



Bruno Mafia Crime Series

RISE TO POWER

KyAnn Waters

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Rise To Power

Bruno Mafia Crime Series

Book One

Marco Bruno ~ The Enforcer.

Some would say I'm brutal. Blood from generations of powerful mafia men courses through my Italian veins. Marriage to Allegra will secure the alliance I need to wage war against my enemy. But the woman in my bed has secrets. She'll discover crossing me is dangerous. Betrayal is deadly.

Allegra Jilani ~ Mafia Princess

I'm traded for power and position. I dreamt of a fairytale life with a handsome mafia husband. I'm loyal. I'd never betray him, but I wouldn't make a good soldier. I don't follow orders. If Marco discovers my first vow of allegiance wasn't to him, but to his enemy, my fairytale will become my nightmare, my palace a prison.

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Acknowledgement

Love is a dangerous riptide beneath hypnotic waves, impossible to fight, destined to sweep me out to sea, to drown me in its power. - KyAnn Waters

Thank you to my besties. You are everything to me. You ride the high tide with me and pick me up when I crash against the rocky shores of self-doubt.

Introduction

Dear Reader,

This is a gritty mafia romance with violence, blood play, knife play, emotional and physical abuse, and graphic content which may be triggering to some readers.

Do you want to know where it all began?

Perfectly Played – High Protocol: Initiation into Submission is Luca’s and Tinker’s story and introduces readers to the Bruno Mafia Crime Series.

Connected Series

High Protocol: Initiation into Submission Series

Damaged

Brutally Honest

Forbidden

Beautiful Liar

Dangerously Bound

Perfectly Played

Heller Raiders MC Series

Blade

Dozer

Romeo

Rogue

Bruno Mafia Crime Series

Rise To Power

Playlist on Spotify

<https://spotify.link/rBjCwtpOQDb>

Just Pretend – Bad Omens

It Had to Be You – Tommee Profitt, Sam Tinnesz

Can't Help Falling In Love – Tommee Profitt, Brooke

Monster – Hidden Citizens, Ryan Innes

It's A Sin - Hidden Citizens

Burn – 2WEI, Edda Hayes

Addicted – Saving Abel

If You Could Only See – Tonic

Enemy – Tommee Profitt, Beacon Light, Sam Tinnesz

Stranger – Thomas Day

Die First – Nessa Barrett

Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) – Marilyn Manson

Chapter One

Marco

The sight of blood was an aphrodisiac. It warmed my gut and seeped lower into my groin like a secret lover. I could feel the flare of anticipation in the pounding of my heart, and the sizzle of heat along my spine. My cock hardened as my enemy weakened.

“I don’t know anything.”

I didn’t expect Greco’s sniveling whimpers. More evidence the fucking rat had betrayed the family. For five years, he’d worked under my brother, Luca, and had been trusted.

Luca trusted too easily. Now, he was dead.

Father Lodi searched for the virtues of men, but it was the seven deadly sins that made men dangerous. The truth, trust no one. I said a silent prayer in my mind. This wasn’t just about business. Power, money, loyalty, and family were interwoven and never to be separated. They were worth defending—worth killing for.

Standing in front of Greco, I rolled my shirt cuffs one more turn, covering the blood splatter staining the white linen.

Fear was a powerful weapon. But not always enough to get me the information I wanted. A thousand cuts strategically inflicted to cause pain,

but not death, could be highly motivating. So were the two-hundred and six bones in the human body.

I rested my hand on his trembling shoulder. With a hard, fast thrust, I rammed the heel of my palm against the ridge of his clavicle. Bone snapped, giving beneath the stretched skin where his shoulder met his neck.

Greco screamed. The piercing wail sliced through the room, echoing off the walls, and warming me like the smooth notes of a merlot from the Bruno vineyards. Some would say the Bruno men were brutal. I would hate to disappoint them.

“Marco, please.” His voice quavered.

Adrenaline, like liquid fire, slipped through my veins in a dangerous and lethal combination. I continued to apply pressure to the broken bone.

“I suggest you use your words for confessing, rather than begging.” Soon, he’d be able to do neither after I cut his deceitful tongue from his mouth. What did he expect? *Omertà*, the code of silence, had been broken.

Sweat dampened my underarms and beaded on my brow. The room wasn’t warm, and I was far from finished. The moment grew heavier with tension.

“I don’t know anything.” Urine trickled down Greco’s leg, spreading out on the concrete, swirling with his spilled blood, and gurgling into the drain in the floor. “I swear to God.”

“Swearing to God? That’s your mistake.” I spoke low and controlled. Muscles in my forearm flexed as I balled my hand into a fist. “You forget you swore loyalty to my family first. God isn’t here to save you. I am.”

Stefano, my younger brother, a capo in the Bruno family, sat on a solid wood table along the wall and chuckled. I cast a quick glance at him as he cleaned beneath his fingernails with a seven-inch, black coated, combat knife. Carmine, our cousin, one of Stefano’s best friends—and a soldier for the

Bruno mafia—sat next to him. Antonio De Napoli, Ant, my best friend and confidant leaned against the wall.

Tears leaked from Greco's swollen eyes. "I swear on my life."

"Your life is already mine. Try again." I gripped his hair, forcing his head back. "Perhaps you should swear on Dino's life. If your son isn't reason enough, perhaps Alice is."

I didn't enjoy threatening his wife and son, but he was jerking me off with his lies. If I wanted jerked off, I'd have a woman's fingers wrapped around my dick.

I narrowed my gaze. "Don't you find it odd that you get pinched, and my brother is clipped?" My throat tightened with the words.

"A coincidence. I'm loyal to Luca, to the Bruno family."

I tilted my head, cracking my neck. "There are no coincidences."

Greco's eyes, pupils blown with pain, could no longer focus. "I didn't rat on Luca." He barely spat the words. His thick tongue dabbed at the gaping splits in his lip.

Stefano inspected his cuticle, then stabbed the knife into the table. "Greco, you don't want to lie to Marco. We know you squealed about the diamonds."

I stood in front of Greco. "Interpol has already spoken to the Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna." *The Internal Information and Security Agency or AISI.* "Luca was killed making the diamond delivery."

"One of his enemies must have known he would be there."

"Who? Who else knew?"

"I don't know." Spittle flew from his mouth as he wailed.

I released his head, took two steps back, and rolled my shoulders.

Stefano's knife grated against the wood. "Who did you speak to at AISI?"

Greco hung his head. After a moment, he whispered, “Pallo.”

I swung, cracking my fist into Greco’s jaw. His head snapped back, and blood sprayed from his face. Red gushed from his nose. The stream mixed with saliva and stained his swollen lips before dripping down from his dislocated jaw. A curl of gratification, of seeing Greco bleed, unfurled in my stomach.

Bits of skin clung to the lion ring on my finger, the rare diamond eye in the center blinking red. I stretched my hand, savoring the tightness and sting in my torn and scraped knuckles.

Ignoring the pain of strained muscle ripping through my shoulder, I landed another punch on the traitor strapped to the metal-framed chair. A chair specifically constructed to extract information from my enemies.

Enemies. I had many. Straps banded around Greco’s torso, anchoring him to the high back. Tethers kept his arms and ankles secured to the frame.

The door swung open. My youngest brother, Orlando, entered the soundproof room.

“Fuck.” His lips pulled into a sneer. Death reeked heavy in the air. “You’re being summoned,” he said to me.

He referred to our father, The Ruthless King. And he was. They called me The Enforcer. Stefano was known as The Terminator. Young and still thinking with his dick, we called Orlando The Lover. Luca had always been The Negotiator.

Guilt knifed through my chest as I thought of my brother. Luca and I didn’t always agree. Because I was the underboss of our family, he never questioned my orders—never until he’d brought the woman home. A tinker to be played with, not to be obsessed over. Not a future mafia bride, but a pet for his pleasure.

A woman who might have information...if I could fucking find her.

Like Luca, she'd vanished into the night. Only with Luca, the police in America had found the bloody trail to his death.

I heaved with a resigned sigh.

"He's yours," I said to Stefano as I walked away from Greco and rolled my sleeves down.

"I'm glad you saved some for me, although there doesn't seem to be much fight left in him."

"You should clean up before you see The Boss." Orlando stared at my blood-stained hands. Our father, the don of the Bruno family, wore the stench of death like his Italian suits. He wore it well, and it looked good on him.

He gave the orders, and I made sure they were enforced.

"It reeks in here," Orlando said, his nose pinched.

"Baby brother doesn't like to get dirty," Stefano teased.

Ant handed me a towel. I wiped blood from my fingers and palms, but my hands would never be clean. I tossed the towel onto the table, grabbed my suit jacket from Ant, and shrugged it on.

"Maybe he doesn't know anything." Orlando stuffed his hands into his fitted black pants. His linen shirt molded to his muscular torso. The Bruno men shared the same Italian features with dark hair and whiskey-colored eyes.

"It doesn't matter," I said and glanced over my shoulder.

Stefano's icy glare would make any man nervous.

"Marco, wait." Greco's lips trembled. "Please," he begged, his gaze darting between me and The Terminator. Tears streamed down his broken and bloody face. "Just kill me."

Stefano smirked and played with his knife. "Where is the fun in that?"

Warm, Mediterranean sunlight blinded as I stepped out of the bunker.

The Bruno estate encompassed several palatial homes, vineyards, an airstrip, and several buildings reserved for business best conducted outside the scrutiny of the polizia.

Not that I worried. The Capo della Polizia was a close friend of my father. Not just with the captain and police, the talons of the Bruno family were deeply imbedded in the legislature and judicial system.

I would prefer a shower, but Orlando was right. The Ruthless King didn't like to be kept waiting. I climbed into my modified SUV. Armored to be bulletproof, equipped with gas masks, bomb blanketed, and pursuit deterrents. Ant sat next to me in the passenger seat, and we drove a half mile to my father's villa.

"Greco doesn't know shit about Luca."

"I had to be sure. Luca brought home a woman. She went by the name Tinker in the BDSM scene."

"Do you think she knows anything?"

"Once I find her, I'll have her in my dungeon so I can find out."

Ant followed me into the house.

"He's waiting," Giada stated when I walked through the door.

My gaze raked up her long legs, over the flair of her hips, and focused on the exposed flesh of her perfect tits. She was a beautiful Italian woman, but Giada was a cunt. Specifically, Bruno cunt.

But she was also lethal with the tongue of a viper. Luca made the mistake of believing she'd make a mafia wife with her olive skin, dark hair, and penetrating eyes.

The relationship never had a chance. The Ruthless King didn't care that she belonged to Luca first. Sadly, neither had I. If I could unfuck her, I would. She'd earned her place in the family and had been warming my father's bed since she became a made woman.

“Marco.” She rested her fingers on my forearm.

I glared into her eyes. I’d warned her not to touch me, but rather than remove her hand, she slid her fingers higher. “You know what he wants.”

I did. My father wanted to secure my place as the future head of the family. He wanted Luca’s killer, and he wanted to expand the power of the Bruno family.

But his patience with me had grown thin. Bruno’s married for position and alliances. I’d avoided this conversation for nearly two years.

“I hate that he puts so much pressure on you.” Her voice dripped with empathy. The tone, the body, the touch, she was a weapon of mass destruction in much the same way I used violence, intimidation, and power.

“I’m touched.” With a chuckle, I continued walking. Hate simmered in her, but it wasn’t my marital status concerning her. Giada hated competition. “Excuse me.” I paused at the door to my father’s office. “Not all family business concerns you.”

Her lips pursed.

I knocked. With my father’s clipped permission, I opened the door, closing Giada off from the meeting.

“Hard at work, I see.”

My father stared out the window, a cigar in one hand and a glass of brandy in the other. Andre, his consigliere, sat in the corner, reading a magazine.

I crossed the room and stood next to my father. Words weren’t really needed. “When do I leave?”

He cast his gaze at Andre. His consigliere set a magazine aside, unfolded from the chair, and quietly left the room.

Once alone, my father sipped his drink. “Tomorrow.”

I growled and rolled my shoulders.

“You know I’m right,” he said. And I did. We had an unknown enemy, and they’d struck first, struck fast, and struck deadly. He turned to me. “Two years, Marco.”

“I’ve been busy.” I rubbed blood from my palm.

“Too busy to honor your commitments?”

“Luca is my priority.”

Roberto Bruno heaved a breath. “Then go. Honor him by taking over his Crew. Go to America. Make those who took my son pay.” His teeth gnashed as he ground out the words.

“I will.”

He cast a side glance at me. “And marry Allegra before the don changes his mind.”

“Salvatore Jilani would suck my dick to secure the marriage of his daughter.” I wanted to avoid being shackled to the timid waif of a girl for as long as possible.

“Salvatore is old, but loyalty in America runs deep with the don. He’s a negotiator like your brother...” His nostrils flared with the mention—another reminder of Luca. He puffed on the cigar, a curl of smoke clinging to his thick, deadly fingers. “It’s his son, Santino. When you’re there, earn his trust. He’ll be useful.”

I’d heard he was quick to anger, groomed by his mother more than his father, and intent on expanding the Jilani territory.

“I’ll leave in the morning.” I slid my hands into my pockets.

“Good.” He blew a stream of smoke through his tightly puckered lips.

“Have you spoken to Orlando?” I asked.

A devious smile curled my father’s lips. The fucking smile that said he was going to enjoy whatever test he was about to put me through.

“No,” I said. Orlando was under the impression he’d be attending

Eminence University in the United States. However, The Ruthless King had yet to inform prince charming that he would be working for his education. “What happened to keeping him on a short leash?”

The don shrugged his shoulders. “Leashes don’t work with your brother. Perhaps more responsibility away from the pressure of pleasing you will give him what he needs.” He tipped the glass, finished the drink, and set it on the table. “It’s time he builds his own crew, takes his position as capo seriously as Stefano has. I won’t be close, so I need a soldier we can trust with him.”

“Orlando will want Emilio at his side.”

Roberto groaned. “Those two play too hard.”

Emilio Pirlo was Carmine’s brother. We all grew up together. Emilio was also brilliant with a computer. The dark web was created for people like him. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

My father turned toward me. “The other capos respect you, the soldiers learn from you, and your enemies fear you. You make me and this family proud, Marco. This marriage is a big step. One day you will be don of this family.”

“One day...” But I wasn’t impatient to take over my father’s position. I smiled at him. “But I’m in no hurry.”

“Don’t forget the ring. Something from our vault. They’ll expect a formal proposal.” Only a Bruno diamond for the finger of a mafia bride.

I left his office. By tomorrow, the youngest capo in the family would be living in the United States, and I’d be resigned to a perfunctory life with my future wife. I wouldn’t be the only one dreading my upcoming nuptials.

Tonight, I’d bury my dick deep in Francesca. I hadn’t seen Allegra since she was a girl, but I couldn’t imagine much had changed. I could only hope she’d grown some tits along with a personality.

Allegra

“I can’t believe he’s finally coming here.” My younger sister, Deidre, flopped onto my bed. At sixteen, she was beautiful. We shared the same Italian features with long hair, although hers was darker than mine. We both had hazel eyes and a heavy fringe of lashes. Sadly, she was destined for the same fate as me. “When will he be here?”

“Soon.” Just saying the words sent a riot of butterflies flapping in my belly. Fire-breathing butterflies, with wings like razors. “I need to talk to Knox.”

Like an army of ants, soldiers, servants, and family swarmed the property. But the one person I needed to see wouldn’t be allowed in the house. He was my secret, the only person I implicitly trusted—and a man my family would kill just for breathing the same air as me.

“Do you know how much trouble we’re going to be in if you get caught?”

“Yes. But this is my last chance to see him. Once Marco arrives, there is no way I’m getting out of the house.” No way would I endanger Knox. He was Irish. He was as shackled to his heritage as I was to mine.

And I’d spent my life saving him. He’d say the same about me, and we’d both be right.

I sat on the bed, slipped on my chucks, and tied the laces.

“Just go in the bathroom, flush, shower, change the music. Watch Matt Rife on TikTok and laugh. Just make it seem as if I’m in here. I won’t be gone long.” I couldn’t. I had to be back before my fiancé arrived.

“And if Mom knocks?”

“Keep the door locked. Text me, but only if it’s a serious situation.

Please, Dee. What if this *is* the last time I see him?”

I blinked tears from my eyes.

She nodded.

I pulled a black hoodie over my head, tucked my knife into the front pouch with my phone, and opened the French doors leading to my private balcony.

The cool night air teased my lips. I'd pulled my hair into a loose ponytail to keep it from my eyes.

The sun had set an hour ago. I hoped the long shadows from the outdoor lighting would hide my escape. I wasn't running away, even though I'd threatened my mother just this morning with the idea.

The second floor, east wing was our domain. Deidre's room was across from mine. The mansion was huge and well-guarded. My fingers curled around the rough cement baluster. Wearing skinny jeans, I lifted my leg over the stone balcony railing.

As a teenager, I'd been able to scale the trellis to the second floor like a spider, but I didn't have the figure of a twelve-year-old boy anymore. My breasts crushed against the old wood as I clung to the lattice.

Sweat beaded on my brow. The rungs creaked and snapped as I carefully placed the toe of my sneakers in the small holes of the trellis. Ivy prickled my hands, scratching my cheeks and my fingers.

“Oomph.” My foot slipped.

“Shh,” Deidre scolded from above me. She kept watch, glancing left and right, as I descended. “Still clear,” she whispered.

I checked the ground. Oh god. This was crazy. I could say there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for Knox, but that would be a lie. We understood each other, made pacts, and shared secrets. With the exception of the night we met, when our worlds had collided in a way that changed us both, I'd never

betrayed my family.

After tonight, I sealed my future.

I hated hurting him, but Marco was coming, and everything was different. To marry Marco, I had to give up Knox. To do otherwise could get us both killed.

Another few feet and I'd be able to drop without breaking my neck. A jagged piece of wood tore a gash in my palm. "Ouch."

Blood smeared against the white paint. I sucked my skin, biting a thick sliver and pulling it from my flesh with my teeth. Then I continued to take steps down to the ground.

Once I cleared the first-floor window, I leaned back, gauged the distance to the soft mulch of the flowerbed, and jumped. The freefall lasted a split second, and then I was on my ass in the dirt.

I scrambled to my hands and knees, quickly squatted, camouflaged by the bushes, and listened for my father's soldiers.

With a final glance at the balcony, I blew Deidre a kiss, then sprinted across the manicured lawn to the shelter of the trees. My heart pounded with the impact of my feet on the ground. Ducking into the darkness, I continued to run toward the lake, weaving between trees and avoiding the pathways and low branches.

Twigs snapped beneath my feet, and wind whistled through the leaves. My breath gusted past the rim of my lips. At the edge of the tree break, I waited and listened. My steps slowed as I followed the worn path to the boathouse.

I peered inside, but the room was dark and empty. The small dock creaked and groaned in the quiet night. The rubber soles of my shoes were quiet on the wood planks.

A red ember winked as Knox took a long drag off his cigarette. He

leaned against the building, a wrist dangled over his bent knee, and he stared out at the dark water. I sat next to him and took the cigarette from his tattooed fingers.

The smoke heated my throat as I inhaled. After I handed it back, I rested my head on his shoulder.

“Is he here?” His voice was low and thick with emotion.

“Not yet. I don’t have long.”

He squeezed my hand. “There has to be a way. You can’t be married to him. They call him The Enforcer. Two years, Ally. Why is he here now? He doesn’t want the marriage.”

“Clearly, he does.” Otherwise, he’d still be in his sanctuary in Italy, probably sleeping with a harem of Italian beauties.

“He’s taking you away from me.” His fingers tightened on mine.

“My family needs the alliance as much as the Bruno’s. I don’t have a choice.”

“There’re always choices.” He pulled his hand from mine. “You taught me that.”

He spoke about the night we met. He’d made a choice he couldn’t live with, and I’d convinced him one bad decision wasn’t worth killing himself over.

I pivoted. “This time, the choice was made for me.”

His smoky gray eyes darkened like a thick fog rolling in. I hurt because he hurt. I knew the life he lived was no less toxic than mine. Like me, he had no choice but to follow orders. And like me, even if he had a choice, he’d still be a soldier for the Irish, and I’d still choose Marco.

I swallowed the fear climbing into my throat. “Promise you won’t do anything stupid.”

“I never make promises.”

I bumped his shoulder. “I know you don’t make promises, but you can’t deny you do stupid.”

He took another long drag off his cigarette. “It’s not stupid to want to protect you.”

I stretched out my legs and clasped my hands together in my lap. “You always ask me what I want.”

“Because you’re smart and beautiful, and you should decide who you want to marry.”

The pain in his voice pricked at my heart.

He continued. “You always do what you’re told. Your dad isn’t the only one controlling your life. Your brother is salivating over the family connection. He can taste the power. Your mother treats you like a whore. Be a good girl and keep your mouth shut unless you’re on your knees to suck Marco’s dick.”

I couldn’t think about Marco or his dick without a flurry of emotions twisting within me, especially not when Knox could read me so easily. I’d never shared with him the dangerous flutters that filled my stomach when I thought of the man I’d been promised to. Sold for power and influence.

I was a female in a mafia family. Worse, I was the eldest daughter. I was a big chip at the bargaining table. I secured an alliance between two powerful families. “It doesn’t matter what I want. I was born for a purpose.”

A prison I couldn’t escape. At least Marco wasn’t old, fat, or ugly. I hadn’t seen him since I was fifteen, but he’d left an impression and become my obsession.

He had been young, handsome, and arrogant, and he’d constantly raked his long fingers through his dark, wavy hair. The golden amber of his eyes had reminded me of a lion in the wild.

The man had sweat power and intimidation from his pores. He reeked

of danger. I imagined the wicked things he would do to me once we were married. I'd fall asleep with my fingers between my legs, imagining they were his. When my body exploded with rippling waves of pleasure, I'd whisper his name into the darkness, hoping he was thinking of me the same way.

Then two fucking years passed from the proposed date of our marriage, and he still hadn't come for me. I'd grown tired of getting myself off.

"I'm going to marry Marco."

"What about us?"

"I'm Italian, and you're Irish. We both know there could never be an us."

My father would never accept him. To my family, I would be a traitor. I loved Knox, trusted him with my life, and would do anything to protect him. But I hated the Irish the same way the Irish hated my Italian family.

"You're my best friend," he said. "I fucking love you."

"I love you, too." He was the most important person in my life. But our friendship carried too much risk. "Be careful, Knox. I overheard my brother. The Bruno's are going to retaliate for Marco's brother's death."

"It wasn't the Irish." He twisted his head to meet my eyes. His rough, inked knuckles grazed my cheek. "I have blood on my hands, just not Luca Bruno's."

I released a breath. Not that it mattered. Another dead Irish or another dead Italian just meant one less enemy to fight. "Promise me, Knox. Promise you'll stay safe."

"Can you promise the same?"

I lowered my head. "I promise to protect you. I swear, but after tonight, I can't see you again." I lifted my gaze to his. "You have to promise the same."

“I can’t promise,” he said. “But I’m not going to cause trouble for you. Just know I’m around.”

“You drive me crazy. Do you know what it would do to me if something happened to you?”

“Would you cry?”

I slugged him in the shoulder. “Don’t tease about something this serious. I need to go.”

I reached into the pouch of my hoodie and pulled my favorite knife. I flipped open the blade and ran my finger over the engraving of my initials and the words, *Fight to the end or live for nothing*. We both understood the life that waited for me.

I remembered Knox’s words to me. ‘*Mafia men take what they want,*’ then he’d shown me how to defend myself.

He taught me to fight and how to use my body and mind as a weapon. In theory, I could kill a man with my hands, but I was even deadlier with a knife. Not that I’d ever had to use one.

“Thank you, Knox, for being my friend.” Because I hadn’t been able to give him anything else. By the time I was old enough to fall in love, I’d been promised to Marco. But Knox was something more than family.

“You saved me,” he whispered. “I’ll be wherever you need me. Always.”

“And forever,” I said. Always for him, and forever for me. A secret vow to always be there for each other. No matter the cost.

He twisted toward me, tugged on my ponytail, then pulled me close and kissed me.

I rested my hand on his chest to push him away, but his lips were soft, and cigarettes scented his breath. One sweet kiss with my best friend to say goodbye. Then I pulled back and rested my forehead against his. These

weren't the lips I imagined kissing a thousand times. Being with Marco meant losing Knox. "I hate this."

"Yeah, I know." He brushed my bangs. "I love you, Ally. You're so fucking special. Don't change," he whispered.

My phone pinged with a text message.

Deidre: He's here. Get home!

"I have to go." I scrambled to stand.

Knox rose and rested his hands on my shoulders. "I'll keep my distance. You won't see me, but I'll be watching. If he lays a hand on you, mistreats you, if he hurts you, I'll fucking kill him."

"No. You have to promise." I pressed the handle of the knife into his palm.

"It was a gift," he said, staring at the weapon.

"I know. And I'm giving it back to you because it's the most beautiful gift I've ever been given. It represents my ability to take care of myself." I leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Stay safe," I pleaded.

And then I fled.

This time, I didn't heed caution. I sprinted along the tree line. In the distance, light reflected in most of the rooms of the mansion. Two stories of windows and balconies stretched across the backside of the house.

People gathered around the outdoor kitchen. Drinks were served as men in Armani suits smoked cigars and cigarettes. I clung close to the house and quietly made my way to the trellis.

Muffled voices drifted on the night air. Waiting to scale the house would be safer, but getting caught outside my room would leave me in the precarious position of lying to my mother, or worse my fiancé, on why I was traipsing through the woods when I was supposed to be primping in front of a mirror.

Strategically placing my feet, I climbed the trellis. The wood creaked and groaned with my weight. Sweat trickled along my spine as I climbed.

“How long do you expect to be here?” The whispered words were close.

I froze, the beat of my heart lodged in my throat. The accents were thick, the Italian perfect.

I clung to the trellis, waiting for them to pass.

The scent of a cigarette curled around me. I glanced down. In the muted light of the window, two men stood directly below me. One man slid his hand into the front pocket of his tailored trousers. They fit his slim hips and long legs. He stared out into the distance.

Please, don't look up.

“Tomorrow, we'll set the date. I have no wish to entertain a mouse of a woman for the next two weeks.”

The voice, familiar in the way it affected me, was deeper and smoother. I inhaled through my nose, breathing slow and controlled as my stomach clenched and a shiver skidded over my flesh.

The other man beside him chuckled. He was thick, tall, and menacing. Muscles burst in massive hills and cut valleys beneath his dark, tailored suit.

“Two weeks? Marco, marriage is a life sentence.”

Marco groaned and rolled his neck. “Allegra understands. Our marriage is business and babies. She is the least of my problems.”

“Francesca?”

Who was Francesca?

“Francesca knows I want a whore in my bed. She sees to my needs.”

Nausea churned in my stomach. On the eve of our engagement, his thoughts were of his mistress? Something sticky and bitter coated my tongue, something that tasted like jealousy.

“I’ll need to deal with Giada. She doesn’t want the marriage to take place, but my father insists there are no more delays.”

Oh, there were going to be delays. We hadn’t said our vows, yet.

“Giada doesn’t like sharing the Bruno men,” the other man said.

“No, she would prefer the Bruno men share her. Speaking of Bruno men... Keep a short leash on Orlando tonight. The last thing I need to worry about is him fucking the bored wife of one of Jilani’s soldiers. And keep him away from the sister. The family reeks of desperation. Marriage to one Jilani will be enough.”

“If Allegra is as you describe, Giada has no reason to be jealous.”

A flash of resentment surged through me. Who was Giada? And how dare they speak of Deidre as if she’d climb into bed with Orlando Bruno? Although far from naïve, she was only sixteen. Her rebelliousness extended to sneaking an occasional glass of wine and falsifying her age online so she could have a bit of fun on social media.

On the other point, sadly, they weren’t wrong. My family was desperate for the alliance.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. My brother wanted power, and my future husband wanted a war with the Irish. All he needed now was a stronger army of soldiers and a bigger footprint in the city.

Knox’s haunting words ghosted through my mind. *Mafia men take what they want.*

“Giada is jealous of every woman, even my sister. Allegra will be my wife. You’ll need to keep Giada away from her.”

“And you’ll keep the lights off when you fuck her, imagining she’s Francesca.”

“Thoughts of Francesca aren’t going to give my future wife tits and an ass.”

Tapping sounded above me. I lifted my gaze. Dressed and ready for the party, Deidre frantically waved me up. She mouthed, “Mom.”

I grimaced, glancing down at the men, still debating whether I was fuckable. I wasn’t some vapid virgin content to be fucked in the dark.

I clung to the trellis and remained whisper quiet, listening to the man with my fiancé.

He rested a hand on Marco’s shoulder. “You need another drink to dull your reactions.”

“Agreed,” he said as they walked away.

I released a breath and climbed.

“Hurry,” Deidre said. Grabbing my hoodie, she tugged to haul me over the railing. “Oh, shit, Ally.”

I squealed, and she laughed. The fabric caught on my ponytail, then jerked free. I scrambled to hoist my leg over the rail as my torso disappeared into the heavy fleece of the hoodie. “I can’t see,” I said.

She laughed, clutched my belt loops, and pulled. We both tumbled to the floor of the balcony.

We flopped to our backs. Deidre’s dress was bunched around her waist. She covered her face and laughed. When she stood, she brushed a smudge of dirt from the dress.

“Mom has hollered at you twice to get out of the shower. She’s going to have your ass if you aren’t downstairs—now.”

I rolled to my hands and knees, then stumbled into my room. A simple three-quarter sleeve dress had been selected for tonight. Prim and proper, with a flounce skirt draping below the knee and a scoop neckline to give a hint of cleavage. The cream color showed off my olive skin and cinnamon hair. But the huge flower pattern resembled my grandmother’s curtains.

“I need your help.” I tossed the dress to the bed. “I’m not wearing

that.”

“If you don’t, you’re never going to convince him you can be a good little wife to him.”

“I don’t care anymore.” I’d been prepared to live my carefully constructed life, but he didn’t want the perfect wife. He didn’t really want me at all. Less work for me. I wasn’t weak and timid, and I wasn’t going to pretend to be.

“You should. And what took you so long?” she hissed.

“Didn’t you see him? Marco was standing below the balcony discussing how difficult it would be to fuck me.” I shrugged. My sister was young, but I’d explained sex to her. The only thing she’d learn from our mother was that she’d be saving her virginity for her future husband.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“Enough. He doesn’t think I’m beddable.” I glanced at the modest dress. “If I go down in that, I’ll prove him right.” I pointed a finger at her. “Stay away from Orlando Bruno. Apparently, he’s experienced with married ladies and young girls.”

“If he looks like his brother, I’m pretty sure they can get their dicks wet in whomever they want.”

“Deidre!” But she wasn’t wrong.

She followed me into my closet. “Are you sure you want to piss off Mommy?”

I flipped through my dresses. “What’s she going to do? Cancel the wedding? Let her.”

Deidre pulled a short black dress more fitting for a club than a dinner engagement. I shook my head. “I don’t want to look like a whore.”

She snorted.

“Not yet,” I said with a smirk. Maybe not ever now that I understood

I'd have competition for my husband's attention.

"Eat a banana during dinner." She giggled. "Or ask him to prove his skills first and give him a juicy peach to eat."

"I'm a bad influence on you." I grabbed a floor-length, black dress with a slit to my hip. After handing her the dress, I crouched low to find shoes on the shelves.

"Oh my god, Ally. What did you do?" She plucked a twig from my hair. "I'll do this. You need to clean up. Mom's going to kill you. Was Knox worth the risk?"

I stilled and stared hard at her. "Yes." I never had to question my worth with him.

A determined fist rapped forcefully on the door. "Allegra Louise Jilani," my mother chastised. "Open this door."

I smirked. It was serious if she was using my full name. "I'll be there in a minute." I spun to Deidre. "Go. Distract them until I'm ready."

"How?"

