okay." My hand squeezed the back of her head and she squirmed out of my grip, pulling back a few inches to look me in the eye.

All I wanted was to hold her tight. Emotions — rage, fear, guilt — welled inside my chest at the thought of Mickey busting in here. At the idea of him seeing her in those little shorts and that nearly see-through white tank. He thought he was going to claim Gia, but she had other plans.

"I thought it was you at the door. But he walked into the bedroom with that fucking smirk," she spat. "He saw the condom wrappers over there and said he'd, quote, paid a lot for my pussy. He looked at me with those pig eyes and called me baby. I knew he was going to try to touch me, and that's when I shot him. I decided to take my chances and kill him before he ever laid one finger on me. And I have zero fucking remorse, Alessandro. He deserved to die. I only wish he'd suffered more."

The cold look in her eyes chilled even me, a hardened hitman. "Damn," I whispered. She was not the sweet young thing I thought she was when she climbed into my car. But the way her entire body was quaking was a sign that she was running on adrenaline, still in shock.

I'd been there, after my first murder.

"I also killed him for you." She shuddered in a breath and I let her words sink in.

"Fucking hell," I muttered. "Why?"

"Because you'd be a better boss. Or maybe now that he's out of the picture, you'll get out of the life. Or something."

Fuck. What is she talking about? My mouth went dry. "Well, Gia, I—"

She interrupted me. "What are we going to do now?"

“What’s done is done.” It was time for me to take charge, even though I had no fucking clue what that meant. “You’re going into the bathroom to clean up. I’m going to gather a few things and then we’re going to get the fuck out of here. Okay? We’re going to be fast.”

She nodded, but didn’t leave my embrace.

“Princess. It’s going to be fine. No one will know you did this. Trust me. Now get in the bathroom, take a hot shower. But don’t be too long. Ten minutes.” I planted a kiss on her forehead, wishing I could believe my own words.

She turned and walked into the bathroom.

I glanced to Mickey’s bloodied, faceless body and pinched the bridge of my nose. We needed to work quick here. I wasn’t sure how many of Mickey’s guys knew he was coming here. Probably not many, because he didn’t let them into his personal life.

The island was far enough from land that no one would have heard the shot, so we had that going for us.

I stepped around Mickey’s corpse and went into the kitchen, where I’d seen two big bottles of barbecue lighter fluid in the cabinet under the sink. I popped the cabinet door and pulled them out.

“Alessandro?” Gia called.

I rushed back into the bedroom, taking care not to slip on the blood.

Gia’s head poked out the bathroom door and she glanced to Mickey and grimaced. “Should I pack all my stuff? I have crap everywhere in here.”

“Yeah. We can’t leave any trace of us here. Do you need help?” During the time we’d spent here, Gia had put approximately three hundred little bottles, tubes, compacts and lipsticks on every possible surface of the bathroom. Leaving any of that shit behind could cause problems later if anything was found by cops.

She opened the door, wearing just a towel. I stepped into the bathroom. Steam rose from the shower.

“You shower and I’ll get all this stuff together.”

She shut the door and nodded, then dropped the towel to the floor. As she turned toward the shower, her gaze shifted to me. Something about her curvy, naked body, the spot of blood on her cheek, her innocent look, unraveled me.

It was totally inappropriate, considering Mickey’s bloody corpse lay feet away, in the other room, just on the opposite side of the door. But I couldn’t help myself.

I grabbed her arm and spun her to me, seizing her mouth. I kissed her so hard that we were both left breathless, and the next thing I knew, she was clawing at my shirt, ripping the buttons open, unbuckling my belt.

Now naked, I yanked her into the shower. She’d done the unthinkable — killed my boss — and created a world of hurt for me. And yet, I wanted her more than I ever had. The taste of her tongue, the sensation of her pussy against my fingers, was somehow sweeter tonight.

She’d killed for me.

She wrapped her leg around my waist, and I hoisted her other leg up so I could press her against the shower tile and drive my dick inside her.

The sex was fast and frenzied, and she screamed my name as she came. Yeah, I groaned her name aloud as I finished, too.

One thing was certain, though, a fact I didn’t need to say aloud.

Gia was mine.

After tonight, we were bonded together, forever.

Chapter Thirty-Three

GIA

“ARE WE READY? WHAT ARE YOU...” MY VOICE DIED IN MY throat when I saw what Alessandro was holding. “Oh.”

“You got all your stuff, right? You wiped down every surface? No fingerprints?” His words were clipped. There was no pretense of kindness now, no tenderness or affection. Understandable, though.

I nodded. My heart was pounding so fast, sending so much blood rushing to my ears, that I thought I might faint.

“Okay. Let’s do this.” He handed me a giant bottle of lighter fluid, the kind you normally use on a bar-b-cue grill.

“Yeah. Right. Lets. Do this.” I gulped a breath and walked into the kitchen. He stalked into the bedroom.

I flipped open the top of the bottle and just like we’d discussed an hour ago — after we’d had sex in the shower but before we’d packed our stuff and put it in the boat — I squirted the liquid on all wooden surfaces. He’d told me to spray in long, zigzag motions, so when the place caught fire, the flames would spread fast.

It didn’t take me long to empty the bottle, and I reached for the next, spraying the sofa, the chair, the wooden coffee table. We’d fucked on every piece of furniture in here, I realized, and soon it would turn to ashes. Fitting.

Alessandro rushed into the room just as I was squirting the last of the second bottle. I handed it to him and he shoved it into a plastic bag.

“Go outside,” he commanded.

I obeyed, walking out the door and standing about ten feet from the house as we’d agreed. I stuffed my bare feet into my pink flip flops. A pair of Alessandro’s shoes, those blue and white striped Adidas sandals that men often wore, sat on the cement paver, and I nudged them with my toe. Craning my neck, I watched his muscular form walk into the kitchen, turn a knob on the stove, and open the oven door.

Less than a minute later, he burst out the door. He was barefoot and holding two plastic bags. “Go,” he shouted, pointing at the dock while shoving his feet into the sandals.

We ran at top speed to the boat and jumped in. He fired it up and we roared off into the darkness. I twisted in my seat to look at the island, which grew small in the distance. To the naked eye, it appeared that we’d left a light on in the bungalow. I knew differently.

I glanced to Alessandro, who was standing in the cockpit of the boat, his eyes steely, focused on the path ahead, looking like a commander of an army. Possibly more beautiful than I’d ever seen him look, more than when he fucked me or more than when he held me.

He’d rolled up the sleeves on his white linen shirt, and I swear to God, I’d never seen a more incredible sight.

I should’ve been smarting from guilt and shame. I’d taken another human’s life, and that act was wrapped up in how I felt about Alessandro. Had I killed for him? Because of him? Or was it my rage at the entire situation? All I felt was anger at Mickey and my father, and admiration for Alessandro.

Mickey probably deserved to die. And yet...someone must love him. His mother, perhaps. Gah.

Not good. Not good at all. But I’d have time to unpack that later — if we managed to get out of here alive and without arrest. Could I tell a therapist about this? I almost laughed

aloud at the thought because it was so... privileged. So white girl bougie.

Focus on this moment. The wind. The smell of the Gulf. The moonless night.

He'd illuminated one lamp on the boat so we could see where we were headed, and when we were about halfway to the mainland, he slowed the engine by letting up on the throttle and killing the light.

"Do it, now," he yelled.

That was my cue to dump the contents of two plastic bags overboard. They contained our bloody clothes and shoes, along with some other bloodstained items that could have our DNA on them. Alessandro said that if they were in the salt water, the DNA would break down. I wasn't sure if he was right, but I also had no choice but to believe him.

That task done, he turned the boat's beacon on and sped off once again. My gaze went back to the island and I squinted. Was the cabin on fire yet? What if the lit matches hadn't caught ablaze? What if the gas oven somehow had extinguished itself?

My breathing grew heavy as we approached the dock. I half expected a line of police cruisers to be waiting for us, but there was no one. Nothing except the placid sailboats at the marina. No people, no commotion. Alessandro maneuvered the boat into a slip and shut down the engine.

He stepped to my side and pressed his hand into my back. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"What are we going to say if anyone asks?" His voice was a touch too demanding, and suddenly I was back to feeling like I was his captive again. My insides began to shake. I'd killed his boss. Sure, we'd spent the last several days fucking, but Mafia guys were loyal to their own — not to women.

Reality came rushing at me, just like the salt spray a few moments ago. Was Alessandro telling the truth when he said he wouldn't hurt me?

“Princess?” he prodded, using a gentle voice.

“That we were out fishing but had some trouble with the boat, so that’s why we’re coming back so late.”

He pressed his nose into my cheek. “Good girl. Now grab your bag and wait for me at the end of the dock.”

Again, I complied. What else could I do?

I watched as he loaded a bunch of sacks into a wheelbarrow meant for the boat owners. It was all that food he’d gotten, and I’d wondered if we should just discard it at the cabin. He’d said no, wanted to leave as little as possible to tie us to what was about to happen.

Or what should be happening any moment...

Once he’d filled the cart, I followed him to the parking lot, where his Maserati sat. Again, I wondered about the safety of it all — how sure could we be that Mickey’s other guys didn’t know where we were — but on this, I had to trust Alessandro.

As he was loading all the stuff into the trunk, we heard a thunder-like boom in the distance. I flinched. Alessandro didn’t. In tandem, we swiveled our heads to the left. We could barely see between trees and the sailboat masts in the distance, but there was a definite bright blaze on the island.

“Thank fuck,” Alessandro whispered, slamming the trunk. “Let’s get out of here.”

My heartbeat didn’t slow down as we sped away, nor did I relax once we were on the Interstate. We drove in silence for an hour. I couldn’t look at him, I was so anxious. I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance he’d go through with what we discussed. Which meant there was an equal chance that he’d drive me to a swamp and shoot me in the head.

I twined my fingers together in an attempt to will away the shaking. Alessandro was lost in thought. One hand was draped over the steering wheel, and he bit his bottom lip. That was my only indication he was nervous, too. Otherwise, his face was hard and cold as granite.

Then he flicked his turn signal and we exited. I shut my eyes. Hotel or swamp? Life or death?

I couldn't watch my impending fate. I felt the car take several turns, and I let out a whimper.

Then he stopped the car. "We're here, Gia."

I peeled my eyes open and exhaled at what was in my line of vision.

A Holiday Inn.

Oh thank God. I was spared. Maybe this meant he'd taken my words seriously. Back at the bungalow, when we were talking about how to torch the place, I'd babbled for a solid five minutes about him leaving the Mafia. I thought he hadn't heard my pleas, wasn't listening at all. Perhaps he had. If he didn't want to kill me, maybe he wanted a future with me...

Still shaking in my flip-flops, we grabbed one of our packed bags — the one with all my stuff — and walked inside. A young woman, not much older than me, looked up from her Nintendo and scrambled to her feet.

"How can I help you?"

"My wife and I would like a room, please." He flashed a dazzling smile and the woman giggled.

I didn't have to force a smile. Just hearing Alessandro say those words was hilarious, even under these twisted circumstances.

The clerk checked us in under a fake name — Mr. and Mrs. Adam Carey — and we took the elevator to the third floor, then walked down the hall to our room.

Our room was nothing special, but it was clean and — maybe — safe. Alessandro double-locked the door and moved a heavy chair against it. I flopped on the bed and let out a strangled groan.

"Oh my God. I can feel the adrenaline leaching out of my body."

"Get up. We need to talk."

I struggled to sit. “What? Why can’t we just take five minutes and relax?”

He opened the minibar fridge and extracted two small bottles — a Jack Daniels and a coconut rum. He cracked both open and handed me the rum.

“Wait, why can’t I have the Jack?”

That elicited a smile. “Fine. You get the Jack. You deserve it.” He took the rum and handed me the whiskey.

“To our first job,” he said.

Like there would be any others? *Wrong*. “To our last job.”

We clinked bottles and each downed the booze. The whiskey was sickeningly strong but it slid down my throat, burning my insides and matching my mood.

Alessandro sprawled in a chair across from the bed. “Okay. I’ve been thinking. On the drive here I gave what you said a lot of thought.”

I inched to the edge of the bed, suddenly alert and alive. The hazy fog of shock was beginning to wear off. “You agree that we should just make a break and live somewhere?”

He shook his head.

My breath hitched. “Then what’s the plan?”

“I need time.”

“For what?”

“To make sure the organization is solid. To make sure there’s not a vacuum of power. Most importantly, to make sure no one thinks you or I killed Mickey. If I get a whiff that anyone knows, I’ll have to kill them.”

I winced. “Won’t everyone think you and I killed Mickey? Don’t they all know what we were doing, and how he sent us to the island?”

He fixed those cold blue eyes on me. “There are only a few people who know where we were and what we were doing. I might have to eradicate them. We’ll see.”

“Okay, so who? Mickey, who’s dead. My dad. Judith. Me. You. Maybe my dad’s bodyguard? The guy you got the groceries from?” My stomach hardened. “Wait. You’re not thinking of killing them, are you?”

He let out a breath through his nostrils. “I would never hurt anyone that you love.” He swallowed and briefly looked at the tiny, empty booze bottle in his hand.

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said in a sarcastic tone. “So you’re talking about killing your own men, if they suspect anything.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Okayyy,” I breathed.

“The grocery guy didn’t know I was with you. Your dad’s bodyguard didn’t know where we were going.”

“And the guy who met us at the dock that night?”

“He’s a local. I paid him a lot. He’s one of my guys. Forget about him.”

“So what’s the issue?”

“I need to consolidate power. Need to make sure some investments are legit. I need several months, Gia. Maybe a year. You need to let me handle my business.”

I grimaced. “A year? Then what? We leave? We get a one way ticket to Costa Rica?”

“I don’t know.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Just give me time and I’ll figure it out.”

My heart plummeted into my stomach. This didn’t sound like a man who wanted to leave the lifestyle. “And what should I do in the meantime? Are you planning to put me up in some condo in Miami and treat me like a cheap sugar baby? Fuck me between business meetings and murders? Keep me locked away?” I snorted and rolled my eyes.

He shook his head slowly. “I would never treat you like that.”

“Then what? What’s *my* plan?”

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and took out his cell. “You’re going to call Judith now and have her come get you. When she arrives, I’m going to leave for Miami. You’re going with Judith away from here, away from me.”

My mouth opened but no sound came out.

He sat back and clasped his hands behind his head. In that moment, Alessandro was the portrait of an alpha male Mafia guy — a fact that I loathed.

“Then we’re going to spend the next few months apart until things die down. You’re going back to school as planned. We need to keep our distance. Once I’ve taken over and everything’s nice and calm, I’ll call you. You’ve gotta trust me on this, Gia.”

“I’m not sure that I do,” I replied.

Chapter Thirty-Four

ALESSANDRO

THE LAST THING I WANTED WAS TO LET GIA GO.

But I knew I had to, at least for a few months. Maybe longer.

I looked over. She was sleeping in the hotel bed next to me, tucked into the crook of my arm. The bathroom light was on, spilling illumination into the room. Neither one of us wanted to be in the dark.

She hadn't wanted to sleep, but after two shots of Jack and a difficult conversation, I'd coaxed her to stretch out. She'd had a wild look in her eyes, borne of the knowledge that she'd just taken another man's life.

Goddammit, I wish we'd never gotten ourselves in this situation...

"Kiss me," she'd said, extending her arms.

I'd placed a peck on her cheek.

"No, a real kiss." She'd pushed out her sexy bottom lip.

I rubbed my nose on her forehead. "If I start kissing you, I won't want to stop. And we can't get into that now, because we're waiting for Judith."

She huffed out a small noise of impatience. "Fine. Then just hold me."

Of course I wanted to do that, so I'd wrapped my arms around her until she was breathing deep. Her body, which was fever-hot from all the adrenaline, sank into mine. I swept a lock of her dark hair off her cheek. No way did I want to let her out of my sight. But I also knew I couldn't just show up with Mickey's fiancée and take over the organization, either.

I needed to talk with Judith, Amato's lawyer. She'd struck me as a straight shooter, and one who cared about Gia's safety. But no one would care about her safety as much as me, a fact that made me fiercely anxious.

Gia had raised the idea of me putting her up in a condo in Miami, and I couldn't lie. The thought had crossed my mind — at least until she told me in no uncertain terms that she wasn't going to be, as she put it, a “sugar baby.”

No, keeping Gia hidden away wouldn't help either of us. I need to make sure she was safe, then let her go — for a short while, at least, while I sorted shit out. Gia wasn't one to sit back and be quiet, and that would only complicate matters that were already tangled and thorny.

We stayed like this in bed for I don't know how long, me listening to her rhythmic breaths and the hum of the air conditioner. I mentally went through everything that needed to be done in Miami: meeting with the crew, organizing a sit-down with the bosses of the other crime families, checking on all the fucking business deals.

Dealing with the Russians in Atlanta, especially if they'd killed Gia's father. Christ, that was another major complication. I hadn't yet told Gia what Matteo had said about her dad. Maybe it wasn't true...

A sharp rap on the door ripped me out of my thoughts. I jumped up, sweeping the gun off the nightstand. I glanced at Gia, who let out a cute snore. In my bare feet, I quietly stepped down the carpeted hall to the door, gun at the ready.

I put my eye to the peephole. Tiny Judith Esposito in a blue track suit and Adidas sneakers was flanked by two of the biggest dudes I'd ever seen. I lowered the gun and opened the door about a foot and a half.

“Hey,” I muttered, and Judith slipped inside, leaving the two men in the hall. I bolted the door.

“Where is she?” Judith asked in a low whisper.

“Sleeping.”

“Good. Let’s step in here to talk.”

The hotel room was the kind where the bathroom was immediately to the left of the entrance, then the rest was down a longer hall. We went into the bathroom, and I gently shut the door, not wanting to wake Gia.

“What the fuck happened?” She leaned against the bathroom counter.

I sat on the edge of the tub and scratched my neck. “I was just going to ask you that, about Amato.”

“He’s dead. Your boss killed him in Atlanta.” She folded her thin arms and fixed her steely gray eyes on me. “Mickey felt that he was taking the side of the Russians.”

For the first time in a while, I was stunned to silence. “Oh, shit,” I whispered. That little fuck. It made me wonder what he really had planned for Gia, and I shuddered just thinking about it.

But Amato was dead. *Gia*. This would devastate her. How would this complicate my relationship with her? Would it? I had nothing to do with it, but would she believe me? She sure was quick to think I set her up with Mickey.

“Oh shit is right,” Judith snapped. “Now tell me why you’re here with Gia, and not safe on that island.”

I flexed my fingers then balled them into fists. “I went off island to get food and left Gia behind.”

“Are you an idiot?” Her glare made me nervous. My lingering doubts that she wouldn’t be intensely protective of Gia faded.

I ignored her question. “I left Gia with a gun. When I got back, I found Mickey there. Dead.”

Now it was Judith’s turn to gape. “Gia shot him?”

“Multiple times. She’s got good aim.”

The corners of Judith’s mouth quirked up. “And so you left the body there?”

“We torched the whole place.”

She nodded once, then studied me. “What went on with you and Gia?”

I massaged the back of my neck with my right hand. “Well, uh—”

“Don’t fuck around with me.”

“We, um,” Jesus, why was she making me so nervous. “We got to know each other well.”

Judith snorted and took lighter and aa pack of Camels out of her front sweatshirt pocket. She offered me one, and I accepted. She lit my cigarette, then one for her. We smoked in silence for a while, the tension between us as thick as the smoke.

“What are your plans with Gia? Do you have plans for her? I imagine you do if you didn’t kill her when you found out she blew your boss’s head off.”

“We can’t be seen together for a while.”

“Of course not. I want her to stay as far away from you and your crew as possible.”

“I have to deal with the business. Make sure no one suspects her of Mickey’s disappearance. Then in a few months, we’ll see.”

“We’ll see?” She arched an eyebrow. “As in, *we’ll see if you’ve found a better piece of pussy?*”

I stood, drawing myself to my full height. “Absolutely not. As in, *we’ll see if Gia still wants me.* I’m in line to become boss, but I’m not a piece of dogshit like Mickey. I don’t believe in arranged marriages and I only want Gia if she wants me. And honestly, I’m glad her father’s gone. Any man who would give her to a guy like Mickey isn’t a man, in my book. I know you worked for him, and all, but it’s the truth.”

She sighed out a plume of smoke. “I tried to talk Amato out of choosing Mickey. Never liked the guy, myself. But Amato was only thinking about the business. And look where that got him.”

Snorting, I chucked the cigarette in the toilet. “How are we going to tell Gia about her father?”

“I’ll do it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do you want to risk her thinking you had anything to do with her father’s murder? Your boss killed her father. Let’s not forget that.”

I heaved a sigh. Judith had a point. Maybe putting some space between me and Gia was for the best, although it ripped my heart out thinking of her facing grief alone.

“Okay, let’s go wake her up. We should play it by ear and I’ll be here when you tell her. She’s going to be devastated, because no matter what her father did to betray her, she loved the guy.”

“No. We’re going to let her sleep. She hasn’t slept well since her mother died so if she’s in a deep sleep, it’s a rare thing. Let her rest. I’ll handle it.”

“Weird, since she seemed to sleep okay on the island.”

Judith shot me a pointed look. Christ, she knew we’d been fucking non-stop, didn’t she?

“You’re going to leave now, and I’ll make sure she’s okay. I don’t want there to be a lot of back and forth between you, her, and me. I’m worried she’ll try to go with you, and cause a scene.” Judith flicked her cigarette into the toilet, next to mine.

She was probably right, but that didn’t make it any easier.

My chest felt like it was in a vise grip as we walked out of the bathroom. In the half-darkness, I went to the bed, where Gia was still sleeping. She looked like an angel, her dark hair spread on the white pillow. Her mouth was still red and raw from when I’d kissed her with brute force in the shower, and her chin looked scratched, probably from my stubble. I also

spotted a hickey on her neck, and a wave of desire crashed over me.

I would never stop wanting Gia.

Bending down, I pressed my lips to her forehead, a gossamer kiss goodbye. She sighed and rolled onto her side, burrowing further into the covers.

Fuck, why was this so hard? I didn't want to leave her now, or ever. I caressed her hair and stood. My stomach churned in a way it never had, not even after the bloodiest of murders. Every cell in my body screamed for me to stay, but knew I couldn't. I knew Judith was right. I glanced to her, and she was sitting in a chair across the room. She nodded at me.

I swallowed a lump in my throat and stepped away from the bed. It was almost impossible to tear my gaze away from Gia's gorgeous face.

Taking a deep breath, I put one foot in front of the other and walked out, giving a curt nod to the two goons in the hall. I half expected them to shoot me - not because I didn't trust Judith, but because anything was possible. When they didn't, a twinge of relief hit me, replaced once again with a steely resolve.

I made my way to the car and roared south, to Miami.

There was so much to do. A family to run. An empire to build. I'd make millions, go legit, set everything up so that the world both feared and respected me.

Me. Alessandro Bianchi.

And now, I had a purpose for it all: Gia's love.

Chapter Thirty-Five

GIA

THE ODOR OF CIGARETTE SMOKE SNAKED THROUGH MY nostrils. Odd. Alessandro told me the other day he'd quit smoking a couple of years ago. Had he started again? Was I dreaming?

In a hot second, everything came rushing back to me. Shooting Mickey. Alessandro returning to the cabin. Us having sex in the shower, then powering away from the island in that boat. Driving off, with the flames of the cabin in the rearview mirror.

I opened my eyes, feeling oddly refreshed. How long had I been out? Somehow I always slept better with Alessandro nearby.

Where was I? Right. A hotel. I blinked a few times and rolled over. There, by the window in a chair and peering at a laptop on a small table, was Judith. She was smoking one of her cigarettes. A tall lamp near her was illuminated, bathing her in a soft glow.

Yes. We'd called her. The grim reality was once again clear, and my stomach tightened.

"H-hey," I sat up. Somehow her presence calmed me. Judith was my dad's lawyer, his consigliere. She fixed problems, and now, I suspected she could help Alessandro and I fix ours.

I swiveled my head toward the bathroom, but heard no noises coming from that direction. Hunh. Where was Alessandro? Had he gone to the car? The hotel room wasn't that big.

Peeling back the covers sent a shock of chilly, air-conditioned breeze on my bare legs. I swung my feet over the side of the bed. "Thank God you're here."

Judith snapped her laptop shut and stared at me, a tight smile on her face. "Why don't you go freshen up and then we can talk."

Used to obeying her, I padded toward the bathroom, then paused at the door. "Where's Alessandro?"

"I'll tell you when you come out."

I washed up in the bathroom and scowled at the lingering smell of cigarette smoke, which was stronger in here. Maybe Judith had a cigarette in the bathroom? But where was Alessandro? Something was off. I could feel it. After wiping my face with a fluffy white towel, I yanked the door open.

"Okay, now tell me. What's going on? Where's Alessandro?" I walked over to the table and sat in the chair opposite her.

"He left."

"What?" I yelped. "When? Why? Without saying goodbye?"

"I told him leave. I thought it best. So did he. He kissed you goodbye." She gnawed at her bottom lip and I wondered if that was the only piece of bad news she was harboring.

"Asshole," I whispered. My stomach started to gurgle uncomfortably. I knew we'd have to part, but I never imagined we'd do it without a goodbye. Without a final kiss.

"No, he did the right thing. Trust me." Her mouth was set in a grim line.

I didn't want to get into it with Judith about how Alessandro and I had spent the past weeks. How we'd consumed each other. How we'd actually gotten to know each

other in a deeper level. How we'd had a mental — hell, a soul — connection. Stupid as it seemed now, in the deathly silence of this hotel room.

Or did we have a connection at all? Now that I was here, with Judith, I wasn't sure. Wasn't sure of anything really. Everything that happened at the engagement party and the cabin seemed like it was something I'd seen in a movie, not something that happened to me. A small part of me felt like I was going crazy, as if I'd been gaslit for weeks.

Judith rubbed her forehead. "Honey, I've got some bad news."

I gaped at her. What now? Her voice had the same, creaky tone that it did in the days after my mother passed. "Tell me." I seemed to be unable to speak in anything more than a shocked whisper tonight. "What is it? What could be worse than what's already happened?"

She took a deep breath. "It's your father. He's dead. I'm sorry."

My lips parted in a silent scream.

Judith swallowed. "Mickey killed him up in Atlanta."

I blinked once. Twice. "Mickey...killed my father?"

She nodded. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

I pressed my hand to my chest, gasping, trying and failing to take in enough air. Judith rose and stood next to me, wrapping her thin arms around my shoulders. Her tenderness, and the news, unleashed a torrent of tears. I sobbed and sobbed for I don't know how long.

And then I looked up at her and said, "I have no regrets about killing Mickey."

* * *

THE FOUR-HOUR RIDE UP THE DARK INTERSTATE TO HOME WAS excruciating. Along the way, as Judith and I sat in the back of the armored SUV, I told her everything about what had happened at the cabin. I spared no details, babbling about Alessandro like a lovesick fool one minute and then spitting

nails about him the next. I described killing Mickey in great detail, and how Alessandro and I had plans.

I ranted. I screamed. I cried. I told her all my complicated feelings about my father, how I adored him but how I also hated him for being a made man. How I blamed him for my mother's descent into pill addition.

At one point, I even smacked the leather seat between us. "I hate my father. Hate Mickey. Hate Alessandro, even," I ground out. "I hate all men. Especially all Mafia men."

"Dear, do you need a tranquilizer? It might be best if you take one."

"I don't want a pill," I snarled. "You know I'm right."

Fortunately, there was a partition between us and the driver, who was one of my father's longtime bodyguards.

"Alessandro and I were talking about just running away from this life," I wailed. "And now, I don't know. I don't know anything."

"You need to think about what's right for you, Gia. You need to take care of you." Judith angled her body to stare at me. "You're finally free of the terrible legacy of your family — arranged marriage. I always thought it was an antiquated practice, but it was the one thing your father never listened to my advice on."

"I hate him," I sobbed.

"Use that anger," she hissed. "Use it to start a new life. The only important thing is that you are in charge of your own life. A man shouldn't be in charge of your life."

I sobbed for a bit more, and Judith was silent. I reached for her hand. "I think I'll take that tranquilizer now."

* * *

FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS, I MOPED AROUND MY HOUSE, HAZY on tranquilizers and too much sleep. In my more lucid moments, I went over my options after obtaining some important information from Judith.

I'd been admitted to grad school at New York University, with a partial scholarship. That had been my plan, in between the engagement and marriage to Mickey (shudder).

I could still go to school. Although the feds had seized many of Daddy's assets, he did have an offshore emergency account for me, with about a million dollars. That would easily pay for a modest apartment and living expenses for many years. I was far more fortunate than most, and didn't want to squander it. I had something to look forward to, even if it wasn't exactly what I wanted.

Of course, there was the matter of Alessandro. His kisses haunted my dreams, and sometimes at night, I awoke, forgetting about all the grief and yearning for his touch. That would send me into another spiral of anger, and I vowed never to have anything to do with him again. He was connected to the man who killed my father, a citizen of that world.

And I wanted nothing to do with it. I had to push his memory into the recesses of my mind, for my own sanity. Judith was right. I was in charge of my life.

On the fourth day home, I stepped into my most conservative black silk dress, and a pair of black flats. Why bother with makeup? The day I'd been dreading had come: Daddy's funeral. After twisting my hair into a sleek chignon, I stopped at my vanity, intending to take another pill.

No. I needed to be strong. I didn't want to risk becoming like my mother. I grabbed the pill bottle and stalked to the toilet, dumping the remainder into the bowl and flushing. There. This was another way of taking charge, right?

I was silent as I rode in the back of the limousine with Judith, and wobbled only a little as we walked to the church. Judith was also wearing a black dress, and we clutched at each other in the pew. Honestly, I remember nothing of what the priest said, because all I could do was stare at the gold casket.

Oh, Daddy, why did you have to be in this life? Couldn't you have been happy as an accountant, a plumber, a professor?

My heart cracked for him, a man who felt that he had no other choice in life but to be a criminal. Well, his legacy was stopping with me.

Back in the limo, on the way to the cemetery — the one I'd been near when Alessandro picked me up all those weeks ago — I swallowed a lump of tears in my throat.

“I'm glad he's being buried next to Mom,” I said.

“I am too,” Judith replied. “They did love each other, despite everything.”

The Florida sun was scorching, and I wondered why we didn't have some sort of awning. I wished I'd brought sunglasses, and swayed on my feet as I stood near the open grave. Hundreds of men in dark suits crowded around, their wives in tasteful black dresses. All of my father's business associates, all mafiosos. A veritable who's who of the American Mafia, along with probably more than a few undercover agents.

As the grieving daughter, I didn't have to be friendly until the final receiving line.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as the casket was lowered into the grave. With a heart that felt as though it was made of lead, I dropped a red rose atop the casket six feet below. Then I turned and tried to push through the crowd. Judith caught my arm.

“We still have the receiving line. This will be over soon,” she hissed.

After the first handfuls of dirt hit Daddy's casket, a funeral home director steered us to a patch of vibrant green grass nearby. I knew the drill, for I had stood there at Daddy's side when Mom had died.

I steeled myself with a deep breath. A line formed, and one by one, my father's peers stopped to pay respects. I felt myself growing weak in the hot sun. So many murmured condolences, so many double cheek kisses. But this was my last duty as Angelo Amato's daughter.

This was for him.

I exhaled long as I saw the line thin, and turned my head to Judith. “We’re almost done, thank God.”

“Not quite,” she said in a grim tone, then nodded.

I turned. There, standing in front of me, was Alessandro. I took in a sharp breath. Jesus Christ, how had I not noticed that he was here? Why had I not assumed he’d come? All of those pills I’d taken over the past few days had scrambled my mind and left me in a haze.

Of course he’d be here. I was an idiot not to plan for this scenario.

“Giada.” The fact that he used my full name sent a sob clawing its way into my throat.

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t breathe. He was too stunning, all black hair and flashing eyes. The way his dark brow was set in a near-squint made him more menacing, and irresistible.

His stubble was gone, and somehow, his face looked even more angular and hard. He filled out the black suit perfectly, his biceps straining the sleeves. That full mouth, the one I’d spent hours kissing, taunted me in the bright light of the noonday sun.

I wanted him, even here at my father’s funeral. I’d surely go to hell for this.

“I’m sorry, Giada.” He gently wrapped a hand around my bare bicep and I visibly shook, as if an electric shock surged through my body.

When he pressed his warm lips to my cheek, my legs gave out and I sank into his body, into his arms.

Chapter Thirty-Six

GIA

HE CAUGHT ME. JUST AS MY KNEES BUCKLED AND I THOUGHT I was going to faint, Alessandro caught me. He clutched my bare shoulders in his big hands and sparks showered through my body.

I tried to right myself and straighten to standing. “Sorry. Sorry. It’s the heels,” I said hastily. “You can let go of me now.”

“Like hell I will,” he growled. Then, he turned his head and barked to a bodyguard, “Pull the car around. And make sure there’s water in back.”

The black-suited guy scurried off. Judith fluttered nearby, asking if I was okay.

“I’m fine. Seriously, I’m fine.” I tried to wriggle out of Alessandro’s grip, but he kept one hand clamped around my arm. The few people still present at the graveside service were now staring. “We’re making a spectacle,” I hissed.

He ignored me and turned to face Judith. “I need to speak with Gia. Since she’s not feeling well, we’re going to do it in the back of my car, which is air conditioned. I hope you don’t mind.”

I rolled my eyes. “What if I mind?”

“That’s fine,” Judith said, her mouth in a thin line. That’s when I realized: she couldn’t say no, and neither could I.

He was a boss, and we were just...women. We no longer had the protection of my father. All we had were a couple of bodyguards, a few million stashed in overseas accounts, and an estate that was quickly being seized piece by piece by the feds. If I managed to keep my beloved horse it would be a miracle.

A massive black Mercedes rolled nearby and came to a stop on the gravel road nearest my father's grave. A driver got out and went around to the back door and opened it.

"Come," Alessandro said, never letting go of my arm.

I steeled myself. What did he want with me? Why was he here? And, more importantly, why did it feel as though an electric current was running through my veins?

I climbed into the back of the car, followed by Alessandro. It wasn't the kind of limo where two seats faced each other; instead, it was a roomy backseat — all expensive tan leather, of course — with plenty of legroom and a plexiglass divider. It reminded me a little of a first-class row in an airplane.

The door closed with a muted *thunk*. It was cool and shady inside the car, probably due to the dark tinted windows and the blasting air conditioner. Which did feel good after standing in that heat, I had to admit.

I hauled in a breath and angled my body in his direction, trying and failing to pull down the hem of my dress. Somehow my bare legs felt too exposed.

Which was ridiculous, of course, since he'd seen literally every inch of my body.

He leaned forward and plucked a small bottle of water out of a console, then cracked it open. Without saying a word, he handed it to me and I took a sip. I hadn't realized how thirsty I'd been until now.

"Are you eating?" he asked.

I squinted at him. As handsome as he was, I felt like fighting. Maybe it was my father's funeral, or because I'd been surrounded by Mafia guys all day, but it irked me that he showed up looking incredibly delicious — and dangerous.

Expensive suit, freshly shaven. His jaw looked sharp and hard, and he turned those unforgiving blue eyes on me.

I needed to remind myself that he was no different than any other man here today, including my father, who was six feet under.

“You called me in here to ask if I’ve been eating?”

“You nearly collapsed out there. And you look thinner.”

I rolled my eyes. Indeed, I hadn’t eaten much since coming home. “I haven’t seen you for what, like, a week? And now you’re commenting on my weight?”

“I’ve been worried about you. Even more worried now that I saw you nearly faint.”

That sent a little zing through me. “It’s hot. It’s a stressful day. And by the way, you could’ve called. Or, I don’t know. Could’ve said goodbye back in that hotel room. Left a note. Texted. Sent flowers. Something.”

“Listen. I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye. I thought it would be easiest to just leave and let you and Judith talk.” He inhaled deeply and a look of anguish crossed his face. “I was wrong. I’ve thought about you non-stop.”

His words did little to soothe my anger and I jammed the water bottle into a cupholder on the armrest. “Why did you come here today?”

He stared at me, unblinking. “One, because I needed to see you. Two, because I wanted to pay my respects to your father. From one boss to another, it’s tradition. It would have raised eyebrows had I not attended.”

I sank back into the seat, suddenly deflated. He was here because of *tradition*. “Have you taken any steps to get out of the business?”