"Regale them with reenactments from Taylor Tomlinson's Netflix special."

She headed for the door. "I'm not getting my ass handed to me to save yours." She glanced over her shoulder, "Except for when it comes to Knox. Hurry. I'll be the annoying younger sister and ask your fiancé a hundred and one stupid questions."

Once alone, I ripped the ponytail from my hair, stripped out of my clothes, and rushed into the en suite. Leaning into the mirror, I covered the scratches from the ivy and the jog through the woods with makeup. I finger-combed my hair into loose waves.

Not bad for a five-minute fix. The satiny fabric of the dress hugged my curves. Without a bra, the plunging neckline revealed the shadow of my

breasts. A tear-shaped diamond on a platinum chain draped my neck and rested against my skin.

I sat on the edge of my bed and slipped on three-inch Louboutin heels. Crystals lined the strap coiling like a snake around my ankle. The final accessory—a six-inch blade in a black leather sheath bound to my upper thigh.

Thank you, Knox.

Chapter Two

Marco

Two weeks of this hell. I nodded, smiled, and sipped my drink. Not only was I tired, but I hadn't had anything to eat. The alcohol was hitting my head, but not enough to turn the encounter with Elise Jilani into an enjoyable conversation. I didn't give a fuck about her charity work and the upcoming City Gala.

A young woman entered the room. Her dark hair fell around her shoulders. Straight white teeth sank into her lip as her gaze shifted about the room, as if searching for someone in particular. And then finding me. She stumbled in her steps. She forced her mouth into a smile as she approached.

Far too young to be my fiancée. She had the same features as the woman making me wish for an ice pick to stab into my ears just so I wouldn't have to listen to any more of her annoying commentary. Or maybe I could do everyone in the room a solid and slit her throat. Then no one would have to hear her speak.

A dark green, halter dress hugged the girl's slight curves and draped to just below her knees. It was like a mirror to the past, and the first time I'd seen Allegra.

As the girl approached, her intense green eyes lingered on Orlando. Full lips with a swipe of pink lipstick tilted up on the corner in a shy but practiced smirk.

Orlando stiffened beside me. I cast a quick glance and barely shook my head. A sly smile curved his lips. Ant was going to be busy on babysitting duties.

“My daughter, Deidre,” Elise said, introducing us. “Mr. Bruno and his brother.”

“Orlando,” my brother said, disarming her with a smile. He took her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed her knuckles.

Deidre blushed, slipped her hand from Orlando’s, and coquettishly shifted from her right foot to her left.

“Where’s your sister?” Elise asked.

“I can’t imagine you’re impatient,” she said to me. “You’ve waited two years. What’s ten more minutes?”

“Deidre,” her mother snapped.

A laugh rumbled from Orlando.

Those dark-fringed eyes sparked with mischief. “Perfection can’t be rushed.”

“I’ll see what’s keeping her.” Elise spun toward the door. A harsh exhale rushed past her lips. “Excuse me.”

A stunning auburn-haired woman entered the room wearing a black dress that could send a man to his knees. Fucking hell. My gaze raced over her illegal curves and skated over the provocative swell of her tits.

Red painted her full lips, and black lined her smoky eyes. With a soft flip of her head, her hair floated over her shoulder, draping her back in curls I could envision twined around my fist.

“Was she worth the wait?” The young girl’s voice cut through the

dangerous fog of lust rolling through me.

“Excuse me?”

“My sister, your fiancée?” A triumphant gleam sparked in her eyes.

This was Allegra? Heat slipped beneath my skin. I lifted my drink, the ice clinking in the empty glass.

Orlando leaned into me. “I think you need another drink.”

I handed the glass to Orlando but couldn't tear my gaze away from the woman. Elise gripped her arm. With a rigid spine and narrowed gaze, she leaned into Allegra, whispering into her ear.

Allegra's gaze connected with mine. This wasn't the young, bashful girl I'd met five years ago. She boldly focused on my face, daring me with her eyes. An answering response had my cock thickening. Even from thirty feet away, her hazel irises sparked with a fire, and I felt the heat burning in my gut.

Elise continued to speak with lips pulled tight.

Allegra's gaze snapped to her mother. She shook her head and attempted to free herself from her mother's grasp. However, Elise continued to clasp her hand around Allegra's upper arm, pushing her toward the door.

“Excuse me,” I said and stepped away from Orlando and Deidre.

“We'll get you another drink,” Orlando said.

“No, let's watch. I'm not missing the entertainment.” Deidre's animated voice faded as I crossed the room with purposeful strides.

I approached. Elise's harsh tone sent a lick of fire through my blood. I hadn't spoken to Allegra in five years, wouldn't have recognized her outside of this room, yet the flare of possessiveness burned through me.

“Do you wish to be his whore or his wife? You disrespectful—” Elisa snapped her mouth closed. “Mr. Bruno,” she stammered. “I'm sure you remember Allegra.”

“If you’ll allow me a moment with my fiancée.”

Elise’s fingers slipped from Allegra’s arm. “Of course. Dinner will be served in a few minutes.”

“Allegra?” I held out one hand, indicating the direction I wished to take her. My other hand slid onto the sexy sway of her lower back. The touch ran awareness from my fingertips into my groin. My gut clenched, my balls heated, and my cock did another slow stretch behind the zipper of my trousers.

She moved with sleek sophistication. As soon as we stepped into the quiet corridor, she shifted away from me.

“You wanted to talk to me privately,” she said with clipped words.

I was used to women with power. Allegra hadn’t quite risen to the level of bitch. Not the way Giada could cut a man with a single word. But then Giada was a cunt, and Allegra would be my wife.

She was clearly annoyed. Unless crossed, two minutes in my presence usually wasn’t long enough for a person to develop open hostility for me. Although, I was rarely an agreeable man. Given time, I’m sure I’d deserve her scorn.

She lifted her arm and tucked her hair behind her ears. A thin, gold chain draped her wrist, red stones dripped from her ears, and a tear-shaped diamond nestled against her flesh between her breasts.

“You’ve changed,” I said. Banal first words, but I couldn’t seem to form a coherent thought.

I remembered a gangly girl with big eyes, a timid colt, too long of legs to be elegant. Five years ago, I couldn’t imagine getting between her thighs for the next sixty years. But then I wasn’t a sick fuck that lusted after young girls.

She raised one perfectly arched brow. “It’s been five years.”

Even her voice had taken on a smoky allure, feminine with just enough dark tones to want her panting my name when I had her on my mouth.

Perhaps she'd felt jilted. Her mother should have explained a man wanted a woman in his bed, not a girl. "I could hardly marry you as a child bride."

"Don't pacify me with platitudes. I wasn't a child."

Not a child, but still giggling with girlfriends and wearing chucks with her school uniform.

She continued. "We both understand that our marriage is business and babies."

Her thoughts mirrored my own. I'd spoken those same words to Ant. "We have a couple of weeks to get to know each other again."

"We know enough about each other, Marco. And does it really matter?" She sparked with attitude.

"You're upset with me?"

"You've neglected the business of our marriage for the past two years."

I lifted a brow. Five years ago, I'd agreed to marry her when she turned eighteen. Apparently, in the past two years, she'd become a bit hostile. "I'm here now."

"And as for any babies between us," she said as if I hadn't spoken at all. "Like most things between us, they'll need to be negotiated." She took a step closer.

I inhaled the subtle scent of her perfume. Her breath warmed my neck as she leaned into me.

"I'm sure we can reach an acceptable compromise," she said. "However, tonight, we should try to maintain appearances. I have no need to be *entertained* for the next two weeks."

Another statement I'd made to Ant repeated back to me. I breathed

deeply. A rush of heat flooded into my cock. “Ah, but I’ve decided I do need entertained.”

She lifted her face. “In the two years I’ve been of age, I’ve found ways of amusing myself. As I’m sure you have. Like you, I fully understand the definition of discretion.”

“In this dress, you clearly understand where your power lays.” Staring into her eyes, my chest tightened. Another flex of my cock had my hands balling into fists.

Her gaze lifted to mine. “Do you believe my power to be between my legs?”

A smile twisted my lips. She was toying with me. Her pulse fluttered in the column of her neck. She closed the space between us. Should anyone stumble upon us, they’d assume we were having an intimate moment. But my future wife was challenging me.

I flared my nostrils, breathing deeply. When she took a step back, I gripped her hip, anchoring her close to me. “Once you’re my wife,” I whispered in her ear, “I intend to find out.”

“Dinner is being served.”

Allegra rested a hand on my chest, either to steady her trembling or to push me away. She glanced at the servant at the entryway to the main room. “Thank you,” she said and dismissed him.

Once we were alone again, she dropped her hand. “I have no desire to rush to the altar.” Her voice lowered. “Nor do I have any intention of climbing into bed with you—*for your entertainment.*” She spun away, but my grip tightened. “You don’t need to placate me. I won’t insult either of us by pretending there is any interest in a real marriage.”

The mouse has come to challenge a lion. “Too late, *topolina.*”

And she’d revealed just how much of a *little mouse* she wasn’t. That

intrigued me more.

“I hardly think we’re acquainted enough for pet names, Mr. Bruno.” A mischievous smile curled her lips. “And I’m not the one who is too late.”

I slid my gaze over her chest and the sparkle of the diamond against her skin. Fuck, but her tits were magnificent. Full, round and shifting beneath the silk of her black dress. “You have my word. I won’t keep you waiting again.”

“Someone has given you a false impression of me. I stopped waiting two years ago.”

“Careful with your words, Allegra. I just might believe you.” I’d expected a blushing virgin, not the woman next to me, purring with innuendo.

I kept my hand on her back as I escorted her to the massive dining room. A table seating for two dozen people stretched the length of the room. Floor-to-ceiling windows reflected the room and overlooked the city lights in the distance.

Orlando, Emilio, and Ant had already been seated at the table, along with most of the other guests. A servant pointed to the two empty chairs between Orlando and Deidre. Ant sat to the left of Emilio. I held the chair next to Deidre until Allegra took her seat.

Then I sat next to her. My thigh brushed against hers. She moved closer to her sister.

I rested my arm along the back of her chair, leaned into her, and whispered, “Careful, topolina, you’ll give our guests the wrong impression of us.”

Servers approached the table with the first course. The aperitivo. Wine from the Bruno vineyards filled the glasses.

Allegra angled toward me. Her hair looked soft as silk and tumbled over her shoulder. “You mean, they might think you’re too close to me and

making me uncomfortable?”

“It’s not discomfort you’re feeling,” I said, trailing my fingertips along the open back of her dress. Shallow breaths floating past her lips were the only hint her heart raced.

“It couldn’t possibly be any interest you have in me. Are we going to play a game of touching each other for appearances?” She slid her hand onto my leg. Her nails scored along my thigh, sending a shiver down my spine.

With a hard swallow, an intoxicating cocktail of lust, intrigue, and fascination slid down my throat. I needed a long slow sip of her mouth, something to whet my palate before I tasted the rest of her.

“Are those drinks dulling your reaction to me?” she asked.

If she moved her hand any closer to my dick, she was going to discover just how affected I was by her. And it wasn’t just her beauty. The stubborn defiance challenged me.

“You overheard my conversation?” I asked her in Italian.

Deidre glanced at her sister, casually took Allegra’s wine glass, and drank as she watched her sister’s reaction.

“It’s rude to speak in Italian when there are people at the table who don’t speak it.” Allegra kept her voice low.

“But you do,” I whispered. “What other secrets can I discover?”

Her gaze stayed with mine. “You were expecting a *little mouse*, Marco.”

I enjoyed the way my name floated across her lips. “I admit, you’re not what I expected.”

“Sadly, I can say the same thing.” She snatched her hand back from my thigh.

“I suggest we start over,” I said. “Yes, unfortunately, I don’t generally consider the feelings of others when I speak. And of course, I never would’ve

voiced my opinions had I known you were listening. I'm not accustomed to being spied upon."

She laughed and twisted toward me. "Really? Your only concern is my eavesdropping. Next time, don't speak under my balcony."

"How could you hear me from your balcony?" The second-floor landings were twenty feet up. She'd have to have been hanging over the side to hear our words.

"We both heard you," she said, indicating Deidre. "Sound travels."

Deidre took another sip of wine and nodded conspiratorially.

"What you overheard was a private conversation."

"What I heard was that you already have a woman to warm your bed. I can hardly be jealous since our marriage will be a business arrangement only. However, you require an heir, so when the time comes, we can arrange for IVF."

"IVF?"

She leaned in and lowered her voice. "It means you won't have to fuck me in the dark."

My jaw clenched.

Deidre leaned back in her chair and quietly spoke to Orlando. "Lanny, I told you this was going to get interesting. Five bucks says Ally draws blood first."

"Lanny? You're giving me a nickname?" They whisper-spoke to each other behind our backs. "Are you good for the money?"

"Yes. And you'll need to come up with a nickname for me. Make sure it's a good one."

Ant leaned forward. "Would it be rude to change seats?"

"I'll trade with you." Deidre slid back in her chair.

"Deidre?" Allegra scolded.

“Don’t worry. Now everyone is focused on me rather than you two. Obviously, you haven’t noticed you’re drawing attention. I’m sure they’re wondering if you’re going to stab him with one of your knives or kiss the smirk off his mouth.” Her eyes widened. “We can bet on that, too,” she enthusiastically said to Orlando.

“Deidre!”

She burped. “Oh.” She covered her mouth.

“How much have you had to drink?” Allegra gripped her wrist.

“I won’t drink anything else.” She leaned down. “I’m taking one for the team. If mom is focused on me, she won’t see how mean you’re being to Marco.”

“I’m not being mean. I’m proving a point.”

She snorted, scooted back from the table, and lifted a brow. “The dress proved your point.”

I agreed. The dress begged to be stripped from her body, as much as her mouth tempted.

Ant and Deidre changed seats as the antipasti course was served. Meat, cheese, and nuts filled charcuterie boards. Several were placed on the table, along with olive oil drizzled over tomato bruschetta.

Deidre sat between Orlando and Emilio and immediately engaged in a quiet conversation. My jaw tightened. I’d warned Orlando. The three appeared extremely comfortable with each other. I would deal with that tomorrow.

Orlando allowed his dick to do his negotiations, and Deidre was too much temptation. Sixteen was too young, and *Lanny* had a job to do.

I doubted responsibility to his family was suddenly going to become important to him. Not with a beautiful, half-drunk girl looking at him as if she’d offer her underage, illegal pussy up on a platter for dinner.

Unlike the woman next to me. Fuck me and the unfortunate circumstance of being overheard.

Salvatore stood and lifted his wine glass. “Tonight, is a special celebration.” He raised his glass to me. “Welcome to my home.”

“Your home and hospitality are most appreciated.” I slid my chair back and stood. “Our families have known each other a long time.” I lifted my glass. Seeing Allegra now, I wished I’d put a little more effort into the proposal. “Years of friendship have brought us to this day.”

I set my glass down on the table. I stood over Allegra and held my hand out to her.

Her wide eyes met mine. She swallowed and slid her trembling fingers into mine.

“You can stop this,” she whispered as she stood. “I won’t be a good wife for you.” Her long lashes lowered. When she lifted her gaze, the stubborn set of her mouth had me wanting to kiss her until her mouth bruised and I’d shattered her resistance.

Deidre leaned closer and hung on every word.

Sliding my fingers under Allegra’s hair, I wrapped my hand around her neck, pulled her intimately closer, and rested my cheek against hers as I spoke into her ear. “You’re a liar, topolina.” I softly kissed her cheek. “I won’t just fuck you in the dark. As my wife, I’ll fuck you wherever and whenever I want.”

“Do you expect me to wait while you finish with the other women in your bed?” Her breath rasped against my cheek. “Giada doesn’t like to share, and I won’t share you with Francesca.”

“Are you jealous?” I inched back and stared into her eyes.

“No. They can have you.”

Fuck, my cock hardened with her defiance. Fire sparked in her eyes.

Words dripped with accusation, but her mouth hinted at seduction. “Not only will you be a good wife.” I spoke so only she could hear me. “But you’ll be a good girl and get on your knees for me. However, this will be the only time I get on my knees for you.” Proving I was a liar. She’d have me on my knees often just for a taste of her pussy.

I pulled the velvet box from my pocket and dropped to one knee.

Allegra

I was so screwed...or at least I would be. For a moment, I’d forgotten this was Marco Bruno—The Enforcer. His strong fingers held mine in a firm grip. Those surrounding us wouldn’t see my fingers tremble or my heart race. They couldn’t feel the veiled threat cloaking me in insecurity.

His lips were moving, making promises he’d never keep. I couldn’t hear past the rushing of blood through my ears.

Would I become his wife? I acted as if I had a choice, but I didn’t. The agreement for my marriage couldn’t be broken without making an enemy of Marco. I had no choice.

“Yes.” The word tasted bitter on my tongue. Marco was everything I remembered, but so much more that I hadn’t understood. When I was fifteen, he’d been beautiful, and my innocent heart had believed in fairytales.

I’d spent five years dreaming he’d come to sweep me off my feet and into his bed, where he would do wicked things to me.

He’d come for me. I wasn’t going to be swept off my feet but shoved to my knees.

I salivated at the vision in my mind of this beautifully brutal man forcing his cock between my lips. My mother was right. Knox was right. I would be a whore with a ring on my finger.

A ring that was supposed to represent love and commitment, but for me wouldn't be a promise but a prison.

He slipped the diamond onto my finger. With the unfamiliar weight of it on my finger, he could've been closing his hands around my neck. I tried to breathe in through the pressure building in my chest.

He rose to his feet. The uncomfortable heat of his stare caused a kaleidoscope of suicidal butterflies to swarm to their death inside me. I couldn't speak. Dark brows arched over intense whiskey-colored eyes. The eyes of a lion. Powerful, intimidating, and darkly hypnotic.

"Marco," I whispered, the same way I whispered his name when I touched myself. He tunneled his fingers into my hair. His lips, warm and soft, barely touched mine. His palm held my neck as his thumb caressed the flutter of my pulse.

Applause sounded around the table. My world reduced to a pinprick of awareness. The man next to me was officially my fiancé. Stubble darkened his strong jaw. His eyes crinkled at the corner as he smiled and accepted congratulations.

Tingles slipped over my skin where his hand rested on my lower back.

"My princess," my father said as his arms circled me. I focused on his face. His eyes glistened with pride. His beefy hands held my cheeks as he smiled and kissed my forehead. My brother shook hands with my fiancé.

"Allegra, my beautiful daughter." Tears fell from my mother's eyes, and I rolled mine. She smiled at Marco. "You have a rare treasure in Allegra."

His hand tightened on my hip. "As I'm just discovering."

"A beautiful ring." She held my hand and gushed over the size and brilliance of the monstrous ring on my finger. I was an embarrassment an hour ago. "You'll be draped in diamonds."

I was already draped in regrets. I stared at the huge diamond. The stone had to be at least five carats. Smaller baguettes circled the cushion-cut center. It looked ridiculous on my thin finger.

My father shook hands with Marco. Time seemed to slow. Words blurred with faces.

“Ally?” Deidre grasped my hands. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. Staring at Deidre, I realized with perfect clarity, I’d done this to myself. I’d been the prim and proper mafia daughter. At least as far as they knew. I’d hid my truths, and it was too late to reveal them now.

Everyone took their seats as the soup was served. Knots coiled in my stomach. Marco dipped his spoon into his lemon chicken soup. Instead of tasting the soup, he held the spoon out for me.

“I’m not hungry.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. His gaze focused on my lips.

He leaned in. “I would like you to taste the soup.”

Our gazes held. He waited as I accepted the first taste of my future. I couldn’t tell him no.

Parting my lips, I accepted the smallest sip of the broth, but tasted nothing but the bitterness of apprehension. He was brutally handsome. And I was going to be his. I licked a drop from my lip. Marco brought the same spoonful to his mouth and finished it.

His hand rested on my thigh. As he held out another spoonful, his fingers slipped into the slit over my thigh. I pressed my legs together.

“I can feed myself,” I grumbled and picked up my spoon. “I’ve been taking care of my needs on my own for a while.”

His palm slid between my thighs. “Taking care of you is my responsibility, my pleasure.” He waited, both with the spoon and the way he grazed his finger along my flesh. “Open.”

I parted my lips, but he waited. The sexual energy spiking between us seemed to drown out the voices, the clink of forks against China, the tinkle of crystal...and any intentions I had of resisting him. Like the moon on the tide, he was pulling me in. Yet, I knew better.

Marco was the dangerous riptide beneath hypnotic waves, impossible to fight, destined to sweep me out to sea, to drown me in his power. My gaze shifted first.

“Allegra. I asked you to open.” The dark timbre of his voice slipped through my veins, and my thighs widened. His fingers inched higher on my leg. Then he stilled. I shivered as every nerve, molecule, and synapse fired. He was stealing the oxygen, and I was sinking into a black hole of unfamiliar emotions.

With one hand, I guided his spoonful of soup to my lips. With the other, I held his wrist between my legs. His gaze hardened, but my self-control softened.

No doubt he recognized his fingers brushed against the knife strapped to my thigh. A shiver slithered along my spine, tightened my lower belly, and zinged into my pussy.

I’d mistakenly believed I’d experienced arousal when I’d touched myself to my memories of him. Nothing before had ever triggered the hard clenching of my core.

Fear of him discovering just how soaked my panties had become kept me from shifting on the chair.

“Any higher and I’ll use it.” My voice came out stronger than I felt.

“Does violence make you wet, topolina?” His lips brushed the shell of my ear as he softly spoke to me. “Are you wet now?” My nipples tightened, and his fingers continued their trek higher. “Tell me or I’ll find out for myself.”

Needing liquid courage, I tipped my wine to my lips and finished it.

“Yes,” I hissed. “Because I’m imagining my knife slowly sinking into your flesh until your warm and thick blood bubbles against my fingers.”

“Don’t tempt me with the sight of blood, even my own.” Marco slid his hand from between my legs, leaned back, adjusted in his chair, and tugged on his trousers. “Or we’ll need to continue this stimulating choice of dinner conversation privately.”

“I’ve heard you live dangerously,” I said. Relief flowed through me. I drew in a breath to quell the rampant beating of my heart.

“Does your sharp tongue get you into trouble?”

I lifted a brow. “What have you been told?”

“Your father praised your virtuous qualities, your submissive nature, and how you’ll make a perfect, *demure* wife.” He sipped his wine.

“I’m to be a wife who is content to hang on her husband’s arm and keep her opinions to herself.” My voice seemed steady when I felt anything but calm.

“You’re under the false impression those qualities would appeal to me,” he said.

“You’re under the false impression that I care what you want. And since our conversation is causing you visible discomfort, perhaps we shouldn’t speak to each other at all.”

Luckily, I didn’t have to parry another round of arousing retorts. Servers entered with the beef braciolo. Marco draped a napkin over his lap, covering the noticeable condition of his cock as a server approached from the left.

I averted my gaze rather than drool at the idea that I was the one setting him off. That he was as affected as I was.

My wine was refilled, and I took a large gulp.

With a sharp knife, Marco sliced into his beef with long, smooth strokes. Dark hair dusted his knuckles. Red diamonds winked from the gold lion's head ring on his left hand.

I glanced at the ring on my finger as I held my fork. "I want a long engagement."

Marco stilled at my words. "Impossible."

I slapped my fork on the table. "There are always choices." As Knox had reminded me. And I was definitely opting for stupid decisions because I was negotiating with the one they called The Enforcer. "Two weeks isn't long enough to decide if we want this marriage."

"If?" Marco smiled. "The two weeks is to plan the wedding. Then we'll return to my home."

"Good luck with that," I said.

My mother never missed an opportunity to exploit her party planning prowess. The wedding would be on the scale of the Princess of Wales. Cake, dress, and the guest list to show off her daughter, the wife of Marco Bruno. My tummy tumbled with the thoughts in my head.

I'd be married to Marco, and he'd spend his time with the other women in his life. I pretended to be hardened, but inside, I was as soft as pudding. Sitting next to him, the scent of his cologne, the fit of his tux, the way his fingers held the knife teased me, and the way he brought his fork to those full, sensual lips had me drowning in wants.

Marco set his fork to the side. "I can compromise. Negotiations are part of any successful arrangement."

Slipping back into a mask of indifference, an unladylike snort escaped my mouth and nose. "Please." Mafia men didn't compromise.

"That word doesn't come easy to you." He nodded to the server to take his plate.

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing has ever come easy for me.”

He leaned in, his lips a breath away from my ear, and his palm slid onto my thigh again. “That sounds like a challenge.”

I felt Marco’s stare as he chatted with my father and my brother. His presence sent a tingle along my spine, and an answering flutter deep in my stomach.

Deidre had slipped away with Orlando and Emilio. I wanted her to be careful, but part of me wanted her to find a little mischief, not enough to tarnish her princess tiara with Santi or our dad. But she needed fun and friends.

I sidled around the perimeter of the room. I smiled as I was congratulated on my engagement. Yes, my ring was stunning if I wanted to sink to the bottom of the lake.

Marco seemed to know exactly where I stood. He turned his head again, his eyes finding me. Antonio entered the room, crossed to Marco, and pulled him aside. They whispered words. He nodded once, then excused himself from my father and brother. As he crossed the room, goosebumps broke over my arms.

He headed out of the room with Antonio next to him. His gaze briefly connected with mine, and then he left, presumably for a private conversation.

I considered making my escape to my room but found myself following. My heart hiccupped. Yes, he was here to marry me, but only because he wanted vengeance.

I couldn’t stop my thoughts from turning to Knox and what it would mean to him for my future husband to wage war against the Irish.

I hated this. Hated knowing there was nothing I could do. Hoping I never had to choose between them.

My heels clicked on the tile as I searched for Marco. He wouldn't risk having Antonio beneath my balcony again. I followed out to the patio and listened, staying in the shadow of the shrubs and bushes.

"Where are they?" Marco's clipped voice sounded close.

"One minute they were here, and then they were gone."

"I told him to leave the girl alone. What in the fuck is he thinking? Find him before I lose the support of Salvatore."

The girl? I hiked up my dress and rushed as fast as I could in my heels.

Both men turned in my direction as I came around the corner of the greenery. "What's wrong?"

"Fuck." Marco scrubbed his fingers through his hair. He glanced over my shoulder. "We have a situation."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Your sister is with my brother and Emilio. They're together, but I don't believe they've left the premises."

"What do you mean together? She's sixteen," I stated. "That stupid girl." A little tarnished. A little fun. She was impressionable, a jump first girl, especially with those two beautiful boys, full of testosterone. "What is Orlando thinking? She's still a kid."

Marco scanned the surroundings. "He wouldn't fuck her."

I narrowed my gaze on him. "I heard you earlier. We need to find them because Deidre is just like your brother. Whatever you want to convince me he wouldn't do, Deidre would. And you should fear Santino more than my father. Santino won't listen to reason."

"They aren't in the house," Antonio said. "Orlando and Emilio aren't familiar with the area. Where would Deidre take them?"

"Come with me." I crossed my arms against the cool night air and led them across the manicured grass.

“Allegra.” Marco stopped me, shrugged out of his jacket, and wrapped it around my shoulders. The warmth from his body surrounded me. His gaze softened on me as he threaded his fingers under my hair, gathered it in his fingers, and draped it to the outside of the jacket.

“Thank you.”

His finger grazed my cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll deal with Orlando.” His fingers slid against mine as he clasped my hand.

“I’ll cut his dick off with my knife if he’s touched her with it,” I said as I struggled to keep up with his stride in my heels.

“Keep talking, topolina. With every word out of your mouth, you’re convincing me we’ll make a good match.”

“My words should convince you I’m not a little mouse.”

I led him through the trees, this time taking the worn trail to the boathouse. Silvery moonlight reflected off the lake. Laughter and splashing sounded in the distance.

We stood on the dock. I groaned.

“Oh, fuck.” Antonio laughed and leaned against the boathouse. He pulled a cigarette from his pack. The flame highlighted his face as he lit the tip and inhaled. “Looks like we found the fun.”

Marco strode to the edge of the dock. Clothes littered the area. I scooped up Deidre’s dress from the ground.

Marco’s voice was low and intimidating. “Get out,” he stated in Italian.

“Relax. We’re just swimming.” Orlando treaded water.

Emilio and Deidre swam to the ladder. Emilio stepped on the first rung to climb out, but Deidre rested her arms on the edge of the dock. Thank god she was wearing her bra and panties. I wouldn’t have to stab anyone—yet.

I approached. “And you think *I’m* reckless?”

“Come swimming.” She stared up at me with those pleading, innocent

eyes. “Just once more to remember. You’ll be married and we won’t have midnight swims ever again.”

We both lived under the scrutiny of our responsibility. Faced with the truth, I’d squandered my teenage years wishing on stars for the man next to me.

“I can’t.” I squatted in front of her, careful to angle my hips to keep my dress from splitting and showing my crotch to Orlando and Emilio.

“Just because you’re getting married doesn’t mean you can’t have fun.”

I smiled at her. “Yes, I think it does. You’ve met my fiancé.”

“But he’s getting the washed-out version of you.” She grabbed my arm. “You haven’t laughed once tonight.”

“Don’t do it,” I scolded as she tugged. Unstable on my heels, I teetered toward the edge. “Dee—” The rest of my scream drowned in my mouth as I tumbled into the water.

I kicked to the surface, sputtering and gagging.

Deidre laughed, dodging my flailing arms.

“You little beast.” I was going to murder her. Maybe I’d gut her like a fish with my knife or push her under the water until she drowned. Oh my god! She’d really done it. I spit lake water from my mouth. The water was cold, but I was on fire.

“Allegra.” Marco held out his hand.

“Just a minute. She’s dead.” I kicked hard, surged through the water, and grabbed Deidre. She laughed as I pushed her head under the water. There was nothing funny about this. Next thing I felt was Orlando’s arms around me as he swam me toward the ladder.

“Can’t let you kill her,” he said. “I like her.”

“I did too, until two minutes ago.” I grabbed the ladder. Marco’s

sopping wet tux jacket weighed heavily on my shoulders, and my dress clung to my body as my heel slipped on the rung.

Then strong hands braced my ribs and pulled me from the water.

Bending over, I ripped the Velcro strap on my knife and slipped it from my thigh.

“Wait,” Marco said with a chuckle. “Put the knife away.”

“I’m just going to threaten them.” I pushed my hair from my eyes and spun to find Deidre. She braced her hands on the dock and launched out of the water like an Olympic swimmer.

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at Emilio and Orlando. Her lips trembled from the cold, but her smile tempered my anger. I remember looking at Marco the same way the first time we met.

The three whispered as they dressed.

“I’ll speak with them both.” He took the knife from my chilled fingers. “Nothing like this will happen again.” Marco slipped his soaked jacket from my shivering body, replacing it with Antonio’s. Then his arm was around my shoulders.

I wanted to be angry, but Marco’s harshly spoken words reminded me of the vehemence of my father’s and my brother’s criticisms. Deidre was young and impressionable, but she was also raised in a family that spit on society’s rules but required adherence to their own.

“Don’t be angry with Orlando and Emilio. Deidre’s impulsive, and she’s persuasive. Not to mention she’s infatuated with your brother and Emilio. Look at them.”

His grip tightened on my shoulder. “It’s fucking irresponsible. Orlando has always been impulsive. I trust Emilio to be his voice of reason. But one glance at your sister has them both behaving foolishly.”

“I want her to have friends, to have fun.” I stiffened, remembering I

was supposed to hate the man next to me. I stepped away from Marco. “I don’t want her to have regrets.”

We made our way back and slowed as we approached the house.

“How are we supposed to get inside without being noticed?” I asked.

Deidre snorted. “You could always sneak in by climbing the trellis again?”

I dropped my arms. I was already cold and wet. Now, I was pissed again. “Deidre, you need to shut up.”

“Oh, shit,” she stammered and slapped a hand over her mouth. “We’ll go make sure the coast is clear. Come on, Lanny.”

Before I could argue, Deidre scrambled toward the house with Orlando.

“Don’t worry,” Emilio said. “I know what you’re thinking, but she’s safe with us.”

“I doubt any girls are safe with you two.”

“Yeah, but she’s family now. So, we’ll take care of her.”

I wanted to believe him.

We entered the house. Voices and laughter spilled from the parlor. Timoteo approached. Tim was more than one of Santino’s soldiers. They were best friends, and he was just as over-protective as my brother.

“Allegra, Santi wants to see you.” Tim’s gaze raked over me. “He’s been looking for you.”

Marco tugged the jacket closed and tucked me close to his side. “You can tell him she’s with her fiancé.” He escorted me to the stairs.

“Allegra—” Tim said again.

“You can see she’s fine.” Antonio remained at the bottom of the stairs.

“Ally—”

I glanced over my shoulder. Tim’s gaze lingered on me. Worry

furrowed his brow.

Marco tightened his hold on my elbow. “Eyes forward, Allegra, or I’ll take the knife from your thigh and gut him where he stands.”

Antonio took a menacing step closer to Tim. “Mr. Bruno won’t be disturbed for the remainder of the evening.”

“Tim is going to assume you’re taking me to bed.”

Marco growled as he led me down the hall. “Which room is yours?”

“You’re not coming in.”

“Then we’ll go to mine.” Marco tightened his hold on me, propelled me toward his suite, escorted me into his room, then closed and locked the door.

“I’m not staying in here with you.” I stepped away from him.

Marco prowled across the room. His gaze darkened, sliding over my skin in a heated caress. “You’re not leaving.”

My nipples hardened against the wet, clinging fabric of my dress.

“No one can see you like this.”

“You don’t like to get dirty?” The jacket parted as I pushed my wet hair away from my face. I reeked of lake water. Mud dried to my ankles, and I could feel it squish between my toes.

He took a step closer. “You misunderstand.” He parted the jacket. His gaze raked over my body until his whiskey eyes stared hard into mine. “No other man will ever lay eyes or hands on what’s mine. Your brother and his soldiers will understand you only answer to me.”

“I’m not yours.” Not yet. Or maybe I was. His imposing presence made my knees weak.

“You will be.” His knuckles grazed my flesh, dangerously close to my breast.

My shallow breaths matched the rampant fluttering of my heart. “You

don't want me."

"Do you require proof of my attraction to you?" He leaned closer and breathed against my neck. "You're beautiful, Allegra."

My hands rested against his hips, and my head tilted to the side. "Is that all that's required of your wife?"

"I remembered a shy girl. She was skinny and too timid to talk to me. I expected an adult version of that quiet girl." His lips tickled the lobe of my ear. "Instead, I find you." He pushed the jacket from my shoulders. "Stunningly beautiful, full of fire and confidence."

Marco peeled the strap of my dress off my shoulder and pressed his lips to my skin. I banded an arm across my chest before the dress could slip from my body.

"I'm not sleeping with you."

"Not while you smell and taste like the lake." His fingers ghosted over my collarbone, tracing the chain and diamond pendant floating against my skin.

"Come," he said and laced his fingers with mine. He led me to the bathroom. He began to unbutton his shirt. "Take off your dress."

I lifted a brow, then caught my reflection in the mirror. Good fucking hell. I was wrecked. Black smudges darkened my eyes. My hair stood out at odd angles and snarled down my back. Mud smeared my neck and shoulders. "I'm filthy."

Marco pressed the controls for the waterfall shower behind the glass partition. Green and amber light flooded the enclosure. Soft rain poured from the overhead panel.

Behind me, he shrugged out of his shirt. I wasn't naïve. For my entire life, I'd understood the consequences of not holding onto my virginity. Men like Marco didn't share. But I'd never wanted anyone else. I didn't know if

he was anything like the man I'd imagined him to be in my mind, but I wanted to find out. I wanted to be his.

Never could I have envisioned the hard hills of his shoulders. Bronzed skin stretched over the cut grooves of his torso. Dark hair dusted the plains of his pectorals, feathered down his defined abdominals, the narrow ribbon disappearing behind the thin leather belt of his trousers.

With one hand, he slid the tail loose, flipped the buckle, and tugged the belt from the loops. I swallowed hard, dragging my gaze to his.

"You're going to be my wife. Not only will I make love to you on our wedding night, but I'm going to fuck you while you have your knife strapped to your thigh." He dropped his trousers but left on his underwear.

Oh, Saint Agatha of Sicily, how was I supposed to withstand the sexual prowess of this man? A rush of heat unfurled deep in my belly. The man was a masterpiece carved from granite. Thick veins roped his arms, leading to huge hands with long, strong fingers. He reached around me and tested the temperature of the water.

Hard, thick, and long, the outline of his cock stretched the fabric of his underwear. I wanted to stare, but his body towered over me.

"Just to be clear," he said. "I want you wet and filthy when you're in my bed, but not with lake water and mud."

His wicked words twisted into a knot of need. His arm snaked around my waist, and he backed me into the shower.

Water cascaded over our heads. Not that I needed to worry about my dress or shoes. They were both ruined from my swim. I tipped my face to the water. My eyes closed, and my lips parted. The warmth of the water chased the chill from my flesh, but it was Marco's hand on my neck that had my body heating.

"Can I kiss you?"

My eyes snapped open. Then his warm breath danced over my lips. I closed my eyes again as his mouth descended onto mine. I'd dreamed this moment. His lips crushed to mine, his palm holding me hostage as his mouth conquered mine. A low growl vibrated from him and seeped into me.

His tongue slid into my mouth, tasting me. Dark, dangerous thoughts collided in my head. He was going to wreck me. I'd fallen in love with the idea of him. Tonight, my fairytale had become my nightmare when I'd learned I wouldn't be the one he wanted in his bed. And yet, I couldn't resist the temptation of his mouth.

God, I'd waited for him, to feel his masculine hands on me. I'd only had the touch of my own fingers on my breasts and slipping through the wetness between my legs.

My arms dropped to my side as I leaned into him. I'd kissed boys when I was a girl, and I'd shared a disastrous kiss once with Knox. Never had I burned the way I did for Marco.

I stared into his eyes as I slicked my tongue over my lip, wishing for another intoxicating taste of him.

“Don't be afraid to touch me.”

My core clenched with his whispered words. I lowered my gaze and lifted my hand to his sternum. His flesh quivered with the brush of my fingertips. With my arm lifted, my dress slipped from my chest.

With one hand wrapped around the back of my neck, he slanted his mouth over mine again. As he claimed me, I kissed him back. I followed his lead, sliding my tongue against his. Tasting, exploring, and sinking deeper into the dangerous waters of desire.

Marco groaned, and his thumb rasped against my nipple. With a gentle turn, he shifted me, pressing my back against the marble shower wall. I tried to step out of my dress, but my feet tangled in the folds of fabric.

He cupped my breast in his large hand, then pinched my pebbled nipple between his thumb and finger. I tried to widen my legs, to feel the press of his cock against the fierce ache building in my core. My knees weakened as he set fire to my flesh.

“Marco, wait.” My breathless voice echoed with the softly falling cascade of water.

Marco’s hand slid along my neck and onto my shoulder. The thick, hard length pressed against me. He rocked into me.

Too fast. Too real. I turned away from him and gulped for a breath in the steam-filled enclosure. “Wait,” I said again, needing a moment to slow the torrent of rampant needs building within me.

“Fuck,” he cursed.

“I’m stuck in my dress.”

He kissed my cheek. As he lowered to squat in front of me, his hands mapped the dips and tucks of my body. His fingers slid against the ladder of my ribs, across the soft contour of my belly. My arrested breath tightened my chest as he stared at the valley between my legs.

At least the water would hide the wetness leaking from inside me. My clit throbbed, and my internal muscles clenched in anticipation of his touch. He pressed his lips to my hip, drinking the warm water as it sluiced over my trembling body.

I leaned against the wall as he lifted one foot and slipped off my shoe, then the other. Muddy water swirled down the drain.

The dress and shoes were ruined. A laugh bubbled out of me. Any anger I could have for Deidre died with the temptation of Marco.

He stood and placed his palm under the dispenser for shampoo. He tipped my head back as his fingers slid along my scalp. “We’ll have a story for our grandchildren.”

“This feels too good to start talking now.” I closed my eyes. “I don’t think you want to hear most of what I want to say, and I don’t want to piss you off.”

He chuckled as the water rinsed the suds from my hair. “You haven’t feared my temper yet.”

I wiped water from my face with my fingers, opened my eyes, and met the intensity of his stare. I wanted him to be everything I had believed in. “I’m brave when I have my knife.”

“We need to start over, Allegra.”

I bowed my head. “How can we? I don’t want to argue with you, but I did listen to your conversation with Antonio. I’m not talking about your misconceptions of me.” I hated this unfamiliar feeling of insecurity. But he wanted another woman, had promised his bed to her. I tried to tamp down the lump climbing into my throat.

Marco dispensed hair conditioner and fingered it through my tangles. “An arranged marriage comes with complications but also the simplest of expectations.”

“I’ll be your little mouse, only trapped because we both know there’s only going to be one in the marriage.”

“I’ll take care of you. You get stability, protection, and children.”

“I don’t need anyone to take care of me.” I rinsed my hair and stepped from the shower.

“Allegra—”

I wrapped a fluffy towel around my torso and handed a second towel to Marco. He stripped out of his soaked underwear. Oh my. Only a glimpse of his erection gave my heart palpitations. Then he wrapped the towel around his hips and secured it with a tuck low on his abdominals.

“I want from you the same as you’ll demand from me. Loyalty,

fidelity, and trust.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Loyalty is rare, fidelity is expected, and trust is earned.”

“But you expect it of me without having earned it.”

“Yes.” The word was hard and final. “I’ll be your husband.”

“If you want a meek, quiet wife, you’ll want to marry someone else.” I’d been prepared to pretend, to be the wife he expected. But his callously spoken words beneath my balcony had brought clarity to my future.

I could be loathed for being the mafia bride my mother had groomed me to be, or I could be hated for challenging his definition of wife.

My cage wouldn’t be gilded. I’d fallen in love with the idea of him, and he’d suffered the idea of me. Both of us were trapped, but I was the only one who had to fight for what I wanted.

“You aren’t going to be in my bed if you’re fucking Francesca or sharing Giada.”

He growled and raked his fingers through his dark, wavy hair. “Agreed.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “I won’t fuck Francesca. You have nothing to worry about with Giada.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. I wanted to believe him, but I couldn’t look at him and not feel an answering pull between my legs.

Marco closed the space between us. He tucked a tendril of my damp hair behind my ear. “My brother was the negotiator, but I can compromise. If possible, I’ll give you what you want.” His thumb traced my lower lip. “And you’ll give me no arguments. I expect you to obey me.”

I took a breath to speak.

“No arguments. You won’t challenge my authority or defy my orders

in public or in private. You'll have all the power that comes from being my wife. You'll answer to no one except me." His palm slid along my jaw. I shivered as he collared my throat.

I desperately wanted to look down, to reach between us and curl my fingers around his cock. I wanted to touch him, to feel the hot, velvety skin of his shaft in my hand. Fear held me in her grasp.

"Don't ever betray me."

I couldn't imagine anyone would betray this man. Maybe I *was* his topolina. A little mouse under the paw of the lion. I shuddered with his touch. I wanted to believe him. I wanted my fairytale.

"I'll be your wife."

Marco

I tugged on the towel tucked between her breasts. "You belong to me now."

This woman, innocently fierce. Yes, she was beautiful, but the world was full of beautiful women. Something about her reflected something in me. I needed her to be mine. If she'd have asked for a blood vow, I would have sliced open my heart and bled for her.

Her pulse fluttered in the column of her neck. Nipples hardened and darkened. I bent my head, gently bit the sweet tip, and sucked her flesh into my mouth.

Allegra whimpered, and her knees weakened. Scooping her into my arms, I carried her to the bed. Her tangles of wet hair brushed against my arm. As I held her, I kissed her again, sliding my tongue into her mouth.

Her lips were hesitant. I laid her on the bed, dropped the towel, and climbed on beside her. I stretched out next to her. Eyes, darkened with lust

and inexperience, stared into mine.

I traced the sharp angle of her brow, skimmed my touch along her face, onto her neck, and skated gentleness across her shoulder. I stilled as her chest lifted with a deep inhale, and then I slipped my fingertips around the swell of her breast.

A sharp exhale had her arching into my touch. Leaning over her, I sipped her lips and traced the feminine contour of her quivering belly.

Her knees were bent, with her feet braced on the bed, and her thighs tightly closed.

“Don’t hide from me.” Her insecurity was showing. I wanted her to fuck me the same way she challenged me at dinner. Passionate, fierce, and defiant. “Our world trains their sons to be merciless, and it demands their daughters conform to the will of her husband. Our marriage can be more than a contract.”

“I’ve never seen the contract, only been told that I’ve been promised to you.”

“Promised to be my wife, but I’m going to take more. I want all of you. Not only will you speak vows before God, but you’ll make vows to me.”

Pressure built in my chest and possessiveness flared through me.

“I’m not a forgiving man. If you allow another man to touch you, I’ll kill him. Your body is mine.” I grazed my fingers over her arm where her mother had grasped her. “I heard your mother before dinner. She had her hands on you. That will never happen again. Make no mistake. From tonight forward, you belong to me.”

She lowered her gaze, but when she refocused on my face, her eyes sparked with fire. “After overhearing you, I wanted to prove you wrong. I wanted you *to want* to fuck me. My dress didn’t meet with her approval.”

“From the moment you entered the room, you were all I could see.

You're a beautiful woman. Men are always going to want to fuck you."

"I only care if you want me." A small smile curved her lips. "I hated that you thought of your mistress. Tonight was supposed to be mine."

Her father promised me her purity, but I'd never cared. I'd hoped she'd found someone to get her off so that I wouldn't be burdened with the task. Now, I seethed with the thought of another man near her. I'd fucking kill him. And I'd enjoy watching the life drain from his mutilated body.

There was no delicate way to ask about her experiences. "Are you a virgin?"

"Yes, but—" She rested a hand on my chest. "I've touched myself. I've come with your name on my lips, but I've only wanted to be yours."

I stilled as her nails scored the hair on my chest. "Open for me, topolina."

Her thighs parted, but just enough to invite the touch of my hand.

"Fuck," I cursed as I slid a finger through her slick, hot folds. Liquid heat drenched her. With the tip of my finger, I rimmed her opening.

I couldn't resist another taste of her mouth. Her lips were soft against mine as I kissed her. Tongues tangled as I savored her again and again. At the same time, I penetrated her with my finger. Inner tissue melted against the invasion.

She whimpered as I worshipped her body with my mouth, touching my tongue to the soft skin of her neck. Hovering over her, braced on one elbow, I curled my fingers inside her.

Her tentative touch grazed along my torso, lower across my abdominals, and slid onto my hip.

I kissed her again, sinking into the dark, delicious depths of her mouth. Her tongue glided against mine. I cradled her breast in my palm and pinched the nipple into a hardened bead.

“I’m yours,” she said against my lips. “Are you going to be mine?”

I didn’t answer her. I flicked my tongue along her jaw. I’d show her she was mine. Moving down her body, I laved her nipple, sucking hard on the tip. Her flesh was soft and smooth, and carried the clean taste of our shower.

Shifting over her, I split her thighs and positioned between them. She lifted onto her elbows. Her gaze locked on mine as I licked the rim of her bellybutton.

“Every part of you is mine.” I breathed in the scent of her arousal. A feral need surged through me as I closed my mouth over her pussy, sliced the blade of my tongue through her folds, and curled it around her clit.

Allegra flopped to her back, stretched her arms over her head, and arched. “Marco,” she whimpered as she fisted the blanket. Her neck stretched as her head angled back, and her pelvis rocked into me.

I wedged my palms under her ass and lifted her to my mouth. I feasted on her cunt, sucking the sweetness from her folds, and drilling my tongue into her tight, virgin hole.

My gut clenched as my cock hardened. I wanted inside her, to possess her. I wanted to believe her words. Somehow, the young girl had fallen for the monster, saving herself for me, waiting until I’d come to ravage her.

As her body crested, I closed my eyes, relishing her surrender. Flutters rippled through her channel as her cream bathed my lips.

Innocence had never tasted so much like sin.

Chapter Three

Marco

Propped on two pillows, I lay in bed. Allegra curled into my chest. Moonbeams poured into the darkened room through billowing curtains. Night air chilled the room.

Her silken, auburn hair fanned across my skin and her fingertips traced random patterns on my chest.

“I changed my mind,” she softly spoke.

“About what?”

She glanced into my face. “A long engagement.”

I smiled and brushed a stray tendril of hair from her cheek. “Impatient now that you’ve had a taste?”

She huffed. “You’re the only one who had a taste.”

A laugh built in my gut, rolled into my chest, and rumbled into the room. I flipped her onto her back, breathed against her neck, and nipped her skin. “I’m going to make love to my wife for the first time on our wedding night.”

“Maybe we can compromise. Make love to me on our wedding. Tonight, just fuck me.”

“Mia moglie,” *my wife*, “I will never just fuck you.” I slid my fingers between her legs. “Do you want to come again?”

“Yes, please.” She rolled her hips into my hand.

I slid two fingers into her passage. “You have a greedy cunt, *topolina*.”

Her gaze narrowed as she hissed a breath. She arched into my palm. “You told Antonio you needed a whore in your bed.”

My thumb gently circled her clit. “Never,” I murmured, and spread her juices as I fucked her with my fingers.

Her lips parted with a soft hitch. “I want to be enough for you.”

Fucking hell. She’d have me promising moonlit walks and monogamy. She was nothing I expected, and more than I deserved. If I gave her what she wanted, she’d unleash The Enforcer into her bed. I didn’t allow for weakness in my life.

Allegra was kryptonite.

I had my fingers inside her, claiming her pleasure for my own. She clawed my shoulders. Fluids soaked my hand. Spasms contracted against my fingers. As she came, I slammed my lips onto hers and swallowed her cries with a hard, punishing kiss. I sucked her tongue, stealing the breath from her lungs.

Fuck a long engagement. All we needed was a license, a Catholic church, and a priest.

I slid out of her cunt and brought my fingers to my lips. Her eyes widened as I tasted her cream, licking her glistening juices.

Pupils, darkened with pleasure, focused on my mouth. “You’ll have to show me what you want.”

“Be careful what you ask me for.”

“And if I want the same thing?” Her fingers glided along my biceps and traced the thick veins of my forearm.

“Open.”

Allegra’s delicate pink tongue slicked across her lip. Her throat stretched and flexed as she swallowed.

Heat surged through me as she did as I asked. Warm breath caressed my hand as I slid two fingers past her full lips and into her moist mouth. “Suck.”

I growled as her small hand curled around my wrist. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her tongue swirled over my fingers.

“Cazzo! *Fuck.*” Rearing up onto my knees, I fisted my cock.

Allegra slowly sat. Her gaze locked on my hand as I stroked the length and grazed my thumb over the head.

Blatant desire swirled in her beautiful eyes. Heat sizzled down my spine, my gut clenched, and my balls tightened. She leaned into me, her fingers gripping my hips. Her mouth was a breath away from my dick.

I wrapped my hand around the base and stilled. The moment grew heavy. Lust swirled with indecision. Violence and passion simmered in this woman. Her fingers curled around mine, and she rubbed her cheek against the glans.

“Fuck, Ally.” I forced the words from my mouth. “You’re killing me.”

Her gaze lifted. I groaned and gathered her hair in my fist. Parting her lips, she opened her mouth and swirled her tongue along the frenulum and over the slit. She tasted the fluids leaking from the tip. A low hum vibrated from her mouth.

I moved my hand, and she launched onto her knees, opened wider, and swallowed my cock.

Two fisting my dick, she sucked and swirled her tongue around the head. She moaned in the back of her throat, and I nearly fucking shot my load in a blur of riotous curls, full pert tits, and luscious lips. She was wild,

slurping and sucking. Spit drenched my shaft. She slid her fingers through the slickness, squeezing and pumping me.

My innocent wife knew how to give head like a whore. A shiver chased along my spine. She might be a virgin, but she wasn't inexperienced.

No doubt she'd sucked dick before, but she'd remember mine. Holding her head, I fucked her face. Releasing my shaft, she held onto my flanks, her nails cutting into my flesh.

Pleasure and building rage warred within me. I'd know the name of the man who had my fiancé on her knees. A blackness swirled within me, snapping painfully at my possessiveness of this woman.

I took her harder, wanting to punish her for giving to anyone what was mine. She gagged, fighting for a breath as I shoved more of my cock into her mouth.

Her eyes closed.

"Look at me," I demanded. "See your fucking husband."

She tried, but my cock stretched her mouth, and my fingers gripped her skull. Fuck, she was beautiful. That someone had her on her knees...

My lips pulled back in a snarl as I exploded, filling her mouth with my seed. She swallowed, yet white cream smeared around her lips.

With a final suck, she inched back, my dick slipping from between her lips. She inhaled a ragged breath, gasping for air. Then she turned those questioning eyes to me.

A surge of contradictory emotions slammed through me. I understood people. I recognized guilt in the eyes of my enemy. Would she lie to me? Those who feared me always lied.

She hadn't needed instructions on how to please me. A silent storm built in my gut. Was she playing at innocence? I climbed from the bed, tugged on my boxers, and walked away from her.

“Are you angry?” she quietly asked.

I stared at her from across the room. “Should I be? You know how to suck dick.”

She smiled. She shouldn’t look pleased.

“Who taught you to give head?”

The question in her eyes morphed into something I feared was her go-to reaction with claws and passive aggression. “You want a name?” Her lips parted on a strangled inhale. Then her eyes flashed. “Google.” She tossed off the covers. “And a banana, but the banana never tried to choke me, and in the end, I ate it.”

I stilled as she scrambled off the bed. “Allegra—”

“Shut up. This was supposed to be special.” She ripped the blanket from the bed and covered herself. “You’re a dick and you’ve been one since the minute you arrived.” After securing the blanket around her torso, she pushed her hair out of her eyes. “I’m trying to be what you want. Yes, I wanted to prove something when I wore the dress.”

“Ally—”

“No, don’t call me Ally. Like trust, you haven’t earned it. You had planned to continue your relationships outside of our marriage, but I’m supposed to trust you. You’re two years late to our engagement party, but I’m supposed to trust you. Your only complaint is that I *‘know how to suck dick.’*”

“Dee is right. There’s no way I can keep up pretenses. I can’t be a good, obedient wife.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and clasped my hands between my wide-spread thighs. “We’ve been over this.”

“Clearly, I’m not what you expected. But I’m not sure which one of me you want. I’m not the docile wife that is mute and has the personality of a snail, but if that’s what you want, I’ll try.”

This evening had been wrought with revelation. My future wife carried a knife, had no issue making threats, pried into my business, listened to my conversations, and apparently climbed the trellis to her room to avoid detection.

Reckless, daring, fucking beautiful, and full of fire. I spoke of trust, but I was ignorant of her activities for the last five years. I assumed she was attending school and passing time as my sister did with shopping, wasting time with her friends, and procrastinating about her future.

I suspected she'd done none of those things. Instead, she was garnering an education with online porn. She stood before me, clasping the blanket against her chest, and promising a wife with the personality of warm milk. It might be nice late at night but would only put me to sleep.

"We've been provoking each other all evening," she said. "And then you brought me here. Why? Why do *that* to me?" She pointed to the bed. "I didn't start this."

"Sit."

She hesitantly sat but kept space between us.

"More than anywhere else, I want your trust in our bed. Forgive me if I expected some hesitancy from your inexperience."

"I'm a mafia princess, Marco, and I've always wanted to be your wife. I'm not a timid virgin coming to your bed. I've never had sex, but I know how to please my own body. Once I became your wife, I wanted to know how to please you, too."

"And you learned how to give a blowjob on Google?"

"Mostly. I learned how to give good head by watching gay porn."

"Mio dio." *My god*. She was serious. I flopped onto my back and covered my face with my hands.

She tugged on the blanket, scooted closer, and kneeled next to me. "Do

you still want to start over?”

I sat up again. “No.” Because what I was discovering about her only made her more appealing. “We need to learn about each other.”

“My brother says they call you The Enforcer and that you’re unforgiving. I’m sorry that I’m not what you expected.”

“I’m the one who needs to apologize.” I cradled her head in my hand. Her silky hair slipped between my fingers. “I don’t want a tepid wife.”

“I know this marriage is only happening now because you need soldiers. I know you had three brothers. I’m sorry about Luca. Are you going after the Irish?”

“Our bed isn’t the place to speak about business.” I didn’t expect to discuss business with her at all.

She chewed on her lip. “I’m not talking about sex with you either or how we’ll split the household duties. Maybe I should just go to my room.”

“Your place is next to me.”

“Why? We’re not going to have sex until our wedding night, and I’m not going to do any of the other things I’ve learned. I’d rather go to the kitchen and get a banana. At least I won’t be hungry after I come.”

I chuckled and toppled her onto her back. “I think we’re getting along well, considering we’ve had two fights in two minutes and neither of us is bloody.”

“Only because I don’t have my knife.”

I shifted on the bed and lay back on the pillows.

“Please,” I whispered, opening my arm for her.

Keeping the blanket tucked around her, she stretched out next to me. I tunneled my fingers through her hair again. In the darkened room, the fight drained from me. I needed to remember she was young and at a disadvantage in this arrangement.

“Do you know how to use the knife?” I asked.

She fidgeted with the blanket.

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me, Allegra. I’d rather have the truth, even if it means we fight until we resolve whatever is between us.”

“I don’t want to argue.”

I kissed her temple. “If you’re going to carry a knife, you need to know how to use it. I would be surprised if your brother taught you to fight.”

She didn’t speak.

“I won’t be upset.” I promised. “By your silence, I assume you weren’t trained by Santino. Google?”

Her laugh vibrated into me. “Self-defense training. I’m good with the knife.”

“Will I discover any other secrets?”

She relaxed next to me, settling her head on the pillow. I faced her.

“I don’t want to live in Italy. My sister needs me. I have friends here.”

“My father’s still young, and I have no ambition to take his place before he’s ready to step down. My business requires me to return often, but I want our life here.”

She scooted closer and rested her hand on my chest.

I lifted her fingers. “Why have you taken off the ring?”

Leaning up on an elbow, she glared at her hand. “I...um...”

“Allegra? Where’s your ring?”

Her gaze slowly shifted to mine. “At the bottom of the lake.”

Allegra slept. Her hands pillowed beneath her cheek. Warm breath slipped past her lips, and long, dark lashes shadowed against her olive skin. I trailed a finger over the soft slope of her shoulder.

My gut tightened. Already, she was mine.

After slipping out of bed, I dressed in my slacks, took my phone out to the private balcony, and called my father.

“Is she as you remember?” he asked in lieu of hello.

“Five years is a long time,” I said. “The wedding will go forward as soon as possible.”

His robust laugh brought a smile to my lips. “Tell me about her.”

“She’s going to challenge my patience.” I leaned back and closed my eyes. “Her sister is trouble for Orlando.”

“Put him to work making inquiries into Luca. Before his murder, he was doing business with Alex Ferraro. If you need more motivation to get the businessman to talk, I’ll send Stefano. You need to take these two weeks to romance your bride.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Allegra stared at me from the bed with a sleepy softness. The blanket had slipped, giving me a peek at her pink-hued nipple. My gaze stayed with hers.

“She’ll surprise you,” I said in Italian, knowing she understood every word I spoke.

“A woman is a beautiful rose, rare in its intricacies, the scent unlike any other flower. Her touch is in the softness of the petals.”

I chuckled. “You’re a poet, old man.”

“Ascoltami per un momento.” *Listen for a moment.*

“Yes, I’m listening. Water and sunlight to bloom. I promise, I’ll keep her wet and warm.”

Allegra arched a brow.

“Bah. She won’t bloom without being nurtured. You can be abrasive, figlio mio.” *My son.*

Allegra stretched, rolled to her belly, and wrapped her arms around the pillow beneath her face. We stared at each other. I spoke to my father, but my

words were for her. “She’s rare and beautiful. She’s fearless, and she comes with thorns.”

He laughed again. “She will need them with Giada.”

“She forgets her place in this family.” I leaned forward in my chair. Only hearing my words and not my father’s, Allegra’s brows furrowed. “I won’t tolerate her interference.”

Allegra sat up and clutched the pillow to her chest. I stood from the chair. My gaze locked with hers as I crossed the room.

“Giada is protective of her family,” my father said.

“Giada is hungry for power. Keep a leash and a muzzle on her. When she feels threatened, she strikes out.” I cupped Allegra’s cheek, then slid my thumb along her lower lip. She held my wrist, opened her mouth, and swiped her tongue against the edge of my thumb.

I pushed into her mouth. Her lips closed around it, and she sucked. Heat rushed through my veins, flaring in intensity. She fucking unraveled every misconception I had of her.

“I’ll speak to her, Marco. I want your new bride to be at home here.”

I shoved my thumb deeper into her mouth, pressing against her tongue. The fingers of her left hand disappeared beneath the sheet. Her eyes slid closed, and her body shuttered. I didn’t need to see where she’d put her fingers to see the effect it had on her. Her hips rocked against the hand moving between her legs, and she moaned as she sucked. The wet inner walls of her cheek gloved to my skin.

“We’ll return for a short visit. But we’ll live here. I’ll need a home for my bride. Ask Anna to begin searching.” My sister would understand the size and security I’d require for a permanent residence.

“Molto bene.” *Very good.*

With a promise to speak soon, I ended the call and tossed the phone to

the nightstand.

I braced one knee on the bed and leaned into my fiancé. “You should be sleeping.”

“I didn’t want to sleep alone.”

I wrapped my fingers around her throat, urged her onto her back, and followed her down. Splitting her lips, I thrust my tongue into her mouth, swallowing her whimpers, and I devoured her.

“I’ll make you come, topolina.” I grazed my knuckles across her abdomen then lower.

“Marco,” she whispered as I slid my fingers into her slick folds. Her hand curved around my neck as she pulled my lips closer to hers.

“Tell me what you want.”

“Just you.”

Allegra

The sun was warm on my face as I sat with my mother and sister on the patio for an alfresco breakfast of fruit and pastries. Marco spoke with my father and brother.

Orlando, Emilio, and Antonio joined Tim and several of my father’s soldiers at the buffet table.

My mother flipped through her wedding planner. “I need you to sit with me today and make the final decisions on the wedding.”

The engagement was just a formality. My mother had been planning and plotting my wedding for years. I just wanted it over, although I wasn’t sure what marriage to Marco would look like.

As if sensing my thoughts lingered on the way he’d touched me this morning, he glanced at me over the rim of his coffee cup.

A slow smile spread across my lips, and my face warmed.

My mother followed my gaze. “Allegra, you need to stop.” She lowered her voice. “Everyone knows where you spent last night. Spending the night in his bed on the first day of his return? You don’t even know him.”

I snapped my gaze at my mom. “And yet you’re planning my marriage to him.”

“Do you think he wants a whore for a wife?”

“Yes.” I popped a bite of a scone into my mouth. “Don’t all men?” I leaned back on the chair and propped my foot on the seat.

“Sit like a lady.”

“I thought we just came to the conclusion I’m not a lady.”

“And dragging your sister down with you.”

Deidre groaned and dropped her head on the table. “Mom, let it go.”

“I heard about last night. Really, Allegra.”

How was last night my fault? One glance at Deidre, and I knew. I’d take the hit on this one because I owed her for all the times she’d covered for me with Knox.

“I think the pressure got to me. I needed a release. It was either jump in the lake or jump Marco.”

Deidre snorted.

“I ended up doing both.”

My mother slapped her wedding planner on the table. “How are you my daughter?” She stood.

“Oh, come on, Mom. I’m teasing. We were just having a little fun and don’t worry, I can still walk down the aisle without going to confession.” Mostly.