His nostrils flared. “Gia, it’s been less than a week. I’m cleaning up the shitshow left behind by Mickey. If I don’t, then other families will move in on our business and there will be more senseless bloodshed and money lost. Do you want that?”

I snorted. “Of course not.”

“And that’s another reason I came. To show the rest of the families that I didn’t agree with what he did to your father. I’m a newcomer. Politics and procedure, princess. In coming here, I also wanted to show all the other families that I have my eye on you.”

“On me?”

He nodded.

“As in, what?” I waved my hand in the air, suddenly horrified. “As in, she killed my boss so I could take her life?”

He wouldn’t, would he?

“As in, I’m the boss, I must choose my wife and I’ve got my eye on you.”

“What?” I nearly shrieked, even more unsettled somehow. “What about all that bullshit back at the cabin about how you wouldn’t want an arranged marriage?” I was pissed enough that my hand went to the door latch. He sure was sounding possessive — which was both titillating and a turn off.

Why did I want this man with every fiber of my being and want to reject everything he stood for? I really needed to work on my daddy complex issues with a therapist.

He grabbed my other arm and tugged me toward him. “Jesus, calm down, Gia. It’s all for show. It’s all fucking theater. I just don’t want any other families sniffing around you. I want to give you the space you need while benefitting from my interest and protection. That’s all.”

We were now close. Too close. Close enough that we were both breathing heavily, and in tandem. I caught a whiff of his spicy aftershave and my heart slammed against my chest. “Oh,” I whispered. “Thanks. I guess.”

“I need more time, princess.” He said this in Italian, and I nearly melted into a puddle right there. “Give me four months, six months. A year. Please. It may take a little longer than that. I don’t know. I’m in uncharted territory. This is all new to me as well.”

That didn't sound like a man who wanted to leave the life to me. That sounded like a man who was hedging his bets.

And as much as I wanted to kiss him, as much as I wanted to bury my face in his neck and run my fingers across his smooth, razor-sharp jaw, I couldn't. Judith's words rang in my head.

A man shouldn't be in charge of your life.

If I waited for Alessandro, and especially if I married him, he'd be in charge of me. I couldn't let that happen, no matter what he inspired in my body or my soul.

I pulled away. It was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. He gently released my arm, but reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

"Is that okay? Will you wait for me? I promise it will be worth it."

Oh, how his words sounded beautiful. But I knew otherwise. I knew he'd never leave the Mafia, and I knew that men like him wanted it all: money, power and a loyal woman. I wasn't meant to be that woman, and I still had a narrow window to escape this life.

I looked into his beautiful eyes and nodded. "I'll wait for you."

It was a lie, but a necessary one. I leaned forward, pressing my nose to his cheek. I needed to inhale him one last time, and it was so worth it.

He grabbed my neck and angled my head toward his mouth, consuming me with his lips. The kiss was everything I'd been dreaming about in recent days. It was captivating, heady, lusty.

We broke apart so our foreheads were touching. For a few seconds, we breathed in each other's air, not saying a word.

"I'll be in touch soon, okay? I want you to be completely on board with this, so I think it's important you go to school, or travel, or whatever. I want you to seriously think about things first, okay?" His voice was hoarse.

I nodded. Tears sprang to my eyes. He was giving me an out, it seemed. It seemed too much, to have to say goodbye to my father and to Alessandro on the same day. But that was my life, and I needed to face reality.

“I’m sorry about your father, Gia. I’m so sorry.” He stroked my hair.

I needed to get out of this car, otherwise I’d change my mind. “I need to get back to Judith,” I said in a raspy whisper.

“Of course. But Gia?”

“Yes?”

“Please be careful. I know you will be, but if you want additional security, or anything, you can always call me.” He reached into the jacket of his suit and pulled out a card. “My main cell is on here, and my secretary answers it twenty-four seven. Anything. Please.”

That snapped me back to the present. He had a secretary already. Just like my father. I took the card from him and pasted on a wan smile. “Thank you. I will consider it.”

He licked his lips and studied me, then opened the car door. I climbed out and murmured a thank you to him.

Holding my head high, I walked toward Judith who was smoking a cigarette near our bodyguards under a nearby tree. The air was thick with the scent of fresh-mown hay, cedar and men’s cologne; a mix of funeral flowers and grief.

Alessandro’s Mercedes rolled away. A backhoe showered dirt onto my father’s casket, and all the funeral guests were gone.

Alessandro was gone, and with him, all sense of safety was shattered, yet the possibilities were limitless. I was free to do whatever I wanted with my life, but now that I had the chance to be my own person, I couldn’t think of anything.

I had a choice to make, and two possible paths ahead. One that would take me to Alessandro and to love, and one that would lead me to what I once thought I wanted. No matter

how hard I thought about it, I was stuck between two things that could end in heartbreak.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

GIA

A WEEK LATER, I SAT IN A LOUNGE CHAIR BY THE POOL AT MY father's house—I guess it was my house now, but who knew at this point, with the feds lurking in our business—and told Ashley everything. She was my lifelong friend, and the only one I trusted on this earth.

It was sunset, but Florida was a hellscape this time of year, so we were both in swimsuits. We'd been out here for hours and by the prickly feeling on my skin, I could tell I'd gotten too much sun today.

At one time I would've worried about sunblock and skin cancer. But I had bigger problems at the moment. Probably even problems I hadn't even thought of. In my half-drunken state, the realization that I was isolated and alone here at my family's estate left me with an unsettled, caged feeling.

"Hold on. I need more wine for this. What a fucking story. It's like a movie." Ashley uncorked a bottle of one of Daddy's most expensive Cabernet into our glasses. It was our second bottle. I'd been plowing through the wine cellar with wild abandon.

"Your father would have gone nuts if he knew we were drinking this without letting it breathe," she laughed.

"Yeah, he was obsessed with that shit." It almost made me miss Daddy, thinking about his love of good wine. But honestly, I was still pissed at him. For giving me to Mickey.

For aligning with scum Mafia men. For setting all of the recent events into motion, up to and including his own death.

Everything was still so raw. It would probably take years of therapy to sort all this out in my brain.

“Once I get to New York, I’m getting a new therapist,” I slurred.

“Listen,” she adjusted her bright bikini top. “If it does turn into a movie, can you get Michele Morrone to play the lead?”

I curled my lip. “This isn’t a fucking joke, Ash. I fucked my mafia boss’s bodyguard and killed him.”

“It’s pretty problematic. But listen, tell me what he was like in bed.”

“Ash. Shut. The. Fuck. Up. My life is in danger and you want to know about the dick? Come on.” I paused and gulped my wine. “He was incredible.”

She sighed in a swoony way, pressing her hand to her chest. “Okay. Back to the details. What are you going to do?”

I shrugged. “I’m going to New York as planned. Going back to school. Try to live my life as a normal person. Not let this affect me. I have plans and goals. If anything, this clears the way for me to live the life I always wanted.”

“And Alessandro? Do you want to be with him? Something tells me that he’s not the sort of guy to just give up a woman he wants.”

My finger went to the rim of my wine glass and I circled it, imagining the way he’d held me in the limousine and gently pressed his lips to my temple. “No...probably not.”

We sat in silence, watching the sun dip below the rolling green of the horse pasture in the distance. Would the feds seize my horse? Panic rose in my chest.

I finally spoke, twisting my head toward her. “Part of me wants to see him. A desperate, sick part. He’s addictive. It’s toxic, what we have. He’s also exactly what I don’t need in my life.”

“Do you believe him when he says he’ll go legit?”

“I don’t have a lot of confidence in that. And listen, I’m only twenty-one. I don’t want to be married now. I don’t even know if I want to be tied down. He’s older, and I get it. I get why maybe he’d want to settle in with someone. It’s natural. But maybe I’m not the woman for him.”

She raised her eyebrows. “It might be difficult convincing him of that.”

“That’s my worry.”

“Why don’t you guys just hang out?”

I snorted, then gulped down the rest of my wine. My head felt a little fuzzy. “Ash, it’s not like he can just take me to dinner and a movie. We’re not exactly a normal couple. I killed someone, and he helped cover up the evidence. The other Mafia families are going to be poking around. Not because there’s any love lost with Mickey, but because they want to exploit any weakness of Alessandro’s. And he has business to take care of. Mafia business. You know, extorting people, fraud, whatever.”

He could also claim me in a perverse bid to get back at the other clans. The thought was so horrible that I couldn’t utter it aloud.

“I’m sure you two can find a way. Shit, Gia. You have this whole house to yourself. It’s not like your bodyguards will talk, and Judith isn’t going to mind.” She gestured to my sprawling home.

I made a *hmph* sound and sat up to reach for the wine bottle. The air seemed to be thick and resistant, and I swayed a bit as I poured more into my glass. I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t thought about texting Alessandro since the funeral. But since he hadn’t texted or called me — or taken my hint to send flowers — I was pretty salty.

“We’ll see.”

“Just be discreet. You’re here for what? A month? Then you go to New York?”

“Yeah, school orientation is in mid-August. Judith is making plans to take me there. It’s July, right? I have no fucking sense of time. It was like I was on that island for a decade.”

Ashley tapped on her phone and smiled dreamily. “It’s actually kinda romantic, the two of you trapped there.”

“You were at the engagement party and saw what happened. You could’ve been killed. I’d give anything to take it all back.” Hot, fierce tears sprang into my eyes, surprising me with their insistence.

She waved her hand in the air, as if to say, *it was nothing*. That’s the kind of existence we led, Ashley and me. Girls who grew up to anticipate massacres at our parties. It was fucked up. No wonder I didn’t feel more remorse about putting a bullet in Mickey’s ugly face. Still. I needed to get out of this life.

“I was near the back door, talking to Giorgio. We ran. I think we were some of the first people to leave.”

I squinted at her. Strangely, my facial muscles felt like they were two steps behind my brain. The wine was obviously getting to me. “That’s the guy your dad wants you to marry? How is it with him, anyway?”

“You know, not bad. I was super worried when I met him, because of his age. But the more I get to know him,” a little smile danced on her lips, “I think he’s a silver fox. And he’s incredibly funny. He makes me laugh. And he’s more like a businessman. That’s what Daddy says. Stocks and stuff.”

She shrugged quickly. “There are worse men to be engaged to.”

“No shit,” I muttered, thinking of Mickey’s pig face.

“In speaking of Giorgio, I need to get going. My chauffer’s here. I have to sober up and get ready for tonight. Geo’s taking me out for a late dinner. That new steakhouse in town.”

“Lucky.” I’d been eating microwave popcorn and Hot Pockets for the last week. When I bothered eating. I spotted a crumb stuck to my shirt.

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll text you. Maybe you can come over to the house on Sunday. Mom would love to cook for you. I’ll ask her to make a feast. She will because she’s worried about you.”

That made me crack a genuine smile. Ashley’s mom made incredible Italian dishes, everything from a killer Bolognese sauce to the creamiest mushroom risotto. Although being with her family might remind me that I now had none. “We’ll see. I’ll let you know.”

She leaned over and pecked my cheek, then stood and grabbed her canvas tote that said BEACH, PLEASE in cursive letters. “Try to relax. Don’t get too drunk.”

“Too late for that, bitch.” I waved and took a drink, realizing that I’d let a little red liquid dribble down my chin. I chuckled bitterly and wiped it away.

For the next hour, I sat and finished the bottle of wine. My head wasn’t just fuzzy now, it was as if a thick fog had descended. Deep orange hues of the sunset had set the sky on fire, and I sighed.

What was Alessandro doing right now? Where was he? I wanted to hear his voice. Wanted to touch him. I missed him.

Fuck.

I didn’t want to miss him. The rational part of me wanted to forget he ever existed. After seeing him at the funeral, I’d vowed to sever all ties. But now, drunk and horny and lonely near my pool, my resolve faltered.

Maybe Ashley was right. What if we got to know each other? Maybe the attraction would fade. Maybe we’d fuck some more, realize we have nothing in common and part as friends. The taboo part of our relationship was mostly gone. Even though we couldn’t be seen in public for a while, we could hang out.

What was he like in real life?

“Only one way to find out,” I said aloud, although I suspected my words were slurred.

I grabbed my phone off the little table near the lounge and navigated to his contact info.

Hi, it's Gia, I started to type, then erased it.

Hey dude. I erased that, too.

I typed an eggplant emoji. Jesus, I was a goofball. It was Friday night, so he was probably at some swanky bar in Miami Beach and here I was, sending him a dick symbol. I giggled aloud and wiped it from the screen.

For a few seconds, I stared at the blinking cursor. Then I typed what was in my heart.

I need to see you. Now. Get your ass to my house ASAP

When he didn't text back after fifteen minutes, I started to cry. I stumbled into the house, up the stairs, to my bedroom. The last thing I remembered before passing out was that in my drunken state, I'd left my phone by the pool.

* * *

THE SCENT OF SPICE HIT MY NOSTRILS EVEN BEFORE I COULD open my eyes. It smelled like Alessandro, and it would have been a pleasurable moment to savor had my head not felt as though it was about to cleave in two.

Yeah, I'd drunk way too much wine. I moaned. My right eyeball felt like it was about to explode out of my head. I also had to pee, which meant I had to get out of bed and actually walk. Like a human being. It was unclear if I was even capable of doing that with this raging hangover.

What time was it? I'd come up here right as the sun went down, so about eight p.m.?

A grunt escaped my lips and I opened my eyes. The room was dark so it was obviously nighttime.

But what was that—

I gasped when I saw the silhouette of a man. He was near the French doors leading to the balcony. From the backlit moonlight, I couldn't see his face. My headache throbbed in time with the erratic beat of my heart.

“Oh my God! Who—” I managed to squeak.

“Christ, Gia, it’s me,” the annoyed male voice said.

A burst of awareness exploded in my chest. I sat up, wondering if I was dreaming. “Alessandro? What are you doing here?”

He flicked on a light and I winced, shielding my eyes with my hand. “Turn that off.”

He didn’t. So I scowled at him long enough for me to see that he was in a charcoal gray suit, with a white, button-down top. All business-like and hot. Very adult, far more than I remembered him being on the island. Also, he wore an expression something like fury.

His eyes flickered to my chest, and I realized that my bikini top had fallen off one shoulder and I was flashing him my right boob. This wasn’t the classy reunion I’d hoped for. I launched off the bed and toward the bathroom, feeling a rising nausea in my stomach as I passed him along the way.

“You smell like a winery.” He shoved his big hands in his pockets.

“Fuck you. Who asked you here, anyway?”

“You did.”

The memory of drunken text popped into my head as I reached the toilet. Oh, hell. That’s right. I had texted him in my drunken state by the pool. Brilliant.

I didn’t expect him to actually come to my house.

Nausea flooded my body, and just looking at the toilet bowl made the contents in my stomach do a somersault. I hurled into the bowl, then heaved again. Now I was on my knees, worshipping the porcelain god. Awesome. Tears streaked down my face from humiliation and physical discomfort. All I wanted was to die.

I was dimly aware of the bathroom door opening.

“Oh, princess. You drank way too much, didn’t you?” He let out a heavy sigh.

I felt him kneel behind me, gently sweeping my hair away from my face. “Get it all out of your system. You’ll feel better. That’s it. It’s okay.”

I puked and puked, then collapsed back into his arms, not caring that my bikini top was completely askew and both breasts were hanging out. It wasn’t as though I could get more undignified. Well, hell. He was just going to have to accept the real me. Or not. Too late now.

“I’m sorry. I drank like two bottles of wine. And I guess I texted you.”

“Okay. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

He flushed the toilet, flipped the lid down, and commanded me to sit. I watched as he carefully found my toothbrush and toothpaste, then handed it to me.

While I brushed, he walked into my bedroom. I heard the bureau drawers opening and closing. When he returned, he held one of my tank tops and a pair of panties in his hand.

He put them on the lavatory near the sink and turned on the shower. “C’mon.”

I stood, my legs still shaky, and spit the toothpaste into the sink. In the mirror, I saw him stripping his clothes off.

“What—”

He reached for me, and gently led me into the shower.

“I’m not in any shape to have sex, Alessandro.” My voice was like sandpaper.

“I’m not either.” He reached for a bar of soap and looked at it while frowning. “What the fuck is this?”

I giggled and leaned against him, my body feeling boneless and weak. “It’s special pink clay soap.”

“Christ, it’s probably like ten bucks a bar.” He rubbed it between his hands and worked it into a lather. “But it smells nice.”

“Twenty.”

“Such a princess,” he murmured, as he ran his soapy hands over my shoulders and down my back.

As he carefully washed me from head to toe, emotion welled inside me. I started to sob. He didn’t say a word, just washed every part of me. Not in a sexual way. It was as if he was cleansing me with his caring. Which made me sob harder.

I wasn’t even sure why I was crying. He shut the shower off, dried me with a towel, dried himself with one, then helped me put on the T-shirt and panties. He picked me up and carried me to the bed.

He shut off the light and let out a huge sigh. I was no longer crying, but I was bone-tired. Something about being in bed with him again was a huge relief, as if all my edgy, wary, fearful feelings dissipated once he was near.

Alessandro maneuvered me so that we were spooning, his hair-roughened leg slung over mine. He wrapped his muscular arm around me and pressed his face into my neck, the warmth of his naked body soothing my skin. I drifted off almost immediately, until he spoke out loud. His fierce, accented voice jarred me out of a light sleep.

“When you texted, I messaged you back. Then I tried calling and got no answer. I was so fucking worried about you, Gia. I drove all the way from Miami, made it here in three and a half hours. Nearly got a speeding ticket. Judith let me in. I was out of my mind, thinking about what could’ve happened to you.”

“I’m really glad you’re here now, with me,” I whispered, and fell asleep again.

* * *

I SLEPT IN HIS ARMS FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE DAYS. Alessandro must’ve been exhausted, as well, because he barely stirred.

When I woke, I felt more refreshed than I had in since staying with him on the island. My headache was gone.

Goodness, it felt amazing to sleep next to him again. I shifted to stare at him in the morning sunlight. He was on his back and I was curled against his body, his arm circling me. It must have been mid-morning by the way the sun insistently poked through the curtains. Instead of minding the intrusive light, I appreciated it because that way I could soak in his gorgeous face.

Yeah, I'd missed him. A lot. But all of my concerns were still there, waiting patiently.

I shifted my leg and accidentally brushed it against his crotch. I felt something stiff against my thigh.

He had a massive hard-on, and groaned. "Gia," he whispered, turning his head to kiss my forehead. I responded with sheer instinct, nuzzling my face into the smooth skin of his neck and slowly brushing my lips all the way to his ear. I took his lobe gently between my teeth and he sucked in his breath.

Despite all of my doubts about a long-term relationship with him, I simply couldn't resist when he was naked and in my bed. I'm not proud of this fact, but my need to get absolutely railed was a top priority this morning. It was probably stupid, but I could only think of fucking. That's what he did to me, made my toxic past and my uncertain future evaporate like morning mist.

I slid atop his body and his hands immediately went under my tank top. He squeezed my breasts hard, pinched my nipples. Of course, I sat up, my hair wild, and just stripped off my top, wanting to give him an eyeful in the morning light.

His eyes fluttered open to see me rocking on his erection. "Take those panties off. Now."

I did, in record time. Already, I was wet between my legs, and my breath quickened because I knew he was about to worship me. Devour me. Smash my senses to bits.

Just as I was about to rub myself against his cock, he pulled me up his chest, toward his face. "It's been too fucking long since I've tasted your cunt." His voice was low and raspy,

which made his words even filthier, especially in the daylight hours.

Too fucking long. What had it been? A week? Two? I'd lost sense of time, but he was right. Too fucking long.

I knew what he wanted, knew he loved it, knew he craved me. With shaking legs, I straddled his head and pressed my hands against the white, tufted headboard while lowering my pussy to his face. About two inches from his mouth, I stopped to tease him, hovering my wetness over his lips. He clamped his hands on my hips and forced me toward him.

“Get the fuck down here.” His tongue made contact with my wet flesh and I tried to grip the headboard but since the fabric was so taut, I was unable.

I wanted to grind myself into him and come fast and hard, but I tried to resist, tried to revel in the feeling of how he was gently licking my slit. Probing between my lips, seeking my swollen clit. It was driving me absolutely insane.

With two fingers, I spread myself open for him so he could have easier access to that throbbing bundle of nerves. When his full lips softly kissed my inner folds, I nearly came right away, then moaned out loud when his tongue flicked against my stiff little bud.

Everything was sticky and wet: his lips, my lips, hell, even his chin. Maybe I should've been embarrassed, shoving my private parts in his face in broad daylight. I didn't care. He had turned me into a monster, one who craved his touch and his tongue.

I moaned his name, not at all quiet. *Fuck it.* I pressed myself into his mouth, seeking relief. Surely he'd let me know if he couldn't breathe. Actually, I didn't care if he could breathe or not. He simply had to make me come with that incredible tongue of his, then he could have his face and his mouth and his lungs back.

My fingernails clawed at the fabric headboard as he assaulted my clit with his tongue. His lips worked their way around, circling and sucking. My pussy quivered and

tightened, and then I let go, all of the tension of the past week rushing out of my body.

Were there any bodyguards on this floor? Household staff? Judith? I didn't care, because I cried out his name as I exploded, saying things like, *I'm coming, yes, please, more oh fuck, you are so fucking good.*

As my clit pulsed with orgasm aftershocks, he wrenched me away from his mouth, flipped me onto my back, and plunged his thick cock into me without even pausing to wipe my juices from his face.

"I'm still coming," I whimpered.

"Good." He kissed me, and now both our faces were sticky.

He wasn't bothering with niceties or decency, just squeezed my wrists in his hands and jackhammered into me. I didn't care. It felt too amazing, too perfect. Harsh, but perfect.

"You've turned me into a slut, you know that?"

He smirked, then bit my neck harder than I anticipated, making me gasp. "My slut. You're *my* slut, Gia."

A long string of Italian slipped from his mouth. I knew from the way the sweat bloomed on his shoulders that he was about to come, and I pulled him in, wanting the weight of his body on top of me. He wouldn't last long, not like other times. Not today. Not when we needed each other this much.

"I can't...can't fucking come inside you. No condom." With what looked like almost painful control, he withdrew and spurted two streams of hot, white liquid onto my stomach. That was when I noticed he was panting, hard.

"Fuck, Gia. *Fuck.* We shouldn't have done that without a condom."

Our eyes met and a twinge of fear went through me. "I know."

His arm muscles trembled as he hovered above me. He dipped to kiss my mouth softly, and we must've kissed for a solid minute.

“That was amazing.” I reached up and brushed his hair off his forehead.

He nodded and kissed the tip of my nose. My doubts about him were beginning to soften. Maybe this *could* work out. Perhaps I was the one with the commitment issues here, and I needed to give him a chance.

Finally, he sat up and ran a hand through his jet-black hair. I lolled on the bed, admiring his beauty, sated from my orgasm and ecstatic that my hangover was finally gone. Sure, my stomach was covered in his sperm and that was kind of gross, but it was also primally erotic.

He motioned to my midsection. “Go clean up and bring me a cup of coffee. We have a lot to talk about.”

I sat up, frowning. “What the fuck is this bossy attitude?”

“Gia, I drove hours to see you. The least you can do is get me a cup of goddamn coffee.” He climbed out of bed and reached for his boxer briefs, as if what he’d said was totally acceptable. In fact, he reminded me a bit of my dad, who used to demand my mother wait on him hand and foot.

Naked, I sat on my heels in the bed, staring at him, my chest welling with dread. His cum rolled down my stomach but I ignored it.

He grinned, a maddening, arrogant expression. “Please?”

Damn him. As great as the sex was, all of my doubts about this relationship were creeping back.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

ALESSANDRO

AS I WAITED FOR GIA TO BRING COFFEE, I PULLED ON MY pants and grabbed my cell off the nightstand. I had dozens of texts, mostly from my lawyer, Roberto. Christ. I was still riding high after that incredible sex. All I wanted was to go back to sleep, but I had shit to do.

Like talk to Roberto.

Next to my sister, he was one of the few people I trusted in this world. Roberto was about twenty years older than me, had attended a fancy law school in Boston and most importantly, had been the consigliere of my old boss in New York. Since Mickey's death, I'd ask him to help me, figuring it would be better to fly him to Miami and pay him well than try to trust any of Mickey's guys.

I scanned through his texts and sat on the bed, leaning against the headboard. Gia's room was frilly and girly, and part of me felt out of place here. Everything was so...white. The furniture, the four-poster bed, the comforter. White and sunny, because the sheer curtains on the French doors didn't keep any of the morning sun out of this room.

Instead of responding to Roberto and fucking around with a back and forth, I dialed his number.

"Hey. You okay? Is Gia okay?" Roberto's gruff New York accent hit my ear. I'd told him some, but not all, details about her. Of course I'd left out the part about her killing Mickey,

but I'm sure he had his suspicions. But he was being paid enough to be discreet and loyal.

Mickey's disappearance, and the discovery of his charred body on the island, had caused quite a stir. It had been on the front page of every New York tabloid, and I was trying to dodge and weave, while save the business.

Made men were gossips, no better than the old women who lived in my building back in Italy.

"Yeah. She's fine. She wanted to see me for...personal reasons. So what's going on?" My gaze caught on a silver-framed photo on the nightstand, and I reached for it. It was of her, her father, and I assume her mother. Gia was just a kid in the photo, which was taken in front of the Cinderella castle at Disney. What had she been like as a kid? She looked happy in the photo, in a way that she didn't now.

I half-expected Roberto to grill me on my personal relationship with Gia. He hadn't yet, but figured the talk was coming. I set the photo back down.

"The Palermos want a better deal on the garbage contracts in Atlanta and Memphis," he said. "They want an extra ten percent."

"I'm sure they do. Fuck them." Roberto was also going over all of Mickey's deals in detail. I'd asked for his advice over what to keep, and what to let go.

"They think Mickey was trying to screw them over."

Mickey tried to screw *everyone* over. "He was. But I'll work with them on something more equitable. Five percent." I heard papers shuffling in the background of the call. "Call them and make them an offer."

"My sources are telling me the Palermos might try to make a point if they don't get what they want."

Roberto had contacts up and down the east coast, from low-level thugs in Philly to Congressmen in North Carolina to top Wall Street guys in Manhattan. Rumor had it that his sources went all the way to the top in Washington, D.C., and it

was the reason my old boss had never been hounded by the feds.

It was why I liked the guy. I scratched my bare chest and stifled a yawn. “What kind of a point?”

“They’re talking about Gia. Asking around. Wondering if she’s considering taking over her father’s territory. Or if she’s in the market to marry into a family.”

If I wasn’t awake before, I was now. Like hell she’d get involved with any of this. Like hell she’d marry anyone.

Anyone but me.

“Gia’s not taking anything over. Ever. And she’s not marrying anyone. She’s out. Finished.”

“We need to make that clear to all the families then. Because some want a sit down, with her and you, and the Southern families. That’s what my inside source is saying, a guy who’s pretty high up on the food chain in the Palermo family. Since she’s Amato’s daughter and technically was Mickey’s fiancée. She’s considered the next in line. She’s hot property.”

“Absolutely not,” I ground out, pissed that anyone would even consider involving her in their bullshit. Not after how she’d stood at her father’s funeral, miserable and haughty. Anyone could see that all the woman wanted was to get the fuck out of this life.

And hopefully, she would, with me. It would take time, though. We couldn’t just leave. Our world didn’t work that way.

“I didn’t think so, Ale. I’m just passing along what I heard.”

A thousand scenarios ran through my mind. Gia’s father had been so powerful that it made sense for outsiders to think his only child would take over the business after his death. But I didn’t want her anywhere near any of it. She didn’t want to be involved, either, from what I knew of her feelings about the mafia.

“What do you suggest?” I asked.

Roberto blew out a breath. “We can hold them off for a couple of weeks, but eventually we’ll have to stake our claim to Amato’s holdings, or allow the Palermos to take those deals.”

“No. Fuck no. That’s ours.” No way would I allow them to take what was rightfully Gia’s. At least not until I consulted with her.

“I think we might be able to buy more time because the feds are crawling all over Amato’s assets. The Palermos want to use this situation to get a better deal. But they know that since Mickey’s body was found a few days ago, that we’re going to proceed slowly.”

“Fuck yeah, we will.” I was willing to do whatever it took to ensure Gia’s safety, and pressed the phone hard enough into my ear that it made the cartilage smart. “Fine. Make it happen. Stall those cocksuckers.”

Roberto cleared his throat. “In the meantime, you might get Gia out of Florida. You said she was planning on going to school in New York, right? Between the two of us we can easier protect her here. Or in Miami. But being in an empty mansion in the middle of bumfuck, Florida? Not good.”

My hand involuntarily clenched into a fist at the thought of Gia here with Judith and a couple of bodyguards. She was essentially defenseless. “Agreed. I’ll take care of this today.”

“Okay. When are you coming back to Miami?”

“Soon. After breakfast. It’ll take me four hours, max.”

“Great. Because we’ve got a dinner meeting with some condo developers who are looking for investment capital. Real nice building on the beach.”

He told me where we were meeting for dinner, then we hung up. My stomach growled, and I wished I’d asked Gia for some food along with my coffee.

What the hell was I going to do? Were the Palermos brazen enough to threaten Gia here, at her own home? I massaged my

temples with my thumbs and shut my eyes. There were also the Russians to worry about, and others. Mickey and Gia's father had left a wake of shit with their deaths, and I was the one who had to clean it up.

There was a faint jiggle of the doorknob, and I opened my eyes. Gia walked in carrying a tray.

"Room service." Her voice had a slight edge to it, and I suspected that she didn't like how I'd asked her to bring me coffee. I'd make nice with her later. Right now we needed to eat and get the fuck out of here.

She carried a silver tray to the bed and gently set it on the comforter next to me. Not only was there a cup of coffee, but a plate of biscotti and a peeled and quartered orange.

"Ah, you're the perfect housewife."

She sneered at me, and I laughed. I knew that statement would get a rise out of her; I wasn't interested in her being a housewife at all.

"You're not eating?" I reached for the coffee and a biscotti.

She shook her head. "My stomach's still on strike after last night."

"Yeah, you were pretty sauced. When Judith let me in here, I thought I'd stepped into a barrel of wine."

"Not funny. And you scared the shit out of me, just standing here and watching me sleep in the dark. Creeper. Like a sparkly vampire."

"You didn't seem to mind my sparkle this morning, princess."

Grinning, I dunked my biscotti into my coffee, then took a bite. It was the good kind, the anise flavor. After chewing and swallowing, I looked at Gia, whose pale cheeks had turned pink. "Why'd you get so drunk yesterday, anyway?"

She rolled her eyes. "No reason. Not like I've had any stress in my life or anything."

I drank my coffee in silence for a few minutes, watching Gia pick at an invisible thread on the white duvet. She was in one of her tank top-shorts combos, and her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. She looked so beautiful that I ached inside. I had a gnawing reminder that I was in fresh territory with her.

It all seemed so foreign here at her house. What were we doing? Why was I so into this woman that I'd drive hours after a single, pleading text?

I didn't understand anything.

Gia made me feel vulnerable. So vulnerable that it was difficult for me to know what to even talk about with her. Funny, we'd had hours of conversations in the beach bungalow, but now, I was tongue-tied. Maybe it was her beauty? Or because she carried herself like royalty, which somehow struck at the heart of my insecurities? Me, a poor kid from Naples, wanting a woman like her?

Or was it because that we were in her childhood bedroom? In the daylight, it looked both young and expensive, and somehow that was intimidating, too. I'd never admit it to her, or anyone though.

More than anything, I didn't want to fuck things up. Didn't want to put her in harm's way, and wasn't sure I should be giving my heart to her just yet. Those two things weren't compatible, so I had to gamble.

I chose the former.

"Are you going to lecture me about getting drunk last night?" She stared at me accusingly.

I set my coffee mug on the nightstand and shook my head. "Come here."

She hesitated, then walked on her knees over to me. "What?"

I circled her waist with my arm and hauled her into my lap. She wriggled until she was straddling me, the tiny shorts barely covering the space between her legs. She smelled faintly of sex and that expensive soap I'd washed her with last

night. Even though we'd just fucked not long ago, the feel of her on top of me made my dick twitch to life.

Dammit, we needed to get on the road soon.

"I'm not going to lecture you, Gia."

"Hmph." She twitched her nose.

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm not judging. Just curious. What made you drink, then text me?"

"I've been drinking every day since the funeral. Not as much as I did yesterday. Ashley came over, and I guess I just overindulged." Her tongue darted out and wet her top lip. "And I texted you because I wanted to talk. Didn't expect you to drive hours to see me."

"I'm sorry you've been having a hard time. You could've texted or called earlier, you know. At the funeral I told you to contact me whenever you needed."

"I didn't want to bother you. Figured it was better for us to have distance." Her eyes avoided my stare, and instead focused on her hand, which was resting on my bare chest. She shifted on my lap. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

Her question made me hesitate. Before my call with Roberto, I'd planned to tell her that I'd visit her every week or so up here, until she went to New York. But things had changed in just a half hour.

My hand went into her hair, combing it with my fingers. What was the best way to tell her she was coming to Miami with me? I sensed that if I started to make demands, she'd bristle and refuse.

"I wanted to tell you that I was glad you texted me." I pressed a kiss to her neck. "I missed you."

"You did?" Her voice was a soft murmur.

"Missed sleeping next to you."

She smiled.

I ran my nose over her cheek. "Missed kissing you."

“Hmm.” Her smile grew wider.

“Missed touching you.” My hand went up her tank top and found her breast. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and I let out a long breath when my fingers found her nipple.

She arched her back and pressed into my hand. “How long are you staying here?”

I licked the side of my mouth, forming a plan of how I’d get her to Miami. “Long enough to do this.”

Both my hands were now under her tank top, cupping her tits. Her nipples were stiff peaks and I pinched them both. When I heard her sharp inhale, I grinned.

She reached for my belt, but I grabbed her hands and shook my head.

“That’s not what I want, princess.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you want?”

I leaned up and brushed a kiss over her lips while pinching her nipples again. “You’ll see.”

It took about three seconds to yank her top over her head, and I shoved her shorts down. She wasn’t wearing any underwear, and I spied the reflection of her sweet ass in the mirror along the far wall.

“Turn around.”

She did, and I pulled her into me, her back to my front. Her skin was scorching against mine. I could now see all of her in the mirror, and could explore her with both hands.

I kissed the shell of her ear. “Open your legs.”

“You don’t want to take off your pants?”

“Nope. I want you to show me your pretty pussy.”

“Pervert. But I like that about you.” She kissed my cheek and spread her legs.

I chuckled against her ear. “You know what I think? I think you’re a little bit of an exhibitionist. You love showing yourself off for me.”

“Maybe.”

I kept my gaze on her image in the mirror as I palmed her tits. Her head was turned, her faced grazing mine. “Look at yourself in the mirror, princess.”

When she saw herself spread and vulnerable, and in my arms, she raked in a breath.

“You like that? You like watching me touch you?” I kept one hand on her breast and trailed my fingers of the other hand slowly down her stomach.

“You know I like this. You know what you do to me.”

Fuck, she was stunning when she was turned on. My dick felt like it was about to burst out of my pants, but I needed to maintain control here. I circled her bellybutton with my index finger. “What do I do to you?”

“Touch me and find out.”

The skin of her stomach was velvet-soft, and I brushed my fingers down, down, down, until they reached the neat, trimmed hair between her legs. She squeezed my thighs with her hands when I skimmed my fingers through her wetness.

My other hand followed, first spreading her pussy lips open, then sliding a finger inside. Her eyes fluttered shut when I began to slowly plunge two fingers inside while softly stroking her clit.

A big emotion welled inside me, one that seemed too vast for me to contain. I might not be able to vocalize all my complicated feelings about her, but I could show her with my actions. With my touch.

This was mine. *She* was mine. My prize and my possession. More importantly, my partner and my equal.

“So fucking beautiful, you know that?”

Her breath came in shallow stutters. Lips parted, eyes closed, long black eyelashes brushing against her cheekbones. A picture of perfection, one that nearly took my breath away.

I rubbed faster. She dug her fingers into my legs. I heard my own voice, speaking in Italian, as if I was separate from myself. *Come for me*, I commanded in my native tongue, knowing she was aware exactly what I wanted. *Let me take care of you. Let go.*

Her clit was swollen, her cunt sopping wet. She was close. I knew her body.

“Open your eyes. Watch yourself. Watch me make you come.”