She went to the buffet for fruit. I glanced at Marco again. Sunlight reflected off his dark hair. He plucked his sunglasses off the table and slipped

them on.

The light linen, button-down shirt fluttered in the cool breeze and the tan pants molded to his strong thighs. My nipples warmed and sent another wave of heat lower.

Marco glanced at his phone, stood, and excused himself from the table. He approached, standing next to me. I glanced into his face.

“I have business to take care of. Salvatore graciously offered his office, but I’d prefer to use our room.”

“I won’t bother you. I have a final fitting on my dress. Do you want me to come say goodbye before we leave?”

“Always.” He kissed my forehead.

And forever. I smiled, thinking of Knox and knowing he’d approve of Marco if he could see the way he was treating me.

Orlando approached. “Good morning, patatina.” He plucked a grape from Deidre’s plate.

Marco’s hand shot out and aggressively grasped Orlando’s arm.

Emilio sidled up next to Orlando. “We gamed last night, and our *little potato* is badass on Grand Theft Auto.”

“Choose another name for her,” Marco said.

Deidre laughed. “I like it. I want Lanny and Emilio to call me patatina.”

“You wouldn’t if you understood the sentiment behind it.” Marco sifted his hand under my hair and grazed his fingertips along the back of my neck as he stood behind me.

A tingle followed his touch, shivered along my spine, warmed my belly, and settled in my clit. With every touch, I slipped a little deeper into this erotic madness.

“Oh, they told me.” Deidre popped a grape into her mouth. “I own it.”

My mother had wandered over to my father and brother.

“What does it mean?” I whispered.

“Don’t tell her,” Deidre said.

I glared at Orlando. “We’re just getting to know each other so you aren’t aware of how close I came to maiming you yesterday. I’m deadly with a knife and protective of my sister.”

“We mean it in the most innocent way, but if you’ve seen her play GTA, you’ll understand. She’s sadistic.”

“Is that what it means?” I asked.

“Nah,” Emilio said. “It means when she plays, she’s a cunt.”

“Hey, Ezio,” Deidre said, calling him by the character in the video game. “You were killing it on Assassin’s Creed.”

“Patatina also infers a girl is fuckable,” Orlando said. “But don’t worry. She’s just our little badass potato.”

Deidre glanced at Orlando. “I don’t have to go into the city.” She jumped to her feet. “We can go play now.”

“I wish we could,” he said and tugged her hair. “But the boss is a hardass.” He smiled at Marco. “We have to work.”

Deidre flopped back into the chair. “Kill me if I have to spend all day with our mother.”

“Suck it up,” I said to her. “We’ll hit Vintage Brew for cappuccinos.”

Once Marco walked away, I turned to Deidre.

“Tell me the truth. Did something happen between you and those boys?”

She glanced over her shoulder. Mom sat at the table with our dad. “Swear you won’t say anything,” she said to me. “Promise, Ally. I keep all your secrets. You have to keep mine.”

“What did you do?” Deidre was impulsive, but I hoped she wasn’t

foolish enough to play with those two. Orlando and Emilio were too beautiful, too tempting, and too fucking dangerous.

Did she not understand what Santino would do to them if he found out they compromised his baby sister? My brother could be volatile. His reactions could be unpredictable especially when it came to opportunity for violence.

“We snuck out last night and went into the city.”

“For what?”

“Weed.”

“They’ve been here for a day. How would they know where to go?”

She chuckled. “Lanny hooked up with a plug on Tinder.”

“He has a Tinder account?” The situation continued to spiral.

“Yes, they both do, but I lifted the keys to the BMW. Someone is always borrowing it so if anyone noticed it was gone, they’d assume Tim or one of the crew took it.” The lilt of her voice revealed just how proud of herself she was. “Then we came back here, got baked, and played GTA.”

“You stole a car to use on a drug buy.” I slapped my hand to my forehead. “You’re crazy.”

“Here she comes,” Deidre said.

Mom picked up her wedding planner. “Come on girls. Get ready to go.”

Twenty minutes later, I’d gone to my room, changed into a casual boho-style dress, slipped on a pair of wedge sandals, and stopped at the door to Marco’s room. I paused, wondering if I should just open the door, or if maybe I should knock.

Mafia men kept their business private. I softly knocked. A moment later, Antonio opened the door.

Marco sat at the table. The top two buttons of his shirt were open,

giving me a teasing glimpse of his chest. Emilio sat in a chair with his legs stretched out in front of him and his ankles crossed.

Orlando stopped speaking. Marco's head barely lifted.

Why couldn't I breathe? His gaze penetrated me. He made me want... want for every dark seduction promised in those smoldering whiskey-laced eyes. "We're leaving. I just wanted to say goodbye."

Marco rose from the chair and crossed the room. "Let me see your phone."

My fingers trembled as I reached into my purse, unlocked the screen, and handed it over. Standing next to him, the scent of his cologne was like an aphrodisiac. I swallowed and lifted my gaze to his.

"For now, here is my contact information, and Ant's. Tonight, you'll need to give Emilio your phone so he can reprogram it and install tracking."

"I have the find my phone app."

Emilio chuckled.

Marco softened his words. "Life will change for you as my wife. You'll need additional protection."

"I don't like soldiers following me around." Until yesterday, I'd played a dangerous game with my friendship with Knox. I'd become adept at evading our security detail. "I can take care of myself."

Marco's gaze traveled along my body, pausing on my legs. "Do I need to ask?"

"Not if you don't want to know." Because, yes, my knife was my security blanket.

He growled. "I'll see you tonight."

Marco

I stared at the closed door for a moment. The binding knot in my gut when it came to my bride loosened. She held no hesitation giving me her phone or accepting that I intended to track her movements.

Not only would I know where she was, but I'd be able to activate her camera to see who she allowed near her. The spyware would allow access to the microphone to listen to her conversations, record her phone calls, and block numbers from reaching her.

"Ferraro's club holds a munch once a month at a place called Jay Swings." Emilio pulled up the website for a BDSM dungeon called High Protocol. "Membership is exclusive."

"We need to be discreet." Ant stood just outside the room on the balcony, smoking a cigarette. "We go in with guns, and Ferraro is involved, we risk sending our target underground. This was Luca's scene. We're out of our depth on this one."

Not that far out of our depth. Luca had lived the lifestyle. As a Dom he chased the high of discipline and punishment. His last submissive had worn his bruises like Versace.

Immediately after Luca's death, Emilio had searched for Mia Toliver. But the submissive was a ghost. Everyone had an online footprint, but there was no record of anyone resembling the woman I'd met once.

She'd been unforgettable. Luca had introduced her as Tinker. Blonde, petite, and sexually hypnotic. Luca had been blinded by her. She'd fed into his dark side, becoming his obsession. The woman had taken pleasure in pain. Not that she'd enjoy what I had planned for her. If she had answers, I'd get them.

"Make contact with Ferraro," I said. "Ask for a meeting."

"I've reserved a spot for us at the munch," Emilio said to Orlando. "We should update your Tinder profile and see if they have spankings and

leather as an interest.”

Orlando laughed.

“Don’t worry about putting it in the bio,” Ant said. “You aren’t going to meet our target on Tinder, but we might be able to get a lead on the underground scene. Private meetups.”

Orlando sat on the edge of the bed with his thumbs flying over the screen of his phone.

I stood. “We’re going to take a little drive.”

Ant shrugged on his black suit jacket. “We need to clean house. Unauthorized side business at the industrial yard is attracting unwanted attention. We thought we’d pay a surprise visit.”

Under Luca’s direction, the Bruno family had acquired several businesses along the eastern seaboard. Bars, strip clubs, and adult entertainment. The days of collecting protection money and using extortion passed with my father and grandfather. Luca had vision.

On paper and to the public, the Bruno family heavily invested in crypto currency, renewable energy, and commercial construction.

One day, I’d return to the seat of our family. Orlando would build his regime here, just as my uncle Cirillo had migrated to Portugal, married, and stayed loyal to my father. There were other capos in the organization throughout the world. Bruno soldiers and associates were loyal.

The Italian underworld respected the name Bruno. We maintained mutual respect with the Bratva, but the Irish pissed in their own backyard. I wanted Luca’s killer. I wanted to see fear in the eyes of my enemy as their blood warmed my hands.

Orlando’s voice invaded my thoughts. “There’s a strip club out on I95. The Landing Strip. Emilio and I can check it out and see if they can be persuaded to sell. If I’m going to establish a crew here, I need some good

earners.”

Emilio fought the smile on his lips. I shook my head. At least Orlando was making an effort to get involved in the family business.

“You need to spend time with Jilani’s soldiers,” I said. “Inquire about those who would be enticed to expand their duties. I’ll be doing the same.”

I went to the dressing room off to the left to change into a black suit and black dress shirt. I shrugged on a chest harness and slipped my semi-automatic into the holster. After I buttoned the jacket, I joined the others.

Ant followed me to the door.

“Stay out of trouble.” I glanced over my shoulder to Orlando. “In case I wasn’t clear. Stay out of Deidre.”

Emilio shifted his gaze to Orlando. Neither would look at me.

“Marco, relax,” Orlando said. “She’s cool, and we’re not the ones corrupting her. We’ll keep her from getting into too much trouble.”

Ant followed me out of the room. Outside, I climbed into the passenger side of the SUV.

“Last night I spoke with Santino’s man,” Ant said as we drove out of the Jilani compound. “They have a guy inside with the police. Fucking bloodbath between a local motorcycle club and the Ortiz cartel. They weren’t just moving product. Young girls. Smells like the Irish.”

Patrick Byrne was known to go online to entice young girls onto his yacht in international waters. He also had a private island in the Caribbean, protected by local governments that enjoyed the fruits of his labors.

An exchange I understood. But that was where the similarities ended. Only the lowest form of human waste would profit off young girls.

My phone vibrated with a text from Emilio.

“Change of plans,” I said. “Alex Ferraro can see us now.”

Chapter Four

Marco

I slipped open the button on my suit jacket and sat across the desk from Alex Ferraro. Ant stood next to the door of the glass partitioned room. A business associate took position behind Alex. His arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Alex said.

Like a hunter, I scented money and power, stripping it from my enemy. I recognized a formidable opponent when confronted. Alex wasn’t intimidated. But was he my enemy?

“Thank you. Luca spoke highly of you.”

Alex leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “I wish I could say the same of your brother. I don’t appreciate the deceitful way in which your family conducts business.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure we’re both willing to do whatever is necessary. However, I’m not here to discuss business ethics with you. My interest is personal. My brother is dead.” I leaned forward in my chair. “I need to speak to the woman called Tinker.”

Alex shifted his gaze to the man he called Ronan. Neither spoke, but

there was clearly silent communication happening between them.

“Don’t insult my intelligence,” I said to Ferraro. “Clubs like High Protocol are Luca’s playground. He brought a submissive to his son’s birthday party. He was doing business with you. Are you going to deny knowing who she is?”

“No, but I wish I could speak to your brother. We haven’t seen her since Luca’s murder.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “When they find his body, maybe they’ll find hers, too.”

My gut clenched. I’d dismissed the idea she could be dead. I needed her to be alive. “Who is she?”

“Before Luca, she was a demo dolly in the club,” Alex said. “She was into it all.”

Ronan pushed away from the wall. “Tinker was special to Protocol. We all took responsibility for her. She was deep in the scene. Not just submissive, she wanted to be owned. Luca was her Master.”

“When was the last time you saw her?” Ant asked.

“The day she returned from Italy.” Alex clasped his hands on top of his desk. “She was scared.”

“Of Luca,” Ronan said. “She’d realized the man she’d fallen in love with was mafia. We haven’t seen her since.”

“Where is her family?” I asked.

“We’re her family. Parents and brother are dead,” Alex said. “The only way to describe her is broken. She was too trusting.” His voice hardened. “I take responsibility because I brought Luca into my club. Had I known the cost of doing business with a Bruno, I would have made other choices.”

“You knew her well?”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Have you been to a club like Protocol?”

“No. My business keeps me busy.”

Alex nodded as if he understood. “The club offers anonymity. There is risk for the BDSM community. Most members use a Dungeon name, such as Tinker.”

I palmed my beard with a slow stroke, waiting for him to elaborate.

His gaze locked on mine. “I don’t have any other information for you.”

“Her name?” I asked as a test. Would he give me the name Mia Toliver?

Alex shifted his gaze from Ant to Ronan. “Iris White.”

Ant slipped his hand into his jacket. I raised a palm, stopping him from escalating the inquiry to a threat.

“I’ll take all the information you have on Iris White from your membership files.”

“You’re welcome to it, but it’s a dead end. My sources have exhausted the lead. She used a false name.”

I nodded. Possibly. Or more likely, I was being lied to. “Her name is Mia,” I said.

Ronan’s eyes widened, but he quickly lowered his head. Not before I gleaned the truth. They were hiding the woman.

I stood. “I will find the girl by any means necessary.”

“Let us know if you do,” Alex said. “We’d like to know she’s safe.”

“Perhaps I’ll come by the club while I’m in town.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. Our membership process is complicated,” Ronan said.

Alex interrupted. “If you want to experience the club, you can enter as my guest. No weapons, and no muscle,” he said indicating Ant. “You’ll be on my private viewing platform or in a private room with a sub of my choosing. You won’t interrogate my members, and you’ll have a DM with you at all

times in the private room. A DM is a dungeon monitor. You have no experience in a club.

“You’ll respect the privacy of my members. You won’t ask questions about Tinker. I’ll get you all the information I have.” Alex stepped around his desk. “I’m not interested in who you are or what the fuck you do. I don’t want your kind of trouble. Keep the mafia out of my club.”

Too late. I was already here.

Allegra

This was happening. I stood on a pedestal. Mirrors caught my reflection from every angle. I rested a hand on my stomach to calm the wild fluttering.

My mother dabbed at invisible tears. The gown was stunning with capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. The satin molded to my torso like a second skin, tucked in at my waist, and exploded into a shimmering ball gown bottom reminiscent of a fairytale princess. A gown picked by my mother.

But this wasn’t my fairytale anymore. Marco wasn’t prince charming, and I wasn’t his princess. I ran my fingers over the delicate fabric.

“Is there something wrong?” The woman had made the dress fit my body perfectly. She spoke with pins pinched between her lips.

“It’s beautiful,” I said and turned to my mother. “But I can’t wear this dress.”

My mother gasped and lunged to her feet. She fanned out the veil, draping it over my shoulders. “Trust me. This is your dress, and you look lovely in it.”

“But it’s not me.” The dress was an ostentatious monstrosity and matched the ring at the bottom of the lake.

Deidre groaned and flopped back onto the plush, circular couch. Her maid of honor dress bunched around her. “I’m going to the fitting room to take this off.” She batted at the fullness of the dress.

“You girls need to stop complaining,” my mom said.

I met my mother’s harsh stare in the mirror.

“We have less than two weeks until the wedding. Marco left us with no time to plan a proper wedding, and your father wants to get the marriage settled immediately.”

“He’s probably afraid Marco will change his mind.” I said it as a joke, but my mother’s perfectly threaded eyebrow lifted as confirmation. “Really?”

“What don’t you understand, Allegra?” Her softly spoken words still delivered the impact of a baseball bat to my gut. “I’ve cautioned you about your behavior. Do you think your husband would approve of the way you slip out of the house in the middle of the night? I swear, Marco better be your first. I don’t care what else you’ve done, but you better whimper like a virgin the first time with your mafia husband.”

“Mom, I’m a virgin. I want to marry Marco, but not in this fucking dress.” I stomped off the platform. “I’m not going to be his princess, *draped in diamonds*.” I tossed her words back at her as I strode toward the dressing rooms.

“The dress is spectacular,” my mother said to the seamstress as I walked away. “We’ll need a few more crystals added to the veil. She needs to sparkle.”

I groaned as I threw open the dressing room door. “She’s killing me.”

Sitting in her bra and panties, Deidre coughed and waved her hand in front of her face.

“Are you getting high?” I screeched, slamming the door closed and twisting the lock. She was baked.

“Shh.” She took another quick puff, then jumped to her feet. “Here,” she said, handing me the joint.

“I don’t want it.” I pinched the joint between my fingers.

She spun me around, tugged on the stays, and unzipped the dress. “Just hold it for me.”

“You’re not smoking it either.” I glanced around for something to stub it out on.

She snatched it from my fingers and took another hit before I could take it away from her.

“I can’t believe you’re in here getting high while I’m out there suffering with mom.” I snatched it back from her, stared at it for two beats of my heart, and then my mother’s grating voice came through the doors.

“Hurry up, girls. We’re going shopping downtown. Allegra, you need a wedding night wardrobe.”

I put the joint to my lips and inhaled.

Deidre laughed as she untangled me from the billowing layers of fabric and tulle. She kneeled at my feet.

“Did you get this from Orlando and Emilio?” I took another long pull.

“Yes, and I have another one for you.” She plucked a second joint from her bra. “It should get us through the afternoon.”

I stepped out of the dress and sat on the bench. She took the lit joint and sat next to me.

“I’m contributing to your delinquency,” I said.

“I brought the weed.” She took a puff. “That means I’m contributing to yours. Don’t forget, I’m the one who covers for you so you can sneak out to see your boyfriend.”

“Knox was never my boyfriend.”

She snorted with her laugh. “So, what would you call him?”

“It’s never been like that with us. I’m not passionate about him. I just can’t imagine my life without him. I know I’ll never have to wonder if he’ll be there for me. He’d never lie to me, not about anything.” He’d kill for me...even my future husband. And he’d die for me. Just as he’d once made a promise to live for me.

“I hope he’s smart enough to stay away from you now.” She handed me back the joint. “Think about what Marco would do if he found him with you.”

“I know.”

She leaned against me. “What am I going to do without you? I can’t live with them without you,” she said, referring to our family. “How am I going to live with her?” Her hand waved toward the door where our mother waited on the other side.

I kissed her forehead. “Don’t ever change,” I said to her. “I love you, Dee.”

“I love you, too.” She lifted her glassy gaze to mine. “And I think your husband’s brother is super hot.”

I laughed. “I agree. Maybe I shouldn’t, considering we’re smoking his weed, but I trust you with him.”

“We had fun last night. They didn’t try anything on me.” She looked around for somewhere to put the tip of the joint.

I stood and grabbed one of the mini bottles of water on the small table in the corner of the dressing room. After guzzling half, I handed her the bottle. She took a drink, then dropped the roach in the bit of water remaining in the bottle.

She giggled as she tugged on her jeans.

I slipped the hobo dress over my head.

“Girls,” –our mom banged on the door– “what is taking so long?”

“Almost ready.” I dug in my purse for my perfume. “The room reeks.” I squirted perfume in the air.

“Give me your dress.” The layers of tulle buried Deidre as she lifted the gown into her arms. “This will keep her busy.” She flung open the door. “Take this.” She dumped the dress into my mom’s arms.

“Deidre! Be careful. You’ll damage the lace.”

“Don’t worry. No one will notice if one piece of tulle is wrinkled.” Deidre piled the veil on top. She smiled over her shoulder at me.

“We should go.” I maneuvered them away from the room and pulled the door closed.

My mind was brilliantly distracted. I could definitely get through the rest of the day with my mother. While she was spewing complaints from her frosted pink lips, my sister smiled and nodded.

Maybe she was always high when we were out with our mom. Maybe I should be, too. At least I’d be able to tolerate her criticism while smiling.

My limbs grew heavy, and my belly warmed. Knox and I smoked weed on occasion, but this was a first for me and Deidre. I wondered if Orlando shared his weed with his brothers. Then I recalled Marco’s conversation about Giada. He’d said she preferred the Bruno men share her.

At least I wasn’t sharing men with my sister. I giggled. Just a joint.

“Ally.” Deidre linked her arm with mine. “Focus. Mom is talking to you.”

“I know. But I hate the way she speaks to me.” I glanced at my mother as she gave the seamstress final instructions. “I won’t be like her, content to look pretty and hang on my husband’s arm in public, stay quiet, and raise babies in private.” I turned to my sister and tears filled my eyes.

“Oh, no, don’t start crying.” She grabbed my hand. “We’ll meet you outside,” she said to our mom as she tugged me out of the boutique.

Weston, my mom's bodyguard and driver stood next to the SUV. He opened the back door for us.

"The only thing I want to cry about is that dress," I said as I climbed in. We both chuckled.

Mom hustled out of the store and hurried into the passenger seat. "How about Tuscany for lunch?"

"Yes," Deidre said. "I've got the munchies." We both laughed as we settled into the backseat.

On our way to the restaurant, my phone chirped. I fished it out of my purse. My heart rabbited, and an answering sizzle slipped through my veins. I was hot for my future husband. "It's Marco."

This was the first time he'd ever called me. Adrenaline rushed into my head, fighting with the haze of my high, and my stomach flipped as I slid the button to answer. "Hi."

"Ciao."

Oh, I was high and deliciously turned on by the sound of his voice and secretly pleased he was thinking about me enough to call.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

I tried to bank my smile, but yes, I had the munchies, too. "Yes. We're headed to Tuscany. Do you want to join us for lunch?"

My mom glanced over her shoulder at me and nodded.

"Sì." *Yes.*

"I'll send you the address."

I sent him a text with the address, anticipation singing through me.

"Are Orlando and Emilio with him?" Deidre asked.

"He didn't say."

When we pulled up to the restaurant, Marco and Antonio were waiting.

Deidre huffed a breath next to me. "He's not here."

“You’re going to end up locked in a tower,” I whispered.

“Only because I don’t have a younger sister to cover for me—” she unsnapped her seatbelt and climbed out of the car with me, “—or a secret friend to sneak me out of the house.”

For the first time, when it came to confiding in Deidre, fear flashed through me. She was too flippant with my secrets. I’d never betray Marco, nor would I ever risk Knox.

I rested my hand on her arm. “Careful, sister. We would both be in a lot of trouble if anyone were to find out about him.” I softened my gaze, pleading with my eyes. “You know what would happen to him,” I whispered. “And what that would do to me.”

She squeezed my fingers, skipped past me, and sidled up to Marco. His gaze roamed down my body, setting off tiny explosions of awareness. A light breeze caught my hair. I tucked the flyaway strands behind my ear and approached him.

“You’re drooling,” she said to Marco as I approached and stopped in front of him.

That was it. No more weed for Deidre.

Marco smiled at Deidre. “Maybe Orlando’s nickname for you is appropriate.”

“Next time, bring Lanny. I need entertainment.”

Weston remained next to the vehicle.

“Join us,” Marco said. He nodded and followed us.

We entered the Italian restaurant and were immediately shown to a large, hardwood table. Marco held my ladder-back, wrought-iron chair, and then sat next to me.

Weston held the chair to my right for my mom. He and Antonio positioned themselves with the wall at their back and in perfect view of the

restaurant and entrances.

Deidre bounced around to the other side and sat next to Antonio. She immediately began to chat him up. I'd apologize later. I just prayed she kept to topics that wouldn't get me into trouble.

"How was the fitting?" Marco asked just as I took a big gulp of water.

"Fine." I nearly choked on the word.

"You won't have to worry about saving room for the Holy Ghost when Father Josue marries you," Deidre said. "The bottom is so big, you'll be standing three feet away from her. And good luck finding her under all the tulle on your wedding night."

Antonio laughed, and my mother glared at Deidre.

"What?" she asked with incredulity. "It's true."

Marco rested his arm along the back of my chair. "The dress will be beautiful."

I raised a brow and took another gulp of water.

He leaned in and whispered to me. "You won't be wearing it long." His warm breath caressed my flesh and sent a rush of heat into my breasts. "I'll ask the priest for a condensed ceremony."

The server brought our salads.

My mother sprinkled pepper on her salad. "I knew the dress was *the one* the moment I saw it. I had it on order a year ago. When Allegra saw it at her first sitting, she was speechless." She plucked tiny bites of salad from the bowl.

I stabbed my salad and shoveled a bite into my mouth, crunching the crouton as if I chewed up rocks to spit out gravel.

Marco's fingertips brushed my shoulder. "Was the fitting the first time you saw the dress?"

I hummed a positive sound and stabbed a cherry tomato.

His voice lowered. "Tell me about the dress."

Unable to form words with his touch chasing shivers from my nipples through my stomach and lower into my clit, I adjusted on the seat.

"It's white."

Marco watched me devour my salad.

Deidre and Antonio seemed to be in a heated discussion. Antonio rubbed his temple as Deidre explained why he was wrong that football was played with a soccer ball.

"The dress will look stunning next to your ring," my mother continued.

I hummed again. Another disappointment for her. The ring was lost to the lake.

The main courses arrived. My mom dominated the conversation with details of the wedding. The food, the guests, the church, and even interrogating Marco on when she could expect his family to arrive.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

He slid his hand onto my thigh, leaned back in his chair, and appeared to engage in the conversation. But under the table, his fingers continued to tease. He traced the edge of the knife strapped to my thigh.

I couldn't focus as I squeezed my legs together. I glanced at his strong profile. Slightly longer than a gentleman's cut, his dark hair created a wave on top, and shadowed a tight fade on the sides. A short, boxed beard carved the edge of his jaw and cut across his upper lip with a perfectly trimmed 'stache.

He turned, the look in his eyes taking the breath from my lungs. His dark eyes focused on mine, then dropped to my lips. With a hard swallow, his throat flexed.

I wanted my lips right there, on the column of his neck, touching my tongue to the dark stubble, breathing in the spicy scent of his cologne.

He wiped his mouth and laid his napkin across his plate. “If you’ll excuse us, I’d like to steal my fiancée for the rest of the afternoon.”

Before my mom could protest, Marco stood.

Antonio scooted his chair back.

I guess lunch was over.

Marco

If my wife was anything like her mother, we were going to have a short marriage because I’d fucking kill her.

I slid into the backseat next to Allegra, unbuttoned my jacket, and pulled my tie loose. “Your sister needs to live with us.”

“I survived. She will, too.”

“That you know exactly what I mean is revealing. How the fuck does your father put up with her?” He raked his fingers through his hair.

Ant climbed behind the wheel. “Where to?”

“A million fucking miles away from Elise Jilani.”

Allegra laughed. “You’re going to have mother-in-law issues unless she meets with a tragic accident that leaves her mute.”

“Or we move. We need to find a house.” I leaned my head against the seat. Allegra scooted closer and rested against me. Her eyes slid closed. The silence was beautiful.

I pulled out my phone and did a quick search for a jewelry store. I forwarded the address to Ant. His phone pinged. After he checked the text, he pulled up the GPS and followed the directions.

Fifteen minutes later, we parked in front of a posh brick building. I planted my lips against Allegra’s forehead. “We’re here, topolina.”

She leaned over me to look out the window. Her soft hair draped down

her back, and her delicate hand splayed across my thigh. My dick noticed.

“Why are we here?” she asked.

Ant exited the vehicle. Once he gave the nod that the area appeared secure, I opened the door. I held my hand out to Allegra. Our fingers laced.

“Because my fiancée tossed her engagement ring into the lake.”

“Maybe I can find it if you toss me in after it.”

My words held a touch of sarcasm. So did her reply.

“You hate the ring,” I said. “It belongs at the bottom of the lake.”

“Not everything I hate belongs at the bottom of the lake.” Her eyes sparked with naughtiness. “I hate you.”

“Liar. You don’t hate me.” I slid my palm onto her lower back. “You hate that you still want to fuck me even after you listened in on my conversation.”

“No, I don’t hate that I want to fuck you. I hate that *you* didn’t want to fuck *me*.”

With no retort, I conceded. She won this one. I escorted her into the store.

She glanced into my face. “I still hate the ring.”

“The next time you swallow my cock, you’re going to wear my ring.”

She was stunned silent. Maybe I won this one.

When we entered, the older gentleman behind the counter straightened. A woman browsed the jewelry beneath the glass cases. The store was high-end. Recessed lighting spotlighted the glass counters. Chrome, glass and luxury, and ambience that attracted a certain type of clientele that would appreciate discretion and diamonds.

Another woman chatted with the security guard as she worked at a computer behind the counter.

The gentleman approached. His white hair shimmered in the LED

lighting spectrum. Fluorescent lights illuminated the black and white velvet-lined display cases.

“Hello. What can we help you with today?” the man asked.

“We need a private hour of your time,” I said.

“Yes, of course. Janet can set an appointment for you.” He signaled to the woman behind the counter.

“Now.”

“Oh.” His gaze darted between me and the woman at the counter. “I’m afraid we only do private shopping by appointment.”

Ant stepped forward. “I think you can make an exception.” He opened his suit coat, pulling out a credit card, and revealing the 9mm lodged against his ribs.

“I...” The man raised his hands as if we were there to burglarize his business.

Ant slowly moved his hand. “Sir, we’re not here to rob you. Mr....?”

“Taylor. Steven Taylor.” He cast a quick glance at his security officer. The imposing man pulled his sidearm.

“Steven, I’m Mr. Bruno’s protection. He’s shopping with his fiancée and wishes to have your undivided attention. We will make it advantageous for you to accommodate his needs.”

“I see.” A moment passed as he studied me.

Ant stepped in front of him. “If you don’t have the authority to grant the request, we need to speak to the person who does.”

“This is my store.” He puffed with pride.

“Then decide quickly,” I said, “or the next jeweler will get my business.”

The man nodded, but the security guard continued to hold his weapon. “My associate can handle the store. We could perhaps set up a private room

in the back.”

“Mr. Bruno prefers not to have interruptions. He’d be more comfortable if you closed the store for an hour. For the inconvenience, he’s committed to spending six figures today.” He handed over the Amex Black card.

Mr. Taylor took the card and snapped his fingers at Janet.

Janet approached the customer and saw her out of the store. Then she twisted the lock.

“Now we’re alone,” he said to me, “what’re you interested in?”

“Diamonds to begin with,” I said. “We’re in need of an engagement ring.”

He led us to a plush white sofa in the corner of the room. Janet situated the black felt-covered table. There were loupes, color grading trays, and a microscope.

Allegra sat on the sofa.

“Champagne?” Janet asked.

“Bruno red?” I sat next to Allegra and spoke to her in Italian. “Today is for you, little mouse. Choose a ring that you don’t wish to toss in the lake.”

She laughed and replied in Italian. “And one not so big it’ll drag me to the bottom.”

As if Janet just connected me to the wine, her lips formed an O. “Yes, we do carry Bruno wines.” She smoothed her hands down her pencil skirt as she scurried to the rear of the store.

“Do you know what you want?” I asked her.

Allegra chewed her bottom lip. “Does it have to be a white diamond?”

“It can be whatever you want.”

Janet returned with two glasses of wine. “It’s such an honor to have you in our store. If there’s anything I can do for you.” She leaned over,

giving me an unobstructed view of her ample cleavage.

She had yet to speak to Allegra.

“I’m not the one you should be asking.” I reclined on the couch.

“Oh, yes,” she stammered and shifted her attention to my fiancée. “Of course.”

Steven approached with two trays of brilliant stones.

Allegra peered at the rings. “They are beautiful, but I’d like a red stone.” She lifted my hand and touched the eyes of my lion’s head ring. Her gaze met mine. “I want whatever this stone is.”

Steven glanced at the small stones in my ring.

“Red diamonds,” I said.

Allegra smiled. “I’d like to see your selection of red diamonds.”

“Ah, your fiancée has excellent taste. However, I don’t have any reds here in my collection. But I can bring in a selection for you. What size stone are you looking for? They are a million per carat.”

“Dollars?” Allegra stilled, her gaze stalling on Steven’s.

“Yes.”

She took a sip of wine and turned to me. “Maybe I should just pick one of these.”

“We need a ring today. Bring her rubies,” I said to Steven.

Steven nodded to Janet. She rushed to the case, returning with several pieces.

Let the shopping begin.

Allegra placed a ring on her finger, twisted it in the light, then selected another. I watched her, the play of a smile on her lips and the hint of mischief in her eyes. Innocence, and fuck me, but I wanted to be the one to corrupt every part of her.

I’d gifted women jewelry before. Diamonds and wine were part of the

Bruno dynasty. However, there was no enjoyment in adorning Francesca with jewels. She expected gifts because I expected her to suck my dick.

This woman didn't seem to care about money and power. Men in her life already wielded those things as weapons. It was clear today that she'd never been given a choice in anything, not even the dress she'd wear to a wedding where she had no choice in the groom.

Guilt twisted in my gut. Not even by me. I would give her my name and protection, but I hadn't considered her wants.

"Will you wear a band?" she asked as she touched the lion head ring on my finger. "Or will you wear this as your wedding ring?"

"I will honor the vows a ring represents."

Janet approached. Allegra inhaled a sharp breath. Her spine stiffened. I sat up and glanced over her shoulder. Her fingers trembled as she lifted the ring from the black velvet.

"Three carat Burma ruby set in platinum," Janet said. "One carat trillion diamonds." A vibrant, pure red stone was flanked by two brilliant white diamonds. "An Italian designer. Appraised at three hundred and fourteen thousand dollars."

Allegra set the ring back on the velvet.

I leaned forward. My gaze lifted to Janet and Steven. "Excuse us a moment."

"Of course." Steven took a step back, taking Janet with him.

I picked up the ring from the velvet and turned it in the light. I could grade the ring under the loupe, but I cared less about the quality of the diamonds or the cost. I'd buy her the red diamond if I could buy it today.

What I cared about was the way Allegra's eyes sparked as she stared at the stones. "Do you like this ring?"

"It's beautiful."

Pleasure rushed through me, and heat built in my balls as I held her hand, the ring poised at her finger. “Will you feel like my wife with this ring?”

“I don’t need the ring. Even without it, I already feel like your wife.” Her breath rushed over her lips as I slid the ring onto her finger. The ruby caught the light like fire, and the diamonds sparkled with a million brilliant cuts.

“Topolina, will you marry me?”

Waiting for her words, my chest constricted. She didn’t have a choice, but she had a voice.

Moisture glistened in her eyes. She kissed me, her soft lips whispering a promise of intimacy, joined with mine. “Yes.”

I slid my lips along her neck. The subtle fragrance of her perfume seeped into my skin like the heated rays of the sun. Shallow breaths lifted her chest, and her nipples pebbled as she tilted her hand, catching light in the facets of the diamonds and ruby. Rare stones, but my future wife was a rare beauty. Like the ring, she was fire and ice.

Leveraging over her, I guided my hand beneath the hem of her dress. My fingertips brushed the underside of her knee.

“Marco.” Her breathy voice hinted at more while breaking with fear. Her hand, resting on my sternum, had my dick stretching against the fly of my slacks.

“Leave us,” I said to everyone else in the room. Then I kissed her, sliding my tongue into her mouth as I touched the satin softness of her inner thigh.

Ant stood. “Mr. Bruno would like a moment alone with his fiancée.”

“Impossible,” Steven said.

“Nothing is impossible,” Ant said.

Steven grumbled. “This is my business. I’ve already offered the accommodation—”

“It wasn’t a request.” I nodded at Ant, leaving him to argue with the jeweler. Then I grazed my fingertips along my fiancée’s neck and slanted my lips over hers. I kissed her, eating her mouth, drawing a whimper from her luscious lips.

“I’m not leaving my store,” Steven argued. “I have a million dollars of inventory on the table.”

Allegra tried to stop the trajectory of my hand, but I had to touch her. She slid her hands inside my jacket. Her eyes stared hard into mine as she pulled my gun from the holster and rested it in her lap. “You use a gun to make people do what you want?”

“When necessary.” I rubbed my knuckles against the damp silk of her panties. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes, but not in front of strangers. Make him leave.”

Lust coiled in my gut. Heat surged through my veins as I stared at the hunger in her eyes. I *would* kill for a taste of her.

Fierce craving twisted within me.

“Ant,” I growled, sliding the scrap of fabric to the side, and slipped through her drenched folds. Liquid heat coated my fingers as I pushed two inside her.

Allegra’s head fell back, a strangled moan escaped her lips, and she clamped her thighs against my arm. “Oh god.”

I took the gun from her hand. My gaze locked with the guard. “I’m going to insist you leave.” I narrowed my gaze on Steven. “This isn’t a negotiation.”

“Name your price for you to walk out the door,” Ant said.

Steven’s face pinched. “You’d have to buy the damn store.”

“Agreed.”

“What?” Steven stuttered. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly serious.” Ant leveled the veiled threat.

Allegra’s gaze darkened with lust, and her hips gently rocked against my fingers. “They know what you’re doing to me.”

Did she understand what she was doing to me?

“Out,” I roared.

Steven and Janet scrambled to the door. The security guard followed them.

Ant held his hand out to Steven. “I’ll take the keys to the property. You can return this afternoon for your personal possessions. Mr. Bruno will have his attorney here to settle the transaction.”

“Who does he think he is?”

“Marco Bruno.” Ant stepped closer to Steven. “He’s a fair, yet dangerous businessman. It would be unfortunate if you were to renege on our agreement.”

“I didn’t agree,” he stammered.

My consigliere needed to hurry the fuck up. Allegra softly whimpered as I twisted my fingers into her slick heat, gathering her cream, and gliding my thumb over her clit.

Ant placed a hand on Steven’s shoulder. The man flinched from the pain of Ant’s fingers digging into him. “Live a long life and take the money. Or fuck with the boss and have none of those things.”

“Christ, is he in the mafia?”

Ant shrugged. “You decide what kind of business you’ll be doing with him.”

The door closed, and the lock twisted from the outside.

“Fuck. Finally,” I muttered.

“Is this how you usually do business?” She lifted her dress.

“No, that took too fucking long.” I grabbed her panties and ripped them down her thighs. Dropping to my knees on the floor, I covered her pussy with my mouth and sucked her juices from her cunt.

Sitting on the sofa, Allegra widened her thighs, tempting me to taste more, to take more. Sweet and addicting, I closed my eyes and breathed in the essence of her. My only need was to have her breaking apart on my mouth.

I tugged her to the edge of the couch, gripped her ass, and buried my face between her legs. Her fingers threaded through my hair, and her hips rolled into my mouth.

Soft and wet, her pussy clenched around my tongue. I licked between her folds, rasping the flat of my tongue against her clit, then pinched it between my lips as I sucked the sweet tang drenching her.

“I’m going to come. Marco,” she whispered my name.

“My ring is on your finger.” I slipped two fingers inside her. With a shudder, her body crested. Muscles tensed, and her back arched. “Your cum is going to be on mine.”

The ferocity of her release tore a primal cry from her parted lips. Cream slicked her channel. I pulled my fingers from her passage, circled her clit, then slid deep again, fucking her with my hand.

“Strafiga!” *Fucking beautiful.* She was mine.

As she came down from her climax, a heavy breath gusted against her lips. Her body softened, and she relaxed into the plush seating. “Did you just buy a jewelry store so you could finger me on their couch?”

“From the woman who pulled my gun to have an orgasm.” I adjusted her dress. She scooted back, and I slid onto the couch next to her. “I need a storefront to move my diamonds. This one will have memories for us.” I

kissed her lips.

However, I was in no need of a hesitant rental police officer too afraid to use his weapon. One of my soldiers would secure the store. But I intended to make Steven an offer, an offer he'd be foolish to refuse. In truth, he wouldn't be allowed to refuse. I required him to stay on as manager of the store.

I'd be a silent owner. To the public, Steven Taylor would still be operating a luxury jewelry store. His reputation would move my diamonds to the unsuspecting public as high couture designs.

"How did you know I hated the other ring?" She curled into my side and clutched her fingers into a fist as she stared at the ruby and diamond ring.

Because she didn't look at the ring the way she looked at me. Like I belonged inside her body and the ring belonged on her finger. "Because your eyes tell me everything I need to know."

Ant leaned against the wall near the door to the jewelry store. His suit jacket hung over the back of a chair. Ant had mastered the art of intimidation. The black steel of his 9mm contrasted with the white linen of his dress shirt.

The stylish sweep of Steven's silver hair bore the marks of a man under pressure.

Jilani provided the name of the firm representing his business negotiations. The attorney sat across from Steven with the contract laid out on the glass display case.

"The terms are non-negotiable," Dwight Collins, the attorney, said. "The offer is generous. On the surface, you and your business remain unchanged. You'll come to work the same way you have for the last seventeen years."

Steven's hand shook as he held the pen tip against the paper. "I'll sell

the business, but I don't want to work for the mafia.”

The attorney sighed. “Why use labels? You'll work for Marco Bruno.”

I approached the counter and rolled my shoulders. “I've made you a very rich man, Steven. Where is the appreciation?”

“Thank you, but I can't.” His voice trembled.

“Think of the life you'll be able to give your wife,” I said. “Do you have grandchildren, Mr. Taylor?”

He visibly swallowed. Fear saturated the air. His gaze lowered to the paper, and he scrawled his name across the contracts.

I extended my hand. Steven shook it.

“Relax. You're under my protection now.” I lowered my voice. “I'm a man who rewards loyalty. Betray me, and you won't live to regret it.”

Collins collected the papers. “I'll take care of these for you,” he said to me. “Of course, I'm available whenever you need me.” We shook hands. He glanced over his shoulder to Allegra sitting on the couch. “And let me extend my congratulations.”

Once he left, I approached Ant. “Take Allegra for a walk.”

Allegra glanced up from her phone.

“I need a few minutes alone with Mr. Taylor.”

He would understand why they called me The Enforcer.

Chapter Five

Allegra

Even in moonlight, the ruby sparked with fire. I felt the same inside when Marco touched me. Desire so hot it burned through me in waves of molten lava. He sat on the balcony with his shirt sleeves rolled onto his forearms, his tie loose around his neck, and the top two buttons open.

A tumbler of whiskey sat on the table. I stood just inside the bedroom. A gust of wind billowed the curtains.

Sensing my presence, he held his hand out to me. “Sit with me, topolina.”

My bare feet stepped onto the tiled balcony. I’d changed into a thin cream-colored spaghetti-strap nightgown. A nightgown my mother had purchased for my wedding night. The silky material clung to my body, sliding against me as I walked.

Standing next to him, I laced my fingers with his. His gaze focused on the glinting ruby. With a gentle tug, he settled me on his lap. His fingers brushed against me as he slipped my hair from my shoulder and pressed his lips to my skin. A shiver skittered along my spine.

“Bellissima.” *Beautiful.*

With a fingertip, he circled my nipple through the silk. “I’m glad you like it. My mother bought it for our wedding night.”

He stilled a moment, then he tipped my chin, his gaze lingering on mine.

Every glance, every touch, and every darkly spoken word had me sinking deeper into this impulsive temptation.

Yesterday, I’d caged the kaleidoscope of fluttering butterflies when I thought of Marco. With his touch, he’d allowed them to escape, free to batter my misled heart with their wild and chaotic wings.

“Does she expect to undress you on our wedding night as well?” His words turned dark and edged with danger.

“Please don’t suggest it,” I said and smiled to ease the tension building between us. “She might just say yes.” I grazed my nails along his sharp jaw, combing the soft hair of his tight beard.

“Do you like what she chooses for you?”

I traced the tendon of his neck, followed the shadow of his shirt, and ghosted my fingertips across the hollow at the base of his throat. He swallowed.

I lifted my gaze to his. “I like *who* she chose for me.”

Slipping his finger under the thin strap, he slid it off the slope of my shoulder and down my biceps until the fabric caught on my pebbled nipple. He did the same with the other strap. With a soft tug, he exposed my breasts to the cool night air.

He dipped his finger into his whiskey. Holding his fingertip over my breast, he waited for the drops to splash against my nipple. Then he took me into his mouth and sucked on me.

I brought his finger and the bitter taste of his whiskey to my tongue.

“Nothing, not your mother, not this,” he said as he ripped the front of

the gown to my waist. He fingered my panties. “Not even a scrap of lace will come between us.”

I pressed my lips to his, initiating the kiss. Parting my lips, seeking his tongue, I kissed him hard and deeply. I fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. He ripped his tie loose and flung it to the ground.

Sliding my hand into his shirt, I mapped the hard contours of his chest. A low growl climbed from his throat and vibrated into me. He grabbed my breast, pinching the tip, and molding me to his palm.

“You kiss me like you could climb inside me.” He pushed my panties to the side. “Your cunt is dripping for me.”

I moaned as he slid a finger into me, triggering a sharp and jagged need for more. I wanted him tumbling in this wild abandon with me. This beautiful and brutal man could take all of me. “Are you hard for me?”

“I’ve been hard since I had my mouth on you.” His finger grazed along the edge of my clit, then pushed inside me again.

I rested my palm against the closure of his pants, tracing the thick length through the fabric and pressing my thumb against the crown.

Marco was a possessive man. Underboss of one of the most lethal Italian families. The Enforcer. Mafia and marriage—once you were in, there was only one way out. *Til death do us part.*

When he touched me, I didn’t feel trapped. I felt empowered. Maybe he only wanted me now because I’d challenged him. Someone to bend until I broke.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” His voice was a whispered demand, not a request to know my thoughts. I couldn’t lie to him. I didn’t want to.

“You fingered me in front of them.” I should have been modest, should have protested, but in the moment, I would’ve let him take all of me.

“There is nothing that I can’t buy you, and nothing could have stopped

me from touching you, Allegra.”

I tumbled closer to the swirling edge of a mind-numbing climax.

“You belong to me.” He rested his head against my chest, his focus on his fingers as he plunged into me again and again.

“You can have me—all of me. The marriage ceremony doesn’t change anything between us. The first time you touched me, I became your wife. Oh god.” A shuddering wave crashed over me, unexpected in its intensity, and inevitable because when he touched me, I shattered. “I’ve always been yours.” Even when I didn’t know if he’d ever come for me, I’d held to the idea of us.

I wanted him to be mine.

Marco pulled his fingers from inside me, grabbed the tumbler of whiskey, and drank the rest with one swallow. Then he stood with me in his arms and carried me bridal style into our room.

The torn nightgown fell away, leaving me in only panties soaked with my juices. I climbed onto the bed. His hooded gaze roamed over me, stirring a dark longing deep within me. Nothing had ever felt like this, as if I could splinter into a thousand pieces only his touch could make whole again.

Marco stood over me and stripped out of his shirt. Muscles shifted beneath his dark Italian skin. His gut clenched, defining the deep grooves of his abdominals.

I tried to breathe, but the wild racing of my heart took my breath. I swallowed as he unbuckled his belt, lowered the zipper, and shed the rest of his clothing.

Thick and erect, his cock thrust forward from a thatch of black, neatly groomed hair. Veins, swelled and pulsing, roped the length. I didn’t want to compare him to the men I’d watched on my computer, but he was big. I never thought a man could be beautiful until Marco, naked and fully aroused.

I wanted to touch him, to taste again the shiny fluid leaking from the slit. Fear held me immobile. Fear of shattering the moment growing heavy between us. Fear of his anger. Fear of pleasing him and taking pleasure for myself. Only to earn his accusations.

As if he could read my mind, he whispered to me. “Touch me.”

I lifted my gaze to his.

He cupped my face, and I gave myself over to him.

“Put your hands on me,” he said.

With trembling fingers, I stroked the velvety length of his shaft to the tip and smeared the slippery fluid at the crown. I inhaled the spice of his cologne and the earthy essence of his arousal. I brought my finger to my tongue.

“Cazzo! *Fuck*. I need inside you.” He climbed onto the bed, wrapped an arm around my waist in the tightest embrace, and shifted me to my back. Kissing me deeply, his tongue stroked mine, and his hands glided along the ladder of my ribs.

“Please,” I begged.

Thoughts fled my mind. I could only feel his mouth everywhere—my lips, my neck, along my collarbone, and then he sucked my nipple. Fire streaked from the tip in an invisible, magical string to my clit. Of their own volition, my thighs spread.

“This is to be our wedding night, *topolina*. I promise to provide for you, to protect you, and to destroy anyone who threatens our family.”

I ached for words of love, and that he would honor, cherish, and remain faithful. But that wasn’t this man. He wouldn’t whisper words that could make him weak.

He shifted into the cradle of my thighs. I relished the weight of him against me. His vows reflected what he would do for me, and I swore what I

would never do to him. “I promise never to betray you or break your trust by lying to you. I’ll never endanger you or our family. I won’t be careless or reckless with the faith you have in me.”

In my heart I promised to love and honor him, but just as he would never trust me with all his secrets, I could never trust him with mine because before Marco, I’d already made a vow to Knox. And I’d never betray him either.

Marco sealed his mouth to mine as he reached between our bodies, fisted his cock, and slid the head through my wet slit and nudged my opening.

“Wait.”

He was going to claim me as his, but I wasn’t prepared. I hadn’t taken any precautions.

Pushing up, he rose onto outstretched arms. His biceps and forearms bulged with restraint. “I don’t want you to be afraid. I don’t want to hurt you.” He stared into my eyes. “But I’m going to make you bleed for me.”

“I’m not scared of the pain.” He’d already proven his mastery over my body. I licked my lip and swallowed my fear. “I’m not on birth control.”

He chuckled, and a devilish smile tilted his lips. “Ah, topolina, you never will be.”

This time, he aligned his cock with my center and notched the crown into me. His lean hips caressed my inner thighs. Bracing on one arm, his other gripped my hip as he anchored me to the bed and drilled his dick deeper into me.

My body stiffened with the first bite of pain. He lowered onto my chest and kissed me hard. I clawed at his shoulders, my nails digging into his flesh. His cock continued to grind against my resistance.

With a forceful thrust, he invaded my body. My back arched, and a cry

ripped from my lungs. I gasped as searing heat blazed through my crotch and down my legs. My toes curled into the bed.

“Wrap your legs around me.” With a feather-light touch, he sipped tears from my face.

I couldn’t move. He filled me, choking the breath from my lungs, and the strength from my limbs.

“Ally, breathe.” He held still, waiting for my body to adjust.

I dragged in air, and he eased out of me. My inner tissue softened, melting around him as he slowly pushed back into me.

“Better?”

I nodded, even though pain still rippled through my pussy. I lifted my thighs against his flanks.

“You take me so good, wife.” He reared back and filled me again.

With each thrust into me, the tender burn morphed into a piercing ache. Thick fluids slicked my channel.

Marco kissed me as he rammed into me. His tongue devoured me, his soft lips crushed mine.

“Mine,” he said with a growl, biting my lips then plunging his tongue into my mouth again.

“Yours.” I held tightly to him as his speed increased. Muscles in his back tensed beneath my hands as he surged into me, reared back, and speared into me again and again. Harder, faster, he lost himself in the pleasure of my body.

A moan ripped from my throat as I felt him in the deepest part of me. He sucked and bit my flesh, marking me in a tapestry of bruises.

Rising onto his arms, he stared into my face as he hammered into me. Tendons stretched in his neck, his jaw clenched, and a guttural groan erupted from his chest as he climaxed. Hot spurts of cum soaked my core. And he

continued to rail into me, fucking me in a way I'd never imagined.

Powerful, mesmerizing, and viciously erotic.

His eyes darkened as he ripped from my body. Rearing back, he lowered on the bed, split my legs, and covered my clit with his mouth. He sucked me hard, biting my tender flesh, and slamming his fingers into my channel, slick with cum and blood.

I couldn't speak as my body bucked against his mouth. Lightning vulted through me. A silent scream ripped from my mouth as I crashed into turbulent waves of release, suffocating in the dark storm of his possession. As the tide receded, he hovered over my body.

Tonight, I'd chosen. I'd forged a blood oath with a dangerous man. He stared into my eyes with my blood and our cum staining his lips. He'd taken me, forced his way into my body, then took me into his when he covered my brutalized pussy with his mouth and made me come.

My stomach tightened with power. I wasn't disturbed by the sight of blood, but I'd never been aroused by it either. Until now.

He reached between my legs, gathered my wetness on his fingers.

"You belong to me now," he vowed.

With my virginity on his fingers, he painted my nipples red. Dragging his fingers along my flesh, he marked me with stripes of blood and cum.

"You bled for me, wife." He reached over to the nightstand and grasped my knife. "Make me bleed for you."

He put the knife in my hand. The steel fixed-blade, one piece knife called the Professional Soldier, slid into my palm. I trembled as I searched his eyes. My throat tightened as I gripped the knife tighter, the smooth steel cutting into my fingers.

"You want me to cut you?"

Why did I want to?

Marco

“Deep enough to bleed, deep enough to scar.”

Never had I gazed at a woman, the way I stared at my wife. Tangles of hair draped around her thin shoulders, the tips curling around her nipples smeared with her blood.

I’d created a masterpiece of pain and pleasure. Bruises bloomed beneath her flawless skin.

She stared at the knife in her hand, her thumb running along the dull edge of the blade. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Yes, you do. I see it in your eyes.” I banded my hand around her small wrist.

“What do you see when you look in my eyes?” she asked as her gaze locked with mine. I lifted her hand, the knife protruding toward my chest.

“Mia moglie.” *My wife*. My body clenched with tension, unfamiliar with the vulnerability. She could decide at this moment, to plunge the knife between my ribs to spill my blood.

She rose onto her knees. I shifted, stretching my legs out and leaning against the pillows and headboard.

“My mom is afraid you’ll call off the wedding.” She straddled my lap.

“Why? Both of our families benefit from the marriage.”

“All my life, I’ve proven to be a thorn in her side.”

“You seem tame compared to your sister.” Needing only a few minutes for my refractory period, I gripped her hips, and she settled her heated center over my hardening cock.

“I’m blamed for her rebelliousness, too.”

I didn’t require a confession from her. I’d dismissed the assumption I’d

have a docile wife.

Not Allegra.

Because she wanted to come, she pulled my gun to threaten the jeweler. Since my arrival, she'd done exactly as she pleased without fear of the repercussions.

She was going to challenge my patience and my preconceived ideas on marriage. Lifting from my lap, she grasped my shaft, aligned it with her opening and slowly sank down. She flinched as her hot, wet walls gloved to my length.

A groan clawed up my throat.

“Fuck.” Fresh blood from her cunt slicked my cock.

Allegra's gaze narrowed on mine as she pressed the tip of the blade into my flesh. I stilled, my dick pulsing within her as my heart slammed against my ribs.

The knife slipped deeper, puncturing through my skin. I hissed as blood pooled around the point of the blade. She rolled her hips. Another flare of pleasure sizzled along my spine as pain seared into my flesh.

“The knife could slip,” she softly spoke, and her pussy ground hard against my groin, forcing me deep inside her. She grimaced as pleasure morphed with pain. “You're too big.”

“You'll get used to it.” Because I planned to bury my dick in her every fucking chance I had.

The knife pulled along my flesh as she rode me. Blood oozed from the two-inch gash along my pectoral. Another inch. More blood trickled along my ribs, dripping into the bed. A warning poised on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't speak. She was fucking breathtaking.

She was going to carve her place in my heart with her knife.

Her eyes glazed over, and her lips parted on a hot, breathy exhale. The

hypnotic play of blood on my chest held her spellbound. Dragging the knife, she scored my flesh to my sternum.

“Allegra,” I whispered, gripping her hips and running my hands over her flanks.

“Fuck.” She lifted the knife from my skin. “Marco! Fuck.” She pressed her palm to the blood seeping from the gash. “I’m sorry.”

I reared up, took the knife from her bloody fingers, tossed it over the side of the bed, gripped her skull, and slammed my lips onto hers. She whimpered into my mouth.

The whimper turned harsh as she fought for control. She slid her tongue into my mouth, and I bit her lips. Wet heat surrounded my cock, her tight channel milking me for pleasure. I grasped her breast, squeezing the fullness, then pinching her nipple.

Blood smeared between our bodies, the scent and thick slickness making my gut clench and my cock harden like granite.

Like talons, her nails clawed my back. She fucked me with a ferociousness of a wild animal. We fed off each other, taking more, demanding more.

Fisting my hand in her hair, I jerked her head back and slathered kisses along her neck.

“Fucking hell, who are you?”

“Your wife,” she said as she careened into her climax. Her body locked to mine. Fluids gushed from her core. I slammed her hard onto my cock and erupted, filling her with my cum, and she soaked me with hers.

As she rode her orgasm, she kissed me. Her lips crushed mine, tongues twining. I sucked her mouth as she stole my breath. With the final spasm, she sagged into my arms, collapsing against my chest. I wound my arms around her, breathing in the intoxicating aroma of our sex and blood saturating the

air.

My lungs expanded, dragging in deep inhales. Muscles burned, and sharp flashes of pain pierced my flesh.

Allegra inched away from me. Blood still oozed from my chest.

“I went too deep.” Tears filled her eyes as she traced the cut with her fingertips.

Lying back on the pillow, my cock still buried inside her, she leaned over me and kissed my chest. With the flat of her tongue, she tasted my skin and licked the blood.

My back arched, and my head pressed into the pillow. A shiver skittered over me. I ran my blood-stained fingers through her hair.

Her face lifted. Blood marred her cheek. Her wild eyes darkened with lust and violence. A hunger for dangerous desires. My blood tattooed her breasts, and my cum smeared her thighs.

Leveraging up, I brought my lips to hers. I kissed her, a sip of her lips as she slid off my lap and curled into my side.

“Does it hurt?”

I banded my arm around her. “In the way that binds me to you.” I touched her cheek. “Just as I know you’re hurting from giving yourself to me.”

Blood painted her skin, the stained sheets a macabre testament to the vows we made.

“We should shower.” She leaned up on her elbow. “And strip the bed. It looks like a crime scene.”

“If you’d cut any deeper, it might have been.” I spun her to her back and partially covered her chest with my torso.

A smirk twisted her lips. “I barely penetrated you with just the tip of a four-inch blade. I’m not complaining, but your dick is big. I could say it’s a

deadly weapon.”

“If you talk about my dick, I’m going to need to fuck you again.” I kissed her jaw, sliding my lips along her skin. “Even if you don’t say a word, I’m going to need to fuck you again.”

She cupped the back of my neck and arched into me.

A fist banged against the door. I lifted off of her and smiled. “If that’s your mother—”

“Marco!” Orlando’s voice cut through the door. “Marco, please open up.”

“Something’s wrong.” I scrambled from the bed.

The frantic pounding sounded again.

I pulled on boxers and my pants.

Before I could ask, Allegra went to the en suite. I waited until she was behind the closed bathroom door before opening to Orlando.

“Is it true? Oh, fuck, Marco, tell me it isn’t true.” His Italian poured from his lips with a string of curses as he rushed into the room. “What the fuck happened?”

Before I could respond, Emilio came in behind him. “What have you heard? Fuck, what happened to you?”

Orlando raked his trembling hands through his hair. “Did they come after you, too? Is this a hit on the family?” His brows furrowed. He glanced from the bloody bed to my injured chest.

I bent, picked up Allegra’s bloody knife, slid it into the sheath and set it on the nightstand.

“Did you kill them?” he asked.

“The only blood in this room is my wife’s.” I tugged on a shirt over my bloody chest. “And mine.”

“Did she try to kill you? Where is she? Did you kill her?” Orlando

paced across the room. “Are the Jilani’s responsible? Are they trying to stop the marriage? Is that why they killed him?”

I grabbed onto Orlando. “No one is stopping the marriage. What happened?”

The door swung open, and Ant burst into the room with a gun in his hand. “Christ. How does the other guy look?”

“Enough. One of you needs to tell me what the fuck is happening.”

“Stefano can’t reach you. Where is your phone?”

I glanced around the room. I’d left it on the balcony. “Fuck.”

“I just heard,” Ant said. “It’s your father, Marco.”

“Cazzo! *Fuck!* He doesn’t know.” Orlando spun to me. “You don’t know.” His jaw clenched as he fought tears. His lips quivered, and his voice cracked. “He’s dead. They got to him, Marco. He’s fucking gone.”

Fear snaked around my chest, coiling tighter and tighter. Words tumbled from Orlando’s lips, blurring into a string of disconnected, chaotic images. My tongue felt thick in my mouth. “Tell me everything.”

My gut clenched as I walked to the table on the balcony and grabbed my phone. I had missed several phone calls and text messages. As I made love to my wife, my father was gunned down. The head of the Bruno family had been assassinated.

Strength drained from my limbs, my knees weakened, and bile rose into my throat. The hum of rushing blood through my head grew louder, becoming a torrent of noise.

My father was dead. Blackness bloomed in my chest, a violent and deadly wave of rage. I flared my nostrils and inhaled a harsh, ragged breath. “Make the arrangements. We’re needed at home.”

“What about the wedding?” Emilio said.

“We spoke our vows tonight and consummated the marriage.”

Ant glanced from the blood-soaked bed to my chest. He was smart enough not to say shit to me.

“The plane is in Italy,” he said as he lit a cigarette. “Your family planned to be here for the wedding.”

I couldn’t delay in getting back to Italy. Word would spread quickly that the don was dead, that a new don would need to assume power, and that responsibility fell to me.

But it wasn’t supposed to be today.

“Charter a plane.” I stiffened, remembering the conversation I’d had with my father. If I’d know they would be my last words...

I approached Orlando and crushed him to my chest, clasping my hand to the back of his head and burying his face in my shirt. His body, racked with emotion, collapsed against me.

“We are strongest under pressure,” I said to him. “I need you.”

He nodded, blinking tears from his eyes.

“Thirty minutes. I need to speak with Salvatore.” Allegra would now be married to the don of the Bruno family, and our enemy had just hit the heart of our empire.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

“Stefano,” I said. “Where is Andre?”

“In the hospital. It doesn’t look good.”

The bathroom door opened. Allegra had showered and put on my bathrobe.

Stefano continued to speak. “He’s in surgery. Anna is there. Carmine is with her.”

“I want her at the compound. Carmine stays with her at all times. Send someone else to the hospital to keep watch on Andre.”

“I’m going to my room,” Allegra mouthed and pointed to the door.

I nodded but continued to speak to Stefano. “She doesn’t leave the compound. Where’s Giada?”

Allegra’s hand paused on the doorknob.

“Here with Savio. She’s inconsolable.”

Giada was a cunt, but I didn’t doubt her affection for my father. “Tell her I’m on my way.”

Allegra’s spine stiffened as she left the room.

I refocused on my phone call with Stefano. “Giada can fall apart once I get there. For now, she needs to take care of Savio. He lost his father and now his grandfather.”

Actually, he’d lost a brother in Luca and a father in Roberto, but he’d never know the truth. Luca had claimed Savio as his son and my father had let him.

“Will you bring Allegra?”

My stomach crawled into my throat. “No.”

I couldn’t risk her safety. Until I found out how an enemy was able to get so close to my father, none of us were safe. Luca had been in the open, doing business in the U.S. and running our operation in the face of the Irish and the Russians.

My father was protected, surrounded by soldiers, his daily itinerary never becoming predictable. I scrubbed a hand over my face. My fingers smelled like my wife, blood coagulated on my chest, and I was going to leave her within hours.

“Reach out to the capos.” My father had never deviated from his wish for me to become don, but I needed the support of the captains, especially my uncle Cirillo. “See you soon.”

Emilio sat at the computer. “I’ve chartered a flight. We can leave within the hour for the airport. They can have wheels up in three.”

“I need to speak with Salvatore and Elise.”

Ant pushed away from the wall. “I suggest a shower first. They may not let you marry their daughter when they discover just how brutal you are.”

I stripped out of the shirt. “She’s mine now.”

The vows I spoke to her meant more than any vow recited before God.

Allegra

Low voices spoke from the library. I stood just outside the door. My pulse beat in my chest, raced through my blood, and rushed through my ears. I tried to focus on their muffled words.

I’d gleaned enough to know Roberto Bruno was murdered, and Marco was leaving.

“When will you return?” my father asked.

A moment passed. “I don’t know. The don is dead. I need to make arrangements for the funeral.”

“We understand.” My father’s disheartened voice broke. “What of the wedding?”