“Alessandro.”

“Say it again.”

She did.

“You’ve never said any other man’s name like this, have you?” I slowed my fingers, and she whimpered.

“No. Never. Please don’t stop.”

I picked up the pace again, stroking and circling her clit. “Good girl. Tell me that I’m the only one who will fuck you like this. Tell me that I’m the only one who will finger you and lick you and fuck you.”

“You are.”

“Say my name, princess.”

She gasped, hard, gripping my wrists as I wrung an orgasm out of her. Her muscles tightened and her flesh bloomed with juice. So wet, messy, gorgeous. Everything about the moment—the bright sunshine streaming into the room, the pitch of her voice, the sight of her arcing in ecstasy—was a scene I’d never forget. Never wanted to.

A cry left her lips, and she clamped her legs shut, trapping my hands. “Stop. Stop! It’s too intense right now.”

I kissed the side of her head. “Relax your legs a little. I can’t move.”

She opened her legs for a fraction of a second, long enough for me to move my hands, then curled into my body. I

desperately wished we could just stay in bed all day. But now that I'd made her nice and relaxed, it was time to drop a bomb.

I squeezed her tight and she let out a little, satisfied sigh. "I still can't believe you do that to me."

"Do what? Give you mind blowing orgasms?"

"Yeah. That."

"Well, you're in luck. Because I'm planning on giving you more of them over the next few days. I need you to pack up."

She lifted her head away from my chest. "Hunh? What? Why?"

"You're coming to Miami with me."

An adorable laugh-snort huffed out of her. "Yeah, right." She rolled off me and sat with her back against the headboard.

"I'm serious, Gia."

"Why would I come to Miami with you? I thought we weren't supposed to be seen together."

"Plans have changed."

She screwed up her face. "So...what the hell are you talking about?"

"I'll explain more in the car."

"What? No. I'm not going anywhere. I wanted to ride my horse later today. I'm also trying to find a place to place him, so the feds won't seize him. A place that I can visit when I'm on breaks from school."

I ran a hand through her hair. "It's a safety thing. There's a family in Atlanta that thinks you're going to take over your father's business."

"Oh, hell no." She rolled her eyes. "Just tell them I don't want anything to do with it. Simple."

"It's not like that. This isn't like cancelling a yoga class, Giada."

"Oooh, using my full name. Now I know you're serious." Why did she have to be so stubborn, when it was evident that I

only had her best interest in mind?

“I am serious. You need to come with me. For your safety. I don’t want you here alone.”

“I’m with Judith and her girlfriend and the bodyguards.”

I shook my head. “You’re my responsibility now.”

“Wait. When did you come up with this plan for me to go with you to Miami?”

“While you were out of the room, getting coffee. Now pack your shit.”

“Alessandro, you’re unreal. You intentionally fingered me to orgasm, then sprang this news on me?”

I shrugged. “Something like that. And, don’t you want to come to Miami to be with me? See my condo? Meet my sister?”

“You thought somehow your magic fingers would make me do whatever you asked?” Her voice rose an octave. “It doesn’t work like that. I think you should leave. And no, I’m not sure I want to be with you.”

That stung, but I would overlook it. She was just being stubborn. “Gia. Spending a few days in Miami is for your own good. I want you to be safe. Do you think Judith and the two bodyguards here will be any match for the Palermos, or the Russians, or whoever else your father screwed over? You’re a sitting duck here. Everyone knows you’re here, and are vulnerable. You are the sole heir of millions of dollars of business contracts.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I resent your manipulation.”

I leaned down and kissed her forehead. “I knew you would say no, so I had to sweeten the deal.”

“I don’t like this. If I give you an inch, you’re going to take a mile. Next thing you know, you’re going to try to stop me from going back to school.” She climbed under the covers and buried herself in the puffy white duvet.

Not only did I not have time for her stubbornness, I didn't have the patience. With a quick flick of my hand, I stripped the duvet off her.

"Hey," she cried.

"Get up and get packing. You have no choice. I'm not leaving you alone. We're going to Miami and then from there, you're going to New York, where my men can keep an eye on you. I won't stop you from going to school. That, I can promise you. You're safer there than you are here in this house."

If glares could kill, I'd be six feet under by now. She stared at me with that beautiful ruffled hair and those sharp, dark eyes. "I'll go on one condition."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "What's that?"

"You need to help me with my horse. Find a safe spot for him. With a therapy center, or a non-profit sanctuary, or something. He needs to be safe."

"Can't Judith handle that?"

"This weekend, she's supposed to go to New Yor—" she stopped, probably realizing that she'd let the words slip.

"You were going to be here all weekend without Judith? Alone? When were you going to tell me this?" I was almost yelling. "I can't believe you. Don't you understand the danger you're in?"

"The bodyguards and the staff are here." She waved her hand in the air, as if to imply that I was overreacting.

"And you trust them? Jesus, Gia. Get your shit together. I'll make sure your horse is safe if we have to bring it to Miami and ride it into my fucking condo. Let's go. I have a dinner meeting."

"What am I going to do while you're at your dinner meeting?"

I took a measured inhale through my nose. Admittedly, I hadn't thought that far ahead. Probably if I left her alone she'd walk out. "You'll be at my house. I have security."

Her jaw dropped. “You’re planning on keeping me captive at your condo?”

“That’s not how I would describe it.”

Her hands went into her hair and she gathered it, twisting and tucking it into a loose knot. “Well, it sure sounds like captivity to me.”

“It’s a fucking luxury condo. Surely you can read your book or watch a movie or drink a glass of wine while sitting on the goddamn balcony for a couple of hours. Don’t be difficult. I’m helping you, for fuck’s sake.”

She swallowed hard. I half expected her to laugh, smile, or crack a joke. Instead she scowled at me, a fiery, defiant look that I hadn’t seen since that night of her engagement party. With a faint huff out of her nose, she scooted out of the bed and lingered at her bureau.

While I was admiring her bare ass, she looked at me over her shoulder. “Asshole,” she hissed.

I snapped my fingers twice, knowing it would annoy her even more. She needed to know who was in charge here. “Move it. We still need to talk to Judith. Pack only the bare essentials. I’ll buy you whatever else you need.”

“I hate this life.” She grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of her bureau and flounced into the bathroom.

I took a sip of coffee, which was now cold. Whatever. I didn’t give a shit. Gia belonged with me for now, because that’s where she was safe.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

GIA

THE NEXT SEVERAL HOURS WERE A WHIRLWIND OF ACTIVITY. First I had to drink coffee and pout about Alessandro's request. No, his *demand*. Because that's what it was. Apparently he'd already talked to Judith about me going to stay with him in Miami until school started.

They had the conversation when he arrived in the middle of the night, before he came into my room and stood silently in the darkness while I slept.

Somehow, Judith sided with him and didn't ask my opinion. But why? It blew me away that even without my father alive, my life wasn't fully in my control.

After about a half hour of us glaring at each other while I finished my cappuccino, I came to the conclusion that my best interests and safety were possibly a priority for him. Why, I wasn't certain. But I couldn't be *that* angry, because I also didn't want to hang around here if I was in danger. Plus if I was alone in this house all weekend, I'd surely just look through old photos and binge drink in an attempt to squash my sadness.

So far, the binge drinking approach hadn't worked out well.

Alessandro's bait-and-switch orgasm tactic left me salty, though, and I wasn't going to give up my attitude just yet. It was clear that he wasn't above using sex, or his masculine

appeal, or my weakness for him, to get what he wanted out of me. He seemed to know that I was powerless against certain things—like his fingers, mouth, and cock—and that irked me.

Of course, while he paced my room in his half-unbuttoned shirt while scowling, he looked sexier than ever. That annoyed me further.

While steaming about all this, I flounced around and packed four bags of clothes and other assorted necessities. I also tried a few old outfits on, making sure they were incredibly skimpy. Normally I didn't wear such stuff and only had a few things leftover from high school, but I thought I might get a rise out of him.

“Where do you think you'll wear that?” Alessandro glared at me as I preened in front of a mirror in a tight, low-cut, sparkly gold dress.

I turned my back to the mirror and stuck my butt out, glancing over my shoulder. “Oh, I dunno. I have a couple of friends in high school down in Miami and I was thinking I might meet them for dinner.”

Slouching against the wall, pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. “Fucking hell,” he whispered.

When I was done with packing, I spoke with Judith about my horse, Lancelot, said a tearful goodbye to Lancelot, said an even more emotional goodbye to Judith, then watched as Alessandro stuffed my giant suitcases in the backseat and trunk of his Maserati while grumbling and glaring.

“We could've shipped this. Or had my men come and get it. I should've paid closer attention to you and not your ass while you were throwing shit into suitcases.”

He'd been on the phone and ignored me almost the entire time I was packing. “You told me to bring what I needed.” I folded my arms. “I *need* all of this stuff. It's essential.”

“Get in the car.”

“Oh, we're back to this, are we?”

He slammed the trunk. “Back to what?”

“Being mean.”

An Italian swear word slipped from his lips. “You’re acting like a child. Let’s go. What’s so funny? Why are you smiling? The car. Go. Chop chop.”

I pulled open the door to the luxury car and climbed in the passenger seat. It was necessary to bite my lip to keep from cackling. He slid into the driver’s side.

“What?” He jabbed at the START button and the Maserati roared to life.

“Your Italian swear word.” I stifled a giggle.

“What about it?”

“My nonno used to say that exact same thing. In the accent you have. You’re like an old, grumpy man, trapped in a hot guy’s body.”

He rolled his eyes and we drove away.

* * *

ALESSANDRO TALKED ON THE PHONE FOR MOST OF THE DRIVE, doing business, discussing deals, making plans about trash and condo buildings. The purr of the engine, the buttery leather of the seat, plus his low, growly voice — he didn’t sound like Nonno, I had merely wanted to tease him — lulled me to sleep.

I didn’t open my eyes until we reached Miami, when Alessandro let out a loud groan. The sound woke me with a start.

“Where are we?” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Had I drooled all over the expensive seat leather? To my relief, I hadn’t.

“About two miles from my house and there’s fucking traffic. I’m already running late.”

“You seem to take this as a personal attack.” I squinted out the window. We were bumper-to-bumper, on a bridge that spanned electric blue water. It seemed vaguely familiar, and I

realized that I'd come here with my parents when I was a kid. "You live on the beach?"

He nodded.

I glanced at his profile. He'd rolled his shirtsleeves up his forearms, and his jet-black hair was messy, the way it always was when he ran his hand through it several times. A lock tumbled over his forehead. His big hands gripped the steering wheel, and his full mouth was set into a fierce slash. His profile was maddeningly tempting. Just like everything about him. My attraction to him was just as strong now that we were off that godforsaken island.

A surge of something—a pinch of adrenaline, a dash of desire, a large cup of annoyance—went through me. I clenched my molars together, then reminded myself to relax my jaw.

The traffic started to flow again, and he let out a breath as he accelerated. "Thank fuck."

I was silent for the rest of the trip, watching the palm trees against the blue skies. We pulled up to the valet at a tall, sleek condo building. A man hustled over and opened my door, and then Alessandro's.

It was interesting watching him with the valet, since I hadn't seen him interact with many people. He grinned and clapped the valet on the shoulder, and the younger guy seemed genuinely happy to see Alessandro. It both charmed and vexed me. The former because I appreciated people who treated others with respect, and the latter because it made Alessandro even more alluring, at a moment when I wasn't sure if he was what I wanted.

"This is Giada. You'll be seeing her around," Alessandro said as he pressed his hand into my back. "Giada, this is Jose."

I gave a little wave and Alessandro steered me inside the building. We did another round of introductions with the concierge, and I realized why I was so annoyed by his chumminess with the building staff.

It was how my father had acted with strangers.

He'd been kind and respectful to everyone he met, but more so to people working in the service industry. Since he'd grown up fairly well off, it suddenly made me wonder how, and why, he'd possessed this innate grace.

Of course, I couldn't ask him, because he was gone.

As the elevator doors slid closed, a sob clawed its way up my throat. I swallowed, then took a breath. He was gone, forever. I could never ask him more about my mom, or about why he sold me to Mickey, or about his childhood.

Or anything.

“What's wrong?”

I shook my head, unable to talk. It was as if I'd slammed headfirst into a brick wall made of grief and regret.

“Hey. Hey. Princess? Why are you trembling like that?”

All I could do was shake my head. Alessandro's eyes skittered around the elevator, and when it stopped on a high floor, he threaded his hand through mine and gently led me out and steered me down a hallway. A large, burly guy stood at a doorway, and I realized it was his security guard.

Just like Daddy.

The guard quickly opened the door and I followed Alessandro inside, tears threatening to spill over my lower lids. Crap. I was a mess, and this wasn't the way I wanted to make my entrance to his house.

The door shut behind us and he slid my purse off my shoulder, setting it on a table near the door. He cupped my face and tilted my head upwards. I squeezed my eyes shut, which made the tears fall.

“Why are you crying? Look, I know I can be a bastard at times, especially when I'm running late. Or are you not feeling well?”

I shook my head and opened my eyes. I had the vague sense that we were in a white-and-gray-and-blue condo, but it looked like almost every other condo I've visited in Florida. Sterile, pleasantly decorated, modern. Easy to ignore.

“No, that’s not it,” I took a deep, cleansing inhale, comforted by his touch. “For the first time, I realize that I miss my father. Grief hit me all of a sudden. Something you did made me remember my dad.”

“Something I did? What?”

I nodded and explained, telling him how gut wrenching it was to realize I’d never be able to ask my father important questions again. Alessandro pulled me close and held me for several long seconds. “I understand. It’s going to be okay. I promise. And it’s totally normal for you to grieve. Fuck, Gia, you’ve gone through a lot in the last few weeks.”

His words struck me as morbidly funny and I let out a little laugh against his muscles before wiping my eyes on his shoulder. What was up with my mood swings today? “You’re right. Sorry, I just got mascara on your shirt, I think.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m going to change anyway.” He stroked my hair. “We can talk about this later, okay? I need to get in the shower because I’m late. Why don’t you relax a little, take a nap, have some food? I called ahead and had one of my guys stock the fridge with the stuff you like. Including your Diet Coke.”

I leaned back and stared into his beautiful, harsh face, and nodded. It was obvious that he didn’t have the bandwidth to deal with my emotional outburst at the moment. Could I blame him, though? Even I was shocked at my mercurial nature.

He kissed my forehead. “If you need anything, ask Gianni.”

I wiped my cheeks. “Gianni?”

“The guy at the door. C’mon, let me show you around.”

I didn’t move, and my gaze landed on a sleek, gray leather sofa. “What if I need to buy something? Like, I dunno, tampons.”

“Gianni can handle it.”

“So I can’t go to the store by myself? I’m a prisoner? Is that it?” There was a large, black and white photograph of

what looked like a plane's propellor on the wall. "Did you decorate this yourself?"

I squeezed a fluffy white pillow on the sofa. Didn't he say his sister lived here, too?

He groaned. "Gia, please. Not this again. You need to buy something right now? Today? Tonight? No. Can you refrain from shopping for a day? And no, I didn't. I bought this from a guy and it came furnished. Why? Do you want to redecorate already? Is it not up to your standards?"

How did he know exactly what to say to piss me off? Why was he such a dick after being so tender? "I don't shop every day, jerk."

"Gia, I'm not trying to be a jerk. I'm really pressed for time. Christ. C'mon. Here's the kitchen."

We walked a few steps into another gleaming, clean space with a massive, double door stainless steel fridge. He opened it and revealed not only an entire shelf devoted to Diet Cokes, but my favorite strawberry shortcake ice cream bars. Apparently Judith had given him an entire shopping list.

I ran my hand over the white granite counter, which was as cool as ice. "Where's your sister? Doesn't she live here?"

"When she's in Miami. She's kind of a digital nomad and travels around for work. She's in Bogota right now at a gem show. She'll be back in a couple of weeks." He cleared his throat.

I nodded and followed him into a bedroom. "Geez, someone really doubled down on the gray-white-robin's egg blue color scheme, didn't they? Gorgeous view of the beach, though."

The vista out the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the beach was stunning, I had to admit. I imagined lying in that big bed with him in the mornings, waking up to the sight of the churning blue ocean waves. I turned back to look at him, and he was stripping off his shirt. Damn him. I narrowed my eyes.

“Try to hold it together for a few hours. That’s all I ask. I have this business meeting, and then I’ll be home. We can talk about whatever you want then. I’ll be all yours. I’m not trying to be an asshole, okay?”

He approached. I folded my arms and stepped back. With a little smirk, he kept advancing until my back was against the window. His skin was scorchingly hot, as if it could singe my thin cotton dress to ashes.

“I guess.” My voice faltered.

His hands cupped my jaw gently. As usual, my heartbeat kicked up because of his nearness and his heady, masculine scent. “You guess?”

“I’ll try.”

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll give you a nice present when I get home.” His lips hovered over mine and I leaned in for a kiss. He obliged, taking it nice and slow. With tongue. I shivered. It was incredible what this man could inspire in me, after my jumbled emotional rollercoaster of the past half hour. Incredibly frustrating.

“And if I’m bad?” I relaxed my arms and placed my hands on his bare chest, shooting him a playful, coy look.

His hands tightened ever so slightly around my jaw, and he stared at me. His eyes were unblinking, cold, as turbulent as the ocean outside the window.

“Don’t fuck with me, Gia.”

Chapter Forty

ALESSANDRO

WHILE I SAT AT ONE END OF A LONG TABLE AT PRIME 112—a steakhouse on the beach where Miami’s biggest business deals happen—I tried to push thoughts of Gia out of my head. It was impossible, despite the luxurious ambience, the Kobe beef sliders, the filet mignon.

Gia was far more fragile than I anticipated. Somehow I’d had a certain impression of her, that she was a tough little thing. But the murder of her father, the situation at the beach bungalow with Mickey, hell, our entire relationship...all combined, they had eroded her mental state.

Not that I didn’t want to help her, or that her issues deterred me from wanting her. I was ready to dive in. But she obviously wasn’t in the same place I was in life, wasn’t as focused. And yet I still craved her. Wanted her like I’d never wanted any other woman. This wasn’t like me, and I felt scattered, unmoored, because of it.

“I think you’ll find that our pre-construction prices, especially on more than one unit, are exceptional.”

I glanced up, in the direction of the male voice, realizing that I’d been zoning out while staring into my water glass. Across from me was developer Colin King. He smiled in that way men do when they were born into privilege.

“I’m sure I will.” I smirked.

Colin sat between his brother, Caleb, and another rich Miami guy named Rafael. These were among Florida's biggest players in real estate, and my lawyer had encouraged me to meet with them. Investing in their condo deals by buying pre-construction units then flipping them was the easiest way to make money as a legit businessman, my lawyer had said.

"What is it that you do again, Alessandro?" I turned to the woman on my left. Her name was Justine, and she was the wife of one of the three developers. Rafael, the Cuban guy, I think.

Her voice was a touch haughty, and awareness prickled through me. Turned out she was a journalist or a publisher or some shit. I'd probably not agreed to this meeting if I knew she'd be here. I liked to stay far away from the press. Especially women like her, who were polished and gorgeous and seemed way too sharp for her own good.

Something about her reminded me of Gia, and that made me shift in my chair uncomfortably.

I wiped my mouth with my napkin and coughed into it. Damn this sore throat. "I'm in the waste management business. Consulting."

Her eyes narrowed for a millisecond, and she nodded. "Fascinating. What's that like, anyway?"

I could tell she wasn't buying my bullshit. But who gave a fuck? Her husband stood to get even wealthier with my infusion of cash.

"Excuse Justine's prying. She's a bit of a snoop, being a journalist and all."

"Publisher." Justine shot a look at her husband.

Rafael smiled indulgently at his wife, then stared at me as though he'd rip my face off if I so much as said an unkind word to her. While Colin and Caleb were the very picture of Ivy League-white guy privilege, Rafael seemed a bit more dangerous.

I liked him.

“Happy to answer any questions.” I coughed again and took a sip of my water, then swallowed. I was so off my game tonight that I wasn’t even drinking wine. “Excuse me. Allergies, I think.”

“They’re going around,” Justine said, and the table launched into a discussion of climate change.

The night wore on. I only finished half of my steak, a quarter of my baked potato, and didn’t even order coffee at the end. I did down a glass of brandy, though, hoping it would soothe my goddamn throat, which felt like someone had taken a sandblaster to it. Yeah, I was getting sick. Sleeping only an hour or two at Gia’s house hadn’t helped. Shit, I hadn’t slept well in two weeks.

By the time Rafael paid the bill, we’d agreed that I’d buy seven, million-dollar units in the building that would soon be under construction in Miami’s Brickell neighborhood.

“I’ll have my lawyers draw up the paperwork and send it over,” he said, as we walked out of the low-lit dining room. “Would you care to come for a drink with us? I think we’re going to hit the Shore Club.”

I shook my head. It felt like I’d been gone for days, but really, it had only been three hours. That seemed like a lifetime away from Gia, who was probably doing God knows what at my house. Plus, I was increasingly feeling like shit as the night wore on.

“Thank you, but I have another obligation.”

“Alessandro’s a single man,” Colin said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Unlike us old, married people. My wife and Caleb’s wife are already at the Shore Club. They had some book event and didn’t want to deal with our boring asses.”

We all chuckled and said our goodbyes, then they climbed into their chauffeured Mercedes. I approached the valet and waited while he brought my car around. As I was wondering if I should text Gia, my phone buzzed. It was Roberto, my lawyer.

“How’d it go?” he asked. “You still with them?”

“No. Just finished. Went well. Decided on seven units.” I told him a little bit about the deal.

“Sounds like they gave you as good a price as any. Jesus, you sound like shit.”

“Feel like hell. I think I’m coming down with something.” I paused to cough. Something about his tone was off. “I get the feeling you didn’t call to talk about condos.”

“No. I didn’t. I heard from the Palermos. They want to hear from Gia herself, about her plans for her father’s business.”

I swore out loud and switched to Italian. “Fuck them. No way. Gia’s not going anywhere.”

“I think the two of you should have a meeting. The top guys will be in Miami week after next. Gia will be safe if she goes with you and your guys. It’s best if you’re with her, instead of her meeting with them alone. That way she can go to New York without any of this baggage.”

There was no way in hell Gia was meeting with any of the Palermos alone. I spotted my car gliding into the valet area. “Hang on. Getting my car.”

After dropping the valet a fifty dollar tip, I slid into my car and shut the door. “Okay, I’m back. Fine. We can meet. But I’ll be with her. When and where?”

“They’ve already decided where. Dominion.”

I gunned the engine onto the street. “Oh, fuck no. Why there?”

“They consider it neutral territory.”

I blew out a breath, which ended in a cough. They had a point. It was one of the biggest, non-mafia owned clubs in the city. Incredibly secure because it was run by a former FBI agent. It was also the largest sex club in Miami, and not a place I’d ever take Gia.

“I don’t think we have much choice in this. You either run, or are affiliated, with most of the other places in town. They don’t want to meet there.”

“Fine,” I ground out. By this time, I was at my condo building. Tonight wasn’t the night to tell her about this. No, it had to wait until I was feeling better; I didn’t have the energy for Gia’s endless questions tonight. Maybe tomorrow over brunch. This news about a sit-down with the Palermos was a fucking obstacle, though. I didn’t even want those assholes to lay eyes on Gia, much less talk with her.

“Set it up and I’ll be there with her.”

“Excellent. And listen, Ale. Take care of that voice. You sound like shit.”

My instinct was to add *fuck you*, but Roberto was on my side, and he’d had already hung up.

Chapter Forty-One

GIA

I HEARD ALESSANDRO COUGHING BEFORE HE WALKED IN. Setting my e-reader on the nightstand, I jumped out of bed to meet him in the kitchen.

I was about to throw myself into his arms when I saw him gulping down a large glass of water at the sink.

“Are you okay?” I approached him with a frown. His cheeks were flushed, and he looked vaguely sweaty. “Did something happen during the dinner?”

He set the glass down and slid his arm around my waist, pulling me close. “It went really well. I agreed to pre-order seven condos.”

I pressed my lips into his neck. His skin was scorchingly hot, but not in the way it was when we were naked together. Was he sick? “Why seven?”

He brushed his lips over my forehead. His mouth felt as though it could singe my flesh.

“It’s part of my plan to go legit. I invest in a bunch of pre-construction condos, then flip them for more money when the building is finished. It’s totally legal, and the developers have a stellar reputation for quality construction. I’ll make a lot, then do it again, and again. Of course, if you want to keep one of the units, we can. Might be a nice place for us when we want to take a break from New York winters, no?”

I squirmed out of his arms, not wanting to discuss the future. The thought of school loomed in my mind, and the idea of doing something so permanent as buying a luxury condo with Alessandro seemed a little too soon. Or was it? Crap, I was so confused.

“You’re really warm.” I pressed a hand to his forehead. “Want me to get you a Tylenol?”

He shook his head. “No, all I want is to sleep.”

“Stubborn.”

He lifted his shoulders into a shrug. “Sorry. You probably expected a night of clubs on South Beach or wild sex. Don’t think I’ll be able to hold up my end of the bargain tonight.”

I took him by the hand and led him toward the bedroom. “That’s all I want, too. I tried to nap while you were gone, but couldn’t.”

I didn’t tell him that it was because I’d spent the last couple of hours snooping through every nook and cranny of his house. I’d found nothing even vaguely interesting or incriminating, which probably meant he was hiding some really big shit—and yet, I was relieved not to find photos of women or anything that might stoke my jealousy.

“Did you eat?” His voice was so raspy.

“Yeah, I had some fruit and yogurt.”

“I should’ve brought you something more substantial. I’m sorry.”

“No. I’m fine. Don’t have much of an appetite.”

Once we were in the bedroom, my hands went to his chest, and I unbuttoned his shirt. “Why don’t you take a cool shower and come to bed? I think you need to take it easy for a night and a day.”

He brushed my hair away from my face. When I looked into his eyes, I detected a certain wildness, an untamed quality. It was unusual for him, because he almost always looked like he was in control. “You know I’d never let anything happen to you, right?”

“I know that, silly.” I raked my thumb over his full bottom lip. “I think you’re sick.”

“Lovesick,” he murmured, and a deep pang of fear reverberated through me.

Alessandro showered and crawled into bed next to me. I kissed him slow, and he rolled over, so his back was to me. Within two minutes he was snoring. We hadn’t even turned out the light, so I leaned over and carefully flicked it off, trying not to wake him.

I pulled the comforter over his shoulder. He was naked, and I wore a little pajama outfit, still unsure about how we’d navigate the small things of life together. I’d slept naked next to him in the beach bungalow, but that seemed like a different, wilder, time.

Now seemed so much more real. I lay on my back in the dark, my heart pounding with fear. I wasn’t afraid of him, but afraid of the unknown. So many questions swirled in my mind.

Was he really going legit? Was he telling me the truth about his business dealings, his life, his feelings? Was I ready for such an adult relationship?

Before all this, I’d planned on living in a tiny apartment in New York and living the life of a graduate student. Well, and trying to evade my husband-to-be for as long as possible. Adulthood seemed years away.

And now, it was here, but in a different form. Or was it?

Choking back tears, I shifted to face Alessandro’s muscular back. His breathing was deep, and I threw my arm around him, not wanting to let go for fear that life might shift once again.

* * *

WHEN I WOKE SOME HOURS LATER, IT WAS STILL DARK, AND I was drenched in sweat. But not my own.

Sometime during the night Alessandro and I had shifted, and he was the big spoon. My pink pajamas were soaked in

perspiration, and I sat up. I pressed a hand to his forehead, and he was even warmer than before.

“Oh, shit,” I murmured.

“Alessandro. Baby. You’re burning up.”

He moaned in response, then said something in Italian. I couldn’t make out what the words were, and suspected they were in a Naples dialect.

I flung off the covers and went into the bathroom to dig around in one of my makeup bags. Ever since my mom had died, I’d been obsessed with being prepared for things—it was stupid, since there was nothing I could’ve done about her death, at least not with anything available over-the-counter. And yet, I toted around enough medicine, ointment, and first aid crap to help a small army.

I found the Tylenol, shook two into my hand, grabbed a digital thermometer, then went into the kitchen. I assembled what I needed: a glass of water, a bag of frozen peas, a dry towel and a towel soaked in cool water. I toted everything into the bedroom on a tray I’d found in a cabinet, making sure to leave the hall light on so I’d be able to see.

“Baby,” I cooed. “You need to wake up for a few seconds. You’re really sick.”

He scrubbed his face with his hand and said something in Italian.

“Please just sit up so I can give you the Tylenol, okay?” I stroked his face.

His eyes blinked open. “Gia? You’re okay?”

“I’m fine, sweetie. You’re really sick. With a fever. C’mon. Let’s get you better. Sit up.”

He pushed himself up while groaning. “Nightmare. I think I had a nightmare. You’d left me—”

“Shh. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. Here, take these.” I reached for the pills and the water, and he gulped them down. “Now let me take your temperature then you can finish the water. I’ll be quick.”

He opened his mouth and I stuck the thermometer under his tongue. Within seconds it beeped, and my eyes widened at the results.

103.5

“Crap, should we go to the hospital?” I whispered.

“No hospital.” He guzzled the water and when he was finished, handed me the glass. “Seriously, Gia. No hospital. Don’t do any shit like call an ambulance. I’ll be fine.”

I swallowed a lump of unease. There was a bodyguard at the door, I knew that. Maybe I could enlist him to help, if needed. “Okay. Let’s see how the Tylenol works. Lie down and try to get back to sleep.”

He slid down, flinging the covers off his bare chest. It was covered in perspiration, and the only time I’d seen it like that was on the island, when we’d been in the sun. I reached for the frozen peas and wrapped them in a towel, pressing them gently to his forehead.

“Oh, that feels good.” He closed his eyes.

“Just sleep.”

“Gia, I’m worried about you.”

“Shh. Don’t worry. Everything’s fine. I’m here.”

“In my nightmare—”

I swabbed his cheeks with the cool pack. “No. don’t talk about that.”

He said something nonsensical in Italian, and I wondered if he was having a fever dream. Or a fever nightmare.

“Just sleep,” I said. “I’m here with you.”

For the next three hours, until the sun peeked over the Atlantic Ocean and beamed between the crack in the curtain, I pressed ice packs against his face and body. He repeatedly talked about how worried he was for me, how he wouldn’t let anything happen to me, how he’d protect me at all costs.

At dawn, his fever broke, and I crawled next to him, both exhausted and worried. Maybe his worries were based in reality, not a fever dream, and that could be the biggest nightmare of all.

Chapter Forty-Two

GIA

I SPENT THE NEXT FEW DAYS NURSING ALESSANDRO BACK TO health. At first I thought he'd be gruff and difficult, but he softened after that first night—especially after I gave one of the bodyguards a shopping list and told him to go buy everything on it.

When the bodyguard delivered the groceries, I made chicken noodle soup. Or tried to. It was a recipe that I'd dredged from the recesses of my brain, something my mother used to make. I thought my version was a bit too salty, but Alessandro declared that he loved it, and wolfed down two bowls plus three slices of sourdough bread. It was the most he'd eaten since his dinner with the developers.

He'd been subsisting on Gatorade and saltine crackers, but I'd managed to get him to drink a smoothie last night.

“You made this?” He lifted the bowl of soup to his mouth and drank the remaining liquid. It was day three of his flu, and he was feeling much better. Today he reclined on the sofa and watched a movie. The entire scene reminded me a bit of the beach bungalow, and for some reason, that made me feel warm and fuzzy.

“It sounds like you don't believe me.” I gently pinched his big toe.

He lowered the bowl and handed it to me. “You didn't cook much when we were on the beach, and the time you did,

you burned the eggs.”

“I’m full of surprises.” I shot him a coy little smile. “And I burned those eggs because you distracted me.”

He frowned and stretched. “If I recall correctly, I’d just come out of the shower.”

“You did. And you were naked. You distract me when you’re naked.”

“I need to get better so I can distract you more.” He dissolved in a fit of coughing and laughter.

I hustled off to the kitchen. The easy banter and the caring vibe that had grown between us was adorable. It also took my mind off the howling sadness of losing my father, and the circumstances that led up to his death.

Still, New York and school loomed on the horizon, and a large part of me was excited about that. I couldn’t wait to get back to the city, return to the rhythm and structure of university. But I also didn’t like the idea of being apart from Alessandro, either.

Probably it was best to live in the moment, and not think too hard about anything.

* * *

SEVEN DAYS AFTER HE FELL SICK, ALESSANDRO FULLY recovered. By some miracle, I hadn’t fallen ill. I knew he was better by the way he grabbed me, by his pleas to kiss me—I wouldn’t let him until he stopped sneezing—and by the way he stared at me with lust in his eyes.

I knew when he wanted me, and it was a heady feeling.

“Tonight we’re going out.” He slapped my butt. “Go get ready. We have a reservation at a sushi place. We need to talk about a few things.”

I squinted at him. The idea of being around other humans made me a little anxious, given Alessandro’s earlier concerns for my safety. Maybe it was better to remain in our bubble for little while longer. Plus, I didn’t like the sound of the words *need to talk*.

“Are you sure? You don’t want to stay home one more night?”

“Nope. I’m feeling a hundred percent better. Aren’t you tired of taking care of me?”

I didn’t answer. Truthfully, I wasn’t. But it was difficult to admit out loud. A sense of unease settled in me as I showered, put on a sparkly black slip dress, swept my hair into a messy updo, and swiped on some makeup.

Alessandro was ready when I emerged from the bathroom. He was in all black, and combined with the dark stubble on his face that had grown over the past week, looked positively, decadently evil.

I adored it.

Damn him.

He grabbed my hand and we set off, driving a few miles up the beach to a place he’d declared was his favorite in all of Miami. The bodyguards accompanied us inside, and none of the wait staff seemed to be fazed by this, or by the fact that Alessandro and I were at a secluded table in the low-lit, sexy restaurant, and the bodyguards at a nearby booth.

I didn’t even bother ordering. Not because I didn’t know what I wanted or didn’t enjoy sushi, but because Alessandro seemed to be so delighted in being out of the house again. He grinned as he picked out a literal boatload of sushi, and I wondered if we’d be able to eat everything.

He reached under the table and squeezed my knee, then traced the cap with two fingers. Sparks shot through me. I was needy as hell since we hadn’t had sex in days. I imagined his fingers trailing up my thigh...

“You look gorgeous tonight.”

I thanked him, suddenly shy from both his focused, intense stare and the thoughts running through my brain. He could be so sweet and loving, and tonight’s gentle smile and tender look in his eyes made me positively gooey inside. I’d fallen hard for him, despite my best intentions, and caring for him while he was sick somehow had brought us closer.

“So, uh, what is it that you want to talk about?”

He removed his hand from my knee and snapped to attention. The focused businessman was back in a flash. “The Palermos.”

I rolled my eyes. This again. “You know how I feel. I want nothing to do with any of it.”

“I’m aware. But they are demanding a meeting.”

“Then meet.” I sipped my sake, which was warm and hot as it slid down my throat.

“They want to hear it from you. Our meeting is in three days. Here in Miami. I’ll be with you, of course, and we’re going to be in neutral territory, in a semi-public place.”

“Oh, hell. Alessandro. Isn’t there some way I can designate you as my,” I waved my hand, “representative? Why do I have to be there? I don’t want anything to do with any of this. Don’t you get it? I’m sick of this life. I want out.”

He shook his head. “Your father was an influential enough man that they want to hear from his only heir. Already they wonder if I killed Mickey to take over his businesses. They want to make sure I’m not coercing you.”

I huffed out an impatient sigh. This was the Mafia. While people only saw the glamour and intrigue of movies, the reality was tedious and endless—while simultaneously being bloody and greedy. I’d seen as much with Daddy, and now, with Alessandro. This was the downside of being with him long term.

“Don’t start thinking this is going to happen a lot. One and done. I promise.” He looked at me with edge in his eyes. “I’m getting out, Gia. It’ll just take a while.”

* * *

“YOU’VE BEEN QUIET FOR A WHILE. WHY?” HE HANDED ME A glass of Diet Coke, with extra ice. Just as I liked it.

Damn him for being so perceptive of my moods and needs. I sipped my drink and stared into the ink-black beach horizon.

It was after dinner, and were back at Alessandro's house. We were on his balcony, which was actually my favorite spot in the entire place. It had a long, rattan sectional sofa with plush, cream colored cushions, and I stretched out on the lounge part.