Did my heart even beat? Would he tell them we’d already exchanged our vows, that he’d take me with him and marry me privately in Italy?

“The wedding will need to be postponed.”

I recoiled from the dark tone of Marco’s voice. Postponed. I didn’t care when we had the wedding. I didn’t care if we had a wedding at all. All we needed was the marriage license.

“Unacceptable.” My brother’s harsh word erupted from the room.

“Santino, have patience,” my father said.

“What of my sister?” he demanded. “He’s had her in his bed. I’ll have a priest here today to marry you. Then you can take Allegra with you.”

“Impossible,” Marco said.

Emotions soured in my stomach. Which part? The marriage or would he leave me behind?

“When are you leaving?” my dad asked.

“Now.”

“You can’t be fucking serious,” Santino said.

“My father is dead,” Marco roared. “I’ll return for Allegra as soon as I’m able.”

“Are you going to let him shit on our family name? He fucked your daughter. He turned her into a whore!”

“Santino! Do not speak of your sister. Nothing has happened between them. Marco, stop. No!”

What was Marco going to do?

My brother laughed. “He’s lucky I don’t kill him.”

“Enough,” Marco said. “Allegra is my responsibility. I want a soldier assigned to her. My brother is dead and now my father. I won’t endanger her. Until I can protect her, she stays here.”

Their voices softened. I strained to listen, but the walls blocked the muffled words.

“Whatever you need, we’re here.” My father’s voice grew louder as they approached the door.

Spinning on my bare feet, I rushed down the hall. My mother was in the kitchen with Clary, our chef. Coffee brewed in the large stainless-steel urn.

“Are you packed?” my mother asked.

A lump welled in my throat. “I...I haven’t talked to Marco.”

She came around the corner. “If he’s like your brother and father, he’s not going to want you coddling him. Nor will he want you making demands

of him. Your future husband is now the don of the Bruno family.”

“Mom, his dad died. I’m not going to presume to know how he feels or what he needs. As his wife, I’m sure he’ll let me know what he needs from me.”

“You’re not married yet.” She lowered her voice. “And if you’re not careful, you never will be.”

Before I could tell her I already saw myself as his wife, her grip tightened on my arm.

Marco stood at the threshold of the kitchen. “Release her.”

My mom glanced over my shoulder.

“She may be your daughter,” his voice lowered with a menacing edge, “but she belongs to me now.” His jaw tightened, and his piercing gaze focused on my mother.

She released me. “I had Clary make coffee. There’s cream or milk.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t time.” He crossed the kitchen to me. Just a look from his dark and stormy eyes had me undone. Flutters rippled in my chest, arresting my breath, and sending a shiver over me.

After what we shared, he was leaving me.

“I have to go,” he whispered, his knuckles brushing my cheek.

I wanted to beg him to take me with him, but instead, I nodded.

“You don’t leave the house without an escort. Promise me, Allegra. I need to know you’re safe.”

Tears burned behind my eyes. “I’ll be fine.”

“Walk with me.” He held his hand out to me.

He stared at my ring, running his thumb over the ruby, then linking our fingers and leading me to the foyer.

While we were alone, he spoke quietly. “No one can know of the vows we spoke last night.”

I tried not to think about the partial conversation I'd heard. I knew he needed to go home and assume the responsibilities as don. But he'd mentioned Giada. Did he rush to comfort her? Her name was the first on his lips.

Not mine. His thoughts were on the one waiting for him, not the one he was leaving behind.

"I know we're not really married."

"Have you forgotten our vows already?" His fingers tunneled into my hair, still slightly damp from the quick shower to wash the blood from my body. "I haven't."

A tingle flared within me, lighting up the deepest parts of me with an awakened memory of his hands and mouth on me.

"I've lost my brother and my father. Until I know the name of my enemy, you aren't safe." He backed me against the wall. He took my left hand, the one wearing a ring that blazed with fire and bound me to him and held my palm to his chest where I'd cut him. "You're mine, Allegra Bruno."

Footfalls raced above us.

"Lanny!" Deidre flew down the stairs, her hair a tangled mess from sleeping.

Orlando and Emilio reentered the house from the pre-dawn darkness outside the open door.

Deidre launched herself into his arms. "I'm so sorry."

He squeezed her. "Thank you, patatina."

She dropped onto her tiptoes. "I know you have to go, but I don't want you to."

Orlando tried to flatten her hair with his palm. "You look homeless."

She batted his hand away. "Don't be a douche, or I'm not going to miss you."

“Ant is loading the luggage into the SUV,” Emilio said to Marco. “He said to tell you we’re ready when you are.”

Marco buttoned his blazer. His gaze shifted from my father to my brother. “Thank you. I wish circumstances were different.”

Santino’s jaw tightened. “Our condolences to you, don, and to the Bruno family.” He took a step closer. He towered over me and glared at Marco. “But don’t keep her waiting longer than necessary.”

“Santi—”

His narrowed glare shut me up. My brother was pissed, and Marco didn’t need my brother’s drama.

“He’s right to protect his sister.” Marco spoke to me but stared at Santino.

“Stay safe.” I breathed deeply of Marco’s scent, touched the soft hair of his beard, and committed the hard angles of his face to memory.

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

And then he was gone. No words of love were whispered. No promises were made. The slightest brush of his lips pillowed against mine had branded me as his.

“I knew it,” my mother seethed. “He’s not coming back.” She glared at my dad. “I told you she’d run him off.”

I dropped my arm to my side and pinched my brows. “His father died.”

“If he planned to marry you, he would have taken you with him.”

Santino and my dad walked away. Typical. Once my mother went on a rant, they bailed. Deidre sat on the stairs. Tears moistened her cheeks.

“It’s okay, Dee. They’ll be back in a couple weeks.”

“You hope,” my mom said.

Deidre stood and sniffed. “At least I’ll be online with them to play GTA.”

“Give them some time,” I said and hugged her. “They’re still grieving Luca and now this.”

She headed upstairs. I took a step to join her.

“We’re not done,” my mom said.

“I don’t want to fight. I’m tired.” My heart hurt, and I didn’t need her putting doubts in my head.

“Congratulations, Allegra. You’ve shown him he has a whore for a fiancée.”

“I’m not a whore! I’m not you.” Tears welled in my eyes. I didn’t want to cry. I was emotionally overloaded. “I don’t intend to manipulate my husband and pretend I’m something I’m not.”

“You spread your legs for him.”

“Yes, and if he had any question of my purity, I answered those last night.” I turned and fled, taking the stairs two at a time in my bare feet and rushing to the bedroom I’d shared with Marco.

All traces of him were gone, yet I could smell him, the hint of spice from his cologne. If I held perfectly still, my memory conjured the feel of his touch, his warm breath, and his pull on my mind.

I crossed the room and sat on the edge of the mattress. Marco, or maybe Ant, had already stripped the sheets. Other than the ache in my heart and between my thighs, there wasn’t any evidence we’d been together. All but the knife, now tucked back in the protective sleeve. I curled my finger around the handle and pulled the blade. Blood still coated the razor-sharp edge.

Dragging my thumb across the blade, I slit my skin. Bright blood seeped out of the stinging, small cut.

I shoved my thumb into my mouth and sucked the blood, remembering the taste of his flesh. He’d only been gone for a few minutes. Already I felt

adrift and lost.

Chapter Six

Marco

My father's mansion sat on a hill overlooking the Bruno vineyards to the east. The seat of the Bruno family. Not a golden castle on a hill, but a secretive fortress of power and influence. The property stretched from the coast to the rugged hills. The rich soil now soaked with the blood of my father.

Feeling the specter of the last time I saw him, I stood where he stood and stared out the window. The capos of the family gathered throughout the property.

We'd gathered for Luca and buried an empty coffin. This time we'd bury two men. Andre sacrificed for my father until his last breath. Another wave of sorrow surged through me.

I remembered my father's words after the authorities declared Luca dead. *Do what matters because death is part of the deal we make.* Luca and I had disagreed about a lot of things, but there had never been a question that we'd rule our empire side by side.

Pain pierced my chest. I closed my eyes. I couldn't let the pain take me to my knees. I'd wait for it to fester, rotting in my gut until it turned to hate,

and then unleash it on my enemy.

A knock sounded at the office door.

“Come.”

Anna hesitantly opened the door. “Savio wants to see you.”

I forced a smile to my lips. The little boy carried the Bruno features with dark hair and amber eyes. He released Anna’s hand, scurried to me, and wrapped his thin arms around my leg.

I rested my palm on his head, running my fingers through his soft hair.

My sister smiled, but her eyes filled with sadness.

“Where’s Giada?” I asked.

“With Cirillo and Mira.”

I ground my molars. I watched what I said in front of Savio. He would learn on his own that his mother was a cunt. After Luca’s death, she’d relegated her responsibilities as Savio’s mother to my sister. Anna had even moved into Luca’s home near the sea to be closer to Savio.

I squatted in front of Savio. Tears moistened his cheeks. “It’s okay to cry,” I said and wiped away the wetness with my thumbs. “I need you to be strong and brave.” I focused on his eyes. “Show me your fierce face.”

His face pinched, lips pursed, and his brows furrowed. His small hands clenched into fists.

“Good. I need my capos to protect our family. I need you to protect Anna and your momma while I honor your nonno. Your *grandpa* was brave, and now we need to be like him.”

Savio nodded. “I’m brave.”

I stood. “I need to talk to Anna.”

She scooted Savio to the door. “Find Luna and Lucia.” Cirillo’s twins, a boy and girl the same age as Savio. “There are cookies in the kitchen.”

Savio cast a long glance across the room to me.

“Go now,” I softly said. “I’ll see you later.”

He turned and hustled out of the room.

“Close the door,” I said, ensuring we wouldn’t be overheard.

“He doesn’t understand.” She rested a hip on the arm of the loveseat.

“He’s five.” But he would grow to be a mafia capo.

“Too young to know so much death,” she said.

Death came to all of us.

I spun the lion ring on my finger and inhaled a deep breath. “Someone in the family betrayed us.”

Anna crossed her arms over her chest, gripping her biceps as if shielding herself from the truth. “I know.”

I slid my hands into my pockets. “His killer is in this house.”

Her neck flexed with a swallow. “Please, no.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do? I can’t trust anyone.”

She launched to her feet. “You trust me. You trust Orlando, Stefano, and you trust Ant.”

I rolled my shoulders. “I need to speak with Giada.” I hated needing her help, but she spent her time at my father’s side. She’d know if he had any recent visitors.

My father had trusted her. But she was a vindictive bitch, and right now, she had leverage over me. She knew who my father was spending his time with.

“You’ll have to play nice with her.”

“I want information, Anna, but I won’t give her what she wants.” Or rather, what she didn’t want. She didn’t want me to marry Allegra. A wife threatened her position in the family. With my father gone, she’d shifted into survival mode.

“She’s protecting her son. Savio needs a dad in his life.”

I spun toward my sister. “It won’t be me.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. I had a wife. Allegra had been chosen for me, but I’d already claimed her as mine. My cock thickened as I touched the stinging cut hidden beneath my shirt. She’d claimed me as hers.

“You could be a father to Savio. Marriage to Giada in name only.”

“Kill me now.” Not only no, but fuck no.

“Fine. I wouldn’t want you to marry her either.” She approached me and rested her hand on my arm. “But Savio needs you, and you can’t be an influence on his life from the U.S. You won’t stay here if you marry Allegra, and Giada knows it.”

“You would have me break my—*our father’s*—word to don Jilani?”

“I’m just saying you’re needed here. You’re the don of *this* family. There’re those who would see you as weak if you weren’t here.”

I cracked my neck and sighed. I was torn between two responsibilities. “I can delay.” Only until I figured out a solution. “I’ll speak to Allegra and hope she understands.”

Anna arched a brow. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you wanted to marry her.”

“She was unexpected.”

Her lips twitched. “Beautiful?”

I smiled. “Sì, bellissima. She challenges my conception of marriage. I suspect she’s going to challenge me in other ways.” I gave her the abridged version of our first meeting, her defiance, and an edited version of her affinity for knives and Google. “Her brother will make a formidable don. But her father had his balls removed on his wedding day and gave them to his wife.”

Or he was an athlete of patience, resisting her annoying voice with calmness. That level of selective hearing was more than admirable. It was a skill requiring constant training.

I pressed a palm to my chest to feel the bite of pain. “In every definition of the word, Allegra is my wife.” My gut tightened. I’d given my word to her, but this family still came first. I balled my hand into a fist. “I made vows to her.”

“Marco,” she whispered.

“I know. I want the world to know she is my wife. But if I bring her here, will my enemy make her a target?” Threats and intimidation were the ways of my world. Wives and children ensured compliance. “It may already be too late to insulate her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What I do best, Anna. And let Stefano do what he does best.”

“And Allegra?”

“This will give them time to plan for the big wedding her mother wanted. I need your help.” I was going to break the iron grip her mother had on her. “Set her up with accounts. I’ll provide her with anything she needs.”

Anna reached up on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “I love you, Marco.”

My mother had died when I was fifteen. Anna had been mothering me and my brothers ever since. That she would offer me comfort now wasn’t surprising.

“When you talk to Giada, remember she’s grieving, too. I know you hate her, but if you push her, she’ll take Savio. I can’t lose him.”

“I want answers, Anna.”

“You won’t get them by torturing Giada.”

“Just having her around is torture.”

She smiled as she left. I walked to my father’s humidor and selected one of his best Cubans. I cut the cap, toasted the foot, and then lit the end. This one was for my father.

Allegra

Four days after Marco left, I started my period. At least I wouldn't have to worry about having morning sickness when I got married, or worse, being six months pregnant when I stood at the altar of St. Joseph's. That was if I got married at all.

I would call him and let him know, but I wasn't sure he'd care. He'd been gone four days, but I'd only heard from him once. Once to tell me the wedding had to be postponed...indefinitely.

Tears built in my eyes again. I hadn't told my mother. I couldn't stand the idea of her gloating and reminding me again that I was an embarrassment to the family. He'd bury his father today. I wanted to be with him, to stand next to him.

Crawling out of bed, I grabbed my phone to send him a text.

Allegra: Just wanted you to know I was thinking of you.

I poised my finger over the send button. Then erased the message and slammed the phone to the nightstand. Four days wasn't long enough to start getting clingy. I'd waited for two years. I could wait a few more weeks.

Crossing the hall, I knocked on Deidre's door.

She didn't respond.

I knocked again. "Hey, Dee, it's me."

When she didn't answer, I opened the door.

Deidre sat at her desk with her buds in her ears. Her gaze flashed to me.

"I need to get out of the house. Come with me." I leaned against the doorjamb.

"I...uh...I can't." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm going to

game with Lanny and Emilio.”

I lifted a brow, then stepped into her room and closed the door.

She slammed her laptop closed as I approached. “What?” she asked.

“You’re lying to me.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Now you’re lying to me about lying to me.” I reached to open her laptop.

“Stop,” she screeched and jerked the computer into her arms.

“Deidre, tell me what’s on that computer.”

“None of your business.”

I lowered to the edge of her bed. “You can trust me with your secrets. I know you go into online chats and lie about your age.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s just a gaming forum,” she snapped.

“As long as you’re only online, I won’t tell. But you have to be safe. No camera access and no meeting anyone in real life. Do I need to remind you about what would happen if Santi found out?”

She glanced at her lap. “No.”

“I think maybe I do. Dee, he’ll kill anyone who touches you. You can’t have a boyfriend.”

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip.

“Come here.”

She scooted off her computer chair and sat next to me on the bed.

“You can’t have a boyfriend in real life. But you can have friends.”

“Like Knox?”

“No, Dee, not like Knox. You know why.”

“Because he’s Irish.”

“Not just because he’s Irish. He’s Irish mafia. But he’d never hurt me.”

I ran my hand over her hair. “He’s had to hide his friendship with me from

his bosses, too.” Knox didn’t have brothers or sisters. He didn’t talk about his dad. Working for the mob had been his way of taking care of his mom until she died. Because of her, he had loyalty to the Irish.

“How did you meet Knox?”

“It’s complicated.” It was a dangerous memory, one I couldn’t share with Dee.

“Do you miss him?” She put her finger in her mouth and chewed on her nail.

“It’s not like that for us.” I tugged her finger from her mouth. “It doesn’t matter if I miss him. I won’t see him again.” I met her gaze. “Marco can never know about Knox.” I brushed her bangs from her face. “He’s my secret, and I’m his. We had to be careful. Just like you need to be careful.”

“Lanny sent me another text this morning.”

Insecurity niggled at the back of my mind, slipped along my spine, and settled in my gut in an uncomfortable heaviness. “Another text? How many times have you talked to him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a dozen times. I’m on a group Snapchat with him and Emilio.”

“A dozen?” I’d heard from Marco once.

“The funeral was today.”

“I know. So, he definitely won’t be gaming.”

A smile curled her lips. “Oh, yeah, didn’t think that one through.” She laughed. “I sent him a meme to make him smile.”

“What was it?”

She blushed. “Uh...nothing you want to see. Plausible deniability.”

“Oh my god. You’re terrible.” I stood. “Are you sure you don’t want to come out with me?”

She set her computer on her desk and ran her hand over the top. “Can

we go later? My friends are online. I want to chat with them. I promise, it's just gamer talk."

I sighed. "Be careful."

I returned to my room, put on my chucks, and grabbed my phone.

Hopefully, Tim was in the mood for a vanilla latte. I bounced down the stairs and headed to my father's office to have him radioed.

My mother stood in front of my father's desk with her arms crossed. The radio crackled.

"Search the vehicles," my father said.

"Yes, sir," Tim's voice came over the radio.

"What's going on?" I asked.

My mother spun in my direction. "We don't know yet. Your father has the soldiers at the gate checking out the situation."

The radio crackled again. "Two utility vans filled with wedding dresses. She's here to see Allegra."

My mother spun toward me. "What have you done?"

I'd done a lot of things, but nothing I'd confess to. "I didn't order a wedding dress."

"Should I send her away?" the guard asked over the radio.

"Yes," my mother said.

"No," I said at the same time.

A moment stretched between us.

"Escort her to the house. Detain her until we find out what's going on." My father left the radio on the desk. "Let's go," he said to me.

Sandwiched between him and my mother, we went to the foyer. My father swung the door open.

A petite woman, about sixty, barked orders at two younger women with her. "Girls, we'll need everything in the house."

She rushed up to the house, her blood red lips smiling, revealing perfectly white teeth. Diamonds dripped from her ears and a string of pearls choked her neck.

“Allegra?”

“Yes,” I said and stepped around my father.

“Oh, it’s lovely to meet you. I’m Erin Delan. Are you ready?”

“For what?”

She blinked in surprise. “To choose a dress. I have thirty dresses with me, but if you don’t find a dress today, we can set up another appointment. Although I didn’t speak directly with Mr. Bruno, his sister was quite specific on his instructions.” She waved her hand as she entered the house. “Where would you like to try on the dresses?”

I glanced at my mom. Her lips pressed together. “I think there was a miscommunication. Allegra already has a dress for the wedding.”

Erin seemed uncomfortable, smoothing her hands over her form fitting skirt. “I am quoting Anna, who quoted Mr. Bruno, ‘tell Allegra to put the gown her mother chose for her with the ring I chose for her. They both belong at the bottom of the lake.’”

I glanced at the ring on my finger—a ring I chose, and now he wanted me to choose a dress.

“What is this?” My mother grabbed my hand.

“My engagement ring.”

“Where is the Bruno diamond?”

Erin raised a severely arched brow. “Apparently in the lake.”

The girls approached with their arms laden with dresses. Erin clapped her hands together. “Lead the way,” she said to me.

I escorted her to the sunroom off the kitchen. Bleached bamboo flooring stretched the length of the windowed room. White plush chairs

banked a long, overstuffed sofa. Sunlight bathed the room in natural light. Huge leafy plants, palms and flowering trees filled the corners of the room.

And I could change in the guest bathroom to the left.

As the girls continued to bring dresses, veils, and shoes into the room, I sat on the couch, holding my phone. Emotions I wasn't ready to feel squeezed my chest.

Four days, but he was still here with me, showing me the depth of his devotion to me. I could text or I could call.

I ached for him and the hurt he'd have to hide. Marco Bruno would never show weakness, not even on the day he buried his father.

My thumb hovered over the phone screen.

Allegra: Thank you.

I hit send. Immediately dots appeared on the screen.

Marco: Did you choose a dress?

Allegra: Not yet. She just arrived.

Marco: If your mother interferes, I'm taking you to Las Vegas to elope.

Allegra: I think she'll be busy diving for diamonds in the lake.

Marco: Maybe she'll drown.

My eyes widened.

Marco: Sorry. I should've kept that one to myself.

I didn't know what to type. I wanted to tell him that I missed him, that I wanted to be with him, that I hurt for him.

My phone vibrated with an incoming call. My heart skipped a beat as his name flashed on the screen.

"Hello."

"I don't wish your mother dead." He sighed into the phone. "Especially on the day I buried my father. And please, I don't say that to elicit a

condolence.”

I breathed in courage and exhaled my insecurities. “I miss you.”

“Tell me something no one knows about you.”

His voice seeped into me. I leaned back on the cushion. “I don’t have secrets.” None that I could share.

“We all have secrets, topolina. I’ll go first,” he said.

Through the phone, I heard the creak of leather. I tried to imagine where he was, maybe a library with dark woods and the scent of books and brandy saturating the room.

“On the estate, there’s an outbuilding with no windows, one door, and the walls are soundproof. When I was twelve, I followed my father to the building.”

Erin arranged the dresses, not a ball gown in sight, as I listened to Marco.

“I’d been warned a thousand times to stay out. Obedience was the first lesson my father tried to teach me, and the hardest for me to learn. This time, there was no soldier guarding the door. I directly disobeyed my father and went inside.” His voice grew quieter, huskier. Warmth seeped into my chest as I focused on the cadence of his words.

“I followed the voices. I was terrified, but I wanted to show my father I was ready to be a soldier for the family. Then one day, I’d be a capo.”

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” Erin stood in front of the dresses, organized by style. Mermaid, A-line, and fit and flares. Some had sheer lace while crystals adorned others.

No, I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready to try on dresses while this man struggled to stay strong under the weight of his grief. “Marco, one second.”

“No, I can let you go,” he said with a note of dejection. “We’ll talk later.”

“I’ll be back in just a moment,” I said to Erin. “Mom, will you please get Erin a drink, and then get Deidre. I’d like her to be here while I try on the dresses.”

I walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

“I’m here, Marco,” I said and sat on the settee. “What happened in the building?”

“You should be trying on dresses.”

I leaned back in the chair, closed my eyes, and listened to the deep tone of his voice. “Tell me what happened.”

“A man was strapped to a chair, begging for his life. He’d confessed to dealing cocaine out of one of my father’s clubs. His face was wet with tears and blood. I remember wondering if he cried because he was hurt or if he cried because he was afraid. I knew I’d never cry like that.”

I heard ice cubes clink and then a swallow.

“My father saw me at the doorway. After he made the other soldiers leave the room, he handed me his gun. I remember the weight of it, the grip sticky in my palm. My fingers trembled. He put the man’s life in my hands.”

“Did you spare his life?” I didn’t need to ask. I knew the answer because he was telling me the story.

“I pulled the trigger.”

Silence stretched between us.

“My father put his hand on my shoulder and told me how proud he was. I’d killed my first man and became a soldier for the mafia. From that day forward, my father referred to me as The Enforcer. Soon even the capos called me The Enforcer. But the only other person who knew what happened in that room was buried today.”

“How did it make you feel? To kill a man?”

A knock sounded on the door.

“They’re waiting for you,” he said.

“Next time we talk, I’ll trust you with my secrets, Marco.”

“Ally, remember who you are wearing the dress for. I want the woman who was in my bed. You’re my wife, not your mother’s daughter.”

“There won’t be an inch of tulle on the dress.” I smiled even though he couldn’t see me. “But it has to hide my knife.”

Marco

People stayed. Food filled the tables. Another bottle of wine. Another story about don Bruno. Cigars were smoked. Anna nursed another Aperol spritz.

Our family owned vineyards, but Anna preferred grapes to be made into jelly until she discovered the Prosecco and Aperol orange cocktail.

As she moved through the room, she accepted condolences with grace. Brilliant and beautiful but sheltered with wings clipped by a father who wouldn’t let her fly.

Orlando sat across from me. He looked like he’d been tumbled through the dryer. His suit was wrinkled, his tie askew, and his half-lidded eyes couldn’t focus. I wasn’t sure what he’d taken, but he was high as shit.

“Don’t leave him tonight,” I said to Emilio. “What the fuck did he take?”

“It’s just weed,” he said.

“Good weed.” Orlando cracked the first smile I’d seen today. He sat up and leaned forward. “Emilio and I want to go back to the States.”

I groaned and leaned my head back. They weren’t the only ones. “I’m working on it.”

Giada approached. She slid her palm along my suit sleeve, ghosting her

fingers over my hand.

A shiver ripped along the back of my neck.

“What do you want?”

She took the glass from my fingers. “I’ll get you another drink.”

A black skirt molded to her ass and hips as she crossed to the bar. Her lashes lowered as she poured two fingers of whiskey into my glass. She stirred the ice with her finger, then sucked it into her mouth.

“Does she think you’re going to fuck her?” Emilio asked.

“He has before.” Orlando closed his eyes, his head lolling to the side.

“Get him out of here,” I said and surged to my feet.

Emilio wedged an arm under Orlando’s. With a tug, he stumbled to his feet. “Sorry,” Emilio said to me. “I should’ve stopped him.”

“Don’t apologize for him. He needs to grow up and realize he has responsibilities. He needs to get his hands a little dirty.”

Emilio nodded.

“If this was your fucking idea of showing Marco we should be back in the States,” Emilio said to Orlando, “you need to know it was shit. Maybe let me come up with the plan next time.”

Emilio was good for Orlando, but Orlando needed to show leadership. He was supposed to be the one in control of his crew. Emilio was his second.

Giada stepped in front of me.

“Not now,” I said, walking past her.

Her heels clicked as she followed me. “Marco, please. You act as if you’re the only one impacted by Roberto’s death.”

I slowed, allowing her to walk next to me. I needed to remember I needed her. Flies to shit. Bees to honey. Whatever.

“Thank you,” I said, stopping in the corridor.

She lifted her face to mine.

“I think you’re a cunt.” I smiled at her to take the sting from my words. She was too conniving not to question any kindness I might show her. “But you were good to my father.”

“I loved him.” A tear slipped onto her cheek. “Savio loved him. What happens to him now? First, he loses Luca, and now his father.”

I closed the space between us. “Savio buried his grandfather today.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I never denied Roberto was his father.”

“You’ve lived the lie for five years. Nothing changes.” I strode into my father’s—*my*—office. She followed me in and closed the door.

“Everything changes. Savio is Roberto’s son—his heir. He needs you. Roberto would have raised him to take over, and now he’s gone.” She rested one hip on the arm of the couch.

What the fuck was she talking about? Savio would never be don. Not now, and not when my time ended.

I crossed to the small bar in the corner. I splashed a generous amount of my father’s favorite brandy into a wide-bowl snifter. I swirled the drink and brought the glass to my mouth for a sip.

I turned to Giada. “I’ll have my own children with Allegra. My future son will one day be don.”

“How can you think of marriage now?” Her spine stiffened, and her hand curled around the back couch cushion. “You’re needed here.”

“I don’t need you to tell me where I’m needed or of my responsibilities to this family.” My voice rose with my words. I raked my fingers through my hair.

“I only meant to say that you’re don now, and your father isn’t here to enforce the contract. Don Jilani will understand. You need a partner at your side who understands your responsibilities.”

I sat behind the desk and took another sip of brandy. “I’ve only postponed the wedding.”

She released a heavy exhale. “Good.”

Good? I wasn’t sure what delusions she had toward me, but for now, I’d let her live in her fantasy. I needed information.

“Marco, Allegra knows nothing of us. Marriage will be a mistake. She’ll be isolated from her friends and family. I’ve heard you say she’s a spoiled, American, mafia princess. You were only going to marry her to please Roberto and secure your heirs. Now, you don’t need to do either. You’re don, and you can make Savio your son.”

“Giada, you and Savio will always have a home here. However, Allegra will be my wife. She will be at my side, whether here or in the States.”

“As we’ve just been reminded, the future is never certain.”

I wrapped my hand around my glass, a dark rage burning with the whiskey in my gut. “Careful with your words, Giada.”

I leaned back in the chair. I had no misconceptions. Giada did nothing that didn’t benefit her. If I didn’t need information from her, this conversation would be much different. There would be no concessions. The time would soon come for her to better understand her precarious position. She no longer had the protection of my father.

“I’m not making threats.” She shifted into the corner of the couch and tucked her legs beneath her. “I’m here for you.”

I went around my desk and sat next to her. “I hoped you would be. I need your help.”

She rested her hand on my thigh. “Anything.”

“You controlled my father’s schedule.”

She tensed. “No one controlled Roberto, not even me.”

I chuckled. “We both know he was shackled to your pussy.” He couldn’t take a shit without her knowing. Part of me wondered if taking Giada from Luca was my father’s way of forcing Luca to go to America. Luca had a need for power and control, especially over his women.

Giada was submissive to no one.

Savio was her salvation. Just as Luca had sacrificed for him, I would as well and spare Giada. Because right now I wanted blood. I wanted information, and my usual ways of compliance weren’t an option.

She unfurled from the couch and stood. “If I controlled your father, you wouldn’t be engaged to the American.”

“Enough about Allegra. She’s not part of this discussion.” I stood and stalked closer to her.

“Then you’ll never get the answers you want.”

“Don’t make an enemy of me, Giada.”

“I’m not your enemy. I’ll tell you everything I know, but I beg you to reconsider the marriage. Ask yourself if war with the Irish is really in the best interest of this family. Your father was obsessed with expansion into America. Luca was killed for it.”

“Besides you, who else knew my father would be at his club?”

“What makes you think I knew?”

“Someone had access to his schedule.”

She was quiet. “Your father never made a decision without Andre.”

And Andre was also dead.

An hour passed, and I’d steadily poured more alcohol into my system. My mind floated on the numbing intoxication, finally giving me a reprieve from the constant drone of condolences and questions.

A dark-haired beauty had Ant engaged in the corner. *Francesca*. My

gaze raked up her curvy body from her stilettos to the contours of her heart-shaped ass.

Her gaze shifted to me, and a seductive smile curled her lips, undoubtedly anticipating my fist around the sleek ponytail high on her head as I fucked her mouth. She'd be disappointed.

I slammed the rest of my drink. Standing, I locked gazes with Ant and gave a subtle shake of my head. Before Francesca could intercept me, Ant had his hand on her hip.

“Not tonight,” he said to her as I slipped past.

Not fucking ever again.

I grabbed the bottle of brandy and a glass off the bar.

Back in my room, I stripped out of my suit coat, poured a drink, and climbed onto my bed. After I switched on the night table lamp, I turned off the overhead light.

Getting comfortable, I kicked off my shoes, unbuttoned my shirt, grabbed my phone, and stared at my earlier text messages from Allegra.

Marco: Tell me your secret.

As I waited for her response, I unbuckled my belt.

Allegra: I'm alone in my room.

I smiled and sipped my drink.

Marco: Are you in bed?

Allegra: Yes.

Marco: Ti immagino qui con me.

I imagine you here with me.

Allegra: I wish I was there with you, too.

Marco: What are you wearing?

Even in my current state of inebriation, I imagined her naked, lips parted as she gasped and writhed. Pink pussy stretched open from my cock,

and her tight nipples painted in blood.

Marco: I hope it's nothing so that you can spread your legs, slide two fingers into your pussy, and tell me how wet you are.

Allegra: Are you drunk?

Marco: Yes. And tired. And hard. And getting harder because I'm thinking about your mouth and your pussy.

Allegra: Another secret. I've never sex-ted.

Marco: They don't teach that on Google?

I could almost hear her laugh.

Allegra: I'll do a search.

A flare of heat rushed through me. I hit the talk button.

As soon as she answered, I said, "Your online education is over."

The laugh I imagined couldn't compare with her throaty chuckle. The vibrations slipping past her lips were aural sex hitting my bloodstream, sending a tide of dark need into my cock.

"Then you're going to have to teach me to have phone sex."

"Ah, topolina, you shouldn't play with a lion. Take off your panties."

"Hold on, let me get my buds."

I did the same, slipping the earpieces in and then shedding my clothes. I set the phone beside me, closed my eyes, and wrapped my fist around my dick.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said breathlessly.

"Lick your fingers. Suck them."

She hummed, and I spit on my palm, smeared it over the head of my cock, and envisioned her mouth closing over the crown.

"Make them wet with your spit."

"I'm sucking them like I want to suck your dick."

I groaned, closed my eyes, and remembered the way her lips hinted at

mischief while her eyes blazed with fire. A surge of possessiveness boiled inside me. Those hungry gazes were mine, her pussy was mine—her fucking breath was mine. “Slide your fingers along your clit.”

She hissed.

“Are you still sore?”

“A little.”

I squeezed my shaft. Lightning bolts of pressure flared down my legs and tightened my gut. “I’d still bite your clit, Ally. I’m going to make you come. I’m there. You’re on my mouth. Those are my fingers rubbing your clit. I’m not gentle.”

“No. You take what you want.” Her words were whispered on breathy exhales.

“I want you.” In my drunken haze, I hit the video call button on my phone.

Her gasps stuttered. “You want to watch—to watch me masturbate.”

“I want to watch you come.”

Her face filled my screen. Her eyes closed, and her neck stretched.

“Are you dripping for me? Is your pussy soaked?” I traced the still tender skin on my chest.

With her eyes on mine, she showed me her wet fingers.

“Put them in your mouth.”

She hesitated. “How drunk are you? Are you going to remember this tomorrow?”

“Sbronzato, *fucking drunk*, and yes, I’m going to remember every moment of this. Suck them, Ally. Tell me how you taste.”

Her pink tongue slipped over the rim of her lower lip and touched the glistening fluid on her fingers. “Musky. Mild. A little tangy.”

My abdominals clenched, and my cock kicked as she slid two fingers

into her mouth. She sucked as she pulled them from her lips.

“I thought I’d taste like you, salty and earthy.”

I stroked my length. “Fuck your pussy. Two fingers, hard and deep.”

Her hand disappeared below the camera.

“Show me.”

For a moment, her teeth sank into her lower lip, then she flipped the screen, butterflyed her thighs, and crammed two fingers into her passage.

“I want to come,” she said a bit breathless. “I want to watch you, too.”

Reversing the screen, I showed her my cock. Fluids saturated the tip. I spit in my hand again and stroked the length.

“Oh my god.” Her fingers danced over her clit and slipped back into her soaked hole.

“Let me see your face.”

I flipped the camera at the same time she did.

“Marco.” Her back bowed, her mouth parted on a low, guttural moan, and she climaxed.

“Fuck.” Hearing my name on her lips as she came jolted heat into my chest, searing out, racing through my veins. My grip tightened on my cock, and muscles flexed in my abdominals with the final strokes. With a feral growl, I erupted. Hot ropes of cum jetted from my dick, splashing my stomach.

I fisted my shaft hard, merging pain and pleasure. As I released the pressure, another hard pulse ripped along the length. I jackknifed on the bed, tension tightening my muscles.

For a moment, we were silent as our breathing slowed.

I wiped my cum from my stomach with my discarded shirt. Only our breaths filled the room. Intimate. Personal. Just us. Just her. My wife.

“You asked me what it felt like to pull the trigger.”

On the small screen, I watched her climb beneath her comforter, prop her phone on the pillow next to her, and stare at me as if I was in bed next to her.

“I know how it feels to pull the trigger on a gun,” she said. “I asked you how killing a man made you feel.”

I remembered the moment of anticipation, the flash of fear, the recoil, and finally the rush of adrenaline. “Until I was inside you, nothing has felt as good as killing my enemy.”

Another long pause stretched between us. Had I shocked her? How would she feel knowing she’d have a monster in her bed? I lifted the glass of brandy and took a hearty swallow.

“It was Deidre’s first communion. There were so many people at the house. Everyone was drinking and eating. Clary made oatmeal cookies with white frosting. They’re still my favorite. Do you have a favorite cookie?”

“*Cuccidati* Christmas cookies. They’re filled with fig. I think we loved them most because we always helped my grandmother make them.” I glanced at the phone. “No need for Google. I’ll teach you how to make them.”

She smiled.

“So, you ate oatmeal cookies. Hardly scandalous at all.” I took another drink.

She clutched a pillow in her arms. “I understood my father was mafia, but I wasn’t old enough to understand what it really meant. There were always men with guns at the house, the soldiers who protected us.”

I leaned back against the headboard and listened to my wife tell her secret. Her voice was soft, more potent than the brandy spiking my blood.

“It was a muggy night. I remember slapping a mosquito on my leg at the same time the gun was fired.” Her voice lowered.

“It was chaos. I remember thinking about what the Priest had said

during the Eucharist, about the body and blood of Christ. My uncle Pauli was like Jesus now. Just a body and blood. He'd been shot in the head. My aunt Gigi screamed. She was next to him and..." She closed her eyes for a moment.

I waited for her to continue.

"Santi grabbed Dee and told me to run. But everyone was rushing into the house. Soldiers were scrambling. I realize now they were looking for the gunman. All I could think about was getting away from the screaming. My legs trembled badly. I almost couldn't run.

"I was petrified with fear, so I ran toward the lake. I remember the lapping of the water against the dock. And the whispered words of a boy huddled against the boathouse."

"The shooter?"

She nodded. "I can't explain the look in his eyes when he saw me. Maybe I should've been scared of him, but I wasn't. He stared at me, eyes blown with fear, as he squatted and rocked on his heels.

"God must have sent me to save him because I sat next to him as he debated whether or not to put a bullet in his head."

I drained the glass. Fuck, she could have been killed. I wouldn't have left a witness.

She continued. "He was a couple of years older than me, but like you, just a boy with a gun. He was ordered to kill my uncle Pauli."

"Fuck."

"That night I saved a life."

"What happened?"

A faraway sadness darkened her eyes. "I couldn't leave him at the boathouse. The soldiers would've killed him. We climbed the trellis to my room. I hid him in my closet. We ate oatmeal cookies. He said he was sorry

he killed my uncle Pauli, but that he didn't have a choice.

"But we always have choices. I was too young to understand I was betraying my family by protecting him." Her voice softened. "He promised he'd never again hurt anyone in my family. In the morning, he was gone.

"That's my secret, Marco. I've never told anyone. My father would disown me, and my aunt would never forgive me. I made a choice, and I don't regret it. When I think of that boy, I know I was meant to save him." She stared hard into my eyes. "But I wouldn't make the same choice now."

"And what would you do now?"

"Slit his throat before he ever realized I was there."

"Hmm." I leaned back into the pillows. "I want to hear about your knives."

"Another bedtime story for another night. It's late and you're half asleep."

Halfway to passed out. "I'm going to dream about you, topolina."

"Will I be naked?"

"You can have your blade strapped to your thigh."

"Good night, Marco." Her finger closed in on the screen and the call ended.

Leaning over, I flipped the lamp off, plunging the room into darkness, and let the alcohol take me under, into my dreams.

And the dreams were of Allegra. I could almost feel the mattress dip as she crawled over my body. I groaned as her silken hair sifted over my thighs. Soft kisses pressed against my groin. Heat surged into my cock.

Fuck, but her tongue felt so good, scissoring along the length. Hot and wet, her mouth closed over the head.

I groaned, fisted her hair, and pushed my cock deeper into her mouth.

You suck me so good. She felt real in my dreams. Spit soaked my balls.

She rolled them in her hand.

My mind floated in a drunken euphoria. I was going to spend every night drunk until I had her back in my arms.

“Topolina.”

She moaned. The vibration rippled along my shaft. With a fist in her hair, I thrust up, fucking her mouth. My dream, I could fuck her face as hard as I wanted. I slammed deep, forcing my cock into her throat.

Her small hands gripped my thighs. She choked, gagging on my cock. Pressure built in my balls. She sucked harder as my climax slammed through me.

Harsh breaths gulped for air. My heart pounded. In the fog of my mind, I unclenched my fist and sifted her hair through my fingers. My wet cock rested against my groin.

Finally, her lips pressed against my abdominals, and I drifted deeper into my dream.

A gentle touch roamed over my torso, nails raked my flesh, and lips feathered along my ribs. My cock stretched as I fisted my hands in Allegra’s hair.

She hummed, arching her back and curling her fingers around my dick. There was something different, yet familiar about the way she stroked my length.

Awareness slowly bled into my mind. I cracked my eyes open, squinting against the bright light cutting through a crack in the blackout curtains.

All of the oxygen sucked into the black hole where my heart was supposed to beat. Rage flared through me, hot and volatile. “What the fuck are you doing in my bed?”

Francesca's full lips tilted up on the corners. "Where else would I be?" She touched my wound. "What happened?"

I shoved her hand off me. "Get the fuck off. Cazzo!" My chest burned with the need to unleash on her.

Surging up, I launched out of the bed. No. This wasn't happening. Last night I'd indulged to excess, but I'd found my release with my wife.

I shook my head, trying to piece the memories of last night together. No. I hadn't gone back downstairs and invited Francesca into my bed. I'd remember. Fuck! I'd remember.

I'd even dreamed of Allegra.

I searched the floor for my boxers. Not seeing them, I slammed my legs into my suit pants.

"Why are you upset?" She sat up, comfortable in her nudity.

"Because I didn't invite you into my bed."

"Since when do I need an invitation?" Her voice poisoned the air around me. "I've climbed into your bed a thousand times. You love waking up with your dick in my mouth."

Not since I promised to be only Allegra's. "I'm engaged."

"You've been engaged to her for five years! You were supposed to marry her two years ago. She's just another family obligation. Those are your words." She pushed her hair from her face. "Marco, last we spoke, you told me you'd take me to Spain on holiday. Why would I think anything has changed between us?"

"Because I haven't spoken to you since I returned!"

"You weren't quiet last night while you were fucking my face."

A knock sounded on the door.

"Not now," I yelled at the door.

"Nothing happened last night." As if my words could change that she

was here, in my bed. “Nothing.”

The knock sounded again.

“I said, not now.”

The door opened. “Yes, now.” Anna froze, her gaze snapping from me to a naked Francesca lounging in my bed. Her lips pulled into a sneer. “You’re an asshole.” She shook her head. “Why am I not surprised? I guess I should be happy it’s not Giada.”

“Anna—”

“You’d called for a meeting with the capos this morning,” she interrupted. “They’re waiting on you.” She slammed the door.

I turned to Francesca. “Get out.”

“No.” She rose onto her knees and crawled to the edge of the bed. “Marco, talk to me.” She reached for the waistband of my trousers.

I gripped her wrist.

Her eyes widened. “You’re hurting me.”

“Never touch me again.” I flung her hand away, stalked into my closet, and ripped a pressed shirt from a hanger.

Francesca slid from the bed and snatched her dress from the lounge in the corner of the room. “You are an asshole.”

“Stay away from me, Francesca.” My hands balled into fists. “This is your only warning.”

My fingers trembled as I tried to button my shirt.

“What did I do?”

It wasn’t what she had done. It was what I’d done. I’d broken my vow.

Chapter Seven

Allegra

I stared at the text message from Knox. He needed to see me, and he wouldn't have asked unless there was trouble.

Ally: Not here. It's too risky.

Knox: Where?

I chewed my thumbnail as I considered our options. Somewhere we'd fit in and not stand out.

Ally: One hour. Washington Street skate park.

There was an ice cream parlor, tattoo shops, and lots of people. I just had to figure out a way to lose Tim.

Knox: I'll be there.

Grabbing my phone, I called for a rideshare with special instructions to pick me up at the bottom of the hill. This wasn't the first time I'd slipped out undetected.

However, there was no way I would get past the gatehouse. Since Roberto Bruno had been assassinated, there were twice as many soldiers prowling the property.

I shoved my phone into my back pocket, along with my ID and my

debit card. I couldn't risk taking my purse without raising suspicion. Wearing my running shoes, cotton joggers and a hoodie, I bounded down the stairs.

Just as I was about to make my escape, Tim stepped into the hall.

"Where're you going?"

I spun around, hoping he didn't notice my rapid breaths or the pounding of my heart. "I need to get out of the house. I'm going for a walk."

"Want some company?"

I stuffed my buds into my ears. "I'm good. I'm going to head down to the boathouse, and then run a few laps around the property."

With a wave, I headed out the door. He called for me, but I took off at a good clip, afraid he'd tag along anyway.

My footfalls pounded on the pathway. Once I was in the shelter of the trees, I deviated off the trail. The ground was soft. Twigs snapped under my feet. I ducked under low branches of the oak and sycamore trees.

A twelve-foot perimeter wall surrounded the Jilani estate. After my uncle Pauli's murder, security cameras were installed. At night, the guards patrolled with dogs.

But I knew of one blind spot. I prayed the wind never blew over the massive sycamore or that my mother didn't one day want it for a new table or firewood. The massive trunk grew close to the stone wall. The thick leaves gave just enough camouflage.

The trunk was too wide, and the branches were too high for me to climb. Knox could climb a stripper poll, but he'd installed tree bolts into the backside of the tree for me. The soles of my shoes gripped the thick screws, giving me enough leverage to scale the tree.

I held to the trunk as I watched the mounted camera. As soon as it panned to the left, I had about fifteen seconds. I lunged onto the flat top of the wall, swung my legs over, held on by my fingertips, and wedged the tip

of my shoes into the cored-out grooves in the cement.

I clung to the wall and carefully lowered one hand and one foot at a time until I could safely drop the last four or five feet to the mulch below.

Staying behind the tall cypress hedge and avoiding the street about twenty feet from the wall, I jogged toward the bottom of the hill.

Standing on the corner, I was out in the open. I checked the app to see if my driver's ETA had changed. Two minutes. I paced, watching in both directions.

Finally, a white four-door pulled along the curb. I didn't wait for the text confirmation that my ride had arrived. I swung open the back door, climbed in, and scooted down in the seat.

"Thanks. Can you flip around?" I didn't want to drive past the security gate. Every car that passed had the license plate photographed.

"Sure." The young, blonde girl pulled away from the curb and headed back in the direction she'd arrived. I watched her eyes in the rearview mirror shift from me to the road. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just need a day off." I smiled to ease the tension I'd brought into the car.

The rideshare dropped me off at the skate park. I sent Knox a quick text telling him that I was here and sitting on a bench. I could see the parking lot to the left and the street to the right. Then I powered down my phone to hide my location.

I heard the scream of his motorcycle as he pulled into the parking lot. A helmet rode on the back of his bike. *My helmet*. Like always, my breath caught as he slid off his motorcycle. I fought the buzzing of my nerves as he crossed the grassy park in black combat boots.

Tattoos covered his arms and crawled under a tight, white T-shirt clinging to his muscular biceps. He'd have a gun strapped to his ankle and a

blade of some sort in the pocket of the black jeans hugging his thin hips.

He smiled, so maybe the news wasn't terrible. Before this week, I would have run into his arms and wrapped myself around him like a koala. Technically, not exactly married, but I belonged to Marco now.

Knox dropped down onto the bench beside me and slouched back. "Fuck, why does it feel like it's been forever since I've seen you?"

I felt the same way, even though it hadn't been two weeks.

He lifted his hips and pulled his cigarettes from his pocket, stuffed one between his lips, then spun the wheel of a cheap plastic lighter.

"I heard about don Bruno."

I settled in next to Knox. His arm snaked across the back of the bench and played with my ponytail the way he had a thousand times before.

"Marco went back to Italy."

Knox jolted forward, flicking ash from his cigarette. "What the fuck? Ally, shit, are you okay?"

"You don't have to worry about me. In the first ten minutes, I threatened to stab him and have our future kids by in vitro fertilization. By the end of the night, his wedding ring was at the bottom of the lake."

Knox laughed. "I take it the wedding is off?"

I took the cigarette from his fingers and drew in an inhale. I'd been taking hits off his cigarettes since the first time I snuck out of the house to see him. Something we shared that seemed intimate but didn't cross the lines of our friendship. Maybe back then, it was to be closer to him. I put my lips where his had been and then he had his where mine had been.

Now, it was just another one of our things.

"You'd think so," I said about the wedding being canceled. "Especially after I confessed to watching porn to learn about sex."

"Ah, Ally, you know you can ask me anything."

“You can barely listen to me talk about being his wife. I didn’t think you’d want to teach me how to suck his dick.”

“Fucking hell. Did you?”

I shoved my shoulder against his. “I don’t think you want the details because I’m smiling for a good reason.”

“When is the wedding?”

“Temporarily postponed. He’ll be back in a couple weeks.” I took another hit off his cigarette.

I pulled one knee into my chest and wrapped my arm around my shin. The park was busy. The screech of skateboard decks sliding across rails blended with the sounds of traffic. Dogs barked in the sectioned off-leash area.

“This is dangerous, Knox. Why did you need to meet me?”

He stood. “Let’s walk.”

I stuffed my hands into the pouch of my hoodie as we followed the cement pathways weaving through the park.

“Fuck.” He raked a hand through his dark blond hair. Dirty, just like the boy who’d become a man in the Irish mafia. Honed, whipcord tough and radiating aggression, his presence intimidated even the air around him.

But the same qualities that kept others away blanketed me in a comfortable familiarity.

Knox glanced over his shoulder, then stepped closer, and lowered his voice. “Irish have expanded their interests.”

I glanced into his face.

“Fuck, okay, listen. This is shit you can’t know about. Ally, I’m fucking serious. You have this good heart that wants to protect people, but sometimes shit is out of your control. Sometimes, the only thing you can do is keep your mouth shut.”

I curled my fingers around his forearm. “What’s going on, Knox? You’re scaring me. Are you in trouble?”

“No, but I think Dee might be.”

Pressure instantly choked me, the tightness seeped into my chest, and a turbulent spiral of fear twisted in my gut. “What about Deidre?”

We stayed on the path that led away from the clusters of skateboarders, dogs, and kids squealing in the playground.

“Byrne has a taste for teenage girls. Always has. A couple of years ago, he got caught. Cops never got involved because he paid off the family. But it wouldn’t have mattered. Last month, he had the governor out on his yacht. There were two fourteen-year-old girls for entertainment.”

Nausea rolled in my gut. I couldn’t argue the criminality of what Knox told me. We lived in a world where the law only applied when you were caught, and then there weren’t always consequences. Money and power, wealth and privilege, whatever the cost.

“What does this have to do with Dee?”

“Byrne is untouchable. His bitch, Jessie, grooms the girls. She tells them what they want to hear, spends a few days gaining their trust. Once she finds out what they’re into, she lures them in for Byrne. Most want to get high or they like the money, and some go because they want to have sex with older men.”

As he spoke, a dark feeling of dread burned in my chest.

“Even if the girls realize their fucked, they don’t say shit,” Knox said. “Byrne makes sure they know the consequences. And then they go home with a couple hundred bucks in their pocket.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

His gaze softened on me. “Because Byrne has discovered some girls are worth more than a few hundred bucks. Those girls don’t all make it home.

He sells them.”

Like a building storm, dark clouds of fear billowed into my head. I couldn't hear through the thunder of rushing blood.

He squeezed my hand. “Does Dee hang out in the chatrooms?”

“Sometimes.”

“There's a girl in a chat room for gamers. She's new. The picture only shows half her face. Maybe it's not her. She goes by the name little potato.”

I swallowed through the thickness in my throat. “Oh, god, it's her account.” Painful tightness crushed my chest in a tide of panic. “Knox. Just tell me. Has she gone with them?”

“Not yet. Fuck. Byrne knows she's sixteen and a virgin. But Ally, he knows she's Italian. Jessie is trying to set up a meet. You gotta talk to her, keep her out of the chatroom, but you can't tell her how you know. This can't come back on me.”

Tears burned in my eyes. I threw my arms around his neck. “Thank you. What would I do without you?”

He held me tightly. “You'll never have to know.”

I loosened my hold, putting space between us. “I can't be gone too long. They don't know I left.”

“After an ice cream cone, I'll take you home.”

Twenty minutes later, he shoved my helmet on my head and buckled the chinstrap. He steadied the bike as I swung my leg over, adjusted on the seat, and wrapped my arms around him.

“Ready?”

I nodded. I'd ridden on the back of his bike more times than I could count. The engine roared as he twisted the throttle. I tightened my hold on the bad boy who was always so good to me.

Now, he just wasn't keeping me out of trouble, but he protected my

little sister, too.

He eased back on the throttle as we turned onto Woodland Drive. Rather than risk being spotted by the cameras, he pulled along the curb. After I climbed off, he parked the bike and secured the helmet.

“I don’t want you to take risks for me,” I said to him as we walked behind the cypress hedge. “But when I think of what could happen to Dee, I’m so fucking grateful I have you.”

He stopped me and with his strong tatted arms, pulled me hard into his chest. Maybe in another life, if I wasn’t the daughter of an Italian don, and he wasn’t a soldier in the Irish mafia, we could have been something more.

Instead, we were each other’s lifeline in a fucked-up world where young girls were sold, some to the highest bidder in the underground sex trade, and some girls were traded then celebrated with big weddings to mafia dons.

We stopped at the section of wall where Knox and I had cored out deeper divots into the cement. I’d always sucked at climbing, but I wasn’t a kid anymore and I hadn’t actually had to climb the wall in a couple of years.

I sighed. “I’m not sixteen anymore,” I said as I looked up to the top of the wall. “My ass is bigger.”

Knox laughed. “Yeah, so are your tits.”

I slugged his arm. “You’re not allowed to notice.”

“Whatever.” He linked his fingers. “I’ll give you a step up.”

I braced my hand on his shoulder, put my foot on his hands, and tried to find a place on the wall to grip.

Knox teetered as he laughed.

“Hold still.” I finally got my fingers into grooves and the toes of one foot on a thin lip of concrete. And then I hung there, like laundry on a windless day, flat and unmoving.

“Are you going to climb?”

I laughed. “I can’t. I’m stuck.”

Knox put his hands on my ass and pushed.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping.”

I couldn’t hold on. My fingers slipped.

All at once, breath swooshed from Knox’s lips, he cursed, and finally collapsed with a grunt with me landing on top of him.

“What happened to you?” he asked. “My badass, fighting best friend is weak.” He shoved me off.

Rolling to my side, I trembled with laughter.

We scooted onto our butts and leaned against the wall. “I’m not getting back in the way I got out.” I glanced up the street to the gatehouse in the distance. “Shit.”

“Want me to cause a distraction so you can slip past the guards?”

I turned to him, my scowl giving away my opinion on his idea. “This is what I’m talking about when I worry you’re going to do something stupid. I’ll be fine.”

“Text me that you’re okay.” We stood. “But don’t text anything about today or the situation with Dee. Never use her name or your name.” He brushed a smudge of dirt from my cheek. “They could check my phone at any time. You’re under Mila Kunis.”

“Seriously? Don’t you think they’ll wonder who it is? Or do they think you have a three-way thing going with her and Ashton?”

“Yeah, so Snapchat only going forward. Now that Marco is back, or will be back again, you should delete any messages. Change my name in your phone.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket. I held the button to delete all of our

messages from today. Like Knox, I never saved the messages. He watched over my shoulder as I did an edit on his contact.

His laugh tickled my belly.

I smiled at him. "Be good, Ashton."

"Always."

"And forever," I said back to him for the thousandth time in our lives.

"Text me, Mila." He jogged back toward his bike, and I popped my buds into my ears and ran toward the guardhouse as if I had been out for a ten-mile run.

As I approached, the moment of lightness I felt with Knox grew heavy in my gut. Not because I was worried about the guards. They could bitch all they wanted. I was home, and I needed to speak with Deidre.

Even if I hadn't just run the two hundred yards, my heart would be racing. Adrenaline flashed through me, firing into my muscles, and sending a surge of energy into my feet. I sprinted the last few yards.

I didn't know every soldier on the property, but they recognized me. I jogged in place at the gate.

"Miss Allegra." The gate swung open. "Is something wrong?"

"Of course not. I'm just finishing my run. Thanks." I didn't pause for chitchat, but one of the soldiers was instantly on his radio.

By the time I approached the house, Tim stood on the porch with his arms crossed over his massive chest.

I stopped at the bottom of the stone steps and waited for the ass-chewing about to happen. "Sorry. I ran farther than I expected."

"You need to take a walk to cool down." He strode down the steps and started toward the tree line.

I had no misconceptions. He was pissed and expected me to follow him. I rushed to catch up, falling into step beside him.

“Care to tell me what the fuck that was about today?” He ground out the words.

“I just went for a run to clear my head.” I stuffed my hands into the front pouch of my hoodie.

We were safely in the shadows of the trees. “Start talking. Where did you go? Who were you with? And you better not fucking lie to me because it’ll be both of our asses.”

I swallowed, but the lump immediately climbed back into my throat.

“You do understand that you are my only assignment now. Where you go, I go. That’s it. What do you think I did the minute you took off?”

I didn’t speak. Timoteo, who just went by Tim, had worked for my family since he was old enough to have a job. Before that, we’d been in school together, but he was a couple years older than me, and happened to be best friends with my brother. Not to mention, a total douche growing up.

Back then and now, I didn’t trust him not to run to Santino with every little thing I did.

“Just tell me what you think I did.”

He grabbed my biceps and pushed me against the tree. “When you took off, I went to the control room. If anything happens to you, Santi is going to freak the fuck out. What do you think your future husband is going to do to me?”

“I’m old enough to leave the house.”

He raked his fingers through his dark hair. His jaw clenched. “As soon as I realized you were going over the wall, I went after you. I saw you get in the white car. Who was in the car, Ally?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “A girl. Blonde, cute, but I don’t know her name.”

He took a step closer. “You got into a car with someone you don’t

know.”

I pushed on his chest. “You can cut the intimidation tactic. I don’t know the rideshare drivers. I needed to get out of the house. I went to the park.”

No doubt he’d find out anyway. All he had to do was access my phone to see I’d ordered a pickup and learn the location of the drop off. But that’s all they’d find in my phone.

“I don’t like this assignment any more than you do,” he said. “If you ever pull that shit again, you won’t be taking a crap without me in the room.”

My lips twitched with a smile.

“You think I’m joking. Your brother will have my balls if something happens to you. As for Marco, I’d prefer to stay on the payroll of The Enforcer.” He took a step back from me. “Don’t fuck me over, Ally. You want to go somewhere, I’ll take you.”

I pushed away from the tree. I hadn’t considered the risk to Tim. I knew I was safe, but he didn’t. “I’m sorry. Next time, I’ll have a better plan, so you’re not caught in the middle.”

“Fuck me. Next time?”

I shrugged and started toward the house. “Maybe I can get you a new assignment.”

He followed me. “I wish.”

“Tim, does Santi have the computers monitored? I mean, like mine and Dee’s.” My stomach did a few twists and turns.

“Of course. But it’s not like someone is sitting around watching. All keylogging is archived. Why? What the fuck are you doing now?” He turned in a circle, clawing his hands over his scalp. “Shit, you’re going to get me killed.”

“I wish.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

We kept walking, and the grip on my chest loosened. Plan A was to get Deidre to see the dangers of the chatroom. She was a gamer. Getting her to quit all together would be asking her to give up her friends.

It would have been like asking me to give up Knox.

I’d say never, just like I knew she would. I hope I didn’t need a plan B.

Tim continued to chat as we approached the house. “Ally, I understand your frustration. It sucks to be watched. You’ll get my teeth kicked down my throat if you repeat it, but I think Marco’s a dick. It’s been two fucking years of waiting, and he shows up and acts like he owns you.”

“It’s not an act. He does.”

“I’m not finished. I get it. If you were my wife—”

“Oh, that would never happen.”

“I’m done talking to you.” He stomped ahead.

I laughed. “Tim, wait.” I jogged up next to him. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry about Marco. I want to marry him. And I’m sorry about today, too. I wasn’t doing anything dangerous.” I glanced into his face. “If I need to leave again, I’ll take you with me.”

I lied.

Tim shook his head. “You’ve always been a pain in the ass. What I was going to say is that I can empathize. Just let me know what’s going on. As long as I know you’re not in trouble, I’ll be your cover.”

That would never happen either.

“Tell me why you want the computers monitored,” he said.

“I didn’t say I wanted them monitored. I just asked if they were.”

“I knew it. I’ll find out what you’re doing online. You better hope it’s nothing more than the porn you’ve been streaming.”

My mouth dropped open. “You know about that?”

What else could he know about?

Marco

I'd buried my father. The capos had respected him. Now, they recognized me as their boss, don of the Bruno family.

"Stefano is back." Ant, now officially my consigliere, slid his phone into the inside pocket of his black suit.

I stood and shrugged on my suit jacket, slipping the button through the slot. Anticipation laced my blood, a surging need to release the pressure building within me. The capos wanted answers. I wanted blood.

We'd taken too many hits. I had a rat in my house. If traps failed, I'd burn down the fucking house then rebuild.

"They're Adami's men," Ant said.

"Adami? Are you sure he's involved?"

Ant nodded. "We know the one they call *Castoro* pulled the trigger. I saw the video surveillance, boss. No doubt it was Adami."

Lazaro Adami and my father weren't friends, but they had never been enemies. They held mutual respect. Adami spent most of his time in Greece. Rumor had it that he preferred an eclectic assortment of interests in his bed.

"I want him. I want to rip his fucking heart from his chest with my hands."

"Who?"

I ignored Giada's voice behind us and continued into the foyer.

"Is this about Roberto?" As she followed, her heels clicked against the marble tile in the entryway. "Please, Marco. Don't shut me out."

Shut her out? I wanted to slam the fucking door on her. I glanced at Ant as he went around the front of the car.

He smirked. “You would know better than I why the boss kept her around.”

I groaned. “Don’t remind me. Get in the car,” I said to Giada.

She opened the back door and slid into the vehicle. “What is going on?”

“Giada—” I rubbed a palm over my forehead.

“Want some advice,” Ant said, glancing over his shoulder to Giada. “Don’t say shit.”

“But this is about Roberto, right?”

“That’s what we’re about to find out,” I said.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Ant drove to the windowless building.

Inside, Stefano and Carmine sat at a table eating burgers and fries.

Off to one side, a man slumped in a chair. Crusted blood colored the side of his face. His gaze shifted to me. He swallowed hard.

I glanced at his associate in the corner. *Castoro*. Rough rope bound his wrists together. With his arms stretched over his head, he hung from a hook. Muscles bunched, and his shoulders strained, ready to pop from the joint.

Ant crossed to the table. “Did you get me some lunch?”

Stef nodded to the bag. Ant stuffed his hand in and grabbed a burger.

“What the fuck is she doing here?” Stef asked as Giada entered the room.

It wasn’t her first time being involved in an interrogation. Giada was stunningly beautiful. I didn’t make excuses for my father’s weaknesses. He hadn’t just been addicted to her warm mouth and wet pussy, but he loved that she’d been ruthless in her pursuit of power.

She approached Stefano. “What have they told you?”

Stefano leaned back in his chair and popped a fry into his mouth.

“Nothing yet. I’m still eating my lunch.”

“Are these the men who killed Roberto?” she asked.

“Fuck.” Ant tossed his burger to the table. “Now, we know why the boss kept your mouth full with his cock. You don’t know when to shut the fuck up.”

Stefano laughed. “I’ll get a dick to stuff in her mouth.”

He grabbed his knife and approached the one called *Castoro* hanging by his arms. He bucked, flailing on the hook. The man in the chair averted his gaze. His shoulders stiffened.