It must have been high tide, because the surf seemed closer than ever, and the sound of the crashing waves was louder than usual.

"Gia?" he said gently.

"Sorry. Yeah, I've been thinking."

He sat next to me. "About?"

"Everything. This life."

He pushed out a long sigh.

"I know, I know. I overthink," I said. "But I just want to be done with all of this. Part of me wants to go to New York and never look back. Forget about this all."

He took my drink and set it on a nearby table, then turned back to me, brushing my hair over one shoulder. It had been several days since he'd turned his focused attention on me because he'd been sick.

"You want to forget about us?"

"No. That's the problem."

He trailed his nose over the shell of my ear and circled my shoulders with his arm, pulling me closer. "I'm a problem?"

Desire showered through my body, as it always did when he was so close. His hand went to my leg, making a slow journey upwards. I was already wet, of course, and wanted him. I despised how conflicted he made me feel, how this situation we were in left me ambivalent. Confused, even.

"You are. Because..." I swallowed hard.

He squeezed my thigh and tugged it toward him, forcing me to part my legs. I inhaled sharply. His fingers found his way to my panties and stroked the damp fabric, all the while pressing his lips to my cheek.

“Because, why, princess?”

“Because I love you,” I blurted, terrified and also relieved that I was finally admitting how I felt. “I don’t want to love you. Part of me wants nothing to do with you. But I can’t help it. Damn it, it’s so confusing.”

His fingers dipped into my panties, sliding into my wetness. “I love you, Gia.”

I turned my head. Our lips hovered against each other’s. My heart felt as though it could burst from happiness, and lust, and yeah. *Love*. Bigger and brighter and more heady than I ever imagined.

“You do? Even though I’m difficult? Even though I’m a bitch?”

He laughed softly and kissed my cheek. “I love you *because* you’re difficult. You’re mine. For as long as you’ll have me. I’m fucking crazy about you. But you need to trust me. Trust that I’ll keep you safe. Trust that I know what you want, and that I’ll do what’s best for both of us. I’m leaving the business, I promise that. Please trust me. Because I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. Ever.”

My desire built, and I shuddered in a breath. Could I trust this man?

“I’ve got you, princess.” The sound of the surf grew louder, and I shuddered in a breath as he circled my clit with his fingers. “I’m yours, Gia. I’m not going anywhere.”

Yes. I could trust him. He’d given me no reason to think otherwise. I couldn’t control the future any more than I could control my powerful feelings toward him.

Chapter Forty-Three

ALESSANDRO

AS WE WALKED INTO DOMINION—MIAMI'S HOTTEST PRIVATE sex club—I tightened my grip around Gia's waist, digging my fingers into her soft flesh underneath her skimpy black dress.

From the second we entered, the very air was laced with the scent of sex: heavy cologne, leather, cigar smoke. And an intangible combination of lusty anticipation and danger. This was the only such club in the county that was independently owned—that is, not owned by one mafia family or another.

It was owned by a former famous fashion designer who happened to be a shrewd businesswoman and it was treated as Switzerland by the city's families. Dominion was a neutral place and one that no one wanted to defile with violence, a sleek, posh place that had strict membership requirements.

It was also the classiest club that catered to some of the raunchiest fantasies in America. Nothing illegal, of course.

To be honest, being here with Gia made me horny. Which is exactly what I didn't want tonight, while talking to the Palermos. While she was at my side. I liked to keep my horniness with her in the confines of my own home, where I could control the situation.

There was another reason for my building apprehension. My ex, Merry, used to work here as a waitress. I wasn't sure if she still did, since we hadn't talked in months. Merry and I

had dated only for a little while, and it had been a casual relationship with an amicable split.

Still, I wasn't eager for Gia to come face-to-face with anyone from my past.

"Stay next to me. I don't want you wandering off," I growled in Gia's ear.

"Ow. Why are you being so possessive?" She tried to wriggle away from me but I drew her tighter.

"Maybe because every person here will want to fuck you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously. We're here for a business meeting and all you can think about is that Neanderthal shit?"

I steered her toward the bar, flagged down the bartender, and ordered two drinks. A Scotch on the rocks for me, and a glass of red wine for her. Then I turned to stare into Gia's gorgeous face. Tonight, she was fully made up, all fake eyelashes and red lips. I loved this look equally as much as the no-makeup look, but had to admit that combined with her black dress, her face looked older and more professional.

Probably she wanted to project that image to the Palermos, but it left me feeling protective and yeah, maybe a bit insecure (although I'd never admit that to her). I didn't want them to get the idea that she was more interested in the business than she was, or that she was anything but a student and my partner.

The bartender, a middle-aged guy who looked familiar, brought our drinks and I tipped well. "Thank you, Mr. Bianchi."

Dammit. Now I remembered who he was. He'd been a friend of Merry's. I grabbed the drinks and motioned toward a more private booth, adorned in deep, red leather. Gia scooted in, and I followed on the same side. I wanted to shield her as much as possible, from everything here. In the background, hypnotic, chill electronic music pulsed over the sound system, loud enough to hear each beat, but soft enough to carry on a conversation.

Gia reached for her wine, tilting her head with a curious expression.

“How does the bartender know your name?”

I scratched the back of my neck. “I’ve been here before.”

I watched Gia scan the bar, her eyes skimming over the beautiful women in designer dresses. The men dressed in sharp suits. They were here for one of two reasons: money or sex. Usually both. Gia, as naïve as she was, understood perfectly. I could tell by the look in her eyes.

“You’ve been here before, have you? A lot?” A smirk spread on her lips. “Care to explain?”

“No. I don’t.” I set my expression in a sharp glare.

She took a dainty sip of her wine. “That dominant shit doesn’t fly with me and you know it.”

“Now’s not the time, Gia. Don’t be a brat.”

She licked her lips and leaned into me, her perfume making my dick twitch. I swear to god, my dick was like Pavlov’s dog whenever I smelled that scent of hers.

“What are you going to do? Punish me? Take me into one of those rooms and spank me? Like I didn’t catch a glimpse of that when we walked in here, those two women in that room together.”

I cleared my throat, unnerved at the thought. It would be incredibly fun to bend Gia over and smack her juicy ass.

“Did you come here for business, or pleasure, Alessandro?”

My nostrils twitched. This was the true reason I hadn’t wanted to come here. I didn’t want to answer questions from Gia. Because I knew she wouldn’t want the answers.

I flicked my wrist and checked my watch. “We’re a little early. In about ten minutes we’ll head over to the meeting room.”

Gia gave a soft chuckle, probably because she could see right through me. Her hand rested on my thigh, which was

concealed by the table. As we drank in silence, her palm drifted upwards. Of course, I was hard, because my mind was filled with fantasies of taking Gia into one of the private rooms, and using a few toys on her.

“Just as I thought,” she murmured. “You’re hard. Care to share what you’re thinking?”

“No.”

“Now who’s being the brat?”

“Take your hand off my dick.”

She did, while rubbing her slick, scarlet lips together, which only made my cock throb harder. “That’s not something I ever thought I’d hear you say. My goodness, Alessandro. So unlike you. Usually you’re begging me to touch your cock.”

I snorted. “Drink your wine and shut up.”

“So bossy,” she whispered.

Why did she have to be so difficult? So fucking sexy? So aware of my weaknesses?

We drank in silence for a few minutes, with Gia watching the people walk back and forth by our booth. Out the corner of my eye I caught sight of a woman at the bar. Oh, shit. It was Merry. I turned quickly to face Gia, angling my body away from the room. Fuck, I hope she didn’t see me.

“You look gorgeous tonight, princess.” I smiled and swept a lock of hair out of her face. “We’re going to have to go out more. And when you’re in New York, I’ll fly up and take you anywhere you want.”

She leaned in and kissed my nose. “I’d like that, but you have to promise not to be so grumpy.”

I was about to lean in and kiss her mouth when I heard someone call my name in a high-pitched, female tone.

My molars involuntarily ground together. I knew before I turned around that it was Merry. Exactly what I didn’t want. Christ on a cross. Merry wasn’t a bad person, but she tended to

be competitive when it came to other women. And I suspected Gia was the same.

Gia poked her head around me. “Oh, hi. We’re all set with our drinks.”

I shut my eyes for a moment, then peeled them open.

“Alessandro, I’d know those muscular shoulders anywhere,” Merry cooed. “Hi, baby. Long time no see.”

Raking in a deep inhale, I turned to face the situation, knowing that any misstep on my part could potentially cause trouble with Gia. “Hello, Merry. Gia, this is Merry. Merry, Gia.”

Merry slid into the seat opposite us, without asking. She was wearing a classic schoolgirl getup, with a plaid skirt, a white button down tied in the front, and her blonde hair was in high pigtails. She’d never dressed like this when we were together—I wasn’t into the little girl fantasy at all—and I wondered if she was even a server anymore.

“I’m so sorry for thinking you were the waitress,” Gia said, smiling at Merry.

“It’s okay, I used to be, and I guess I still have that look about me.” Merry met Gia’s smile with a grin, which gave me a bit of hope this might not be terrible. “How have you been, Alessandro? I haven’t seen you around in a while.”

I shrugged and slid an arm around Gia’s shoulders, pulling her close. “I’ve been great. You know, working hard. Playing hard.”

“You do like to play hard,” Merry purred, eyeing Gia, who stiffened next to me.

“So, you’re no longer a server?” I asked, hoping that I didn’t seem too interested.

“Yeah, I was promoted to one of the house escorts. It’s a much better deal, a lot less work. I only have one client per shift, and don’t have to be on my feet all night. It’s also much easier than being out on your own. I’m sure you can understand.” She winked at Gia.

“Excuse me?” Gia responded in a cold voice.

“Oh. You’re not an escort?” Merry widened her eyes, and that’s when I knew she was fucking with Gia. “Sorry. I just assumed you were because y’all are together. Alessandro... well. You know.”

“No. I do not know.” Gia folded her arms. “There’s a lot I don’t know, apparently.”

Merry giggled. “Oh, honey, you’ll see. Once you’ve spent enough time with him, you’ll get it. Men like him, they’re like flies to shit with places like this. With women like this.” She gestured around the room. “Anyway, I need to meet my client. Have fun tonight, you two.”

She gave us a little finger wave and launched herself out of her seat, her ass and skirt swaying as she strutted off.

Gia reacted by wrenching out of my grip. “I need to use the bathroom.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“You will not. Move.”

With a sigh, I climbed out of the booth and let Gia out. She didn’t look at me as she scooted out. She did hiss the word “*baby*,” however, and roll her eyes. Just fucking great.

I grabbed Gia’s arm. “I know you’re pissed, and I’m sorry about Merry. I didn’t expect to see her tonight. But get yourself together, we’ve got fifteen minutes before we meet the Palermos. We have to be united when we talk with them.”

Her eyes slammed into mine and hit me with a poison-tipped gaze. Then Gia turned and walked toward the restroom lounge, her head held high. I could feel the visceral anger, confusion and jealousy coming off her in waves.

Chapter Forty-Four

GIA

A MINUTE.

I only needed a minute alone. To catch my breath, to talk some sense into my brain.

Of course Alessandro had a past. Of course he'd screwed other women. Of course they'd be gorgeous like Merry.

It wasn't that I was jealous. Well, maybe a little. It was more the reality of the situation, that Alessandro had a vast and rich life, one outside of me. Until now, we'd been in our little cocoon, forged by murder and isolation, by lust and sheer need.

He was being perfectly reasonable, kind and genuine. He'd done nothing wrong.

And yet.

Being here with him reminded me of all that he was—all that he is—and how difficult it will be for him to give that all up.

I yanked open the door to the restroom. This was an incredibly swanky place, far beyond the college pubs and clubs I'd frequented as an undergrad. I'd never been interested in sleek, popular places, and this appeared to be in that vein. It smelled like money and sin, and everyone—from the doorman to the servers to Merry—had a look of impossible cool, an

expression that combined zero fucks and the knowledge that this was a place where only the beautiful gathered.

Fortunately, there was no one inside when I stepped into the bathroom. It was a large place, decorated in blinding white everywhere, even a white lounger facing a long, white-framed mirror. I glanced at my full-length image. I was a vision in black, my long hair tumbling everywhere.

Probably my friends would tell me to take a selfie, I looked so dramatic. But that was the last thing on my mind. I sank onto the white sofa, grateful that I didn't have to collect myself while hunched over a toilet seat.

Breathe in. One, two, three. *Alessandro's been nothing but loving tonight.*

Breathe out. One, two, three. *I can even excuse his bossiness, considering I'd tried to provoke him.*

Breathe in. One, two, three. *It's perfectly normal to be a little jealous of his ex. She's beautiful. Maybe a bit snarky. And he doesn't owe me an explanation of his past.*

Breathe out. One, two, three. *Get your head straight for this meeting with the Palermos. It's critically important they know Alessandro and I are on the same page, and that I support him taking over my father's business.*

I closed my eyes and continued my deep breathing. I heard the door swing open, and I peeled open my eyes.

Oh, hell. It was Merry. If I felt garish in this pristine, sterile, all-white space, she looked downright garish in her schoolgirl costume.

"Oh, hey," she said, glancing at me with a feral smile.

I gave a small wave. "Hi. I like your shoes."

They were patent leather Mary Janes, and they were cute. It was probably better if I ignored her earlier snark and complimented her. Mom always told me to compliment people who criticized you, because it would throw them off. I later learned that this was top-notch passive aggressive behavior, but whatever.

“Thanks.” She plopped down next to me on the seat and stretched her long, tan legs, admiring the shoes and the little frilly ankle socks. “They’re at least comfortable. Some guys want you to wear like five-inch heels and that sucks.”

“I can imagine.”

“Want a smoke?” She pointed at her bag, which I now noticed was a vintage tin lunch pail with the 1970s version of Scooby Doo on the front. For a second I thought it was cool, then remembered she had the entire kids’ ensemble because some guy wanted to pretend she was a girl. Gah.

“Uh, sure.” Why was I doing this?

She extracted a pack of Marlboro Lights out of her bag, handed one to me, and lit with a Zippo. She lit one for herself.

“Your first time here?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m surprised Alessandro brought you here.”

I shifted in my seat so I could get a better look at her. “Why?”

She lifted a thin shoulder. “He’s not much for going out. He only came here for business meetings usually. That’s how I met him, if you were wondering.”

I nodded, not wanting to let on that we were here for business as well.

“He doesn’t really get off on the public sex thing. Prefers to do it at home.” She smiled.

A knot formed in my gut and I nodded, stupidly. “Right,” I murmured.

“Yeah, he didn’t even like the business meetings here. He’s really a homebody. I’m not, which is one of the reasons we drifted apart. Well, that and the fact that he can’t stop working. I’ve never seen a freaking gangster work so much. I used to tell him that he should give up the life and go to business school to be a CEO or some shit, because that’s how he approached his job. Other guys, you know, love the lifestyle.”

I took a drag off the cigarette, unsure of how to feel about her words. “Yeah, he can be intense at times,” I said in a noncommittal voice. Why was she telling me this? Did she think we were going to be friends? Were we supposed to be bonding in here?

She snorted. “That’s the understatement of the year. One time, it was my birthday and he picked me up. I thought he was going to take me to Prime 112, because I’d been dropping hints for weeks. But instead he brought me to a little trattoria and we got takeout. Brought it back to his house and ate it there. While he took phone calls. I mean, later, we had fun...”

The smirk on her face told me everything I needed to know about her idea of “fun.” Nausea fluttered in my stomach. “I see.”

She burst out into laughter, smoke swirling around her. “Sorry. I have no filter. Listen, have fun with him. The man eats pussy like it’s an Olympic sport. Just don’t get too attached because he’s already in a relationship. With the mafia.”

When she saw my obvious shock, she waved her cigarette at the door. “Go. Have fun. You’re totally his type. He loves that Italian look more than anything. Trust me. I never measured up.”

“Uhh, thanks?” I said, taking a final inhale of the smoke and then stubbing it out in a free-standing white ashtray. “And thanks for the cigarette.”

“Anytime.”

I stood up. “Good luck with tonight.”

She waved her hand. “I’m meeting some guy named Palermo later. He’s harmless, just likes to watch me touch myself.”

How to respond to that? As an undergrad, as a feminist, I’d always maintained that sex work was legitimate work. But it was always in a theoretical way. Now that I was face-to-face with an actual escort, I wasn’t sure how to feel. But perhaps

that was also because my boyfriend's face had been between her legs. No, I didn't have time to unpack this right now.

"See you around." I said, trying to strut out with confidence.

Alessandro was hovering around the door, a glower on his dark brow. "Everything okay? We have to go."

I nodded. "Just peachy."

He threaded his fingers into mine and led me through the bar and down a long corridor. We passed by several closed doors, and I wondered what was going on behind them. Earlier I'd caught glimpses of sex, of threesomes and some light bondage. Had Alessandro fucked Merry here? It didn't sound like it, from what she said. But who knew? Obviously, there was a lot I *didn't* know about Alessandro.

We came to a door flanked by a large man. I recognized him immediately as a bodyguard, and he and Alessandro nodded at each other. The man opened the door and we went in.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting inside the room, but it wasn't this. The space was decorated like a corporate boardroom, with a long mahogany conference table, a white board, and a flat screen TV. Twelve leather office chairs circled the table, and a tasteful bar with liquor bottles and snacks were on a side banquet. If I didn't know where I was, I'd think I was in any company conference room in America.

There were three people at the table. They all rose as we walked in. Two of them looked vaguely familiar, and I recalled seeing them at my father's funeral. All were men, all were between the ages of thirty and forty, and all wore expensive-looking suits.

Alessandro introduced me to them, and as I shook their hands, I instantly forgot their names, maybe because they looked so much alike. Apparently they were all Palermo brothers, which explained their resemblance to each other, all dark hair and that Italian, pugnacious nose.

Oddly, I relaxed a little as I took a seat in the black leather chair. I understood these men, had seen guys like this around my family's house since I was little. This, I could grasp. That world outside this door was the harder part.

For a few minutes, we exchanged pleasantries, about traffic, the weather, and a new condo that was being built next door to this club. Banal stuff. Probably people who weren't in the mafia would be shocked at how boring and corporate it'd become.

"We want to thank you for coming," the older of the trio said, placing his hand over his heart. "Especially you, Gia. Our condolences for the death of your father, rest his eternal soul."

I smiled tightly. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"We wanted to discuss his investments, since we had many with Mr. Amato."

I nodded. "Of course."

"It's important that we find out your wishes, Giada. Not just hear them from the new head of the clan."

"I give Alessandro full permission to handle my affairs and my father's affairs," I said, reciting what Alessandro and I had discussed on the way over. "It's only natural, considering I was engaged to his former boss."

One of the Palermos cleared his throat. "Yes, about Mickey, we were quite surprised by his death."

I maintained an expressionless face, but wanted to laugh. How could they be shocked by his death? He'd been a gangster.

"Mickey was poised to take over some of Amato's holdings," Alessandro said.

He was? Daddy had never told me that. I wanted to scream. It was one more indication that my father had sold me to Mickey for business reasons.

Let it go. Not now...

“That makes sense,” one of the Palermos said. “It’s only right that you take over those businesses, and assume everything else as well.” He gestured to me, as if I were property. Now I wanted to scream.

“This is what he would’ve wanted. And since it’s tradition, I’ll be assuming Mickey’s duties with Gia, as well,” Alessandro said smoothly.

Unbelievable. I fumed silently, clenching my hands into fists under the table. Even though Alessandro had told me he’d say something to that effect, hearing him utter those words aloud—assuming Mickey’s duties with Gia—made me feel like a problem to be overcome, an object that needed organizing.

A trash contract that needed a signature.

Fuck. That.

I raised an eyebrow. “Yes, since I’ll be going to school in New York, I need Alessandro’s help. Once I’m finished with school, I should be in a position to take a more active role in the business.”

The Palermos nodded, with only a hint of surprise on their faces.

Alessandro’s neck swiveled to look at me. This hadn’t been part of our rehearsal, and I’d never expressed interest in the business. Quite the opposite, since I’d begged Alessandro to exit the lifestyle. I smiled beatifically at him. “He’s done such a good job with his duties so far,” I said, then winked at the youngest Palermo, who chuckled and blushed slightly.

I spotted the muscle in Alessandro’s jaw tick. “As you can see, Gia is strong-willed, just like her father.”

Everyone chuckled, a false, hollow sound filling the room. My thoughts turned to whether I should change majors and get a business degree in New York, just so I could assume the corporate part of my father’s assets. Take them legit myself. Just to piss off all these sexist men.

I fell into a fantasy about business school, wondering the feasibility of it all. Alessandro and the three men launched into

a discussion of profit and percentages. I pretended to pay attention as they talked about how much each would glean from a trash contract. Now that I'd given my permission for Alessandro to take over my father's assets, I was of no use to the conversation.

I studied Alessandro, who was leaning forward with his hands folded on the table. He wore a dark suit, similar to the Palermos, but without a tie. Somehow he looked more formidable than they did, perhaps because of his broad shoulders, or his piercing blue eyes. I noted how the three men deferred to him in conversation, and how with a single, steely look, they backed down.

His power made me ache with desire, and part of me hated myself for feeling this way. Why did he have to be so goddamned magnetic?

"Gia, what are your thoughts on that?" one of the Palermos said. They'd been discussing the Russian infiltration of garbage contracts in Miami. I snapped to attention. All of the times in class I'd daydreamed and only half-listened to the lecture finally had paid off.

"I don't think we should give them a dime. We've always held these contracts in Florida, and we should continue to. I remember my father, and he'd say the Russians try to use brute force in whatever they do. I think we should show them what brute force really is."

Good lord. Where did that come from? It was like I was channeling Daddy. I grinned.

The Palermos chuckled, a genuine sound this time. "She is like her father, Alessandro. You'd better watch out. You might have a shrewd businesswoman on your hands here. And a bloodthirsty one, too, if the Amato legacy is any indication."

"No need to watch out," Alessandro said, sliding a cool glance my way. "I've got her fully under my control."

We'll see about that, my dude. For some reason, I chafed at his possessiveness. Something I adored when we were in bed. In real life, though, it left a lot to be desired.

They blathered on about some other contract this time in Italian. It was a deal that had to do with construction of industrial parks in Broward County. It didn't involve my father's assets so I tuned out entirely until the conversation was finished. I tried to guess which man had hired Merry, but couldn't. They all looked as though they could be into some kinky shit, but weren't all men that way?

Was Alessandro that way? Did he want to fuck me in public, spank me, tie me up like those women I'd seen in the rooms when we walked in?

More importantly, would I allow that? I had to remind myself not to display worry on my face while we were in a room with the Palermos, but I'm not sure I did a great job of that.

After a half hour that seemed like a year, all of us stood and shook hands again.

"Gia, it's been a pleasure. I hope we can do business together in the future." The eldest Palermo caught my gaze and held it, while also trapping my hand in his.

"Likewise," I said.

"Would you two like to get a drink at the bar?"

Alessandro clamped his hand around my waist. "We have a dinner reservation, so we're headed out. Thank you again."

We had no such reservation. Unless he hadn't deigned to tell me because it wasn't worth getting my opinion. He steered me out of the room and down the hall.

"I think that went well, didn't it?"

He didn't speak, and I could sense that he was seething. We were silent as we walked out of the club and as we waited for the valet. Once inside the dark, cool interior of his Maserati, he roared off.

"I don't know what that little outburst was in there. Why didn't you stick exactly to what we talked about?"

"Why did you act like I was an object?" I fiddled with my phone, pretending to ignore him.

“Why did you say you were interested in possibly being a part of this business? I thought you wanted me to get out? What the hell, Gia? You’re pulling me in different directions here.”

“Would you like it if I wanted to be involved in the business?” I shot back.

He didn’t answer, just stared straight ahead out the window, his expression inscrutable. His large, brutal hand caressed the steering wheel, but he no longer seemed pissed. Talk about different directions; this guy was mercurial on the regular.

“Alessandro? Would you? Would you want me to be involved in the business with you?”

“More than anything,” he said in a quiet voice.

Now it was my turn to be silent as my heart thrashed around my chest. We glided into the circular driveway of his condo building and he parked. The valet ran out.

“We’re not going to dinner?” I asked as I unbuckled my seat belt.

He frowned. “Did you want to? I just said that so we didn’t have to hang out with the Palermos at the bar. Those fuckers are insufferable. I was thinking about ordering a pizza.”

An inexplicable sense of relief washed over me, and I pondered whether telling him that one of the Palermos had hired Merry. Probably not the best idea. “Pizza’s fine.”

“I’m still not feeling a hundred percent, anyway.”

I squeezed his hand as we walked into the condo and stood in the elevator. In the light of his house, I noticed that he did look tired, and realized that he hadn’t fully recovered from his illness. He’d rallied for the meeting, and used all of his energy, it seemed. A twinge of empathy shot through me. My poor sick baby.

We didn’t discuss the night’s events as we ate, and afterward, we snuggled on the sofa. We’d gotten into watching those programs of how things are made, and this one was

about bubblegum. So silly yet so soothing. This was the Alessandro I loved, one who stroked my hair and kissed my shoulder as we did normal, everyday things.

Not the Alessandro at the sex club. Crap. Had I been wrong in asserting myself back there? Nothing made sense anymore.

He started to fall asleep and snore, and I tugged him to bed, stripping off his clothes.

“We’ll have sex tomorrow morning, Princess. I’m sorry. Tonight beat the hell out of me. I thought I was over this flu but I guess not.”

I kissed his mouth. “Don’t apologize.”

As I listened to Alessandro lapse into a deep sleep, his breathing a rhythmic sound, I wondered if we’d be able to survive a long-distance relationship, with him here in Miami and me in New York. Tonight hadn’t given me confidence, not at all. Instead, it scared the crap out of me. From Merry’s little monologue to his frightening, icy demeanor with the Palermos, Alessandro was a man with a past. A powerful man, one who might not give up all that he’d worked for in the underworld.

I wasn’t sure if I could believe him when he said he’d get out of the life. Why would he? And why did he seem so wistful when he said he’d want to be in business with me? I hated the lifestyle, and yet... perhaps we would make a good team.

I nestled into his side, pressing my cheek against his warm, muscular chest.

Once again, I was reminded that this man held my heart, and probably my life, in his hands, and that he could shatter both in a split second.

Chapter Forty-Five

ALESSANDRO

WITH A QUICK FLICK OF MY WRIST, I SWEEP OPEN THE bedroom curtain. The bright morning sun poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was Saturday, and I had big plans for Gia and me. She'd been at my condo for almost two weeks now, most of them caring for me while I was down for the count with the flu.

Outside, the Atlantic Ocean glittered. This was why I'd chosen this unit, so I could look at the ocean from my bed. But today wasn't a day for the beach. Quite the opposite.

A groan came from the direction of the bed.

"Wake up, princess," I said in an uncharacteristically cheerful voice.

"Come back to bed." Gia let out another long moan and flung a pillow in my direction. It barely cleared the edge of the bed. "I'm sleepy. You kept me up too late."

We'd spent half the night watching movies and talking. And, of course, fucking. I'd made it my personal mission to give her three orgasms with my tongue, which might have something to do with her exhaustion.

"Get dressed, amore. We have somewhere to be." I walked out to the sounds of her sputtering.

"Close the blinds! I'm sleeping! Alessandro, it's seven in the morning on a Saturday, oh my God. You're insane..."

I ignored her and went into the kitchen, grabbing Gia's personal kryptonite: Starbucks.

Minutes before, I'd gone downstairs and walked down the block to the coffee shop with one of the bodyguards so I could buy her favorite breakfast: an iced dirty chai tea latte and a vanilla bean scone. How she ate and drank that much sugar in the morning astounded me, but I was a black espresso kind of guy.

Yeah, I'd felt ridiculous when ordering, but it was all part of my plan to show Gia I was serious about her. Intent on making our relationship work. Earlier she'd accused me of not sending her flowers when she was up in Ocala, and that had stung. Now that I felt better after that hellish flu — and after she'd showed the Palermos that she was aligned with me — I wanted to prove to her that I was all in.

I toted the coffee and scone into the bedroom and set them down on the nightstand on Gia's side of the bed.

She burrowed from under the gold-colored comforter and opened one eye, her hair messy and tangled from sex. "Is that a dirty chai?"

I sank onto the edge of the bed. "It is."

That got her to sit up and lean against the soft, quilted headboard. I handed her the coffee and she accepted it with a little smile. Somehow she was wearing one of my shirts with only two buttons done up. I spied a nipple and grinned at the memory of last night — she'd wanted to wear my shirt while I gave her oral. Said something about how she felt sexy in my shirts.

"Stop staring at my tits. Why are you getting me up so early?"

My hand rested on her leg and I squeezed. "I have a surprise for you."

She sipped her drink and eyed me. "I thought you had a business meeting today. The thing about the port."

"It's this evening." Probably one of the more important meetings I'd scheduled since Mickey's death, about who

would control the Longshoreman's Union at the port of Miami. The feds would call it racketeering or extortion, but those in my line of work merely thought it good business to allow contraband, drugs and smuggling to come in through cargo containers. I wanted nothing to do with the drugs because my interests were elsewhere — namely container fees, control of union officials' dues, and tariffs on imports.

I hadn't elaborated any of this to Gia yet, mostly because the sit down with another boss was at nine tonight at a strip club. I was still undecided on whether I should share that particular detail with her, especially since the guy I was scheduled to talk with was the soon-to-be fiancé of Gia's best friend Ashley.

“So we're going somewhere? Is that my favorite scone?”

I held out the baked good so she could take a bite. “Yes and yes.”

She cradled the drink while I fed her. “I guess I need to get dressed,” she said between mouthfuls. “Where are we going?”

“It's a secret.”

“Give me a hint so I can dress appropriately.”

She finished the last of her scone and I stood up. “Casual. Wear something you won't mind getting dirty. I'll wait for you in the living room.”

Scowling, Gia muttered something under her breath about how I was “maddening,” but by the time I was at the door, she was out of bed. Mission accomplished.

In the living room, I dicked around with emails while she got ready. Thirty minutes passed and I was about to check on her when she emerged, wearing tight jeans, a black T-shirt, and black Converse sneakers. Looking gorgeous as ever, with her black hair in a high ponytail. She carried a blue hoodie in her right hand.

“This is the best I can do at this time of day.” She yawned. “Thank you for the coffee and scone.”

“I know, you’re not a morning person. Good job, though. I’m impressed. I don’t think I’ve seen you up this early, ever.”

She pouted playfully and I rose, giving her a long, lingering kiss. “One of the guys is going to drive us. I’ve already told him that we need to stop for a second cup of coffee for you.”

Gia frowned. “What’s going on? What’s all this fuss? Why are you being so nice? Where’s my bossy Italian guy?”

I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the door. “He took a vacation for the day.”

This obviously intrigued her, and honestly, it surprised me as well. Being around Gia made me feel soft and tender. Hell. Loved, even. It was a new sensation, and I’d be lying if I said I disliked it. It took a little getting used to, this being a boyfriend thing.

We rode in companionable silence in the back of the SUV. As we were driving off the beach, she grabbed my hand and squeezed.

“Seriously, where are we going?”

“Seriously, it’s a surprise.” I slipped my sunglasses on and pulled her close so I could kiss the top of her head.

We snuggled like that for the entire way. When we got into South Dade County — Homestead, to be exact — she sat up and leaned to look out the window.

“We’re far from the city. Where are you taking me?”

I scratched her back. “You’ll see.”

For the next ten minutes, we talked about the things we saw: ranches, a fruit stand with milkshakes, rows of avocado trees. Most people didn’t know that this part of the county was agricultural; I knew about this area since some of Mickey’s business associates owned commercial farms down here. Now they were my associates, and for today, I’d called in a favor from a friend of a friend.

“It’s like a different world down here. More like where I grew up in North Florida. Interesting.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

We passed by a few horses in a field and Gia let out a long sigh. “I miss Lancelot.”

“I know, princess,” I murmured, turning my head to the window so she wouldn’t see my smile.

Soon after, the driver took a hard right down a dirt road. Gia practically pressed her nose to the window when she saw the sign at the corner: “Helping Hooves. Ale...”

She’d started calling me Ale. She pronounced it in her American accent, and every time she did, it tugged at my heart.

“Yeah?”

“What is this?”

I smoothed her ponytail back. “You’ll see.”

We arrived at the ranch, parked, and Gia was the first to get out of the SUV, not waiting for me or the bodyguard. I felt reasonably safe here, considering the owner of the place was the wife of an associate.

The crunch of footsteps on gravel greeted us, and an older woman in jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved T-shirt walked up, smiling.

“You must be Alessandro and Gia.”

We nodded.

“I’m Teresita Betancourt, owner of Helping Hooves.”

“What is this, anyway? You have beautiful pastures.” Gia cast a gaze around the vast green vista, scanning the horse stables nearby.

“This is a program for equine assisted therapy. We use horses and ponies in conjunction with therapy for people with PTSD.”

A look of concern crossed Gia’s face. Surely she was wondering if I brought her here because I thought she had

PTSD because of what had happened at the engagement party and with Mickey.

“Alessandro...” her voice wavered. She took two deep breaths, like she was about to begin hyperventilating. I kissed her temple.

“We also have a few stables for boarding horses,” Mrs. Betancourt said. “And your boyfriend knows my husband, and one thing led to another, and we found out that you have a very special horse who needed a place to stay.”

Gia gasped. “Lancelot? He’s here?”

The older woman beamed. “Come on. Let me show you where he is. I’m sure he’ll be overjoyed to see you. He just arrived yesterday and is settling in to his new stable.”

Gia turned to me. “You did this? You arranged for Lancelot to come here, so he could be near you in Miami?”

“So he could be near you when you come and visit from New York. Be near *us*, Gia.”

It had cost me quite a bit to wrangle this stable space — who knew that they were in such demand, I should open a goddamned horse hotel — but I didn’t give a fuck if it made Gia happy. I slipped my arm around her shoulders as we walked, while she wiped tears off her cheeks.

“I can’t believe you did something so amazing,” she whispered.

“I promised I’d care for your horse, didn’t I?”

We were close to the stable, and a loud, insistent whinny rang through the air. Gia let go of me and ran toward the sound, calling her horse’s name. A giant, brown creature stuck its head over a fence. To me it looked enormous and slightly imposing — yet majestic.

I stood back and watched Gia wrap her arms around Lancelot’s neck, burying her tear-streaked face into his mane.

Gia had a month left in Miami before she went to school in New York, and I was determined to make it the best thirty days of her life.

Chapter Forty-Six

GIA

IT WAS NINE ON A SATURDAY NIGHT AND MOST WOMEN MY AGE here on South Beach were probably getting ready to go out, spritzing on sexy perfume and slipping into four-inch heels, preparing to dance all night to the strains of a celebrity DJ at a club.

Me? I was in my pale blue sheep-print jammies with a glass of wine, about to watch a serial killer documentary on Netflix. Alone.

This wasn't a problem. Alessandro and I had spent the day at the stables with Lancelot, and I was beat from all the heat, humidity and excitement. I still couldn't believe Ale had surprised me like that, and I picked up my phone to once again scroll through the photos I'd taken of my horse today.

"Good pony, such a handsome boy," I whispered to my cell, studying a particularly cute photo of me and Lancelot that Ale had snapped.

I'd cried when I said goodbye to him, but Ale reminded me that I could ride any time I wanted.

"You've got a whole month here, princess," he'd said. "Anytime you want to fly down from New York to see him, I'll make it happen."

Of course, I realized that Alessandro had arranged boarding for my horse so I'd be more likely to come visit him, but that was also endearing. And enticing. His one act of

caring for Lancelot, along with his insistence that he would eventually get out of the Mafia, was making me seriously reconsider my future.

Perhaps I should go to school in New York for a semester, then transfer to the University of Miami. UM was an excellent school. I navigated over to the website to look at graduate program offerings. Literary Studies? Communications? Sociology? Hmm.

As I was reading, a text popped up. It was Ashley, and I let out a little squeal as I swiped to read. I missed her snark and her friendship.

Hey, why aren't you here?

Where

This stupid strip club. Alessandro's here.

What? A pang of shock went through me. Ale told me he was at a business meeting, but he didn't say where.

Really?

Yeah, I'm here with Giorgio.

I took a gulp of my wine. What was going on?

Can you FaceTime me?

Hang on, let me go to the bathroom.

I clicked off the TV and poured another glass of wine while I waited for Ashley's call.

"Come on," I muttered impatiently, flinging myself on the sofa. Why hadn't Ale told me that Ashley was going to be there tonight? I'd have wanted to see her. Was he hiding

something from me? Nothing made sense. “Don’t freak out, don’t freak out, don’t freak out.”

Finally, Ashley called. Her face popped up on my cell.

“It’s so good to see you,” she gushed.

“You look amazing!” She wore lots of glittery makeup, and what looked like a slinky silver dress. “Swanky. Where the hell are you?”

She tilted the phone to show a large bathroom stall. “I’m in the bathroom so I can talk.”

“I can see that, and I can hear the toilets flushing. What club are you at?”

“It’s called Playmates. It’s on the beach, not far from the Setai. Giorgio asked me to come to Miami at the last minute, and brought me here. It’s fucking wild.”

“Wild how? What?”

“You didn’t know where he was?”

“I knew he had a meeting about the port or something.” I licked my lips nervously.

“About the port, which Giorgio’s involved with. And I heard your dad’s name mentioned. Something about union contracts and how your dad used to control those.”

My hand shot out to grab the wine glass on the table. “Ale didn’t tell me any of this.”

“Well, I wish he had because I would’ve loved to see you.”

I snorted. “Yeah.”

“I don’t think he knew I was coming, though. He seemed a little uncomfortable to have me around, to be honest.” Ashley stared into the cell, arranging a lock of her hair, which was a new shade of platinum. “How do you think I’d look with bangs?”

Uncomfortable? Why? “Don’t cut your hair. It looks gorgeous. Are you at an actual strip club?”

“Yeah, there are naked women everywhere.” She tossed her hair behind a shoulder. “Listen, we need to discuss my engagement party, so why don’t we go to brunch tomorrow? I’m going back to Ocala tomorrow night on Giorgio’s plane.”

One would think Ashley had gotten enough of mafia engagement parties after mine, but she was far more into this lifestyle than I was. “Yeah, that sounds good. Can you come to the beach? There’s a great place down the street from Ale’s condo.”

“Yeah, I’ll have Giorgio drop me off.” She yawned. “God, I’m bored. I wish you were here. We could at least dance.”

I squinted into the phone. “Dance? Are you suggesting we randomly strip at a club? Are you crazy?”

She burst out laughing. “No, there’s a separate dance floor in another room. This place is huge. We’re sitting in the quiet area, which is boring. Just old dudes talking and topless women in G-strings serving drinks.”

I slurped more of my wine. “I see.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to doing whatever it is you were doing.”

“Drinking wine and watching a serial killer documentary.”

“Fun. Maybe I should tell Alessandro to send for you.”

I sucked at my teeth and stood up to pace as I talked. “Maybe Alessandro didn’t want me to come for one reason or another.”

“Oh Jesus, don’t get all jealous. I haven’t seen him ogle any woman. They’re ogling him, though. He walked in and the entire fucking place practically came to a standstill. I’ve never seen waitresses serve anyone so quickly. Is that his condo? It looks super nice.”

“I’m sure they did serve him quickly,” I said slowly. “Text me tomorrow about brunch.”

“Cool. I’m so excited to see you!”

“Hey, one more thing?”

“Yeah?”

“What did Ale say about me? Like did he offer any explanation as to why I wasn’t there, or why he didn’t ask me to come along?”

Ashley shook her head. “I told him he should have brought you, and he kind of grunt-growled. It was weird, but I just got the impression he didn’t want to answer my question so I let it go. Giorgio squeezed my leg under the table and I took that to mean that I shouldn’t press him for an answer.”

“Hmm, okay.”

“Don’t read into it. Alessandro seems very focused on business.”

“That he is. Talk to you tomorrow, have fun.”

We hung up and I finished my wine. Nothing about this sat well with me. Not the fact that Alessandro was patronizing a strip club — they were often hubs for human trafficking — but that he was talking about my father’s business without me. He’d included me on the Palermo meeting, why not this one about the port?

In light of this news from Ashley, I even wondered about Alessandro’s motives today with my horse. Had he done all that to deflect the fact that he was going to a strip club tonight to talk business without me?

What would he be doing if Ashley wasn’t sitting at his table?

Jealousy wasn’t an emotion that came easily to me. In fact, until this very moment, I hadn’t ever felt much jealousy for anything, at all. But the thought of Alessandro hanging out in a bar with half-naked women left a brick-like lump in my stomach.

It also reminded me of what he was: a mafia boss. A criminal. A man who operated in the shadows. Just like my father had.

“Fuck this,” I whispered, stabbing the button on the remote to turn off the television. Suddenly I was no longer exhausted.

I stalked into the bedroom, where I'd claimed a part of Ale's closet, and pulled out my sexiest black dress and tallest heels. I slipped into both, then swept my hair up in a messy, high ponytail and spackled on some makeup.

"Ugh," I said to my reflection. It wasn't great, but it would have to do. I pulled on a raincoat. Fortunately for me, I'd heard light thunder a while ago, and I needed to obscure my outfit. The heels would have to go, as well.

I stuffed the shoes into a big purse and shoved my feet into a pair of flip flops. This was going to take some finesse, giving Alessandro's bodyguards the slip. Tying the coat belt tight around me, I then opened the front door. One of the large guys who worked on weekends was there.

Josh was his name.

"Hey," I said, batting my eyelashes.

He'd been sitting on a chair, staring at his phone. He jumped up. "Hey, what do you need? Something wrong?"

I plumped my lips. "I need to go to the store."

"I'll get delivery."

"No, I..." My eyes cast downward in a sad expression.

"What do you need? Should I call the boss?"

"No, no. It's not urgent. Well... maybe you could ask him to pick up tampons on his way home? No, that won't work. I really need them like now. I'm relying on Kleenex over here. This is really embarrassing but it's urgent."

He visibly blanched. Typical man, fearful of menstruation and women's bodies. I wanted to laugh at his alarmed, wide eyes.

"Why don't I drive to the all-night pharmacy? Alessandro said we could go there if we had an emergency, and this sure sounds like one." He coughed into a huge fist.

"Oh, would you? That would be perfect. Thank you so much. I would hate to ask you to buy them, but I really need the super-size organic. I only use organic cotton down at this

time of the month. Aunt Flo, you know.” I tilted my head. Then, to add icing on the bloody cake, I sealed the deal. “Or perhaps you could pick up a menstrual cup. I’ve been meaning to try one of those. It like holds your blood—”

“No need to elaborate. Let’s, uh, both go in together and you can buy what you need. Discreetly. C’mon, let’s go. There’s a Walgreens a few blocks away.” He walked ahead of me toward the elevator.

Perfect.

Josh didn’t speak or look at me as we rode to the first floor.

“Thank you for doing this. You know how it is for women. We run out of feminine hygiene products right when we need them.”

“Yeah.” He blinked rapidly, and I almost hooted with laughter.

We powered through the lobby, and I pondered my escape plan. Surely the large, all night Walgreen’s had a back entrance. I’d tell Josh I needed to put my tampon in right there in the bathroom. He wouldn’t argue, and I’d be able to slip out the back and grab a cab to the club.

“I think I might need some Midol, too. I have bad cramps,” I whined. “Maybe some ice cream, too.”

His gaze skittered around the empty driveway. “The car’s right over there, I’m just going to grab it and pull around.”

“I can walk,” I protested.

“No, no, I’m sure the boss wouldn’t want you to exert yourself. Don’t move, okay?” He nervously jogged toward the SUV, which was parked at the far end of the circular driveway.

“Okay.” I let out an exaggerated sigh and patted my midsection.

As if by magic, a taxi pulled up to the condo. An older couple got out, and I eyed Josh, who was opening the door to the SUV. So serendipitous.

I dove into the back and slammed the door. “Go! Go!”

“Where?” The driver twisted in his seat, a confused look on his face.

“Playmates. I need to get there quick. Drive!” Josh and the SUV were turning around, and he surely had figured out that I was no longer standing at the condo entrance.

“The strip club?” The taxi roared forward.

“Yes. The strip club.”

I took the heels out of my bag and slipped them on my feet, then shrugged off my jacket.

“What’s going on tonight?” The driver eyed me in the rear view mirror.

“I’m about to find out.” I stared out the window at the Art Deco buildings dotting Ocean Drive, smirking with anticipation at Alessandro’s expression when I walked into the strip club.

Chapter Forty-Seven

ALESSANDRO

I EYED GIORGIO OVER THE RIM OF MY SCOTCH GLASS. HE WAS discussing the need to have union control at the port, and I countered with a question regarding contraband.

“It’s all well and good to have control of the employees, but how are we going to divide the imports and exports?” Those included cigarettes, designer clothing, luxury cars... all things that people in Miami and beyond needed like oxygen.

He shrugged. Giorgio was from Milan, spoke in impeccable Italian, and had made his money in counterfeit goods trafficking. Now that he was in Miami, he wanted to expand his reach. “I think we should split the Latin American exports, no?”

I pondered this for a second. Mickey hadn’t had much of a presence in Latin America. “I think we should.”

“See, we are getting somewhere.” He flashed a brilliant smile, then patted Ashley’s leg. Why he’d brought her is a mystery, but she was going to be his wife, so I let it slide. “I am sorry, but my phone is ringing off the hook, and I see that it’s my brother in Italy. I’m going to take this in a quiet place.”

I nodded, and Ashley leaned up to brush her lips over his. They made a good-looking couple, although at forty, he was almost twice the girl’s age. The situation reminded me of Mickey and Gia, and I silently shuddered, hoping that Giorgio was a far better man than my previous boss.

He seemed like it, but appearances were always deceiving in my line of work.

I sipped my Scotch and glanced at Ashley. She was twirling a lock of her blonde hair around her finger and looking nervously at her phone. When she spotted me, she cleared her throat.

“So...” she said, then grinned.

“So.” Something was odd with her, and I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. She’d been texting non-stop during my conversation with Giorgio, even went to the bathroom for what seemed like a half hour. I assumed that she was merely bored with our business conversation. Now I wondered if she had a boyfriend, one that was more her age.

“How’s things?” She giggled.

I knew that Ashley and Gia were friends. “Besties,” Gia had said, whatever that meant. I wasn’t entirely sure how much Ashley knew about me and Gia, though, and the thought that I was sitting here with someone who knew intimate details made me uncomfortable.

My phone buzzed. “Excuse me.”

“Of course.” She grabbed her wine glass and gulped it down, glancing toward the stage where a woman was gyrating and removing her thong.

I stood and walked away while I answered. “Pronto,” I said in Italian.

“Uh, boss? This is Josh.” He sounded out of breath.

“Yes, Josh?”

“I uh, have some bad news.”

I walked away from the bar, toward the bathrooms. This was going to be a shit show of a conversation, I could tell. “What is it?”

“Gia. She’s gone.”

A surge of pure fear went through me. “Excuse me? Gone?”

“Yes, ah, we were going to the pharmacy—”

“What? We?”

“Yes, she needed, er, feminine hygiene products and asked me to buy them. Tampons and shit.”

I could feel the anger rising in my chest. “And why didn’t you simply go to the store and buy them for her?”

“S-she said she had cramps.”

“So fucking what?” I thundered. “What happened? Where did she go? My instructions were for you to never leave her alone, and preferably not bring her anywhere unless she was bleeding or on fire.”

“Well, she said she was bleeding.”

I inhaled sharply. Was Gia okay? At the hospital? “Fucking hell. Where is she? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. I saw her get into a cab that happened to drive up to the condo building at the same time we were walking to the car.”

“Are you following the cab?”

“I tried, but I lost sight of it just past Ocean and 8th.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. She gave you the slip.” I pressed my hand to my forehead. Where the hell had Gia gone?

“Do you think she went to the hospital? Was she in pain? What happened? What was she wearing?” My rapid-fire questions rattled him, and he recounted — with much stammering — a story about Gia in a trench coat, and how she’d wanted me to buy tampons on my way back home.

“What time did all this take place?” I demanded. “And I would have bought tampons, for fuck’s sake.”

He told me and I checked my watch. Not that long ago, right before Giorgio and I were discussing the port. When Ashley was texting and went into the bathroom for a long while.

I looked around the club, and my gaze landed on Ashley. Who happened to be staring at me. The moment she saw me looking at her, she quickly turned away.

“Josh. I’ll deal with you later.” I stabbed the end call button on the phone and stalked over to our table.

“So. Ashley.” I sat and reached for my drink. “Has Gia called you lately?”

“Um.” Her finger went back to her platinum hair, and twirled a lock. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? You’re not sure?” I gave her my hardest, nastiest stare, not caring whether her fiancé was about to ink a major business deal with me.

“I mean. I’m sure. We text all the time and stuff. We talk.”

“Tonight? Did you text tonight?” I leaned in, my voice purposefully low and menacing. “Gia’s safety is my utmost priority, you know.”

“She texted me a photo of her horse.” She blinked her eyes, the sparkle on her lids glittering in the club light. “Did something happen to Gia?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

She rubbed her lips together. “You’re kinda scary. I see what she means about you being bossy.”

“Neither of you know how scary I can be.”

We stared at each other for a beat, then finally she piped up. “I told Gia where we were. Was I not supposed to?”

Hell. I hadn’t instructed her not to say anything to Gia, which was my fault. But I didn’t know Giorgio was going to show up with her, either.

A sigh leaked from my lips. Just then, Giorgio returned, sliding back into the booth and kissing Ashley on the temple. “Did you miss me, kitten?”

Oh for fuck’s sake. “My turn for a phone call,” I growled, standing up.

I made my way to the club's private office area, and stood in the hallway. First I called Gia, and she didn't pick up.

Where would she go? She didn't know anyone in Miami, and we'd had such an amazing day together that she likely wasn't going to try to leave me at eleven p.m.

Surely she was on her way here after her little friend told her that I was sitting in a strip club. Gia thought she was going to surprise me here, catch me in the act of doing...something. She probably thought I had a side piece here, or that a bunch of girls were giving me lap dances and blow jobs.

Little did she know that none of it was titillating to me, that I owned this club and it was a decent place for business meetings. That it was a moneymaking venture, like a Subway sandwich shop or a Starbucks.

Various scenarios ran through my head. Would it be a problem for us to be seen together here? Probably not, and we'd already been spotted together a few times before. Perhaps Giorgio already knew all about us from Ashley.

And yet I didn't want Gia in my business. Not yet, anyway. I had to get this message across to her before she decided to delve into my shit on the regular.

Yanking open the door to the office, I found Carmen, the manager, sitting in front of the computer. She wore a conservative black business suit, her brown hair in a bun. In a club filled with naked women, Carmen blended into the woodwork — but she had an MBA and ran this place perfectly. She made sure the clients were happy, the dancers were clean and well-paid, and she kept drugs far away.

“Hola, jefe,” she said, smiling. Carmen was Cuban-American, like many in Miami.

“Hey. I need your help with something. A favor. There's going to be a woman coming here in the next half hour or so. I'd like for you to greet her at the door for me. Can you do that?”

Chapter Forty-Eight

GIA

I STUFFED MY RAINCOAT INTO MY GIANT TOTE BAG, ATOP MY flip flops, before extracting a fifty from my wallet.

“We’re here,” the taxi driver said. He didn’t turn to look at me, probably because he was staring at the two beautiful women dressed in short, red dresses at the door.

“Here. Keep the change.” I shoved the money at him, and he distractedly accepted it.

“Have fun tonight,” he called out as I slid out of the vehicle.

Yeah, right. A strip club called Playmates was not my idea of fun. No shade against sex workers or strippers, but this wasn’t my wheelhouse. Still, I summoned my inner confidence and strutted to the entrance, where the two women stood. They smiled as I pulled open the door, and I nodded a hello.

I wasn’t two steps into the place when a woman in a black suit approached.

“Good evening.” She stood in front of me, blocking my path to the coat check and a set of double doors that looked like they were covered in black, quilted leather.

“Hi. Uh, excuse me.” I tried to step around her.

“Thank you for coming tonight. I’m here to assist you, this being your first time here.”

I squinted. Who did she think I was? A new dancer? “Thanks, I guess. I’m, uh, not here to work. Just so you know. I’m meeting a friend, I don’t need any assistance.”

She laughed. “Let me show you to the private room.”

A private room? Why? “No. There will be no need for—” I stopped talking when a man in an all-black suit materialized from the darkness and took my elbow. His hand was so big it seemed like a grizzly bear paw, and I gasped.

The woman continued to smile and the man gently nudged me forward. “Right this way.”

Although she wasn’t much taller than me, the woman seemed formidable, like she was possibly in charge here. The man tightened his grip on my elbow, which made my heart pound.

“Wha—”

Another bouncer standing at the double doors opened them for the three of us, and I was whisked through. Inside, an array of lights, sounds, and smells assaulted my senses all at once. Although I’d never been to a strip club, I wasn’t shocked or offended by any of the dozen carnal scenes unfolding in front of me. I supported a woman’s right to do what she wanted with her body, and that included sex work. The dancers here had their reasons for choosing this life, and who was I to judge?

But of all the things I thought about this place, the one that was most unusual was the pervasive smell of body powder, as if someone had given the club a light dusting of Johnson and Johnson. I inhaled deep and frowned.

It did, of course, pique my curiosity why Alessandro had chosen this establishment for a business meeting, and it made me feel a bit funny inside. Growing up, I’d heard whispers that my father had frequented these places for similar sit-downs. My mother would talk to her sisters about that, and she hadn’t appreciated those evenings.

“Where—” I didn’t seem to be capable of getting a sentence out tonight. Instead of walking to the bar, which was thick with people, or the stage — where a tall brunette was

bent over, shaking her G-string-clad, round ass to Closer by Nine Inch Nails — we followed the back wall, avoiding most of the people in the crowded club. I tried searching for Ashley, but there were simply too many people and we were moving through at a fast clip.

I wrenched my arm out of the guy's hand, and he glared at me.

“Don't worry. I'll follow you. Calm your tits,” I said crossly. It was beginning to dawn on me that all of this was possibly Alessandro's doing, and I wondered if Ashley had told him that she'd talked to me.

Probably I should've approached this a bit differently. Or maybe not come at all. And surely Josh had called Ale by now, and he was probably throwing a fit because I'd gone MIA.

Now that I was here, in this club with loud music, leering men, and gorgeous, mostly naked women, I felt ridiculous. My plan to confront Alessandro seemed ill-conceived. For all of my organization at school, sometimes I tended to be a bit impulsive. That trait was painfully obvious in this moment.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

I tottered a little on my heels, which made the guy grab my arm again. I sighed aloud. Maybe I should just turn around, call a cab and return to the condo. Deal with Alessandro's wrath later.

But, no. He was handling my father's business. I wasn't a prisoner and should've been invited to this discussion, like the one with the Palermos. Alessandro might be a mafia boss, but he wasn't the boss of *me*. This was a public club, and I had every right to be here, just as much as he did.

The sound of the music in the main room faded as we moved down a long, dark hallway. There were multiple doors on either side, all in the same black, quilted-looking leather. I assumed these were the VIP rooms, where women danced in private.

Why are we here?

The walls between the doors were textured, like someone had affixed sandpaper and painted it matte black.

Our little group stopped at the end of the corridor.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Here we are,” the woman said in a bright, professional voice, like we were about to meet with human resources on the first day of a new job. She turned the knob and went in first. The bouncer guy gave me a little push and I grunted in protest.

“Easy, dude,” I hissed.

The first thing I saw was a gleaming steel stripper pole in the middle of the semi-dark room.

The second was a topless woman with cascading, golden hair and perfect breasts. She was holding a bottle of champagne and wearing only a miniscule pair of sparkly silver shorts and matching silver heels.

The third was Alessandro. He was sitting on a red velvet sofa, the top three buttons of his white shirt undone, his long legs spread insouciantly. His gaze was on the blonde, then it lazily shifted to the three of us, who stood in the middle of the room. I shifted back and stepped on the bouncer’s foot.

He cleared his throat and I shot him a stink eye while edging closer to the pole. What the fuck was going on here? A low trance beat hummed from an invisible speaker, making everything seem all the more surreal and twisted.

“Here she is, sir,” the woman said briskly.

“Thank you, Carmen. That will be all.”

The woman and the bouncer slipped out of the room, leaving me there with Ale and the blonde. His eyes lingered on me, while she didn’t even look my way. All her attention was on him.

“Will you want two glasses, or three?” she asked.

He turned his gaze to her, and although he somehow didn’t stare at her breasts, I was seized with a vicious jealousy that

I'd never felt in my life. I wasn't sure if I wanted to slap him or claw her eyes out. Or both.

Yes, both.

I felt my face grow hot. Fortunately, the lighting was low, so it might not be evident. Not like he'd notice, because he was still looking at the other woman's face.

"Two, please."

"Two glasses, coming right up, Sandro."

Sandro? This nickname was news to me. When did anyone call him Sandro? How well did they know each other? I was gaping at them both now, studying her and then him, filled with incredulity and jealousy.

She opened the champagne and it made a loud pop. I couldn't help but notice how her perfectly symmetrical breasts jiggled just a foot away from his face. He was staring at me again, an expressionless mask, as if he was sizing me up for something.

What kind of game is he playing?

She poured the champagne into two flutes sitting on a small table near Alessandro. While we locked eyes, the back of my neck broke out in a cold sweat. Should I turn and run out? This was terribly awkward in here with the two of them.

But where would I go? More likely than not, he'd have someone chase me down, for reasons I hadn't yet determined. Was this to teach me a lesson? Humiliate me? Something else?

My head felt dizzy, and if it hadn't been air conditioned to the point of freezing, I would've probably passed out.

"There you go, two glasses of Dom, the best of the best," the woman cooed when she was finished pouring.

Alessandro sat up straighter and removed a wad of cash from his pocket. It was held together with a money clip, the kind my father used to use. I realized I was holding my breath, and exhaled loudly.

“Here you go, sweetie, that will be all for tonight.” he said, handing her a couple of bills. I was far enough away that I couldn’t see the denomination, but it was obviously a lot because she beamed. *Sweetie?*

“Thank you, Sandro. You just call me if you want anything else. Have a good night, babe.” She bent over, leaned in, and kissed him on the cheek, pressing her free hand to his face as she did. Her long hair brushed his chest.

Babe?

My jaw dropped, and inside, I quaked with rage. Just seeing her that close to him inspired feelings that I didn’t even know I possessed. Feelings so intense that they terrified me. I looked down and realized my hands were balled into fists.

I closed my mouth and reminded myself to breathe slowly. *One...two...three...four. Exhale. Inhale. Relax your fingers...*

“Thank you, Bambi.”

Oh, come on. What a freaking cliché. Her name was Bambi? I almost laughed aloud but was too furious.

She sashayed out, never once acknowledging my presence.

I glared at Alessandro, sitting there like a beautiful king of hell on his red velvet throne. A line from Dante’s *Inferno* came to mind.

They yearn what they fear...

I yearned for him. Despite everything I’d seen over the last few minutes, I still wanted him with the ferocity of a thousand storms.

And I feared him. I was terrified of what he could do to my heart. To my future. To my soul. Never had another human being inspired such intense emotions in me, and I wasn’t sure I wanted that.

“Giada.” Next to the champagne on the table was a small silver box. He opened it and extracted a cigarette and a lighter, then took a long drag of his cigarette and exhaled, the smoke swirling around him in the low light. With the dark stubble on

his jaw, he looked even more sinister, and troublingly, even more alluring.

“Giada. Come. Sit with me, princess.” He patted the velvet seat next to him.

I hesitated, still standing stupidly in the middle of the room next to the stripper pole.

There was no warmth in his tone. Something about the edge in his voice, or the hardness of his gaze, turned my blood to ice.

Chapter Forty-Nine

GIA

“GIA? CHAMPAGNE?” ALESSANDRO HELD UP A GLASS OF bubbly, as if we weren’t about to have a blowout of an argument. Tension crackled in the air, between the beats of the techno music that played in the background.

I swallowed and leaned against the stripper pole. Something about this seemed all wrong, and I was cagey with anxiety.

Should’ve just stayed home and watched my serial killer documentary...

“Why are you here?” I blurted.

His right eyebrow lifted. “I think the better question is, why are *you* here? Had I wanted your presence, I would have brought you.”

“Harsh,” I hissed.

Damn him and his direct, logic-filled question and his unwavering honesty.

I wrapped my arm around the pole and hiked my purse high on the other shoulder, squirming uncomfortably. Probably I looked like I was commuting on the A train to Manhattan, but didn’t care. All I could think about were Bambi’s bare breasts, her calling Alessandro a nickname, and the fact that he was discussing my father’s business without me.

Okay, the nickname thing was really bugging me.

“Do you trust me, Giada?” His tone was solemn.

I inhaled a thin breath. “I don’t know,” I replied honestly.

The corner of his mouth quirked upward and he took a sip of his champagne. “Mmm. It’s so good. You really should have a glass.”

He was toying with me. Like a giant panther with a baby bunny. I was an amusement. Fucker.

“Why did you come here to do business? Strip clubs are so... so... problematic.”

He blinked. “Problematic? Please enlighten me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh God, come on. Really? Okay. Reason number one. It’s an environment where men reduce women to just a body, a gorgeous meat suit. Have you ever heard of sexual exploitation? Number two. Human trafficking. Places like this are hotbeds for women who are part of a global slavery machine.”

“Really?” He took another sip and casually extended an arm along the back of the sofa. “Tell me more.”

“Yes. I’ll send you some articles about it. I think you’ll be quite shocked. And let’s discuss about what clubs like this are doing for the female population as a whole. It just perpetuates the idea that women are put on earth to only look good for men, to only look sexual for men.”

I was pacing now, really teeing up my argument. “I mean, you have so much money and an entire city at your disposal, you could’ve met anywhere. Steakhouses. Sushi restaurants, Coffee shops—”

“You think two Mafia bosses would meet at a coffee shop on a Saturday night?” He was definitely holding back laughter, which made me pace the shiny black tile floor in anger.

“Well, maybe not like a Starbucks, but someplace more upscale. Anyway. Why here? I guess I’m puzzled. And why didn’t you tell me you were meeting here? That sort of implies that you knew I wouldn’t approve.” I went on to tell him about an essay that I’d read about how strip clubs were places where

men could have sexualized encounter with women without the pressure of physical performance.

Alessandro did that thing where he scrunched up his face and massaged his forehead. “Princess.”

“I wonder if the dancers here talk to their customers a lot. I think this is really a place where men can leave toxic masculinity at the door—”

“Gia. This is my club.”

“Just talking to a gorgeous woman, like Bambi, for instance, makes men feel... what did you say?”

“I own this place.”

I walked over to the sofa, plunked my bag down, and pointed at the floor. “You’re the owner?”

“Yes. Well, a corporation, technically, but I own that.”

I sank onto the sofa next to Alessandro. It didn’t shock me that he owned a strip club, but it did make me feel weird and uncomfortable. “When were you going to tell me this?”

He lifted a shoulder into a shrug. “Dunno. Is it really important? I own a lot of things.”

I reached for the champagne and took a gulp of the crisp, fizzy liquid while I mulled this over.

He leaned close to me. “You know exactly what I do and who I am. Don’t pretend to be surprised.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said slowly, finally taking in the room with its black brocade walls and low mood lighting. “I’m just...thinking.”

We sat in silence for a few seconds.

“When Ashley called and told you I was here, you got jealous and decided to catch me in the act with a stripper, is that right?”

I turned to him and narrowed my eyes. “No. Not exactly. I came here because she told me you were talking about my father’s businesses without me.”

He raked in a breath and tipped his head back. When he exhaled, he said, “Gia, what do you want? What do you really want? You say you don’t want to be part of the business, but then you seem like you do. You talked to the Palermos like you were interested in keeping a door open for you to control some investments. And now this. Just tell me what you want and I’ll work with you. Just don’t give me mixed signals.”

“You’ll work with me? Oh, how kind of you,” I said sarcastically.

He licked his lips. “We’re a team, remember? Why are you acting like I’m against you? What happened on the island, we’re in this together, and we need to stick together. Otherwise we’ll both go down. You’re aware of that, right? As it is, I’d like to try to keep rumors about us to a minimum, although with friends like Ashley that might be difficult.” His expression was no longer sardonic or teasing. It was deathly serious.

I sat back, suddenly deflated. He wasn’t the bad guy here. And I wasn’t being clear with my intentions, perhaps because I didn’t know what they were. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He poured us both more champagne. “I should have told you about this club and that we were going to discuss your father’s business at the port of Miami. I’m sorry. I truly didn’t think you’d be interested.”

I blinked several times. Somehow I’d expected him to fight, to be angry or cause a scene when I showed up. Those expectations had just been blown to bits by his calm logic and explanations. He was far more emotionally stable than I realized, and could even communicate well. Hunh.

Maybe I was the one with the low emotional IQ in this relationship. An unsettling thought.

And yet, I still had reservations about this whole situation. I believed everything I said about women and men and clubs like this. Also, I wasn’t sure how involved I wanted to be in my father’s affairs after all.

“I don’t like that you own this place,” I finally said.

“Because of all the things you mentioned, or because a woman was in here flashing her tits and pouring me champagne?”

“She called you Sandro.”

He nodded and smirked. “Fair enough. In my defense, we pay the dancers well here. We don’t tolerate drugs, and we’re extremely strict about immigration paperwork. Carmen is the manager and she runs a tight ship. And, if I’m not mistaken,” he swept a lock of hair out of my face, “isn’t feminism about women doing what they want with their bodies? Did you ever stop to think that this is what these dancers want to do, or are able to do? Not everyone grew up with all that privilege you frequently mention, Gia.”

His words stung, but there was a kernel of truth in them. He ran the back of his fingers down my cheek, sending sparks through my body. I couldn’t look him in the eye, though, and kept my gaze on my glass.

His fingers cupped my chin and he tilted my head up. “I’m not fucking Bambi. Never have, never will. Everyone here calls me Sandro. You’re the only one who calls me by my full name or Ale.”

“Hmm.” I thought about asking whether he’d slept with anyone else here, but didn’t want to know the answer. Not now, not tonight. All I wanted was to burrow in bed for a couple of days, at least until the feeling of shame and embarrassment went away.

“I want you to finish your champagne, and then I’m going to put you in a car and you’re going to go home and stay there. Wait for me. Is that clear?” His voice took on a bit of an edge. “I’ll be home in a couple of hours, I still have some work to do here.”

“Okay.” I’d been properly chastised and now I, the obedient little woman, was going home to wait for her man. It felt wrong, but I had no choice; I’d acted like such an ass that I didn’t dare ask if I could stay. Honestly? I didn’t really want to.

I still had lots of questions, a multitude of hesitations, but this wasn't the time or place. I'd made a complicated situation even more difficult with my impulsive nature.

“Good girl.” He leaned in and kissed me softly on the mouth, a lingering, sensual motion. Even now, even after all this, I wanted him. If he touched me in a certain way, I'd surely climb onto his lap and fuck him right here in this garish VIP room. Yet one more indication that love was complicated, and I had no idea what the hell I was doing.

He pressed his forehead against mine and we breathed in tandem, the closeness of him making me a little dizzy.

“When Josh told me you were gone, I was scared as fuck, Gia. Don't ever do that to me again. I thought something had happened to you.”

“I didn't think that you'd...” I shuddered in a breath, almost ready to cry, and pulled back. His blue eyes were fierce, and behind them was a painful shadow that I hadn't seen before. Not even when he walked into that beach bungalow and his boss' brains splattered across the wall.

“Didn't think I'd care? Didn't think I'd be worried?”

I nodded, and he took my glass and his, and put them on the table. In one swift motion, he gathered me in his arms.

“Gia, I was ready to burn down the city of Miami to find you.” His eyes flashed with an anger that I'd never seen. “Don't ever underestimate the intensity of my feelings for you. Or my love. Ever.”

Chapter Fifty

ALESSANDRO

ONCE GIA WAS BACK HOME — WITH JOSH *AND* MY GUY TONY stationed outside the condo in case she got another bright idea about leaving — I could finally relax.

I hoped I'd gotten my point across to her, that this club was business and that I wasn't fucking anyone here. That little show with the champagne and Bambi — I almost felt bad about concocting that, but Gia needed to understand my situation. If she wanted to be with me, this was our reality, at least until I decided to leave the lifestyle.

Even that was in question, as far as I was concerned, because she was now rumbling about wanting to be involved. The woman was so damned confusing sometimes. She shunned the mafia yet stepped up with ideas and conversation during our talk with the Palermos. And tonight, when she'd burst in here, asking why I was discussing her father's affairs without her — when she'd previously expressly said I could do so —practically made my head spin.

I wouldn't tolerate this from anyone else. But Gia? I loved her without explanation, without question. Fuck, I even trusted her, although I wasn't sure why. As cold and calculating as I could be, there was a molten, warm spot in my heart, previously reserved for my mother and sister.

Now Gia occupied that chamber too. It was up to me to manage my intense feelings about her and the practical realities of being a mafia boss. Rather, it was up to me to make

Gia understand that she couldn't just pop off with emotion whenever she desired. We needed to lay low, then provide a united front when we finally officially came out as an engaged couple.

I walked through the club, which had become a living breathing entity. Music pumped and fake smoke floated around the stage and everywhere, naked women shook their tits.

It was a regular Saturday night party, one I'd seen a million times. One that held the appeal of an office cubicle, truth be told. I greeted several regulars and a few of the girls who had worked there for years. It was a solid crew here, all due to Carmen's professionalism and business acumen.

I wasn't sure what Gia was talking about when she mentioned exploitation and toxic masculinity, but I was sure proud of this place. It made a ton of money without the usual gentlemen's club drama, and we rarely got the city after our asses because we'd bribed half the city council and the police chief.

I'd left Giorgio and his fiancée at the table to deal with Gia. They'd seemed happy to kiss and check out the girls together. Ashley was... interesting. I knew that she and Gia had been friends since they were little girls; when we were at the beach bungalow, Gia had told me several stories about their sweet shenanigans while growing up.

But in my estimation, Ashley seemed to be quite a different kind of woman than Gia. Wilder. Crazier. Much more interested in the glitz and glamour of the mafia wife lifestyle. Giorgio seemed just her type, an older man who obviously wanted to spoil a hot young thing. It seemed incompatible with Gia's jeans-and-sneakers feminist attitude. But what did I know?

I sank into the booth where Giorgio and Ashley were sitting. She was swaying to the beat, practically grinding on his lap.

"Having fun?" I asked. "Sorry about that. An issue took a little longer than I expected."

“We’re having a blast.” Ashley slid into the seat next to Giorgio, who grabbed a fistful of her hair. “Aren’t we, babe?”

“Sure are. You know, Alessandro, we should all hang out together. Us and our girls. Ashley’s told me about Gia.”

I nodded. Just as I anticipated. Ashley was a little blabbermouth.

“Gia is my bestieeee,” she said in a singsong, then ground her molars in time with the beat of the music.

I smirked. “Someone’s had a few cocktails.”

She giggled and wiggled her nose. “More than cocktails, if you know what I mean..”

A quick glance at her nostrils revealed an almost imperceptible dusting of white powder. Hunh. Did Gia know that her “bestie” snorted coke? Gia had a harsh view of drugs because her mother had overdosed on pills.

“Since we’re done with the business portion of our meeting, I think we’re going to head out,” Giorgio said. “Care to go to Nikki Beach with us?”

Oh, fuck no. A place with models and enough drugs to make Tony Montana blush. Not my scene.

“Oooh I love that place,” Ashley squealed, kissing him on the cheek. They were the quintessential Miami couple, with him around thirty-five, and her in her early twenties.

“Nah, I’ve got some things to take care of here in the office.” We all stood.

“That’s Alessandro for you. All business, all the time,” Giorgio said. “Signore, we’ll talk later. Thank you for the wise conversation about the port. I think we’re getting somewhere.”

We shook hands, and Ashley and I kissed on the cheek. She smelled like a combination of tropical cocktails and the telltale signs of cocaine — salt and aspirin, mixed with a hint of metal.

“Be safe out there,” I said before walking off.

As I strolled to the office, I mulled whether it was worth telling Gia my suspicions about Ashley's drug use. Probably it was best to mind my own business; Gia had enough to worry about, with her father's death, our relationship, and her upcoming move to New York for school.

The latter left me with a knot in my stomach every time it entered my mind, and I shoved it into the recesses of my thoughts. She had a month left with me, and anything could happen in thirty days. Hell, she might even decide to defer — or maybe I'd decide to move to New York with her. Everything was on the table.