“Who is *Castoro*?” I asked, testing their loyalty to each other. I circled around the back of the chair and rested a hand on the man’s shoulder. He nervously glanced at his partner.

“You wish to remain silent. Your boss would be pleased to know this. I, however, am not.”

Ant pointed to the man hanging from his wrists.

“You see, I already know who killed my father.”

I nodded to Stefano. He lowered the zipper of the man hanging on the hook. His trousers dropped around his ankles, catching on his alligator loafers. With a tug, he had his boxers down around his knees. The long, limp appendage flopped against the man’s balls.

“No, fuck, no,” the man begged.

I lifted my gaze to his. “Do you have something to tell me?”

“Tell me what you want to hear. Yes, I pulled the fucking trigger.”

“On don Adami’s order,” I stated. “Why?”

“I don’t question orders,” he cried.

“Enough,” the man in the chair barked. “Give them nothing.”

I nodded to Stefano.

“Damn, it’s almost a shame to cut it off.” Stef glanced over his

shoulder at Giada. “Do you want to play with your food first?”

Leaning over, I spoke low but loud enough for both the man in the chair and the one hanging to hear me. “She’s my father’s cunt, but still too good for his cock. This one’s for you.”

His jaw clenched.

With the flick of Stefano’s wrist, the razor-sharp blade sliced through the man’s penis, and the filet of skin dropped to the floor. The man jerked hard, biting through his tongue. Blood gushed over his lips. His piercing scream echoed off the walls.

“Fucking hell.” Carmine moved the table to protect his food as the man coughed, spraying more blood across the room. “We’re not going to get any answers out of him now. He can’t talk without a fucking tongue.”

“No tongue, and no dick, so no use to you either,” Stef said to Giada.

“Fuck you.”

“Nah, I’ll remain the only Bruno you haven’t fucked.”

Words spoken casually but made my gut clench. The comment pulled like a frayed thread on a tapestry. My gaze narrowed on Giada. “There had better be more than one you haven’t fucked.”

Not only had she not fucked Stefano, but I had another brother. My thoughts went to Orlando, too young, too full of testosterone for his own fucking good.

As if she could read my thoughts, she stared hard into my eyes, and whispered to me. “We can talk about who I’ve fucked after you find out why I’m never going to fuck the man I loved again.”

“Shit,” Stefano cursed and backed away from *Castoro*. Blood gurgled and flowed from his mouth. A river of blood and fluids ran down his legs, soaked his clothes, and dripped onto the floor. His body convulsed, and his eyes stared blankly into nothing.

I pulled a chair over to the man still sitting. “Your associate isn’t going to be able to answer my questions.”

“My brother,” he said with his head bowed.

I flicked an invisible speck from my trousers as I leaned back in the chair. “My condolences on your loss.”

“Fuck you.”

“You fucked me when you killed my father.” I leaned toward him. “If you’d like to keep your mother from seeing her son’s mutilated body displayed on her dining room table, I suggest you answer my questions.”

He shook his head as if waging a war with his thoughts.

“I understand loyalty. I understand anger.” I spun the lion head ring on my finger. “What I don’t understand is why your boss would make a hit on my father. Our families have enjoyed an amenable association.”

“I won’t betray my boss.”

Allegra had asked if I used a gun to get what I wanted. The answer then and now was that I’d use whatever was necessary.

“I’m dead anyway,” he said. “Do your fucking worst.”

Carmine was on him in a flash, prying open his mouth. He thrashed on the chair as Stefano stuffed the bloody, severed cock into his mouth.

He gagged. Stefano held his mouth closed. Lifting from the chair, I stood over him. Tears streamed from his eyes. He choked, grunting, and heaving.

Stefano cut off his nasal airway. His eyes glazed over, and he gagged on a swallow.

Giada prayed her hands against her lips. She didn’t utter a word.

“I’ll send your brother in pieces to your mother, and I’ll deliver you to your boss.” I stepped back. Stefano rejoined Carmine at the table.

My gun was heavy in my hand, the rubber caressed my palm, and the

trigger was smooth against my finger. Lifting my arm, I pointed my gun at his head. I inhaled through my nose. Heat rushed through my veins with the intoxication of reaping vengeance.

“Fuck you—”

I pulled the trigger.

Giada jumped, the ricochet of sound blasting through the room. Blood and brains sprayed the wall behind him. His body slumped in the chair.

I turned around. “How can you eat after that?”

Stefano perched on the edge of the table, smiled, and chomped a fry in half. “Killing makes me hungry. I’d rather eat pussy, but since she’s the only cunt in the room, I’m eating these.”

“Get a clean-up crew in here. Deliver dickless to his mother. Wrap this one up. We’ll deliver him to Adami. You have an hour.”

“I’m coming with you,” Giada said.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled, and my blood instantly flowed hot. Before I could respond, Stefano surged from the table, asserting his responsibility as a capo, putting a lower-level soldier in her place.

“Fuck no,” he seethed. “Your power in this family died with my father. You want something, you fucking ask me, and I’ll ask the boss. Chain of command, bitch.”

“You’re under Stefano, Giada,” I said.

Stef licked salt from his thumb. “He doesn’t mean on your back, either.”

Carminé whistled.

Giada had already attempted to make demands of me. I had the name of my father’s killer, but not the reason. I’d have that from Adami. And then I’d take his organization from him, even if I had to take it one fucking soldier at a time.

“Roberto would want me there. You know what I meant to him, so stop treating me like I was just a piece of ass. I’m not a fucking soldier for your family. I’m more, and we both know it. Marco, don’t take this from me. I want to look into Lazaro’s eyes when he confesses what he’s done.”

“She comes,” I said.

Not because I had some fucked-up affection or consideration for her, but because she was right about Roberto Bruno. Giada was a made woman because of him. Once in the mafia, there was only one way out—in a casket. She’d shared more than a bed with my father. They had Savio. Unless I had a reason, I wouldn’t kill his mother.

“But remember your place, Giada. You answer to Stefano. And you answer to me.”

Forty-five minutes later, she sat in the backseat of the SUV squeezed between Stefano and Carmine. I sat up front while Ant drove.

“I’ve asked for a courtesy meeting.” I glanced over my shoulder at Stefano. “I’ve been to Adami’s estate a couple of times. It’s a house built for entertainment. Open rooms, lots of windows. We’ll be exposed. As soon as we enter the house, you and Carmine take position. I leave it up to you to decide how best to cover our asses and still secure the entries.”

Stefano nodded.

I stared hard at Giada. “Stay the fuck out of the way. Keep your mouth shut. Look beautiful. It’ll keep Adami distracted.”

“If you wanted Lazaro distracted, you should’ve brought Orlando. He likes them young and hot.”

Furrows lined Ant’s forehead, and my jaw clenched. He’d noticed the same thing I had. Two things had become clear. Giada had twice used Adami’s first name. Her tone revealed a familiarity. Unusual because our families didn’t socialize.

And two, I needed to distance Orlando from Giada. I didn't trust her with Orlando. He loved women and weed, and the cracks of her insecurity were showing. No way was I letting her seduce Orlando.

"How do you know Adami?" I asked and took out my phone to disguise my interest.

"I've met him on a few occasions with Roberto. I wouldn't say that qualifies as knowing him."

"Any idea on why he'd order a hit on my father?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "None."

Stefano used his thumb to crack the knuckles on his right hand, one finger at a time. "We're about to find out. I'll give Marco ten minutes to get him to talk. Then I want a turn."

Ant drove up to the palatial estate. Several soldiers surrounded the car. With the twirl of a finger, they requested the window to be lowered.

Ant pressed the button to lower his.

"We'll need your guns," the guard said.

Ant laughed. "That isn't fucking happening."

The click of a locked and loaded weapon sounded. A guard stepped into my line of sight and leveled his weapon at me.

"Guns will stay in the vehicle when we go in," I said. "Everyone but my consigliere."

"Agreed. You'll be searched."

Ant nodded, and the gate opened. The guards walked with the vehicle, making our progress to the house slow as fuck. Finally, we rounded the top of the circular drive. As we opened our doors, we were held at gunpoint.

I slowly pulled my gun from my chest harness and laid it on the passenger floorboard of the SUV. Another guard ran his hands along my ribs, waistband of my trousers, and down my legs.

Stefano and Carmine were checked. Ant revealed the gun he had strapped to his chest.

Giada slid out of the vehicle. She smoothed her hands over her tight skirt. “Do you need to search me?”

The guard smiled at her, his gaze dropping to the fullness of her breasts. “Those are my orders.”

She held her arms out as the guard skimmed his hands over her hips.

As we turned to go into the house, Ant handed me his weapon. Although he was behind me, I trusted he’d have another gun in his holster before he joined me on the steps.

We entered the mansion.

“What the fuck?” Carmine whispered.

A man, in a perfectly tailored single-breasted black suit, was the only splash of color in the room.

“My name is Valentino Adami. Lazaro is my cousin.”

“Marco Bruno,” I said.

I didn’t know Lazaro well, and I had never met this cousin that I could recall. And since I intended to leave this white house bathed in blood, they didn’t need any other names.

White canvas stretched behind white frames as art on the white walls, and white lilies filled white vases on white marble tables.

My black shoes clicked against the white tile as we walked into the massive open floor plan.

Two more soldiers, all in black, stood sentry in the room.

“Does Adami have a problem with color?” Ant’s words echoed in the hall.

We paused in front of white double doors. A guard positioned on each side.

“Mr. Bruno,” Valentino swallowed hard. “Mr. Adami would like to speak to you privately.”

“No,” Giada said.

Stefano rested a hand on her arm, reminding her to be silent.

Valentino pushed the door open.

Lazaro Adami sat behind a massive black lacquer desk in a fucking white suit. Mid-fifties, dark hair, body honed of muscle while still carrying an air of wealth and power. A younger man, also in white, stood behind him.

Without waiting for permission, Ant entered the room with me.

“Don Bruno. I’ve been expecting you.” Adami indicated the seat in front of his desk. “Cigar?”

“We can dispense with pleasantries.” I sat in the chair. Ant positioned behind me, protecting my back should anyone get past Stefano in the hall. “I’m here on business.”

He nodded and stood.

Ant pulled his weapon.

Adami caressed the arm of his soldier when he reached for his. He turned to me and sighed. He ran his fingers over the smooth, polished surface of his desk. Then he walked to the wall of oversized windows. “I never wanted to start a war with the Bruno family.”

“You don’t want a war, yet you put a hit out on my father. Why?”

He turned around and faced me. “This business of ours sometimes forces us to make unfortunate decisions. Debts must be paid.”

“What debt did the Bruno family have with you?”

His gaze hardened on mine. “We all have weaknesses within our empires.” His gaze lingered on the young man next to him. “I recognize mine, but your father never discovered his. My debt wasn’t to your family, but for me, the debt must still be paid.”

Gunfire erupted outside the door.

I pulled my weapon at the same time the door swung open.

Adami's guard leveled his gun at the intruder—at Giada. With her arm outstretched, she held a gun in her hand.

“You killed Roberto!” she screamed.

“Fucking bitch.” The guard aimed.

A flash, my arm jolted, and the acrid scent of gunfire swirled around me.

The young soldier dropped to the ground. Blood soaked his white suit, seeping through the fibers. I'd shot him dead center.

“No!” Adami screamed, scrambling around the desk. A white figurine of nude male bodies entwined crashed to the white carpet. He choked on a gasp. He spun toward Giada. “You cost me everything.”

“I can say the same about you.” She held the gun in both hands and fired, hitting Adami in the throat. He grabbed his neck, blood oozing between his fingers.

“Giada!” I lunged for her.

She fired again. Adami stumbled back a step, then crumbled to the ground. Blood saturated his starched white shirt.

Stefano grabbed her, locking her in his arms, and prying the gun from her fingers. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I thought you were the only crazy fucking psycho with a gun,” Carmine said to Stefano.

“Get her out of here,” I said.

Giada struggled in Stefano's arms. Tears streamed down her face, mascara smudging her eyes.

“Calm the fuck down,” Stefano snapped and thrust her at Carmine. “Get her to the car.”

The vehicle was armored. At the moment, it was the only safe place for her. Either one of Adami's men was going to kill her, or one of mine would.

Valentino stood in the room, staring at the carnage. His jaw trembled, but his hooded gaze narrowed on me.

Deafening silence blanketed the room. The pungent odor of sulfur and death burned in my nostrils.

"Has your need for retribution been met?" Rage edged his words.

I lifted my gaze from the two dead men, their blood soaking the white carpet. "Has yours?"

Ant stood behind me, and Stefano monitored the door.

"No one will be coming." Valentino crossed the room, stepping over the dead men, to the desk. He sat, but I remained where I stood. "Your visit today was expected. As was the result. Lazaro was under no misconceptions that you'd kill him. Your reputation is well earned."

My gut clenched. Adrenaline fired through my system, heightening my reflexes and my sense of danger. "Explain."

"Lazaro had meetings with his capos. He named me the new boss of the Adami family. He admitted that he'd orchestrated the hit on Roberto Bruno without consulting the Commission. He didn't only betray your family, but he betrayed his own."

He'd expected and planned for his death. He killed my father knowing I'd take his life. "Why?"

"Don Bruno, do you wish to have the Adami family as an ally or as an enemy?" Several soldiers filed into the room. "I'd prefer to count you as a friend."

I sat, leaned forward in my chair, my forearms on my knees, and steepled my fingers. "My father is dead."

Valentino glanced at the bodies on the floor. "As is the man who

marked him.” He rolled his shoulders. “But not the man who called for the mark.”

I glanced at Ant and Stefano.

“The Bruno family has an enemy,” Valentino continued. “Lazaro was just another pawn. He owed someone big. And he understood ordering the hit would cost him his life. Whatever someone had on my cousin, he wanted buried with him.”

“Who?”

“If I knew, I’d tell you. As an ally, I’d feel compelled to share with you anything I find out.” We both stood. He rounded the desk. “Do you think enough blood has been spilled?”

“No, not nearly enough. Unless you give me a reason to question your intentions, we’ll make it known Valentino Adami has the support of the Bruno family.” I strode toward the door. “I expect your support on all matters concerning the Bruno family.”

Valentino nodded once, walked with me through the house, and out onto the front landing. More soldiers watched the vehicle.

Carmin and Giada remained inside the SUV.

I turned to Valentino. “Whoever ordered the hit will feel secure because Lazaro is dead, as are the men who pulled the trigger. One is on his way to decorate his mother’s dining room table.” I pointed to the vehicle. “The other is in the back of the SUV.”

Chapter Eight

Allegra

“Ally!” Deidre screeched as she flew into my room.

“What?”

“They’re coming back. Lanny just sent me a text. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

I scrambled to my phone. Had I missed a call or text from Marco? My heart hammered against my ribs. Two weeks. I ached to see him. I more than ached. Inside, I was tied up in knots.

I hadn’t spoken to him since the night of the funeral, but he’d sent a few text messages. Admittedly, I had begun to wonder if there was some truth to my mother’s words. Had he changed his mind?

With his father gone, Marco could renege on the marriage. Perhaps Giada or Francesca did have more appeal. They’d certainly had more experience and hadn’t learned about blowjobs from porn sites.

I set my phone on the nightstand. Marco hadn’t tried to reach me. I sat on the edge of my bed. “Are you sure they’re coming?”

Deidre chewed on her bottom lip. “Yes, but Lanny just mentioned Emilio. I assumed Marco would be with them, but maybe he’s not coming.”

Either way, he should've been the one telling me.

"Maybe he's going to surprise you," Deidre's voice danced with enthusiasm.

I didn't think Marco was the type of man who appreciated surprises. I considered the time difference. There really wasn't any excuse for why he wouldn't have called me. It was close to ten for him. Too early for sleep, but not too early to be in bed.

My thumb hovered over my phone.

"Stay quiet," I said and hit the call button.

The phone went straight to voicemail.

"Do you want me to try to call Lanny?"

"No. You'll see him tomorrow." I stood and grabbed my earbuds.

"Don't you want to talk to Marco?"

Desperately, but I shrugged. "I'm going for a run."

Deidre slid off my bed. "I'm going to go play games."

I paused in setting my fitness tracker on my watch. "Remember what we talked about."

"God, I get it. I'm not an idiot." She rolled her eyes and peeled herself off my bed.

I hadn't specifically told her about the risk in the gaming chat room, but about being online in general. No personal information, never meeting anyone in real life, and spun my concern to include her online friends, and what would happen if Santino found out there was any inappropriate chat happening.

"Dee, not everyone online is who they say they are. You can only be betrayed by people who call themselves your friend."

She headed for the door. "Just like I can't tell a guy that my brother will cut out his tongue if he kisses me with it."

I considered telling her that Santino had the computers monitored but kept quiet. I recognized the same rebelliousness in myself in her. If she knew she was being monitored, she'd find a way around it. And that was my biggest fear.

Before her recent slips in front of the Bruno's, I would've trusted her with my deepest secrets. But this wasn't about my secret friendship with Knox.

Bryne wouldn't just kill Knox. He'd be made an example. Torture would only be the beginning. *Omertà*—code of silence. For the La Cosa Nostra, and for the Irish, the Yakuza, and the Bratva, it was an unforgivable sin.

I met Tim on the walkway in front of the house.

"I'm seriously just going for a run today."

"Those lips lie so well. Give it up, Ally. You're tenacious, but there's no way you're giving me the slip twice."

We started toward the trees with a light jog. "If I'd have been born a boy, I'd own the world."

"Beautiful and deceitful. But you're wrong," he said keeping in step with me. "You're not like other girls. You could rule an empire."

We ran along the edge of the lake. "Mafia empires are ruled by men."

Tim lengthened his stride, and I pushed to keep up. "You're not like most women. You never were." He glanced at me. "Fuck, Ally, you challenged Marco at the dinner table. Your father sees it. And so does Santi."

"What did Santi say?" Because after Marco had left, I'd barely spoken to him. "I'm sure he's wondering what to do with me if Marco backs out of the wedding now that he can't pawn me off to the next best match. Mafia men don't want a wife someone else has touched."

He was quiet next to me as we rounded the path and started up an

incline.

“What? Nothing to say?”

His jaw clenched. “You don’t want to know what I’m thinking.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” I increased my speed. My legs might be shorter, but I was a stronger runner.

“Ally, wait.”

“No, fuck you. Fuck Santi. Fuck Marco. Because you all get a pass. You can fuck all the women you want. Some rich mafia prick fucks young girls, no one cares. But fuck me, because I let the man I’m supposed to marry between my legs, my mother has already set up a counseling session with Father Josue. Getting on my knees for Marco is going to have me on my knees in confession.”

Tim grabbed my bicep. His gaze met mine, but his focus lowered to the rise and fall of my chest as I drew in deep inhales.

Black leggings molded to my hips and stretched over my legs. He swallowed hard as he took a longer look on his way back to my face.

“Is that what you think? A man wouldn’t give a fuck if you were a virgin.” His voice lowered, and he released my arm. “Marco Bruno took you to bed because you challenged him. He’d be a fool to let you go, and we both know he’s not stupid.”

We stared at each other. A cool wind lifted a lock of dark hair from his forehead.

“Thank you, Tim.”

He groaned and started up the hill again. “He’s not stupid, but you are.”

“Just when I thought you weren’t going to be a douche.”

Tim shifted his feet, sidestepping an exposed tree root in the ground.

“Oh shit.” My ankle twisted, my knee buckled, and I crashed onto my

hip. I slid a few feet down the hill in the loose soil and mulch.

“Fuck.” Tim rushed after me, dropping to his knees. “Are you hurt?”

I brushed the palms of my hands on my thighs. “No, just proving I’ll never be graceful.” I twisted to stand, but my ankle gave out.

Tim wrapped an arm around me. “You’re determined to get me into trouble. Can you put any weight on it?”

“Just give me a second.” I braced against him and tried to roll my ankle. Searing pain blazed through my foot and shot up my calf. “Fuck,” I hissed and gingerly set my foot on the ground.

My knee buckled with the sharp pain.

“Hold on.” Tim slipped one arm under my knees and scooped me into his arms.

Breath swooshed from my lungs. I wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

“If you give me a minute, I’ll be able to walk. It’s a long way back to the house.”

He chuckled and stepped cautiously through the mulch to the worn dirt trail. “Are you worried about my back?”

“I’d be more concerned for your neck.” I’d never noticed how dark his eyes were. He stared at me, his angular jaw tense, and his full lips tight. We’d known each other nearly our whole lives, but I’d never been this close to him.

The citrus and musk scent of his cologne clung to his sweat-slicked skin. Hard muscles bunched beneath my fingers. I lowered my gaze first.

“Ally, I requested this assignment.”

I lifted my head again. “Why?”

With the way he stared into my eyes, I was almost afraid of the answer.

“Because I don’t want anyone too close to you.”

Suddenly uncomfortable with the way he spoke to me and the way he

stared, my throat tightened. I pressed against his chest. “Tim, maybe you should put me down. I’m going to marry Marco. I shouldn’t be in your arms.”

“Christ, Ally,” he said and shook his head with a chuckle. “I don’t want to fuck you. Not that you aren’t gorgeous.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think when you talk about not caring if I’m a virgin and then saying you don’t want anyone close to me?”

He smiled. “First, I was just pointing out that your virginity would be the least interesting thing about you. And that is the problem. Ally, I don’t want anyone following too close to you. I saw you climb down the trellis the night Marco arrived.”

I sucked in a breath and stiffened in his arms.

“Don’t worry. I couldn’t follow you, so I checked the cameras. Your friend was recorded on the surveillance footage.” He shifted my weight in his arms and kept walking.

A shiver of cold fear coiled in my chest. I tried to bank my response, the sharp inhale, the tremble vibrating through me, and the instinct to deny but also the desperate need to find out what he knew.

“Tim...what happened on the footage?”

“Don’t fucking deflect. You need to be careful. There are always going to be eyes on you now. Marco is possessive, and he’s known to be brutal. I can only do so much to protect you, but you need to lock that shit down. I deleted the file, but I won’t do it again.”

I exhaled, not realizing I’d been holding my breath.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on,” he said.

I chewed my lip. Tim was Santi’s best friend. Why had he protected me? I wanted to trust him, but I couldn’t trust anyone...except Knox.

“I can’t protect you if I don’t know what,” he continued, “or who I’m up against. You said rich mafia pricks are fucking young girls.” He stopped

walking and stared hard into my eyes. “Are you in trouble?”

My stomach swooped. I waited three beats of my heart, and then decided I had to trust someone. I prayed I wasn’t making a mistake.

“No,” I carefully stated. “But Dee might be.”

His hold tightened on me. “Tell me.”

“Nothing has happened yet. I’m trying to make sure nothing does. Just watch her computer, Tim.”

Marco

I sat behind my desk, drinking. Alcohol kept my idle hands busy but wasn’t doing shit for the guilt festering in my gut.

“You won’t be staying with the Jilani’s,” I said to Orlando. “No fucking distractions. You’ll stay in Luca’s suite at the Onyx.”

Orlando tugged on his trouser legs and leaned forward. “You should be coming with us.”

I tipped the glass to my lips. “I’m needed here.”

I wasn’t sure how true that was. Word had spread of the alliance between the Bruno and Adami families. Valentino had understood well. There would have been no support for Lazaro.

Orlando stood and crossed to the door. “If you’ve changed your mind about Allegra, you need to tell her.”

“I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Then I don’t know what you want me to say to Dee when I see her tomorrow.”

My spine stiffened. “I’d rather they not know of your return just yet.”

Until I knew what I’d say to Allegra about Francesca, or if I would say anything at all, I wasn’t going to see her.

“She knows. I told her yesterday.”

“Fuck.” I hadn’t spoken to Allegra. She’d make her own assumptions on why. How close would she come to the truth? She’d had concerns over Francesca.

“Instead of you saying it to me,” Orlando smirked, “it feels good to be the one to tell you to get your shit together. If you don’t want to fuck up what you have with Allegra, you should be on the plane.”

I may have already fucked it up. She was my wife, we would be married in the church, but I doubted she’d respond well to discovering Francesca had been in my bed.

A knock sounded on the door. Orlando swung it open, and Giada strode into the room.

Orlando’s gaze shifted from Giada to me. “You’re the boss,” he said to me. “Tell me what you need from me.”

“I need you and Emilio at the BDSM club. Find a way in because I don’t want to make an enemy of Ferraro.”

But I would.

“What’s going on?” Giada asked. “Do you have more information on Luca?”

“Not yet, but I will,” I said.

“Do you know who she is?”

I turned my gaze to Giada. “Who?”

“The woman,” she stammered. “Roberto said the woman was responsible for his death.”

I leaned back in my leather desk chair. There was a woman, but was she responsible? Or was she just the last one with him, possibly overheard a phone call or had witnessed an exchange? She could also be dead. Or knowing she was submissive to my brother, perhaps another Dom had taken

her for himself.

“What else did my father tell you?”

“Nothing.”

I ran my finger around the rim of my drink glass. “Don’t ever lie to me, Giada. Unlike my father, when it comes to you, I won’t be forgiving.”

“Maybe you’re more like your father than you know, because the Ruthless King never forgave anyone, including me.”

I stood from my chair and glanced out the window. “What do you want?”

She lifted from the chair and slithered in close to me. “When your father needed to think, he used to stand here and watch out the window. He belonged here, letting his underboss command his capos, and letting his capos control their soldiers.”

“I know chain of command, Giada.”

“Yes, but you need to let Stefano take over for you. He’s your underboss. You belong here as the head of this family.” She rested her hand on my arm. “Orlando and Emilio are leaving. Stefano should go with them, not you.”

“If I need advice, I’ll ask my consigliere.”

“Ant won’t tell you what you need to hear.” She braced her hands on her hips. “The American will make you weak. If you want the other dons to respect you, and your enemies to fear you, then you need to show them The Enforcer is a brutal leader. A ruthless king stands on the backs of those beneath him.”

“I’m not my father.”

“No? Like him, you’re keeping a whore in your bed while your fiancé waits for you. Like him, you slay your enemies. You want their blood on your hands. And like him, you’ll do what’s right for this family.”

“You can leave.”

She strode toward the door. “You owe Francesca an apology. She’s been loyal to you. Oh, right.” She tapped her lip with her long, red fingernail. “You’re like Roberto. He never apologized either.”

I stood at the window, drinking his brandy, smoking his cigars, but finding the collar on my shirt too tight and the footsteps I’m supposed to walk in too small. Because I wasn’t my father. I didn’t need to demand respect or take power. I’d already earned it.

I set the glass down and went to find Ant and Stefano. They sat near the pool on the patio. I slid my hands into my pockets and stared out over the luxurious estate. The vineyards, the mansions, the airstrip. This had always been my home, rooting the Bruno family to the past.

My future was here, with Allegra. But first, I had unfinished business in the U.S.

“Boss?” Ant asked.

I’d been standing quietly beside them for several minutes. “The plane leaves in an hour.”

Ant rolled his cigarette in the glass ashtray. “And will we be on it?”

I smiled. “I have a wedding to attend.”

While on the plane, I glanced through estate listings. Anna had found several along the eastern seaboard, but only one option that fit most of my needs. The twenty-acre estate was small in comparison to my home in Italy, but we would be isolated and near the coast. Thank fuck, far enough away from Allegra’s family to avoid their interference.

“Emilio?”

He stood from the couch and came around my chair. “Yeah, boss?”

“Can you secure it?” I slid out of my seat. Emilio clicked through the

aerial photos of the property.

He smiled. "I can secure anything."

"Good. Make it happen."

"We've got to acquire the property first."

I snorted. "Do I need Stefano to provide the proper motivation to the sellers?"

"For the type of motivation we'll need, I'm going to need to tap your resources. Listing is twenty-two-five." Emilio's fingers clicked across the screen.

Orlando whistled and joined Emilio at the computer. "Dude, for twenty-two million there's staff quarters in a guesthouse. Sounds more like capo quarters. Somewhere for me and my second to call home."

Emilio gave him a fist bump.

I left them at the computer and went to the back bedroom. I picked up my phone. How had Allegra crawled under my skin in only a couple of days? Was it the way she smirked those glossed lips just before she wrapped them around my cock or the way her eyes sparked when challenged?

Or maybe it was the way she whispered my name. How many days had it been since I'd heard her voice?

I hesitated between a text and a phone call. Finally, I just sent a simple text.

Marco: Tell me about the dress.

Why did my heart pound like I was about to go into battle? Probably because I'd been a dick by avoiding her.

I'd had a conflict with my conscience. I didn't want to tell her about Francesca. I wasn't going to tell her. I hadn't invited Francesca into my bed. But I had fisted my hands in her hair, called her by my wife's nickname, and fucked her face.

Guilt wormed through my gut. I'd been drunk, but not drunk enough that I didn't have the memory of it. A memory I wish I could burn from my mind.

Allegra: Who is this?

Marco: Have you forgotten me, topolina?

Allegra: DPMO. I was going to ask you the same thing.

Marco: What is DPMO and how could I forget you?

Allegra: Don't Piss Me Off. As for your forgetfulness, I considered maybe early onset Alzheimer's. IJBOL (I just burst out laughing, in case you didn't know)

I could imagine her twirling a lock of her hair on her finger, waiting for my reply.

Marco: Did you know humans eat more bananas than monkeys?

Allegra: I know this joke and it isn't funny. I'd never eat a monkey.

I smiled. Another bubble of dots appeared as she continued to type.

Allegra: I'm sorry, Marco, but I can't walk down the aisle with you.

I sat up, staring at the words, my blood turning to ice.

Marco: That isn't funny either.

Allegra: It wasn't meant to be.

Marco: Do you need a reminder of the words you spoke? Or I could remind you of the way you cried my name as you came. You're not going to tell me on a text message that you're not walking down the aisle.

Allegra: If you were here, I'd tell you to your face.

This woman, she dared me to push her.

Marco: I'd rather you sit on my face when I see you.

Allegra: Since you're not here, I'm watching porn and eating a

banana.

I unzipped my trousers to give my dick room to stretch.

Marco: Dinner and a movie.

Allegra: I can Netflix and chill by myself. I know how to entertain myself.

Marco: Do you find it entertaining to torture me?

I could tell her I was on my way, but I was enjoying my little mouse and her tease.

My phone vibrated. I accepted the call.

“It must be hard...to be the one tortured when you’d rather be the one doing the torturing.”

Her sultry voice sent heat straight into my dick. “It’s fucking hard.”

“How hard?”

“Fuck, topolina. Talk to me as I fuck my fist.” I grasped my cock at the base and stroked it twice.

“I don’t want phone sex. It’s not enough. I want you here, touching me and kissing me.”

“Will you have la cena, err, *dinner* with me?”

She sucked in a little breath. “When?”

“Tonight.”

“Marco, are you coming home?”

I closed my eyes, hating and loving the tears I heard in her voice as she said my name. My chest constricted as she referred to my place beside her as home.

“Yes, but I’ll be late.”

“I don’t care.”

“Not to your parent’s home. I’m too tired to entertain your mother. I have a suite at the Onyx. Will you stay with me?”

“Yes.”

Breathing became a little easier. “I’ll leave your name at the desk. Please—be there when I arrive. I need you.”

“I need you, too. I’ll be there.”

“Now that we’ve established that I am completely at your mercy—” I leaned back on the pillow and stroked my cock, “—suck two fingers, slip them into your pussy, and tell me how wet you are.”

“Marco,” she whispered my name again, her voice hanging on the O.

After slipping a few buttons open, I tugged my shirt over my head. Then I ripped my undershirt off. I rubbed my fingertips over the red, puckered cut from her blade. The skin had thickened with the emerging scar.

“Talk to me, topolina.”

“I’ve touched myself every night wishing it was you. I think about our promises to each other.”

Not now. I couldn’t think of our vows and promises. I pushed the black feeling of rage deeper into my gut. I’d choke on the guilt before I hurt Allegra. I focused on her voice and pictured her beautiful face in my mind.

I fisted my dick, my balls tightened, and a flare of heat sizzled over my flesh. “