I found Carmen in the office, hunched over a laptop. She looked up, over the screen. "Hey, jefe. Did everything go okay with that girl?"

I eased into a chair behind a desk. "Yeah. It did. Thanks for playing along."

Her dark eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "It was a first, I'll say that."

"What do you mean?"

"You've never asked me to intervene with a woman before. Who is she, anyway?"

I leaned back, stretching my arms up and cradling the back of my head in my hands. "Someone I'm interested in."

"Cryptic. Hmm. Any reason you're being so secretive?"

"No. No reason. Just being prudent."

She nodded. "Word on the street is that you're not being quite so prudent."

I leaned in, drumming my fingers on the table. "What do you mean by that?"

She inhaled, pursed her lips, then exhaled. "A few guys were in the other day talking about how you had gotten involved with Mickey's fiancée. After he died."

So people were already talking. "What's Mickey's is now mine. Tradition says that would extend to his woman, as well."

A laugh escaped her lips. “You and your traditions.”

I smirked and began opening the mail, signifying that this conversation was over. “You almost done for the night?”

It was almost one in the morning, which meant that the club would be shutting down soon. Damn Miami Beach regulations that declared strip clubs had to close hours before other nightclubs. That was one regulation I couldn’t bribe my way out of.

“Yeah, I suppose so. I need to talk to some of the girls.” She stood up and reached for her purse.

“Oh yeah? Something going on?” I glanced up.

“The usual. Someone’s boyfriend slept with another, and there’s been a bit of minor drama. No biggie.” She laughed. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“And you always handle everything so perfectly, Carmen. You know, I appreciate you. I don’t tell you enough, but you do a fucking great job here. I think you deserve a raise.” I shot her a genuine smile.

“Thanks, jefe. Damn. You’re different somehow. Ever since Mickey died.”

“Nah.” I waved her off.

“Yeah, you are. Can’t put my finger on it. I like it, though. It’s a new and improved Sandro. And I’ll take that raise. See you around.”

She strutted out and I was left alone in the cramped office. As big as the club was, our working area wasn’t anything to brag about.

A new Sandro.

I chuckled out loud as I continued to rifle through some paperwork, looking for some documents related to a slip-and-fall lawsuit. Some old Russian jerkoff was suing us because he tripped in the parking lot and fractured his elbow. I suspected that he wanted to collect a settlement from our insurance company, and I’d meant to ask the lawyer about the guy’s background.

Perhaps we could come to a different kind of settlement with the guy. One that involved breaking his elbows for real. I'd have to think about it, especially if he was loosely connected to the Russians up in Atlanta. A little investigative work was in order.

Finally I located the lawsuit paperwork and then became absorbed in some tax bullshit. When I looked up, it was two in the morning and my eyes felt scratchy and dry. I tossed the pen on the desk and grabbed my cell.

I had a text from Gia.

Going to sleep now. xo

I imagined her in bed, warm and naked, her smooth skin against those expensive sheets she'd made me buy. Yeah, it was time to get home to my girl.

I made my way back through the club, where the night cleaning crew was already attacking the place. Mauro, my driver-slash-bodyguard, was slumped in a chair not far from the office, absorbed in his cell. Normally I hated when my guys were on their cell, but he wasn't the only bodyguard here, and one of the few places I felt truly secure, outside of my own home.

"You ready, boss?" he asked.

"Sure am. Let's call it a night."

He brought around the car and we rode the short distance to the condo in silence. I was fucking beat after everything that happened today. At my building, I greeted Tony in the lobby and Josh outside of my door.

Josh looked like he was going to shit his pants he was so afraid. "I'm really sorry about tonight, sir."

My hand was on the doorknob. Josh was the son of a mafia foot soldier from New York. He'd gotten popped for theft and served a year at Rikers, and his dad wanted him to start fresh down here. He was barely twenty-two, and somehow seemed like a kid, even though he was only five or six years younger than me.

I let out a sigh. When I'd come from Italy to New York, I'd fucked up. I was all of twenty years old, a wide-eyed kid who spoke broken English and missed his mom.

I'd befriended a guy I didn't know was an informant — he was nothing more than a drinking buddy, but still. Hadn't given him any important information about the famiglia, but I came close. It was my screw-up, and I owned up to it, scared shitless when I told my boss. He'd exhibited a tremendous amount of grace when he found out. Hell, he could've had me killed. Instead, he'd used it as a teaching moment. That's what he'd called it. *A teaching moment.*

I clapped Josh on the shoulder. "You learned your lesson, right?"

"Yeah, bro. Always run details by you. Even if a woman's talking about her period and shit."

"Good man. I'm going to let it slide, this time, okay? We need to keep a close eye on Gia. I don't want anything to happen like this ever again, you hear me? She has to stay safe."

"Got it, boss. Again, I apologize." He was still trembling. The poor fuck.

I let myself inside, where it was silent and dark, a merciful reprieve from the insanity of the club. After pounding a drink of water, I went into the bedroom. The lamp on the nightstand was illuminated and Gia was asleep on the bed, a book on her chest. She wore one of my button-down shirts, which was bunched up around her hips. No panties. *Nice.*

This made me grin, and I gently scooped up the book and put it on the table next to the bed. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Hey," she said softly.

Was she going to launch into a deep discussion of tonight? If so, I wasn't mentally ready. "Sleep, princess. I'm going to take a shower."

"Mmmm." She rolled over and I got a peek at her bare ass.

While I showered, the image of her sweet ass was front and center in my mind, and by the time I toweled off, my dick was rock hard.

The light was still on when I went back into the bedroom, but Gia had shed the shirt. Her eyes were closed, her legs slightly spread, and she wore a little smile. Thank God we weren't going to rehash the evening, and that we were going to settle our minor disagreement like adults: by having sex.

"How did you know exactly what I wanted?" I murmured.

"Wild guess." She opened her legs wide, giving me a full view of her beautiful pussy.

I didn't even bother with a kiss on her mouth and went right for her other lips. "Fuck, princess, you're already wet. What the hell have you been doing tonight?"

She cooed. "Reading a sexy romance, waiting for you."

"I like that. A lot." I gave her pussy a long, slow lick, the a few flicks to her clit. Her hand went into my hair and she hissed out a sigh.

"So you've been lying here, horny?" I lifted my head from between her legs.

"Shh. Don't talk."

I laughed and licked her slow for several minutes, savoring her sweet-salty flavor. When she was on the verge of orgasm — I could always tell by the way she got more vocal and how she dug her nails into my scalp — I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to be inside her.

I climbed off the bed and went to the nightstand drawer, extracting a condom and sheathing myself. I also reached for a bottle of lube because I wanted to do something else. Something involving that round ass of hers.

She was already stroking her clit in my absence and I let out a growl. "Not yet, princess."

"Why," she whined.

I dropped the lube on the bed.

“Because,” I clamped my hands around her hips and roughly flipped her over, “I’m going to fuck you hard and make you cum that way, that’s why.”

I pulled her hips up and she instinctively assumed an all-fours position, wiggling her ass against my dick. Sliding into her from behind was exquisite, as always, except tonight she felt extra wet, incredibly swollen, so perfect like she was tailor made for my cock.

All. Mine.

“Just how I like you. Ass in the air, wet as fuck, ready for me.”

“Do you only think about sex, Ale?”

“Asks the woman who was reading smut and lying here wetter than the goddamn ocean, waiting for me to come home and fuck her.”

She let out a wicked laugh and I picked up the pace, grinding into her.

My muscles tensed, and yet, I felt relaxed. This was where I belonged. With her, joined with her, one with her. I pumped hard in and out, allowing my head to tip back, reveling in the sensation.

When my balls grew tight and hard, I eased up, wanting this to last a little longer. My hand found the lube and I popped it open, drizzling it down her ass crack.

She squealed. “What are you doing?”

“Going to touch you right... here.” I softly raked my thumb over her asshole while I was balls deep inside her.

“Oh. Oh! My butt?”

“Yes, your pretty little hole.”

I massaged her tight entrance, making sure there was enough lube so I wouldn’t hurt her. Then I gently eased a finger inside, only up to the first knuckle. She sucked in a breath.

“That feel okay, Gia?”

“Yeah, it feels. Nice. So nice.”

“How about this?” I slid more of my finger in, taking time to go slow.

“Ohh, wow. Wow. Yes, please.”

The way she said *yes please* almost made me blow my load. But I slowly fucked her while pumping my finger in and out of her asshole. She was so fucking sexy and vulnerable like this, and at any second, I was going to spurt the entire contents of my nuts into her cunt.

“Need to ...” she mumbled, working her hand between her legs from underneath.

“Need to what, princessa?” I said in Italian.

“Cum.” She furiously strummed her clit, and buried her face into the pillow, which muffled the sound of her moans.

“Good girl,” I ground out, pounding harder with my cock and finger, hard enough that her flesh jiggled in the hottest, most carnal way. “Now give it to me.”

When she came, she was louder than she’d ever been, crying out with a primal noise that tipped me over the edge to my own orgasm. Everything blacked out in that moment, all of the day’s drama and problems, all of my doubts and worries.

Only her.

I was so in the moment that I bent over and bit her shoulder, hard. She yelped, and that brought me back to reality.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” I muttered in Italian.

Our hands and my dick slipped from her holes, and we collapsed onto the bed, her on her stomach and me on top of her, panting, sweating, smelly. Needing another shower.

“Bite marks are love notes written in flesh,” she whispered.

“Hunh? Where’d you get that?” She was so poetic, it slayed me.

“Read it somewhere.”

“Mmm, I like it,” I replied, not wanting to move.

“Ale?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

I swept her hair off her damp neck and blew on her skin, my heart feeling ten sizes bigger. “I love you too, Gia.”

Chapter Fifty-One

GIA

THE MORNING AFTER MY ILLOGICAL AND ILL-TIMED VISIT TO the strip club, Alessandro announced that he had to meet “a guy” for coffee.

I snickered, thinking of how I’d said the previous night that he should do his mafia sit-downs over a nice hot cup of java at a cozy cafe. It was official; I was an idiot.

“This is a legitimate business meeting, Princess.” He was standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, wearing a pair of jeans (loose but tight enough so I could admire his butt), a black T-shirt with a subtle logo of his favorite racing team (Ferrari), and black Puma sneakers. He looked like any twenty-something guy in Miami — at least until he snapped on a platinum Patek Philippe watch. He adjusted the hem of his T-shirt and ran his hands up his muscular chest.

“Oh yeah?” I was also in the bathroom, rubbing tinted sunscreen on my face. A flutter of anticipation hit my belly because this was the first time I was going out with Ashley since before my disaster of an engagement party. And even then, we’d been up in rural Ocala, not here in Miami, where we had access to delicious mimosas and (hopefully) tasty waffles.

“Yeah, I’m talking to developer about investing in a condo building downtown.”

I reached for my lip gloss. “Hmm.”

“Why are you up so early? You’re not usually dressed at this time of the morning.”

“Meeting Ashley for brunch.”

Ale turned to me. “When were you going to tell me this?”

“I thought I mentioned it last night.”

“You didn’t.” His dark brow furrowed into a scowl.

I stood on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “You’re really adorable when you look grumpy.”

“Gia.”

“Sorry. She’s coming to pick me up, with her driver. It’s a brunch-pool party kind of thing.” I leaned over the marble counter, toward the mirror, sticking my butt out.

“A brunch-pool party kind of thing.” He glared at my ass and flipped up the skirt of my sundress, inspecting my backside.

“Hey,” I protested.

“At least you’re wearing a one-piece.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not a prisoner here.”

“I never said you were.”

“Then what’s with the serial killer face?” I finished with my lips and straightened to face him. I’d expected he would be a little cranky about this.

“I just...” he sighed. “It’s that...”

“What? Spit it out.”

“I wish you’d bring one of my guys along. One of *our* guys.”

“Oh, so like a double date? Ashley’s bodyguard, Ashley, my bodyguard, and me? Look, I can’t live like this. Even my dad let me move around freely when I was at school.” Well, most of the time. Occasionally he’d send “assistance,” who would keep a respectful distance. Which maybe also contributed to the fact I hadn’t had many relationships with guys during my college years.

Ale took in a lungful of air. “You’re bringing Tony. End of discussion.”

“Whatever.” I reached for my necklace, which was on the counter. It was a fine gold chain with a locket. Inside was a photo of my mother. “Can you help me with this?”

I handed him the necklace and he stood behind me and placed the delicate strand around my neck. “I want you to text me every hour.”

“Yes, daddy.” I exaggerated a pout.

A pair of steely blue eyes met mine in the mirror. “I’m serious, Gia. You’re not used to Miami. There’s a lot of shit going on here.” His big hands fumbled with the necklace, but finally clasped the two ends together. “All I want is for you to be safe. If you need me to come there and pick you up, if you drink too much, if you feel threatened, call me and I’ll be there as soon as I can. Don’t talk to any sketchy men. If anyone offers you drugs—”

“I promise I’ll be safe. I promise I won’t pop off and take Molly or participate in an orgy or whatever. I think you’re mistaking me with someone else. I’m hoping to have a mimosa and some waffles, and maybe nap in a cabana. I’m still sleepy. It’s only ten.”

He trailed kisses down my neck. “Why didn’t you sleep last night?”

“Ask yourself, horndog.”

He grinned. “Did you just call me a corn dog?”

I turned to face him, wrapping him in my arms. “No. A *horn* dog. Because you’re always horny.”

He put his lips to my ear and whisper-growled. “Says the girl with the soaking wet puss—.”

“Perv.”

“Only around you.”

Our banter ended in a an ass slap for me, a kiss for him, then a hug goodbye. Ale left first, and I sat on the sofa,

waiting for Ashley.

She was a half-hour late, which was unsurprising. I grabbed my beach tote and dutifully collected Tony, who was sitting outside in the hallway.

“Sorry you have to do this,” I said to him as we rode the elevator downstairs.

“No worries. Boss’ orders to keep an eye on you at all times.”

Especially after last night, was the subtext. Fine. I’d play along with Ale’s overprotectiveness. It was acceptable for now, considering that he’d just become boss and that surely some people in the business were wondering about Mickey’s demise. But for the long-term, a permanent bodyguard wasn’t going to fly with me and my life. I needed space and freedom.

I’d deal with that later, though. Today I wanted to hang with my bestie and act like a new college graduate, a girl without a care in the world. I wanted to forget about the mafia, my complicated boyfriend, death, life, everything.

“Ashleeeeyyy,” I squealed, when I saw her standing outside the massive, black SUV. Next to her was a muscular dude in black pants and black polo, with mirrored aviators. He looked nearly identical to Tony. Did these guys work for some Mafia bodyguard agency or something?

I ran to her and threw my arms around her thin frame. I hadn’t seen her in a few weeks now, but it seemed like an eternity. Her hair was long and straight, as white as the blazing Florida summer sun. Oversize dark sunglasses covered her eyes, and a pale pink coated her lips. She wore a gauzy black beach coverup that looked like a babydoll nightgown — entirely too sexy for anywhere but Miami.

NEXT TO HER, I LOOKED LIKE A LIBRARIAN IN A CONVENT, BUT it was always this way with Ash. It made me grin.

“It’s so fucking bright out here. Let’s get in the car.” Her voice sounded like she’d chain smoked a pack of Marlboros.

I climbed in back with her, and the two guys got in front. We took off.

“It’s so good to see you.” I squeezed her hand. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Hyde Beach. Giorgio and I went there last week and it was lit. Get this: he has a table permanently reserved there.”

“Oh. Is he going to join us?” My stomach sank. I’d hoped to have the day with just Ash, no guys.

She shook her head. “He’s golfing today.”

I beamed. “Cool. Cool. So tell me how things are going? What did you end up deciding about grad school?”

“I’m not gonna go.”

“Ashley! But UM is a great school.” She’d been accepted to the prestigious higher education program.

“I know. I deferred for a year. I’m having such a great time with Giorgio that I’m just going to hang out here for a while with him. I love South Beach.”

“And do what?” I gaped at her.

She took her hand out of mine and flicked her hair behind her. “Dunno. Stuff. Enjoy life. I’ve been in school for four years and don’t miss it. Do you?”

I glanced out the window at all the semi-naked tourists streaming toward the beach. It was difficult to imagine this place as real life, or anything permanent. It seemed too transient, too much of a party, too tacky.

I missed being up north, with seasons and cool air. I yearned for cozy libraries and hot cocoa, long nights studying for exams. Fireplaces while snow swirled outside.

“I do, actually.”

She waved her hand. “You’ve always been that way, though.”

“What way?”

“Into books and school. The only reason I wanted to go to college was because it meant I could put off getting married. But now that Daddy’s paired me with Giorgio...”

She let out a little swoony sigh. Unlike my father, hers had allowed her to meet the man she was going to marry — probably because Ash’s daddy knew she had daddy issues, and that Giorgio would fulfill all of her fantasies and then some. I’d met him, and he was one-thousand percent her type: rich, handsome, and a lot older.

She’d merely toyed with college boys, biding her time until she was introduced to the real deal.

Whereas my father likely knew I would’ve made like an Olympic sprinter had I met Mickey before my party — after burning down our family’s home in anger.

Fury at my father bubbled deep in my belly, and I was silent for a while, at least until Ashley piped up.

“Gia? Hey? You okay?”

I turned to her. “Yeah. Just thinking. It’s been a wild summer. I’m still processing it all, you know?”

“You have been through a lot. But we’re going to have so much fun today.” She paused. “Hey, I have an idea.”

“I’m also kinda hungry. Do you think they have waffles at brunch?”

While ignoring me, she rummaged around in her beach tote. “Here it is.”

With a flourish, she presented it to me in the palm of her hand. It was a small, plastic case in the shape of an orange. I reached for it, and she snatched her hand away.

“Would you like...” She carefully twisted the case open and held it out again. There were several compartments inside, four with pills and a few with a powdered substance. “Coke, molly, zannies, benzos, or Aleve?”

My eyes felt like they were popping out of my head. I glanced to the guys in the front, who were separated from us by a plexiglass partition.

“ASH,” I HISSED. “WHAT THE FUCK?”

She giggled and bent over, dipping her pinky fingernail into the powder while I gaped at her. Ash had drank booze since she was sixteen — hell, everyone I knew had — and maybe ate edibles from time to time.

But this?

I bent over so my face was near hers, out of sight from the guys in front.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“A bump. Want one?” She put her pinky to her nostril and inhaled. Her nails were black, with gold tips, perfect talons of destruction. I glanced at my own nails, which were devoid of polish, and bitten to the quick. Attractive.

“No. I very much do not want a bump. When did you start doing coke?”

“Dunno. Giorgio and I sometimes do it together. The sex is out of this world after a few bumps.”

She sat up, rubbing her nose with her fingers. I sat up as well and eyed the guys in front. They were gesturing to each other, deep into a conversation that I couldn't hear.

“I'm not sure coke is such a great idea, Ash.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don't get all preachy. You do edibles.”

“Yeah, occasionally, in college. I haven't since I've been back in Florida.”

“You drink.”

“Yeah. But that's...”

“What? Legal? I thought you were all for drug legalization.”

“I am, but...” For some reason, I wasn't thinking straight today. Maybe it was exhaustion from last night, or general overwhelm. I couldn't easily explain why it made me so uncomfortable that Ash was snorting coke in the back of this SUV.

She barked out a laugh. “Don’t be so judgmental.”

“I’m not. You know I’ll love you no matter what. I’m worried about you, that’s all. First school, and now this.”

“I’m fine, Gia. I’m not like you. I don’t want some meaningful career, I don’t want to fight the patriarchy or challenge the system. I want to listen to good tunes, drink cocktails and look cute. You know that.” She inspected her nails.

“Yeah, I guess.”

No sooner had I settled back into the seat when we arrived at our brunch destination. Ash let out a little, low squeal.

“You’re going to love this.”

And indeed, I did. I pushed Ash’s casual drug use to the recesses of my brain. While our bodyguards sat a respectful distance away — Giorgio had reserved a table just for them, as well — we talked about nothing substantial, avoiding the topic of my father’s death and even Alessandro.

Ash told me all about her engagement party, which was here in Miami in just a few weeks, right before I was scheduled to leave for grad school.

“My dad thinks it will be better here, after what happened with yours,” she said.

“Really?” I made a face. Miami seemed far more dangerous than Ocala, but what did I know?

“Well, yeah, and Giorgio isn’t as involved in certain things, like Mickey and Alessandro were.”

Like Mickey and Alessandro. Hearing the two men’s names in a sentence made me uncomfortable. I didn’t think Alessandro was anything like Mickey, but again — I knew nothing.

Or I chose not to know anything, at least when it came to Alessandro.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I added, just as the waiter walked up to take our order.

The restaurant had a special brunch menu, and I ordered the most delicious waffles — carrot cake flavored, with cream cheese icing, *yum* — and relaxed in a cabana with my third mimosa while watching Ash strut around the pool and swim.

“See?” she said, flopping down on the cabana bed next to me, droplets of water clinging to her tan skin. “It’s not such a bad life.”

“It’s pretty nice.” I had to admit, other than Ash snorting coke in the SUV, it had been a fun morning. The sun was bright, the pool was sparkling blue, everyone around us was gorgeous and diverse in that way only crowds in Miami are. A DJ spun downtempo chill hop for all the people just waking up, or those who hadn’t yet gone to bed, and everything seemed to move in a hazy slow-motion. Guys with half-lidded sexy eyes and girls with perfect bodies, all moving and breathing and chilling to the beat, all superficial, nothing concrete.

It was fun, epic, wild — but didn’t seem real. This was like a beautiful illusion, a vacation, a life that most people dreamed of.

Did that matter, though? *Reality is what you make of it*, my mom used to say. It was like her own Zen koan, and I never understood her when she said those words aloud. Although right at this moment, I almost comprehended.

“You know what would be amazing? If you deferred school like I did, or even transferred to Miami. That way you could stay here and party with me, and be with Alessandro. C’mon, Gia. What do you think? Why do you need to go to New York?” She looked at me and slid her sunglasses down her nose, waggling her expertly plucked eyebrows.

A waiter materialized and handed us more mimosas. The sunlight glinted off the glasses as we toasted, and for the first time, I began to see the appeal of this place. Or maybe that was the fog of the alcohol settling into my brain.

I’d gone to undergrad in New England and majored in feminism as a subtle fuck you to my father, and had planned

on grad school as a way of postponing the inevitable mafia arranged marriage.

Now that Daddy was dead, I had no one to rebel against. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted.

The question was, what did I want?

“Why go to New York, when like, you can do this every weekend?” she asked, taking a dainty sip of her drink.

“Why indeed,” I murmured.

Chapter Fifty-Two

GIA

A HAZY, LAZY MIMOSA BUZZ SETTLED INTO MY BODY, MAKING my muscles feel warm and supple. The scent of pool chlorine and coconut-tinged suntan lotion hung in the humid air, tricking my brain into thinking I was on vacation.

Maybe Ash was right. I needed to let go and enjoy myself. I'd dealt with way too much lately. Grief and complex feelings about my father. The secret guilt I felt over killing Mickey nipped at the edges of my thoughts. Sure, he'd been a piece of shit, but did he deserve to die? The fact that I was only now thinking of these things made me wonder whether I was a sociopath — or if the trauma I'd experienced was so enormous that I couldn't properly categorize my own feelings.

And Alessandro. I'd concluded that I love him, but still wasn't sure if he was good for me.

When I get to New York, I'll deal with my emotions then. Find a therapist. Talk it out. For now, I'm going to be shallow and superficial...

I stretched out in the poolside cabana, idly wondering what Alessandro was doing. Should I text him? No, I didn't want to come off as a clingy girlfriend. God, I was all over the place with my emotions when it came to him.

A little smile spread on my face, thinking of how he could join us here and we would stretch out on this lounge together, like we'd done on the island.

I allowed my eyes to flutter shut, thinking of the way water droplets had clung to his olive-hued skin, as if they, too, yearned to be near him. How his tattoos, stark and black, twisted around his biceps in a sexy, menacing way. How he'd take his broad hand and sweep it through his dark hair, looking more handsome by the hour.

I'd no sooner let out a swoony little sigh when Ashley's voice cut through my thoughts.

"You sleeping?"

My eyelids peeled open. "Not yet."

"You want to wake up? Let's do a bump."

"Ash, why the fuck are you doing that shit?" I propped myself up on my elbows as she pulled the cabana curtains closed, denying us all that gorgeous Florida sunshine.

"Because it feels good. That's why. We don't all need a reason to do things, Gia."

I flopped back down on the lounge bed. The last thing I saw before I drifted off was Ashley doing another key bump of coke, then opening the curtains and shimmying out to the pool, her hips swaying to the downtempo beat of the DJ.

* * *

HOURS LATER, I HUGGED ASH GOODBYE IN THE CONDO driveway. We were both sunburned and drowsy.

Frank stood awkwardly nearby, waiting for me. Even though he seemed like a decent guy, his presence grated on my last nerve. I'd have to chat with Ale about this.

"I'm glad we could hang out. It was fun," I said into Ashley's still-wet hair.

"I'm glad you finally got into the pool and danced. See? You were wrong. Skeevy guys didn't even try to hit on you."

"No, they were all hitting on you." I wondered what her beloved Giorgio would think about that. We broke apart and grinned at each other. "So, later this week? Dinner at our place?"

She nodded. “Giorgio and I will bring wine.”

We made air kiss noises and she climbed back into the SUV. I figured inviting her over with her fiancé would be a casual way for me to get to know him and assess whether he was good for her — not that I could do anything about it if he wasn’t. And while I wanted to hang out with her, I didn’t want to be put in another situation where she was openly snorting coke, either.

Dinner at our place was probably the safest option. Now all I needed was Alessandro’s blessing, but I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal. He’d probably love to host a dinner and show off his pasta cooking skills.

In speaking of Ale, I hadn’t heard from him all day. That wasn’t unusual; he wasn’t the kind of guy to text or call, for obvious reasons.

“Have you heard from your boss?” I asked Frank while we rode up in the elevator.

He eyed me warily. Surely he was aware of my transgression last night. Probably Josh filled him in — or perhaps even Ale.

“Yes, I’ve kept him updated throughout the day,” he said after a long, awkward pause.

“Oh. What’s he doing, anyway? Did he say?”

Frank shook his head. Of course he wouldn’t tell me anything.

Upstairs at the condo door, Frank mumbled something about staying in the hall to make a call. Probably going to tell Ale that I was questioning him.

“Okay, well, thanks,” I trilled, and let myself inside.

I’d no sooner dropped my beach tote on the floor near the front door when I heard the refrigerator opening in the kitchen. I kicked off my flip flops and walked in that direction, talking the entire way.

“Hi sweetie,” I called out. “When did you get home? I had a great time with Ashley today, and you’re not going to

believe how tasty the waffles are there. We're totally going to have to go. And you know what else—"

I stopped talking, because there in the kitchen, was a gorgeous woman with plump lips and raven-black hair in a pixie cut. She was standing at the open fridge, staring at me with eyes rimmed with dark liner. She wore a pink-and-red paisley and patchwork romper, looking more like a punk rock doll than a sophisticated South Beach girl.

"Tell me more about those waffles," she said.

I gaped and blinked. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Her Italian accent was evident.

"I'm Alessandro's—"

"Girlfriend," she said.

"Yes." I narrowed my eyes. Was this an ex-girlfriend, someone who he'd given a key? A jealous lover? A prank?

Holding a jug of orange juice, she shut the fridge door. "Apparently my dearest brother didn't show you a photo of me. I'm Lucrezia. You can call me Lucy."

"Oh, my God." I chortled. "I thought you were..."

"One of his exes?"

"Yeah. That."

She snickered. "Well, he's had a couple of those. But he's never given a key to any of them. Until you came along."

"Oh." I swallowed, but a flare of pride ignited within me. "Sorry I was so hostile. I just..."

She set the juice on the counter and waved her hand in my direction. "No need to apologize. I get it. My brother's led a pretty wild life, so anything's possible. Hey, I was going to make vodka with orange juice. You want one?"

"Yeah, I guess."

I leaned against the kitchen island, feeling ill at ease. Unsure of where to put my arms. "So. You were in South America, right? I think Alessandro told me that. He didn't say

anything about you coming back, though. I mean, I know you live here and everything.”

She took an enormous bottle of Absolut out of a shopping bag on the counter and cracked it open. “I wasn’t sure I was coming back until today. I kind of come and go without telling him.”

I smirked. “I can’t believe you can get away with that. I figured he’d be as possessive of you as he is with me.”

“Let’s just say we came to an understanding a long time ago.” She sniffed the open vodka bottle. “I’ve been in Colombia for a month, touring emerald mines. I’m a jewelry designer, and I like to visit the mines personally to see how the workers are treated.”

“Wow.” I slid into a bar stool at the island counter, genuinely curious about her life. “That’s impressive.”

“Probably surprising, too, because my brother doesn’t exactly come off as some sort of workers’ rights guy.”

We exchanged smiles. “Well, now that you mention it...” I said.

“I’ll let you in on a secret. Well, two. Our grandfather in Italy was heavily involved in the labor movement in our hometown of Naples. And Alessandro is more interested in fair labor practices than you think.” While talking, she mixed two cocktails, pouring the vodka and OJ over ice.

“I didn’t know that,” I said, accepting a full glass from her. My earlier mimosa buzz had faded, and I sensed that a second buzz was on the way. Oh well, it was Sunday and not like I had to go to work tomorrow.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about my brother. Maybe I’ll tell you, if I decide I like you.” Her smile told me that she was joking. Maybe. “He’s told me all about you. C’mon, let’s go sit on the balcony and enjoy the view while we talk.”

I slipped out of the seat, careful not to slop my drink everywhere. “He’s told you about me?”

We stepped out onto the balcony and plopped down on the sofa.

“Yep. He told me everything about how you met and stayed on the island.”

I was mid-sip and nearly choked when I heard her words. Ten seconds of coughing later, I finally asked, “Everything? As in. Every. Thing?”

“Everything, including how you blew Mickey’s brains out.” She held up her glass, as if she was toasting me. “Well done. I hated that motherfucker from the moment I met him.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

GIA

LUCY CACKLED AND REACHED FOR HER PHONE. “YOU CAN close your mouth now. Sorry. I’m blunt.”

I took a long gulp. I wasn’t sure what to think of this woman. There was an effortless cool about her that I admired, but it was a bit unsettling that she knew my deepest, darkest secret. One that could land me in prison, or get me killed.

“When did you meet Mickey?” I asked.

After fiddling with her cell for a second, a stream of chill music wafted from the wireless speaker Ale kept on the balcony. Lucy set her phone down and stared at me. “I met him when my brother started working for him a couple of years ago.”

As she talked, I noticed how her Italian accent was a lot softer than Ale’s, making me wonder about how her background was different than his. Maybe she’d gone to college, whereas he hadn’t? He’d only told me a few select, sketchy details of his upbringing.

“At first I was relieved when Alessandro aligned with him, because when his other boss in New York died, I wasn’t sure about my brother’s future. A lot of times men in that situation get screwed. Someone’s a rat and the entire crew ends up in prison, or worse, if you know what I mean.”

I nodded. Actually, I didn’t, but I could guess. Since my engagement party, I’d gotten to know the mafia much more

intimately than I ever had. Oh, sure, I knew what Daddy did for a living, but it was always couched with semi-legitimate business ventures. He'd also gone out of his way to shield me from the worst of it, mostly by shipping me off to private schools and sending me to New England for college.

Lucy continued, staring into her cocktail glass. "But I knew Mickey was bad news from the moment I met him. He just gave off a bad vibe, you know?"

"Uh, yeah, I kind of gathered that. I mean, I didn't shoot him because of bad vibes. He was an awful human."

She smirked. "He hit on a friend of mine in a really skeezy way."

A noise of disgust escaped my mouth. "I'm shocked he didn't hit on *you*."

She arched an eyebrow. "Mafia guys generally don't."

"Really? I find that difficult to believe. You're gorgeous."

"They don't want to fuck with the sister of one of New York's most infamous hitmen."

My breath caught in my throat. I shouldn't have been surprised by her description of her brother, but hearing those words come from another person's mouth was shocking. Unnerving. Terrifying, even.

I love a man who's snuffed out multiple lives. Somehow I couldn't reconcile that with the tender person I slept next to every night. The man who I craved, the guy who made me laugh, the human who was keeping me sane and safe.

I swallowed hard. "I'm sorry about your friend, that she had to deal with Mickey."

"She was twenty at the time, and we were both apprentices at a jewelry designer here in Miami. He'd come visit us under the pretense of buying his mom and aunts gifts."

I winced.

Anguish clouded her previously mirthful expression. "He wouldn't take no for an answer and one night —"

I held up my hand. “I don’t need to hear more. My imagination can fill in the rest.”

She nodded. “I never told Ale.”

“Why?”

“He’d have wanted to kill him, and I knew that would, in turn, mean Ale’s death.” She paused to lick her lips. “My brother’s not a saint. The fact that he’s lived this long is nothing short of a miracle. I hope he can continue his lucky streak, despite what happened when you two were on the island.”

I nodded slowly. “I hope so too, for all of our sake.”

For a few long minutes, we sat in silence, drinking our cocktails, the dreamy chill music mixing with the sound of the ocean waves below. It would have been a perfect moment, except my heart was banging against my ribcage because all I could think about was whether Ale was safe right at this moment.

He’d wanted me to text him every hour, and I hadn’t. How could I be so stupid? Everything he’d done, every request he’d made of me, all those worried looks and demands? They all stemmed from the fact that he knew how easy it was to kill another human.

And how easy it would be for someone to kill me — or him. Here I’d been, treating his concerns like they were a joke. How stupid could I be?

“I have to thank you,” she finally said.

“For what?”

“For the first time, he’s talking about going legit. He’s investing in legal businesses and real estate. Says your party really changed his way of thinking. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Do you think he’s serious?” My voice was almost a whisper.

Lucy lifted a shoulder. “Hard to tell. I think so. He’s never mentioned doing this until now. Until he met you. But...”

My heart swelled with pride, and I quickly shut down the emotion. For the first time in forever, I was reminded of my Sunday school classes as a girl — Mom had insisted — and Proverbs. *Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall...*

Of all the Bible verses to remember, why that one?

“But what?” I asked.

“We grew up poor in Naples. In an area of called Scampia. Have you heard of it?”

I shook my head. “My great-grandparents came from Naples, but I don’t have any family left there. When we’d visit, my mom and I would stay in Amalfi while my father went into the city for business.”

Lucy breathed out a bitter laugh. “Amalfi’s close to Naples, but might as well be the moon compared to our neighborhood. We lived in a place called *the Vele di Scampia*.”

“The sails of Scampia?” I translated aloud.

“Yes. They’re giant buildings meant to look like ship sails.”

“Sounds pretty,” I said.

She snorted. “It’s anything but. It’s a slum. There’s barely running water, the place is rundown and broken. It’s a huge, open air drug market and the most violent place I’ve ever seen.”

This made me gasp. “Oh. Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t know... I mean, Ale told me that he only got out of Naples because his father, your father—”

“Took the fall for a leader of the Camorra and was sentenced to decades in prison. In exchange, they sent Alessandro to America when he was just a teen.”

“So you didn’t come to America with him?”

“Not right away. Fortunately, he was making so much money that he was able to send me away to school in London, plus I got scholarships. That’s how we got out of Scampia.

Most people don't. I was extremely lucky that nothing was ever asked of me. That I wasn't married off, or asked to run drugs. I was too young, I guess, and they put a premium on the men. And my brother was such a talented... man, that he was able to, how shall I say it, negotiate my release."

I nodded, a heaviness descending into my chest. This was a far more intense conversation than I expected. "How did you avoid a forced or arranged marriage?"

She finally cracked a grin. "Other mafia men might do that to their sisters to gain clout or influence in a powerful family, but not Alessandro. I told him I wanted no part of that, and he respected my wishes." She leaned in and spoke with emphasis. "He knew I'd make his life a living hell if he forced me to marry someone I didn't love."

"I don't doubt that." She seemed quite formidable, but I was also proud of Ale.

My sweet, kind Ale. Taking care of his sister. It was almost easy to overlook his bloody past. Almost.

"This life, here in Miami," Lucy waved her hand around the balcony, "is seductive. I remember when he bought this place, for a price that shocked me. The real estate lady who handled the sale suggested he contact an interior designer. I'd have done it for free, but he insisted on hiring someone. Later he told me that it felt like he'd made it, that he could instantly have a beautiful home, like something out of a magazine. That we'd never have to struggle, like we did in Naples."

"So, you're not sure he'll actually give all this up." My spine sagged into the cushion.

"I'm sorry. I know he says he will. And he always does what he says. But when you come from where we did, and end up like this?" She inhaled. "It's difficult to give up. But I have hope, and I think you should, too. We will work on him, okay?"

A little smile crept across her lips, but I was feeling anything but secure or happy.

The vodka and orange juice began to curdle like two-week-old milk in my stomach.

“I have so many questions.” My tone is soft, almost wistful.

I didn’t want to hear about Ale’s brushes with death or her doubts about his future, and yet, Lucy might be my only access to the full, unfiltered account of his life. We all edit our own stories, and I suspected that Ale was keeping some of his from me.

She could be the key to truly understanding the man I’m falling for.

“I’ll answer whatever you want. Maybe not all tonight, though.” She winked. Her laugh was contagious.

“Okay, just one question right now?”

“Go ahead.”

“What was he like as a child?”

She opened her mouth, but her gaze flickered to the doorway, behind my shoulder.

“Are you telling all of my secrets?”

At the sound of Alessandro’s melodic, Italian-tinged accent, I whirled around to the sliding glass door, which we’d left open.

“You’re here!” I probably sounded a little too enthusiastic, but after everything I’d heard from his sister, and all the emotions swirling in me, I was ecstatic to see him. I rose and walked to him, wrapping my arms around him and placing a sloppy kiss on his neck.

“Someone’s a tipsy,” he said, kissing my temple.

“Maybe,” I mumbled, feeling a little lightheaded. That could’ve been from all the booze, or his nearness. He studied me with those piercing blue eyes and I felt my face grow warm.

That was another question I wanted to ask Lucy — who in his family had blue eyes? Hers were ink-black to match her

hair.

He led me back over to the sofa and I collapsed into it, while he sat between me and his sister. They kissed each other's cheeks, like Italians do.

“Well, this is a surprise. Lucy, you could've told me you were coming home today.”

“Change of plans. I hope you don't mind that I'll be here for a couple of nights before I go to New York.”

“Why would I mind?”

“Well, you and Giada are playing house. But I'm not sure you can handle both of us under one roof”

We stared at him, then at each other, and dissolved into laughter. I definitely liked Lucy.

He scowled and leaned over, taking his sister's glass of juice off the table and guzzling the rest. “Cazzo, Lucy. How much vodka did you put in this?”

That made us laugh even harder.

“Okay, enough partying, you two. We need to make some plans.”

“Yes, daddy,” I said in an exaggerated squeaky voice.

Lucy and I tried to maintain straight faces, but snorted soft laughs as his head ping-ponged from me to her. With a sigh, he stood.

“What are we doing for dinner? Did either of you drunks plan for that?”

“No,” I blurted.

“We were waiting for you,” Lucy added.

“Oh, so you wanna go out? Get pizza delivery?”

“No, we wanted you to cook. Pasta,” I said without thinking.

“You talking to me?” He affected a New York-style gangster accent, which sent Lucy and I into hysterics.

“Yes, we are talking to you. Get your ass in there and make us dinner,” Lucy said. “Vai. Vai. In the kitchen where you belong.”

He rubbed his forehead with his hand. “I’m probably the only mafia boss who’s ordered around by his sister and his girlfriend.”

I boozily waved my glass in the air. “You’re a much better cook than I am.”

Lucy nodded, scooting over and slinging an arm around me. “Better than I am, too.”

He stared at us, a smile spreading on his face. “The two of you together scare me a little.”

“As we should,” I joked.

“Now go. Cook. Let us know when it’s ready. Chop chop.” Lucy made a little hand gesture, which sent me into a fit of hysterics. “Actually, before you start, can you make us another vodka and orange juice?”

Ale shook his head, grinning. “Va bene. I know when I’m outnumbered.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

GIA

“DO YOU THINK I NEED TWO PACKS OF BASIL, OR THREE?” I held the plastic containers of the herbs in my hands and turned to Josh, the bodyguard assigned to me today.

We were in the grocery store, shopping for tonight’s dinner party with Ashley and Giorgio. I’d begged Ale to come with me, but he shook his head and said he had “things” to do today.

Maybe he did, but I also suspected that he wasn’t interested in food shopping.

Josh’s deep brown eyes stared at me with helpless anguish. I’d been driving him insane for the past hour with questions like this. “Uh, better get three, just in case?”

“Good idea,” I murmured.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t cook, I just didn’t feel confident in the kitchen. During college, I’d made a few of my mom and nonna’s Italian dishes for potlucks, and people had raved about them. But I much preferred takeout, or better, Ale’s pasta. He’d told me that he was too busy to cook for this dinner party, though, and said that since I’d invited our friends, I was going to organize the menu.

Fair enough.

And it wasn’t like I was doing anything else. I had three weeks before I was supposed to be in New York for grad

school orientation, so if I wasn't doing this today, I'd be lazing around the condo, or the pool, or ... I don't know what. Aside from Alessandro, being in Miami without a job or purpose was kind of boring, no matter what my best friend claimed. I wasn't ready to live a life of leisure and pool parties just yet.

So I'd decided to throw myself into this dinner and spend the day cooking and listening to music. I'd even called Judith and asked her how my mom would make the manicotti, and together, we cobbled a recipe that I could use. I was actually looking forward to it all.

My eyes scanned the paper list I'd brought along. "Okay, I have everything for the manicotti, the sauce, the tiramisu..." My voice faded when I saw what I'd scrawled at the bottom of the paper.

TEST

Oh, shit. I'd written that last night when I was in a panic, then pushed it out of my mind.

One of those tests.

I'd last had my period before the engagement party. In my defense, my period had always been irregular. Some months I got it, others, I didn't. It was never anything to worry about because I didn't have sex.

A pregnancy test.

But now, I did. And Ale and I had slipped up several times, most notably the night I'd killed Mickey. A shudder ran through me in the grocery store at the memory.

Could I be pregnant? Rarely had Ale finished inside me, but I knew that didn't always matter. I needed to be more careful, and I'd even scheduled an appointment with Planned Parenthood later this week to get a prescription for the birth control pill. It wasn't that I couldn't afford a private doctor; I just wanted to support Planned Parenthood's pro-choice mission.

But all that would change if I was pregnant. I hadn't told Ale any of this yet, figuring that I didn't want his overactive mind to worry. If he even suspected I was pregnant, he'd likely

never let me leave the condo and possibly swaddle me in bubble wrap.

“Hey, I need to grab one more thing.” I looked up at Josh.

“Lead the way.”

I pushed the full cart toward the feminine products aisle. Ignoring Josh, who was standing a few feet away, I scanned the products and reached for a box that said something about “digital results.” Casually, I tossed it in the cart, like I didn’t care.

Hopefully Josh thought I was grabbing a box of tampons, because I didn’t want Ale’s staff to gossip about me. It didn’t seem like he was paying attention.

It took several minutes to get through the checkout and load the bags into the SUV, and then ten minutes to return to the condo. When I walked in with Josh in tow, I thanked him for his help lugging in the groceries. He left, which meant I was alone with the dinner ingredients — and the pregnancy test.

Was now the time to take it? Or should I start the pasta sauce first? No one tells you the etiquette for pregnancy tests. I supposed there was no perfect time.

“Hey princess.” Alessandro emerged from a room he used as an office.

Oh. Maybe I wasn’t alone.

I greeted him with a hug and a big, deep kiss on the lips. He was wearing a black T-shirt and gray sweatpants, and his dark hair was ruffled.

“I’m glad you’re home,” he mumbled into my hair.

“Oh yeah? Did you miss me? I was only gone an hour.”

His hand worked into my hair, fisting my ponytail roughly. “I did. And that hot little selfie you sent from the grocery store didn’t help.”

I giggled into his neck. I’d forgotten that I’d sent a photo of me holding an eggplant, making a pouty, sexy face. Okay

and maybe I'd pulled my V-neck T-shirt down just an inch to show some cleavage.

"You get turned on by eggplants?" I teased.

"I get turned on by thinking of my eggplant between your tits." He scooped me up and hauled me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Ale! Stop! I need to put away the groceries and start the food for tonight—"

"Just a quickie." He carried me to the living room and tossed me roughly on the sofa.

"Wait! Where's your sister?"

"Gone until tonight. She left right before you came home. Take off your top and your bra."

"You are such a pig." I smiled as I said this, sitting up so I could strip. I took off my bottoms for good measure too. Meanwhile, he pulled his shirt off, then shoved his sweatpants down. His body never ceased to take my breath away, all that golden skin and miles of muscles.

"You've been waiting for me to get home with that hard-on?" I grinned.

He straddled my stomach and angled his cock over my chest, trailing it over my nipples. "Fuck yes."

"Such a pervert," I whispered, as my hand snaked between my legs to stroke my clit. I was getting wet and knew it wouldn't take long for me to orgasm. This was what Alessandro did to me, reduce me to my base instincts. Most of the time I didn't mind, like today. It made life more interesting, more exciting.

"I've been thinking about this for a half hour. Couldn't get anything done." He raised his palm to his mouth and licked, then rubbed the tip of his cock over my nipple. He stroked and rubbed himself over my breasts while staring at me with half-lidded, eyes. Then he dipped his head and kissed my mouth. Never once did I remove my fingers from my clit, and that edgy, needy feeling had overtaken my body.

“I want to cum first,” I whispered against his lips. “Please?”

He inhaled sharply. “I can’t resist you when you beg.”

“I want you to make me cum.”

By now he was devouring my left nipple. He lifted his head. “With my tongue or my fingers?”

I brushed my thumb over his lush mouth. “Your tongue.”

“Oh, fuck, I was hoping you’d say that.”

He didn’t bother kissing down my chest or over my belly. Usually he paused to nibble on my hips, or bite the inside of my thighs. Today, he went right to my pussy, diving in and licking and flicking with his tongue. I opened my legs further, setting one on the floor and the other on the back of the sofa. It was kind of awkward, but I didn’t care; all I wanted was that sweet, sweet release only Alessandro could provide.

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed with how good it felt to be so close to him. This sure was lust, but it was something deeper. It was caring, nurturing, *love*.

Roughly, he shoved two fingers inside while massaging my clit with his tongue. That did it for me, and I released all the pent-up tension, spasming and shuddering against his mouth. I gasped aloud a few times, opened my eyes, and saw him sitting up while slowly withdrawing his fingers.

We locked eyes and his hand went to his cock, slowly stroking.

“My turn,” I whispered.

Slowly, because I was still groggy from my orgasm, I moved and leaned into Alessandro. He sat normally on the sofa, like he was about to watch a movie. If that were the case, I would have snuggled into his side, but today, I sank to the floor, between his legs.

“My sweet princess. You always know what I want, don’t you?”

“Mmm-hmm,” I hummed, wrapping my hand around his cock.

He’d figured out that I actually enjoyed banter during sex, and even better, I loved when he praised me while I gave him head. It appealed to my inner, type-A overachiever side. Ale called it a “praise kink,” but I didn’t care what it was labeled. Just his words, in that accent, made me want to do anything he wanted.

Today he said everything that I loved. Sometimes he’d speak in Italian, always he’d talk in a low, growly tone that made my stomach flutter and my pussy wet. With my free hand, I stroked my clit, hoping I could wring out another orgasm.

“That’s my girl.”

“I know you can take my entire cock. Make me proud, princess.”

“Look at you. You know exactly how to use that naughty little mouth on my cock.”

It didn’t take long for me to orgasm again, and for him to put the back of his hand on my head, holding me in place while he exploded into my mouth.

I collapsed in a heap onto the cool, clean tile floor. He leaned back into the sofa and groaned.

“Fuck, that was so good.”

“Mmmm,” was all I could muster. “Crap, I need to put away the groceries.”

“I’ll help. Come on.” He held out a hand and pulled me to standing. We both tugged on our clothes.

“I wish we could take a nap.” I pouted.

“The dinner party was your idea, princess.” He kissed me on the forehead. “And I’m actually looking forward to it. I’ve got some things to discuss with Giorgio.”

“Okay. I’m going to wash up, and I’ll help put the groceries away in a minute.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “Did you get those chips I like?”

“I did indeed,” I called out as I shuffled to the bathroom, still feeling drowsy and relaxed after my two orgasms. Good lord, that man knew how to exhaust me physically. After washing up, I went back into the kitchen, where I found a scowling Alessandro leaning against the counter, his arms folded against his midsection.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, going to a bag and taking out an onion.

“What is *this*?” He reached for a box on the counter.

Oh, shit. *The pregnancy test.*

Chapter Fifty-Five

ALESSANDRO

“WHAT. THE. FUCK. IS. THIS?” I WAVED THE PREGNANCY TEST in the air, my blood pressure rising with each second that passed.

Her mouth fell open.

“Are you pregnant?” I was nearly shouting.

“I- I...” She pressed her hand to her throat.

“Well? When were you going to tell me?”

Gia burst into tears. “Why are you yelling?”

“I don’t know.” I tossed the box on the counter and ran a hand through my hair. “Why were you doing this in secret? Are you lying to me?”

“No, I was going to tell you today. Tonight. After the dinner party,” she cried. “I’m overwhelmed. Fuck, Ale, cut me some slack. My father betrayed me, I was engaged to a disgusting pedophile, I witnessed a mass shooting and I murdered a man. Oh, and I was kind of kidnapped. By you, the man I have fallen in love with. Just a few months ago I was a feminist college student who spent Saturday nights listening to terrible folk music at a coffeehouse with people who wore ugly shoes and smelled like body odor. Now I’m in a Miami penthouse and surrounded by people who have no body hair and who exist on cocaine and skinny margaritas. What the

fuck do you expect from me? That I should be happy and rational all the time? I barely know who I am anymore.”

She stomped down the hall and I heard the bedroom door slam. Christ. It physically pained me to think that Gia was hurting in any way. How could I take that pain away? And why did she bring up the body hair? What was that about? Sometimes Gia could be so confusing, but so could all women. I began to pace the living room.

After a few minutes, I went to the bedroom and knocked on the door. “Princess? Can I come in?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.”

I found her lying in bed, a pillow over her face, and I stretched out next to her.

“I’m sorry. I was irrational. I shouldn’t have yelled, I was just surprised.”

“And pissed to think you’d have a kid with me.”

I plucked the pillow off her face. “No. Not at all.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Giada. I would very much like to have a child with you. Not now, but if you are pregnant, we’ll deal with it.”

She rubbed her nose with her fingers. “Why do you love me?”

“What?” She was changing subjects so fast that I couldn’t keep up. My mind wasn’t at its sharpest after an orgasm.

“Why do you love me? Is it only physical? Because you like my tits and my ass? I don’t get it. I’m difficult, and sometimes a bitch and...”

I gathered her in my arms. “I love you because you’re a fighter. Because you desire a life that’s different than how you were raised. You’re like me. You want something more out of this fucked up world. I know you can be difficult. I don’t care. You’re worth every difficult second. What, you don’t think difficult people deserve love?”

“I dunno, maybe not,” she mumbled into my armpit.

“Sometimes we don’t know why we love another person, Gia. I don’t question it. You’re mine. I’m yours. It’s simple. And if you’re pregnant, we’ll have a beautiful child and try our hardest to raise the baby with our love. I just wish you’d tell me these things beforehand. I tend to blow up when I’m surprised or ambushed. I hate surprises.”

“Okay, that’s fair. I’m sorry.”

I kissed the top of my head, but my muscles still felt tense. What if Gia was pregnant? It would complicate our lives in so many ways...

“You’re going to—” I stopped myself, because I was about to insist that she take the test at this very second. I had to try not to be so domineering with her. “When were you planning to take the test? How many days are you late?”

She sat up and scooted off the bed. “Let’s get this over with. And I’m not sure. My period is all screwed up, it always has been. I have an appointment with a doctor later this week to go on the pill. Or to,” she paused to untie her ponytail and then retie it, a nervous tic she had, “confirm that I’m pregnant.”

I raked in a deep breath and sat up. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“I’ll go get the box.”

While she was in the kitchen, I sat on the side of the bed and tried to steady my heartbeat. Were we ready for a baby? Who the fuck knew? Was anyone ever ready? Fear welled inside me.

She returned and tore open the box and the package. “There are two tests here.”

When she walked into the bathroom adjoining the bedroom I followed. Gia paused at the doorway and stared at me, her hand on the door like she was going to close it. “What are you doing?”

“Watching you take the test.”

“You’re going to watch me pee on a stick?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Sure. Why not?”

“I’d prefer to pee alone. Boundaries.”

“Gia, what are you worried about? Ten minutes ago, I was tongue deep in your pussy.” I swear to God, I would never understand women.

She winced. “Please? Just let me squat in peace?”

A sigh leaked out of my mouth. I couldn’t fight every battle. “Okay, fine.”

She shut the door and I stood there awkwardly. It felt a little too creepy to hover near the door, so I paced the room, eventually sliding open the glass door to the balcony. I attempted to focus on the ocean, but it was impossible because I felt a thick, pulsing lump in my throat, as if my heart had suddenly migrated there.

“Hey,” Gia’s voice competed with the waves as she stepped out onto the balcony.

I turned and stared, suddenly unable to say a word.

“I peed on it.” She brandished the white plastic stick in the air. “Now we need to wait three minutes. It has a digital screen and will tell us the results. What’s wrong? You look weird.”

She plunked down on a lounge sofa and set the stick on the table near her legs. I went over and sat near her. “I dunno, I’m kinda...”

“Scared?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Terrified.”

We didn’t touch as we sat there, the test lying on the table. The silence made my gut churn, and from somewhere on the beach, the sound of a woman’s laughter wafted in the air. I checked my watch.

“Okay, let’s look,” Gia finally said.

I lunged for the stick and held it so we both could peer at the little LED window.

NOT PREGNANT

“Oh god,” I sank back into the cushion. My muscles loosened.

“Fuck, that was a lot,” she whispered, folding herself into my body.

I clutched her hair, pressing my lips to her forehead and keeping them there. “Do you want to have children now?”

She sat up and shook her head vigorously. “Do you?”

“Not really. I’d rather wait until things are settled.” The idea of raising a child in the Mafia world made me uncomfortable. I didn’t need to explain myself to Gia; she knew exactly what I meant.

We both nodded. Something imperceptible had shifted between us, something important. Something real and honest. Something that brought us closer together. It felt like we’d gone through a journey together, and come out the other side stronger.

“We need to be more careful, Ale. I’m going on the pill this week.”

“Yes. I think that’s wise.”

She melted back into me, and we sat there, inhaling the salt air and letting the humidity seep into our pores. She sniffled a little, as if she was crying again.

“Gia?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.” I said it in Italian, because it felt more important, more serious, in my native tongue.

“I love you too, Alessandro.”

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

GIA

I opened the door with a flourish. “Welcome...”

Alessandro finished my sentence. “To our home.”

To our home. I liked the sound of that. All afternoon, since the pregnancy test, Alessandro hadn’t left my side. He’d

helped me make the manicotti and the tiramisu, and we spent hours cooking while singing along to music, dancing and laughing.

I'd had so much fun that I almost didn't want the dinner to happen. For some reason, after that pregnancy scare and our conversation afterward, I felt closer to him. We held the same opinions about children, which was a big deal. Most mafia guys wanted their girlfriends or wives to be knocked up as soon as possible. He said he didn't want kids right away, and I believed him.

And even though he hadn't talked about getting out of the business recently, I knew it was something he was working on.

But this wasn't the moment to think of any of that. I threw my arms around Ashley, whose hair was in a severe, high ponytail. She looked like a Bratz doll come to life, with her little pink shorts and her half-shirt barely concealing her chest. I'd always been envious of how she flaunted her sexuality.

On the other hand, I was in a long batik-print green dress, loose and flowy, boho and sweet. I gave zero fucks, and from the way Alessandro kept grabbing my ass, he seemed to like it as well. (Also perhaps because I wasn't wearing panties).

"You look smokin' hot," I whispered in Ash's ear.

She laughed. "And you look like an Amish girl."

"That's the style these days. Amish chic."

Laughing, we broke apart, and Giorgio greeted me with a polite kiss on both cheeks. Ale did the same to Ashley.

"Something smells incredible," my best friend piped up.

"That would be our manicotti," I said, more than a little proud.

"Gia's manicotti. I was only her assistant," Ale said. "Let's have a pre-dinner drink."

We all went into the living room, and Alessandro poured us all gin and tonics. It all felt so...*adult*. Ale carried himself with a casual grace, and for a moment, everything appeared so normal. Like we were a young, professional couple having

friends over in our beautiful condo. It was everything I wanted, except the obvious.

“Alessandro, I’d like to talk with you about a business proposition. Could we speak in private?” Giorgio asked, gesturing to the balcony.

And there it was. The thing I didn’t want.

Ale looked to me, with eyes that said, *be patient, princess*. It was remarkable how I could read his expressions. “Sure, sure. I suspect Gia and Ashley want to catch up anyway.”

“I want a tour of the condo,” Ashley said in a high-pitched, girlish voice. “You two go do your man stuff outside. We’ll be good little girls in here.”

Giorgio snickered, and I wondered if the two of them were into some daddy-daughter kink. I silently shuddered at the thought and steered Ashley down the hall. “We need to monitor the dinner anyway. Let’s reconvene in a half hour back in the living room.”

She oohed and ahed as I took her into the office, the guest room and the spare room that was empty except for my yoga mat.

“So much sunlight, and look at this view!” the room was bathed in the fading sunlight of the day, and even I could imagine how I’d set up an adorable reading nook here.

“If I were to stay in Miami, I’d probably make this my study area-slash-office,” I said.

Ashley clapped her hands. “So you are thinking of staying! Yes! Please?”

I sighed and led her into our bedroom, then flopped on the bed. For a moment, it felt like we were teens, back at my father’s house. “I’m not sure what to do.”

She stared at herself in the full length mirror, adjusting her ponytail. “Have you talked it over with Alessandro?”

“I haven’t.” For the next five minutes while she dug around in her purse and reapplied her lip liner and lipstick, I told her about the pregnancy scare.

“You two would have such beautiful babies,” she sighed.

I groaned. “It’s too soon. I’m twenty-one.”

“Twenty-two in September. If you don’t go to New York, we can celebrate here. I know just the place in Wynwood.” Ashley sat on the edge of the bed and rummaged further into the depths of her bag.

How in the hell had she found the time to learn every hip spot in the city? That was Ash, while I had been going to the same Starbucks every day on the corner. I had to face facts: I was basic.

I sat up, next to her. “True. I don’t know. I’m really conflicted.”

I watched as Ashley extracted the same little fruit-shaped case she’d showed me the previous day. She popped it open and took out a pill. “Zanny?”

“No, I don’t want a Xanax,” I said crossly. “Jesus, Ash, what is with you? First coke, now Xanax? What the fuck?”

She popped it in her mouth and washed it down with gin, shrugging.

“I don’t think you should be taking that with booze.”

“Please, Gia. I know what I’m doing.”

Visions of my mother, dead in a hotel room in this very city, came to mind. Oh. Maybe *that* was why I was hesitant to live here in Miami full time. I’d never considered that. I’d have to ponder this later and discuss with Alessandro.

“Wanna bump?”

“No,” I cried. “You know how I feel about drugs because of my mom.”

She let out a sigh. “Oh, right. Well, I’m not doing coke tonight. I just want to be nice and mellow.”

“But, Ash, why do you have to take anything to be mellow? Can’t you enjoy reality as-is?”

She sipped from her drink, her perfect pink manicure against the crystal glass looking like something out of a magazine ad. “Not everyone is as capable as you in facing reality, Gia.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I paused. “Wait. Is Giorgio being a dick? Do you not want to marry him? Is that it?”

She sighed. “No, he’s fine. He’s a bit controlling, but they all are. Like Alessandro is, you know?”

Was Alessandro controlling? He sometimes seemed a bit possessive and I bristled against that, but even I had to admit that the extra security he insisted on was necessary. “Yeah,” I said slowly.

“It’s a different life, and this is my way of coping. My way of having fun. Okay? Please don’t worry about me.” Her giant eyes fixed on me with a pleading expression.

“I’m always going to worry about you. About us,” I said. “We’re never going to be fully equal in this world. We’re always going to be decorations, cooks, maids, housewives, eye candy.”

And as soon as the words came out of my mouth, all of my doubts rushed back. What was I doing here, in Miami, with Alessandro?

You love him, a little voice whispered.

Never did I imagine that love would be so fucking complicated.

“I don’t mind the eye candy part at all.” Ash let out a sparkling laugh.

Chapter Fifty-Six

ALESSANDRO

“GIA IS QUITE THE COOK. *COMPLIMENTI.*” GIORGIO TIPPED HIS champagne glass in her direction, and I beamed. “She’s going to make you quite the wife, Alessandro.”

I stretched, lowering an arm around Gia’s shoulders. “Gia has many talents, and I’m not sure I’ve seen all of them.”

“You haven’t,” she said, and cackled. Ashley joined in.

“Seriously, like I didn’t even know that Gia could cook like that. Where did you learn how to make manicotti?” Ashley said.

My beautiful girl shrugged. “Don’t you remember? Mom and Nonna used to make it. I called Judith and hashed out the recipe with her. It was easy. And Alessandro helped.”

“You only let me chop the garlic.”

“Maybe you should open a swanky restaurant here in Miami,” Ashley continued. “That way you could be here with me.”

“I’d invest in that.” Giorgio finished the rest of his champagne.

Gia stared at me. “I was thinking business school first. Or something. University of Miami is a pretty good school, you know.”

“Not women’s studies?” I asked.

Gia lifted a shoulder. “Not sure. I’m rethinking a lot of things.”

Was she thinking of staying in Miami? Warmth spread through me at the thought. “How about we switch to wine? I have an amazing 2012 Brunello di Montalcino.”

Even Gia looked impressed. I wasn’t a wine guy, but a business associate had given me the bottle and raved about its credentials or vintage or whatever the fuck. I was only parroting what he said because it sounded like I knew what I was talking about.

“That sounds perfect, sweetie,” Gia purred, lightly scratching my neck with her nails.

“I’ll go grab the bottle and some glasses.”

I rose and went into the kitchen. A few minutes later, Ashley appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, hey,” I said.

Ashley handed her empty champagne glass to me. From the dining room, I heard Gia’s voice, and the strains of Giorgio’s laugh.

I reached for another bottle of red, feeling relaxed. This dinner had gone better than I anticipated. While Gia and Ashley were doing girl shit in the bedroom before dinner, Giorgio and I talked on the balcony.

He’d proposed investing in a particularly lucrative ecstasy deal with a Miami guy named Griffin Davis. Drugs weren’t my thing, but this seemed like an interesting proposal. The only trouble was that Giorgio wanted to bundle it with a shipment of cocaine, and that wasn’t something I — or this Griffin guy — were interested in. Giorgio said we should all have a sit-down to discuss.

I reached for the bottle of wine and handed it to Ashley. “Want to bring this out to the table? I’ll carry out the glasses.”

“Sure, thanks. Um, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” I opened a cabinet, extracting two glasses. This was probably going to be some engagement

party shit. Probably advice on what she should get Gia as a gift or something proper like that.

I set the glasses on the counter and got two more.

“This is a little awkward,” Ashely paused to laugh. “But do you know where I can get any coke?”

A nervous cough exploded from my throat. “Excuse me?”

“Cocaine. Powder. Like a gram.” She smiled, all businesslike, as if she’d just asked me the price of a new dress.

Holy fuck. I’d suspected Ashley had done a few bumps that night at my strip club, but this was weird. “Why don’t you ask your boyfriend? I’m sure he knows some people.”

After all, Giorgio was the one trying to get me to buy into a multi-million drug deal. Something I still wasn’t sure about — and was getting more uneasy of by the minute.

“Let’s just say Giorgio and I aren’t seeing eye to eye on my desires.” Ashley leaned against the counter and grinned.

I quickly washed my hands. “Absolutely fucking not.”

“Why? You don’t know anyone?”

A snort came out of my mouth. Cocaine dealers were almost as ubiquitous as DJs in Miami. Me? I’ve never liked the stuff. Tried it once on my twenty-first birthday in New York, never did it again. “It’s not that. I don’t think Giorgio would appreciate me giving his fiancée drugs.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Jesus, you made men are so into protocol and tradition.”

“Well, that’s the whole point of the mafia, right?” I flipped on the faucet and washed my hands furiously, wishing she’d leave the kitchen. An uneasy heaviness settled into my stomach. Should I tell Gia about this? How would she react? I wasn’t even sure if Gia did drugs, but I suspected she wasn’t the type.

Then again, it didn’t seem like Ashley did, either. But you never knew.

“I’m not going to tell Giorgio. It’ll be our little secret. I won’t even tell Gia.”

“Secrets really aren’t my thing, especially when it involves women.”

She sighed and grabbed a half-empty bottle of gin, staring at the label. Then she raised her head and stared at me defiantly. “Look, Alessandro, I’m not going to fuck around here. I want a gram, and other than Giorgio and Gia, you’re the only one I know here in Miami. I don’t want to buy it off any rando at a bar, and anyone else I meet will almost certainly tell my fiancé.”

I reached for the towel to dry my hands. “And why are you so sure I won’t?”

She smirked. “Because I know something about you and Gia. A secret. One that you don’t want circulating in your, well, *our*, little mafia world. It involves someone named M-I-C-K-E-Y...”

Her voice launched into a singsong of the Disney tune, and my vision blurred, red with anger.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

ALESSANDRO

IF THERE WAS ONE THING I'VE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS, IT was this: maintaining a stone-face when you're raging inside with the heat of a thousand suns isn't easy. Like I was doing right now. A metallic taste swirled on my tongue, trapping the taste of anger in my mouth.

Tonight, as I looked at Ashley, I reminded myself to be cool. Be collected. Act like I did around hardened mafia bosses, because hell, she was playing like one with this blackmail bullshit. She was wearing a self-assured smirk, but her eyes were narrow slits. She shifted her feet as she fidgeted with the corkscrew.

"What do you know about Mickey?" I kept my tone even as I rinsed a glass under the faucet.

Her voice popped out with a little snort. "Everything. I know how you and Gia hooked up on the island."

"Mmm-hmm." I pretended to be half-listening.

"And how Gia shot him while you were gone." She stopped fiddling with the corkscrew and ran a hand over her long, platinum ponytail.

This bitch. *I don't think I've ever hated a woman so much.* If Gia and Giorgio weren't sitting in the living room, I'd kill her on the spot. Why the fuck did Gia tell her *anything*?

"You don't have a response for that, do you?"

I dried the glass with a cloth and set it in the cabinet. “Actually, I do. You’d prefer to see your best friend murdered rather than go without a few lines of blow? That’s pretty pathetic.”

She rolled her eyes, probably thinking I was a fucking idiot. “I’m not planning on implicating Gia. I’m going to pin it on you. I’m sure there are a lot of people who would love this information.”

“And you don’t think whoever kills me won’t kill Gia?”

She shook her head. “No. I’ll get Giorgio to protect her. And anyway, Gia wants out of this life, and the only thing standing in her way of being free is you.”

The buzzing anger inside me stilled. As awful as Ashley was, there was a kernel of truth in that statement. Gia’s life probably would be different without me. Probably better, according to most regular people. She’d be able to live something closely resembling a normal existence, not one marked by corruption and death. Even though I’d promised to leave the life for her, it wasn’t that easy, or quick. Gia didn’t realize that yet.

“Why not let Gia make her own decisions?” I ground out, incredulous that this one ... child ... would ruin everything for me and Gia, just when we were in a good place.

“Because she’s dickmatized by you. You’ve become her everything. She doesn’t even realize how screwed she is. Trust me, even I know she’s better off without you. Like you’re going to leave the mafia. Please. I’d rather see her with one of Giorgio’s friends, an older guy who trades fraudulent stocks or some shit, one who’s not so violent and crude.” Ashley sipped from her wine glass, staring at me with the boldness of youth.

The idea of Gia being with anyone else made the vibrating rage return. I inhaled deep and considered my next move. In my peripheral vision, I spotted a knife. No. I couldn’t stab her. Not here. Not now. I studied Ashley, whose lips parted, then formed a shit-eating grin. Her fingertips were long and thin, that of a girl’s. She was so damn young. Too young for any of this.

“I’ll get the coke for you,” I informed her calmly.

She smirked and stuck her tongue out at me. “Good boy.” I gritted my teeth as she sashayed out of the room, leaving a cloud of cloying perfume behind.

I moved through the next few motions mechanically. Opened the expensive wine. Allowed it to breathe for a few minutes. Took a few deep breaths myself. Clenched and unclenched my fists. I *could* pull Giorgio aside and tell him about Ashley’s obvious addiction, although I suspected he was already aware of it.

If I did that, what would happen if Ashley then started blabbing about Mickey? Giorgio wouldn’t care, mostly because he wasn’t Mickey’s biggest fan. But there were some Mickey loyalists in my crew who were reluctantly my men, and they *would* care. I was more worried about them staging a coup than Giorgio’s opinion. All Giorgio wanted was money, and he didn’t give a shit who was alive or dead...

Except, perhaps, his fiancée. I suspected he wanted *her* alive. There was a reason why her father arranged marriage to Giorgio.

As I mulled this dilemma, I carried the bottle to the living room, where Gia and Ashley were dancing and laughing in a corner, while Giorgio stared at his phone.

“More wine!” Gia cried, shimmying over and planting a kiss on my cheek. “Ashley and I just decided we’ll do this every week. Next time at her house. These dinner parties are fun, and I love to cook. What do you think, Ale? I’m going to help Ash with lasagna next week!”

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Of course, princess, that sounds excellent,” I murmured. The words tasted like day-old cigarettes in my mouth. All I wanted was to bottle the happiness on Gia’s beautiful face right now, but was pissed because the moment was tainted due to her evil best friend.

Next to the sliding glass door, Ashley swayed to the beat of the techno music playing in the background, probably

emboldened with the thought that she put one over on me. Little did she know the plan I'd settled on.

“Thank you,” Gia cooed. “Did you hear that, Ashley? We've got ourselves a weekly date!”

Ashley whooped and danced over to Gia, and they hugged with tipsy, girlish exaggeration. Above all, I must keep Gia safe — and with me. If that meant eliminating her best friend, so be it.

I bit back my rage and poured the scarlet-colored wine into the glasses. My beautiful girl didn't yet realize that her best friend would be dead before the month is over. All I needed to figure out was how to kill Ashley without Gia — or Giorgio — finding out that I was the murderer.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

GIA

“OH MY GOD, THAT IS SO LOUD. YOU GUYS, COME ON...”

I feigned exasperation at Alessandro and Giorgio, who were sitting on the sofa and watching a replay of last weekend’s recent Formula One race. We finished a few bottles of wine and Ale just brought out another. Then he and Gio started talking about the race, and all conversation ground to a halt as the men turned on the TV and became transfixed by the shiny cars.

The roar of the crowd, the roar of the engines and the roar of my blood all happened simultaneously as I sat on the sofa. Guys loved the weirdest shit, I swear. The cars sounded like angry bees through the speakers, while Ale and Gio sported all the excitement of six-year-old boys.

“Men. You can’t live with them, can’t kill them,” Ashley said in a slurred tone.

“We can’t help it, Dante Annunziata’s winning.” Ale gestured wildly at the screen.

“He’s Italian, so he’s our guy,” Gio offered in a helpful tone.

I sent the men silent, telepathic curses. For a minute or two, I watched as they argued over who was the better driver in another circuit, Fernando Alonso or Lewis Hamilton. I couldn’t take anymore, so I turned to Ash and grinned. “Let’s

go out on the balcony. That way we won't have to yell to be heard over the roar of the motors. We can talk in peace."

"Engines, not motors, princess," Ale teased.

"Whatever," I laughed, as he swatted at my ass. I leaned in to whisper at his ear. "I love you."

We grabbed the half-full bottle and our glasses and slid the glass door open. Once Ash was out, I shut the door tightly, so the strains of souped-up cars were replaced by the lull of the nearby ocean waves. The scent of salt and seaweed and the night sand hung in the humid air, mixed with my perfume.

"That is so much better. God, I love this balcony. It's beautiful in the day or the night." I sighed contentedly and sat next to Ash on the lounge sofa. We were in the semi-darkness, the entire terrace bathed in the glow of the lights in the living room. I was pleasantly buzzed, and couldn't stop smiling.

The balcony was a wide expanse of concrete with views to the east, as broad and sweeping as the Atlantic Ocean. There was a full wall that ran along the whole width of the balcony, and it was made of glass, giving one the illusion of being suspended in air.

"I was thinking..." I said in a dreamy voice.

"Never a good thing." When I look over, Ash was holding her little pill container and shaking out a small capsule.

"Goodness, Ash. You're really into the substances tonight. You might want to slow down." That was the only thing harshing my buzz tonight: her drug use. It reminded me way too much of my mother, or at least what my father had told me about her. "I'm worried about you."

She washed the pill down with wine. "I'm fine. Why do you worry so much?"

I sipped my drink and ignored her bratty voice, not wanting to ruin the wonderful evening. "Something Gio said during dinner gave me an idea. Remember when he and Ale were talking about deferred compensation and stocks during dinner?"

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t ever listen when Gio talks business.”

Funny, I always listened when Ale talked business, but I didn’t tell her that. “Well, it wasn’t what they were talking about. It was that word. Deferred. What if I defer going to grad school for a year, and stay here? I can still do that, with no penalty. Honestly, I’m not sure I’m in a frame of mind to study and embark on intense schoolwork now.”

Ash’s eyes fluttered shut, then snapped open. “That would be incredible, Gia. You could stay here with me. We could party together every night.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but yeah, we could hang out a lot. Go riding, explore all the art in the city, maybe volunteer at a women’s shelter. Ooh, maybe we could take some Cuban cooking classes!” Now I was getting excited at the thought. Maybe my earlier conversation with Ale, and our pregnancy scare, had flipped a switch in me. He’d handled the entire near-crisis so well, so maturely. With kindness and love.

The idea of staying here for a little while was growing on me. Tonight’s dinner, and the easy, breezy normalcy, showed me that a real life in Miami was possible. I even liked Gio, and previously wasn’t sure I would.

“Or we could go to the spa, hang out at the beach, and shop in the Design District,” Ash said.

I snickered. It was funny. I grew up with her in Ocala, and we were besties mostly because our fathers were in the same line of work. I was shipped off to boarding school, then went away for college. Because of that, I only saw Ash on vacations and summers, and until this year, hadn’t realized how different we had become.

“What?” she said in a cross tone. “Why are you laughing?”

“It’s funny how different we are.”

“I guess. Listen, I love that idea of you staying. I can also introduce you to some of Gio’s friends.”

I turned to her and squinted. “Hunh? Why?”

She smirked and raised an eyebrow. “You’re not married yet, or engaged. So you should keep your options open.”

“What?” My eyes practically popped out of my head. “You know how much I love Alessandro.”

“Yeah, but you don’t like his line of work. You’ve said that a million times.” She studied her nails, her eyes half-lidded. Did she even know what she was talking about, or was she that fucked up?

“I don’t, but...” I had to admit that in the day-to-day, living here like this wasn’t so bad. And a little flame had awakened in me since that meeting with the Palermos. My father had spent decades building his business, and had many legitimate holdings. Would it be right to throw that all away — or allow Ale to control it?

“But you could do better, with a man who wasn’t so, I dunno, connected to the street. Gio has a bunch of hot older friends. Stockbroker-hedge fund types. They’re legit, sort of, like everyone’s sort of legit in Miami. We could totally introduce you to them.”

I reared back and recoiled. “Eww. No. Ale’s six years older and that’s enough for me. No offense, but like, I don’t have a daddy fetish like you.”

She giggled. “I know. It’s naughty. But I love it.”

I held up my hand and grinned. “More power to you. I have all I need in Alessandro.”

“He’s smokin’ hot, that’s for sure. I just don’t know about him.”

I screwed up my face and took another long sip of my wine. “This is a change in attitude. How come?”

“I dunno. He’s just so...coarse. He wasn’t raised like either of us.”

“Ash, that’s a privileged thing to say. He grew up poor in Naples and worked so hard to get what he has now. Even before Mickey, he was successful.”

“Successful at killing people.”

I was about to retort with something harsh when her eyes shut, and her head lolled to one side. Reaching over, I grabbed the wine glass out of her hand before it fell, and shook her leg. A stab of alarm shot through my chest. “Ash? Ash? Are you okay?”

“Hunh? Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Just tired. I think I wanna go home.” She weaved when she stood, and looked like if a stiff wind blew, she’d topple over.

“That’s a good idea. C’mon.” I threaded my hand into hers and gently walked her inside. I’d definitely have to chat with her when she was sober, because this shit was scary. Maybe Ale would have some ideas on how to approach her.

Ale turned the TV off as we walked inside.

“Daddy, I want to go home,” Ash said in a baby voice to Gio. She shuffled to him and folded herself into his lap.

Daddy? Ewwww. I fought the urge to gag, and glanced at Ale. His eyes were wide and he was doing that thing where he tried to smile and frown at the same time, like a constipated clown. I had to cough to avoid dissolving into hysterics.

“My girl’s sleepy,” Gio boomed. “Time to go.”

Ale stood and clapped his hands. “It’s been great having you both, looking forward to next week.”

Gio and Ash also climbed to their feet, and Ash leaned against him and snorted softly, her eyes still half-shut. “I’m sure you are.”

Weird. Why would she say that? I didn’t think she had any concept of the things coming out of her mouth. Poor thing. She really needed help. Maybe after the engagement party she could go away to treatment somewhere.

There was an awkward pause, and we all shuffled to the door. We gave Ash and Gio quick hugs, and we opened the door, where their bodyguard was sitting near Ale’s guy. After saying our final goodbye, we shut the door and stared at each other.

I let out a breath. “Whew, that was a lot at the end. Ashley’s really messed up.”

Wrapping my arms around Ale, I melted into his muscular body.

“I love you so much.” His voice quivered as he said the words in my ear. Now he was being weird. Was there something about tonight that was making everyone act strange? Was it a full moon?

“I love you too.” I brushed the back of his neck with my fingertips, feeling his soft hair between my fingers. I walked my fingertips up to his ear, caressing the shape of it gently. His skin was warm and familiar. In his arms, I was safe and protected. Comforted and loved.

That’s it. I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to defer grad school for a year. Give this, us, a chance to blossom. And the best time to tell Ale is in bed. Only this time, we’ll use a condom...

I pressed my lips to his cheek. “Sweetie, I’m going to clean up quick and I’ll meet you in the bedroom, okay?”

He held me away from his body, his hands gripping my upper arms. Something about the way he raked in a big breath made me study his face closely. His expression was pinched, troubled, anguished.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” I caressed his face with my hands.

He let out a long breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled. Before he spoke, it seemed like he took a moment to muster up his courage. His voice was barely audible as he said, “Giada.”

I’m terrified by the unfamiliar tone in his voice, and I blinked. My mood has gone from secure and safe, to edgy and afraid, within seconds.

“What?” I whispered.

“Princess. We need to talk.”

Chapter Fifty-Nine

ALESSANDRO

GIA LOOKED AT ME WITH BIG, FEARFUL EYES. “ABOUT WHAT? Us?”

I opened my mouth, but the words refused to come out. This was probably the most difficult conversation I’d ever had, would ever have. This threatened to end our relationship, and my heart slammed against my chest so hard that I wanted to press my hands to my ribcage to keep it from exploding. I shut my mouth and swallowed hard. Initially I wasn’t going to tell Gia what I was planning with Ashley, but I knew I had to.

For better or worse.

“Alessandro?” Her sharp tone was a contrast to her eyes, which had turned red and watery.

“Ashley. She...” I managed to say.

Gia’s entire body relaxed. “Oh God. Ash? Ale, she’s a mess. She’s doing a lot of drugs. Pills, coke. She was snorting all night and took a pill. Right in front of me. Can you believe that? Pfft. I’m going to have a talk with her this week and encourage her to get help. Like maybe rehab after her engagement party. I’m really worried about her.”

Gia broke out of my embrace and walked into the kitchen, still talking. The empty wine bottles sat on the counter, and Gia murmured that those would need to be recycled. I allowed her to talk, not wanting to ruin everything, knowing that I eventually would with one simple sentence.

There was still time to spare Gia. But, no. I couldn't keep this from the woman I loved. If she found out later that I offed Ashley, Gia would not only cut my balls off, but feed them to me — or worse. I had no doubts about that. Plus, I didn't want to keep secrets from her. She deserved to know what her bitch of a friend was doing to us.

“Ale, I guess the other thing you could do is talk to Gio. He seems like a decent guy, maybe a little pervy with that whole Daddy thing. Wasn't that hilarious? But yeah, maybe he could help. He's a smart man, he must know what she's doing. Or do you think he likes being called Daddy? Goodness. Ashley is a totally different person than when we were young. I'd probably never be friends with her now if I just met her, we're like oil and water in some ways. It's like she takes more risks—”

“Gia, she asked me for cocaine.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets.

Gia's face was a mask of disgust, the empty wine bottle in her hand suspended in mid-air. “What? That's fucked up. Ugh, I'm so sorry. She's completely out of control. I'm going to talk to her first thing tomorrow. How can I convince her to go away to a treatment program? How does one do that with their oldest friend?”

I shook my head. “You don't understand. She asked me to get her cocaine and said if I didn't, she would tell people that I killed Mickey.”

Gia gasped and the wine bottle slipped from her grip. It fell, almost as if in slow motion, to the ceramic tile floor while we locked eyes. When it hit, it exploded in a thousand pieces, with little splatters of blood-colored wine spreading across the floor like crimson raindrops in a pristine lake.

Gia didn't move. She stood, frozen, amidst the shards of glass in her pretty pink dress. I glanced down at her feet. Thankfully she was wearing sandals, but I spotted a small sliver of glass on her ankle. And a telltale trickle of blood.

“Princess, don't move. You're bleeding a little. Let me help you.”

Her mouth opened, and stayed open. Sliding some of the larger shards aside with my foot, I gingerly swept her into my arms and carried her to the sofa, then stomped to the bathroom for peroxide, tweezers, cotton balls and a bandage.

When I returned to the living room, Gia was still reclining, staring up at the ceiling as if dazed.

I sat at her feet and inspected her ankle. “It’s not too bad. Just a little sting. Hang on.”

With the precision of a surgeon, I plucked the glass from her flesh. Another trickle of bright red blood seeped from the cut, and I quickly mopped it up with the cotton. “Does it hurt?”

“Not really.” Her voice was small and quiet.

I cleaned the wound then bandaged her up, dreading the conversation to come. I needed to stall, to think, to give it time for the implications to sink into Gia’s brain. My hand went to her other, uninjured leg, and I gently caressed it.

“I’ll go clean up the kitchen.”

“No.” She sat up, her eyes no longer clouded with shock.

“Gia, your leg—”

“It’s a small cut. Jesus, Ale. My foot wasn’t chopped off.” She maneuvered sideways on the sofa, so she was facing me. I angled my body toward her, dreading what was to come.

“Tell me everything that Ashley said and did. When did she say this to you? Tonight?”

I nodded and recounted how she’d come into the kitchen while I was grabbing the bottle of wine.

Gia’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you two were in there a while. I figured you were discussing her engagement party or something.”

“I wish,” I snorted. “She asked me to get her cocaine, then told me if I didn’t, she’d tell everyone I killed Mickey. Said you told her everything about what happened with us.”

Gia inhaled a sharp breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m sorry. I thought I could trust her. Fuck. I was really out of my mind when I came back from the island, around my dad’s funeral. Most of the time I was pretty drunk. I fucked up. Bad. I told her everything. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m...”

I swallowed, not knowing how to respond. “I told her that if she said anything, it would put you in danger, that if people found out and I was killed, a rival family or whoever took my place would claim you because of your father’s assets. She said she’d get Giorgio to help you, and essentially would find you protection with one of his rich friends.”

Gia’s eyes snapped open, and I’d never seen such a look in her eyes, not even when she was talking about Mickey. The expression scared me, and that’s saying a lot.

“That fucking cunt.”

I paused for a beat, soaking in Gia’s rage. “There’s a couple of things we could do. We could give her the coke and let her burn herself out, tell Gio that she has a problem and encourage her to get clean and hope for the best. Or we could not give her the drugs and let me handle the consequences, allow me to take the fall for both of us. But the best course of action would be to—”

“No,” she interrupted in a cold tone, jumping to her feet and pointing at me. “No way. Nope. Absolutely fucking not.”

I reared back, shocked at the flinty expression on her face, the sheer anger that sharpened every one of her beautiful features. She was still gorgeous but had suddenly morphed into someone else. Someone incredibly dangerous, so much that even I felt a pang of fear.

“Okay, then...” I hedged.

“There’s only one solution. Ashley’s going to die.”

Chapter Sixty

GIA

I THINK I MIGHT HAVE SHOCKED ALESSANDRO. OR POSSIBLY frightened him. Because he was staring at me with a horrified expression. He looked tired, his black hair in disarray, his blue eyes haunted. I could smell him, a hint of wine and spice. Why did this have to unfold tonight, right when I was going to tell Ale that I was staying in Miami with him?

I continued raging, the words spitting from my mouth. “What? What else can we do? That fucking bitch. Yeah, this is my fault, but she’s been my closest friend since we were six. She’s not supposed to spill my secrets. Under any circumstances. The things I know about her, things I’ve never told anyone.” I could feel the blood in my veins heating at all the things Ash and I had shared over the years.

Ale was silent, probably allowing me to rant for several more minutes. I paced and yelled, tugged at my hair and ignored the sting from the shard of glass in my ankle. Probably I looked like a madwoman, but I didn’t care. Anger burned like an inferno in my gut.

My best friend had betrayed me in the worst way. And she was threatening my relationship. “It’s one thing for her to be an addict and ask you for drugs. That’s bad enough, but understandable. I could overlook that and try to help her. But to blackmail you? To potentially put my man in a situation where he might be killed? No. No mercy.”

A little smile crept on Ale’s face. “Wow.”

“What?” I scowled at him.

“I... didn’t expect any of this from you.” He spoke slowly, as if he was choosing his words carefully so he wouldn’t set me off further. “I’ll admit that killing her was my first thought, too. I was just going to do it, and not tell you. But I figured that would be worse.”

I nodded, slowly, as if my entire head was surrounded in fog. “I would’ve been pissed if you hadn’t told me.”

I sank next to him, the weight of what we were discussing suddenly heavy. My entire felt tight and tense. The sensation began just beneath my rib cage and radiated up; an icy cold that pooled in my belly. Then it moved upward to my chest, upward to my throat, upward to my lips, that quivered with sheer rage. It was as if I swallowed an anvil of hate, and it was all Ashley’s fault.

Or was it mine? Regardless, I had to clean up this mess, and there was only one solution.

Ashley, my best friend, had to die. We had to eliminate the threat she posed to me, Ale, and our relationship.

A surging sob clawed its way into my throat and I swallowed it away. “We need to come up with a plan. Right now.”

And so, after sweeping the shards of glass away in the kitchen, we did just that. We stayed up all night, talking, arguing and planning. The hours passed quickly and as dawn approached, we stepped onto the balcony to watch the sun rise. As we sat on the same sofa where Ashley and I had been just hours earlier, my legs pressed against Ale’s as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Are you sure about all this? As I said, I can take the fall. Take the consequences.”

I sat up and stared at him. The warm glow of the sunrise over the ocean hit his face and softened his sharp cheekbones, kissed his beautiful, razor-like jaw.

“You’d be willing to potentially die for me?” I asked in a whisper.

He nodded.

My beautiful, loyal man. As much as I thought I loved him before, it was nothing compared to this moment. I shook my head and pressed my lips to his.

“No,” I murmured. “I’m not letting you go. We’re doing this together, because you’re mine. That’s our deal. You take care of me, I take care of you.”

We sat there for a long while in the radiant morning sunshine, soaking in the beauty and holding each other. A calmness washed over me. Maybe I was a sociopath. Maybe I was no better than my father. Maybe Ale had been right, that I couldn’t escape my legacy.

I didn’t care.

None of it mattered, because I needed to save Ale, the only person who had my back.

The only one who truly loved me.

I shut my eyes and focused on the moment, my head against Ale’s chest. The gentle roll of waves crashing on the shore. The soft, sweet sound of our breathing, in tandem. The cries of the birds soaring past, and the comforting beat of his heart.

Chapter Sixty-One

GIA

IT WAS LATE SATURDAY, THREE NIGHTS AFTER ALE AND I CAME up with our plan. A sharp knock at the door made me jump, and he grabbed my arm.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this? We can always stall,” he asked in a hissing, low voice.

I stared at him, unblinking. “Yes. I’m okay.”

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

We both rose from the sofa, and as planned, he went into the kitchen. I opened the door and saw Ashley’s simpering, smiling face.

“Hey!” I cried, pasting on a happy, excited expression. “Come on in!”

“Are you ready? Or are you pulling your usual Gia shit? You’re never on time.” She swept in, looking every inch the Miami party girl: a tiny green dress that showed off her legs, tall silver heels, diamond chandelier earrings. Her platinum hair was in her signature high ponytail.

“I’m ready. Do you think this dress is okay?” I spun around, showing off the dress I’d bought specifically for this evening. It was basically a black tube top that covered my torso and my ass (barely), and I felt like a trussed ham. Ale had scowled when he first saw me in it, saying that I looked “too sexy.”

“A sexy ham. Great,” I’d said.

“You look so fucking hot,” Ashley declared, taking a few steps into the apartment. “I’d wear a brighter lipstick, though.”

My God. She walked right into the place we wanted her. I fluttered my hands in the air.

“Oh! Right! I forgot. Let me grab my purse and some lipstick and we’ll be gone, ‘kay? Make yourself comfortable, or do you want a drink first? Ale? Sweetie?” I called out. “Can you bring us some champagne? Ash is here.”

He emerged from the kitchen with a grin. “Hey, Ashley.” His tone was warm, and he even kissed her on both cheeks. I had to say, we were doing an amazing acting job. “I’ll open a bottle.”

“I’ll be right back, plus I need to pee,” I chirped, strutting in my heels to the bedroom.

I shut the door, purposefully taking my time. I stared into the mirror at my flushed cheeks. Did I look guilty? Like I was doing something so incredibly wrong that I’d be judged by most people as evil? I gulped in a few breaths and closed my eyes, trying to center myself. This was the world we lived in, and everyone had to live by the rules. Even Ashley. I checked the time on my phone, and decided to stay in here a few more minutes touching up my makeup and spritzing on more perfume.

My absence was Alessandro’s cue to take Ashley into the kitchen and slip her the cocaine laced with fentanyl. Ale kept a small stash of coke at a storage unit — although he never did drugs, he kept some on hand for business associates, in case he needed to sweeten a deal — and it wasn’t difficult for him to obtain fentanyl with his connections. We’d spent the afternoon cutting the coke with a hefty dose of the fentanyl, ensuring that one or two lines would stop her heart. Fortunately, the fentanyl came in pill form, a white tablet, and when crushed it blended seamlessly into the coke.

After an appropriate amount of time, I slathered on some lipstick and walked out. Ash and Ale were sitting on the sofa,

sipping champagne. A glass awaited me on the table, and I picked it up and downed the whole thing.

“Damn, girl, you’re ready for a party tonight, aren’t you?” Ashley remarked.

I smacked my lips. “I’m in need of a girls’ night. Let’s go, babe.”

She and Ale stood, and he kissed my forehead. “You promise to call me if you need anything, right?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Ash said in a baby voice.

“That’s not my thing,” I said, brushing my lips over Ale’s mouth.

He cupped my face and looked deep into my eyes for a beat. I knew what he was thinking: *can you do this?*

“I love you,” I whispered.

“Love you too.”

“Aww, so sweet. Like diabetes,” said Ash from the doorway.

The ride to The Mutiny, South Beach’s hottest club, was uneventful. We chatted about what we’d been doing the past few days — her, shopping, me, looking into deferment of grad school. She refrained from saying anything about Ale or setting me up with Gio’s friends, and for a second I felt a pang of guilt about what was going to soon happen.

But she’d proven to be someone I couldn’t trust, and when I reminded myself of that, the guilt evaporated. Ashley, of all people, should’ve known not to make threats to mafia bosses. Especially ones as deadly as Alessandro.

She’d made a mistake. We both had, but the difference was, I had the upper hand. And I’d make sure to never trust anyone again, outside of Alessandro and possibly his sister.

The SUV let us out in front of the club, and one of Ale’s men said he’d walk in with us. I knew he’d escort us to the VIP and then leave us alone; Ale and I discussed this. He’d

told the bodyguard that I needed my space, and to give me a wide berth tonight.

Within minutes, we'd threaded our way through the throngs of people and were ensconced in a balcony box. The Mutiny was an old theater renovated into a nightclub, and the VIP boxes were high up, and private, similar to an opera house. High ceilings, a cavernous space, the entire dance floor packed with sweaty, pulsing, half-naked bodies.

A perfect place for justice.

"I'm shocked Ale got this VIP for us," she yelled over the throbbing beat.

"I had to beg him, said I wanted the full bottle service. He finally gave in," I hollered back. Lies. All lies.

But full service *was* at our fingertips, and that was courtesy of Ale. A waiter with a chilled bottle of Moet arrived almost instantly, and he asked discreetly if we desired anything else. "Mr. Bianchi said I should take care of the two of you," he added pointedly.

"Chocolate covered strawberries," I cooed.

"Eww," Ash said. "Why do you want to eat?"

"I didn't have dinner," I shrugged.

The waiter swiftly brought the strawberries, and Ashley looked at him coldly. "We'll call you if we need anything more. We don't want a lot of interruptions tonight."

Obviously, because she wanted to do drugs. Not like the waiter hadn't seen *that* before, I thought sarcastically.

"Of course, miss," the waiter said. "There's a buzzer right by the door, back here. Just press it if you need anything."

He pointed to an illuminated button that looked like a doorbell, then shut the door, which was painted black, behind him.

While standing against the balcony rail, I popped a strawberry in my mouth, watching the crowd below sway to

the beat of the DJ. This was the perfect place, public and yet private, out of view from prying eyes.

Ashley tugged on the hem of my dress. “Hey, I’m gonna do a few lines. You want some?”

Here we go...

My heart thrummed louder than the music.

“Nah, I’m good. You know what I do have,” I said in a triumphant voice while plopping on the velvet sofa and taking out a small tin from my purse. “Cannabis edibles!”

I’d brought these along so I could pretend to “party” with Ash. I wanted to do everything in my power, short of snorting cocaine, to make her feel comfortable with doing the fatal lines.

“Do you want one?” I offered her the candies, which were a weak 2.5 milligrams of THC. At least that’s what Ale had said. I popped one in my mouth, and it tasted just like a breath mint.

“Nah, I don’t want to feel mellow, but you go right ahead. I think that’s a good start for you. See, you’re relaxing already in Miami. Now we just have to get you away from that thug and we can really live the good life together.”

“I dunno about that,” I murmured coyly, clinking my champagne glass to hers. “I think I’m really in love.”

She rolled her eyes. “Love, schmuv. You’re sure you don’t mind if I do a couple of lines here?”

I feigned worry on my face but shook my head. “Just don’t let anyone see.”

She snorted. “Like anyone on South Beach cares.”

That was almost certainly true. There was a small table nearby, with what looked like a mirrored, oversize coaster. Probably it was there for the exact purpose of snorting coke. Ashley slid it off the table and balanced it on her lap, then extracted a small baggie from her purse.

Excellent. It was the baggie that Ale and I had put the coke in. Or, it looked similar. I sucked on my edible and nodded my head to the beat. “I love this song,” I yelled.

“Me too,” she said, portioning the coke out in three lines.

Using a rolled-up twenty, she snorted a line, then another, then a third. “Oh, fuck, this is good shit,” she murmured, cutting another two lines with her credit card. Then cut two more. For some crazy reason, a quote from Edgar Allen Poe came to mind, one I’d recalled from a literature class in college.

“I have absolutely no pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge. It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have periled life and reputation and reason. It has been the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories, from a sense of insupportable loneliness and a dread of some strange impending doom.”

Maybe that was why Ashley did drugs. Maybe the loneliness and dread of being an old mafia guy’s wife was just too much to handle. Just like my mother. Maybe I was doing Ash a favor?

This fucking life of ours...

“Oh yeah?” I said mildly, a twisted smile on my face. “What makes it good?”

“It’s difficult to explain unless you’ve tried it. You sure you don’t want some? C’mon.”

I shook my head and poured another glass of champagne. This was why Ale suggested I bring the edibles, to make it seem like I was going along with her partying. “The edible’s going to kick in soon.”

She sniffled, and her eyes fluttered shut, then opened. She made a little murmuring noise. “Wow, amazing. The music’s sooo good. Should we go dance?”

I shook my head and pretended to be in a dreamy, high state — when in reality, the cannabis edible wasn’t affecting me at all, probably because it was so weak. Or because adrenaline was surging through my veins, pulsing in time with

the bass of the music. “I just want to stay here and enjoy the music. Let’s just hang for a while.”

She nodded, and swayed in her seat to the beat. Her eyes shut again, and she licked her lips slowly. When she opened her lids again, her pupils had rolled back into her head. Her eyes closed and she melted back into the black velvet sofa. It looked as though she was sleeping.

I stood, and with my back to her, stared again at the crowd. Even danced a little when a song I knew came on. It looked like I was any other rich bitch in Miami — I even grinned and held up my champagne glass as a toast to a group of girls hanging over the rail on a balcony across the room, all while noting that I couldn’t see inside their box.

Turning my back to the crowd, I glanced at Ashley. Her arms and legs were slack, her mouth parted.

“This is a great club,” I shouted. Ale told me to keep up appearances until it was obvious that she was dead. There might be video cameras, and I had to act the part every step of the way. Even if there were, Ale would be sure to pay off the owner of the club and make any evidence like that go away.

I eased onto the velvet sofa, sitting next to her as if we were having the best time. “Hey, Ash,” I murmured.

She gurgled in response, then her fingers twitched. Flexed and curled. Ale told me this might happen, that she might even convulse. It was possible she could be saved with Narcan if I called for help now, but no. It was too late for her, and for me.

I leaned into her, my head near hers, the lights from the dance floor flashing. My hand took hers, mostly because I didn’t want to see it twitch. It was too creepy. I threaded her fingers in mine and squeezed. Her breathing was labored, coming in short, shallow gasps.

“You should’ve shut the fuck up, Ashley,” I whispered.

A low moan slipped out of her mouth, then a little spittle. Her head drooped to one side, and I checked her pulse on her wrist with my two fingers. It felt faint, maybe even

nonexistent, but it was also difficult to tell given the bone-rattling bass of the techno music.

And so, I sat and waited. Three songs played, tunes I'd never heard before. Maybe I zoned out because of the edible, but eventually, I realized that Ashley's pulse seemed to have vanished. Was she dead?

I let two more long, grinding songs go by. Strangely, I felt devoid of emotion. Or maybe it was relief. I'd have to unpack that later, but for now, I had to see this through.

I carefully wiped my tin of edibles on the velvet seat, then picked up a square bar napkin and clutched the container, slipping them into her purse.

Once again, I checked her pulse. Nothing. It looked like her lips were turning a bluish color, but it was difficult to tell in this light. I couldn't very well hold a mirror under her nose to check for breathing, but I was almost positive she was gone. It was now time for me to go public.

"Ash?" I said loudly. No one could hear, of course, because it was far too loud in the club. I clamped onto her knee and shook. I jostled her thin hand, picking it up and allowing it to fall on the sumptuous velvet. Her fingers were cool to the touch, but not in a natural way. They were cold and clammy, like a hand out of the grave.

"Ashley?" I shrieked, and shook her harder. She didn't move. I pressed my hand to her jugular. Nothing. Now I did take out my compact mirror and hold it under her nose, all while shouting her name.

Her body was empty of breath.

I screamed her name several times, standing up and violently shaking her shoulders. "Wake up!" I yelled, panic overtaking my tone. Then, all of a sudden, my insides felt like they were on fire. My blood was pulsing hot like lava, on fire with life and sin and evil and justice.

My best friend had crossed me, and now she was gone.

The reality of the situation slammed into me. I started to cry as I stumbled to my feet. I slapped at the button for the

waiter and lurched out of the VIP booth and into the hallway.

“Help, I think my friend’s OD’d,” I screamed to a bouncer between my tears. “Please, you need to help me.” Ale’s bodyguard, who was down the hall, ran toward me, shouting something that I couldn’t hear.

Now I was sobbing for real. Not for Ashley, and not for what I’d done, but for something else.

The death of my childhood, the death of all my innocent dreams, the death of the life I thought I’d lead. As the club manager rushed over and drew the curtains in the box so no one could see, as the paramedics tried and failed to revive Ashley, I sobbed and sobbed in the corner.

All I wanted was to be safe in Ale’s arms. I knew he’d be here soon, because his bodyguard would call him. Because we’d rehearsed every minute of this.

A cop showed up, eyed me, then had a word with Ale’s bodyguard. When he returned, he looked at me with kind eyes. Through my hiccupping sobs, I told him that Ash did coke, but I didn’t, and she’d given me an edible. I was in hysterics now.

“It’s okay, Gia,” the cop said. “Alessandro will be here soon.”

My boyfriend even knew to make the cops look the other way. I was safe, but would feel way more comfortable when he arrived. Finally, he did, his face pinched with concern. I threw myself into his arms.

“I’ve got you, princess. I’ll take care of you now,” he murmured in my ear, the beat of the music still pulsing and throbbing. The club hadn’t even shut down for Ashley’s death. They were going to take her out the back door on a stretcher, like she was any other addict. Like nothing ever happened.

I cried into Ale’s chest, and he held me, stroking my hair.

My fate was sealed, and there was no turning back. I was no longer a clueless mafia princess, daughter of a don. I wasn’t running from my legacy anymore.

I am a queen.

A Mafia Queen.

Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

GIA

“HEY SWEETIE!” MY VOICE ECHOES THROUGH THE FOYER OF our new home. It’s still taking some getting used to, being in an actual house and not the beach condo.

Ale and I bought this historic mansion only last month. It’s in Coral Gables. We’d thought about buying something swanky on an island near South Beach, but Ale wanted me to be close to the University of Miami, since I’ll be going there every day for law school starting this month. We found this place and moved in so quickly that it made my head spin.

“Alessandro?” I yell.

I hear a faint “out here,” and know where to go. Ale adores the pool and the backyard.

The home has five bedrooms and six bathrooms, a pool, a lush tropical garden with citrus trees, a formal dining room, a library and space for both of us to have our own offices. It’s where we’ll raise our family in a few years, once I’m done with school. We’re not ready to have human babies yet.

We do have other babies, however, and I can hear them coming bounding in my direction now. The sound of dog nails scraping and clattering against tile are replaced by excited yips and woofs.

“Hello,” I say in an exaggerated, excited voice. “Who are my baby dogs?”

Our two rescue pups — Mulder, a giant, derpy grey pitbull, and Scully, a sharp, longhaired black-and-tan Chihuahua — were a bonded pair at the shelter. I fell in love with them six months ago, and brought them into our lives. They are hilarious, and I often joke that they should star in a crime-fighting buddy movie.

Ale, who never had dogs, wasn't sure about them at first. But now the three of them are inseparable and I often find them snoozing in a big pile on the sofa.

I drop to the floor and give them both giant, sloppy hugs, then stand. "Where's Dad?" I ask them. Scully, the chi, is the smarter of the two. She races toward the French doors and Mulder and I follow.

"Over here, Princess."

I spot Alessandro at the far end of the pool. He's in our lounge area, under an umbrella — it's almost nighttime, but he likes to work with his laptop in the secluded outdoor spot surrounded by tropical foliage. He's wearing his usual work-at-home clothing: swim trunks and nothing else. While he can look incredible in a suit, I love when he lounges shirtless at home. Because he's glorious to look at. Right now he's like something out of a GQ photo shoot, with dark stubble sprinkled over his jaw.

He stands up, and both dogs sprint toward him, as if they haven't seen him in years.

Laughing, I walk over and give him a hug. We collapse on the sofa together, and I end up sitting on his lap. His olive-hued skin is warm but not sweaty, the perfect temperature.

"How was school orientation?" he asks.

"Amazing. There are some really smart law professors, people who are the best in the world. Especially when it comes to business law. The other students seem nice. I can't wait to dig in next week." I tell him about the logistics of the first semester, and then kiss him again. I'd decided on law school because it would help our business the most — and we'd have no need to hire an outside consigliere.

“How was your day? Were Mulder and Scully good?”

The two dogs are lying nearby and raise their heads at the mention of their names. I blow them kisses.

“They were good dogs, yeah. We went to the park, they did their poopies, and then I had that meeting with the guys at the port.”

“How did that go? Did they manage a reasonable counter-offer?” Our union has been pushing for increased pensions for the dock workers. It’s only fair, given how hard they work.

Ale smirks. “I made them come around to our way of thinking.”

I kiss his nose. “I knew you would.”

“Oh, and guess who I saw? Giorgio.”

“Giorgio. As in, Daddy Giorgio? Ashley’s...”

“Yeah, him. He’s getting married. To some girl from New York that he’s known for a long time. We’re invited.”

“Wow. He moves fast.” After Ashley’s death, we paid Giorgio a visit to give him our condolences, and of course attended her funeral. He was upset, certainly, but didn’t seem all that devastated. “Are we going to go? When is it? I might not be able to get away with school and all.”

Ale smooths back my hair. “We’re going to have to miss it because it’s in December.”

“Ohh, right. We have another wedding to attend that month.” I grin and caress the dark stubble on his jaw. I love when he looks dangerous and dark like this.

“One we can’t miss.” He playfully bites my shoulder.

Our wedding is in December, in Italy. Ale’s sister Lucy is there now. She was so excited when we got engaged that she insisted on planning the wedding. She left a week ago and is handling all the details. Thank God, because I don’t have time with the start of law school.

“Lucy texted me today, with like ten photos of cakes.”

Ale chuckles. “I know. She texted me, too.”

“Do you have a preference?”

He shakes his head. “Just as long as you’re my dessert, I don’t care.”

I shift so I’m straddling him, and take his face in my hands. “I’ll always be your dessert,” I whisper.

And then, we kiss for real under the Miami moon that peeks through the tall palm trees. I love Alessandro more now than I did a year ago, and I can’t fully explain why. Love makes no sense, and it’s one of the few things in life that is black and white.

I love him, and he loves me. I’ve stopped trying to figure out the whys and hows, ceased trying to determine why we adore each other so much when we’re so different. Because none of that really matters. What matters is that I feel the strong hand of my fiancé on the small of my back as we kiss and that he makes me feel safe and loved in this fucked up world.

There are shades of grey that have nothing to do with a book.

The grey is in our government. The grey controls our money on Wall Street, controls the news we watch, the jobs we toil for, our very lives. It is there whether you like it or not, whether you choose to believe in its existence.

Nothing is good or bad anymore. That’s the world we live in. Sure, it’s not fair, but it’s reality.

Take us, for example. Alessandro and me. We run a crime syndicate, make millions from fraud, corruption, and sometimes outright theft. We bribe politicians, cops, judges — it’s a must, so we can continue making money. We also have some legit businesses, and we donate hundreds of thousands to causes we believe in. Like women’s shelters, animal rescue groups, children and elderly in need.

I’ve killed two people. Ale has killed even more. I’d like to say we won’t do it again. I’d prefer not to: I didn’t take any pleasure from snuffing out Mickey or Ashley’s lives. I don’t

feel guilty, though, and I sleep peacefully at night. Does that make me a sociopath? Or does that just mean I'm similar to rest of them, the politicians, the CEOs, the hedge fund managers bleeding the pensions dry so people have nothing when they retire?

I'd like to think I'm better than them. But perhaps not. Shades of grey.

Ale and I will kill again, if we must, if someone threatens us. If someone tries to take away what we're building together. We're family, and we stick together.

Are we good? Evil? Or are we merely like everyone else?

It doesn't really matter. Because we have each other. Forever.

THE END

* * *

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—ANNA

About the Author

Anna Argento delves fearlessly into the clandestine world of dark mafia romance, weaving tales of intrigue, passion, and peril. She's married to a brooding Italian who is the inspiration for all her heroes.

A recluse by choice, Anna often finds solace in the mysterious allure of antique bookstores and secluded cafes. Her fascination with the enigmatic facets of human nature fuels her writing, guiding her through the labyrinth of dark emotions and clandestine desires. Outside her writing sanctum, she indulges in the art of black-and-white photography, capturing the haunting beauty of forgotten cityscapes and abandoned places.

She also loves dogs.

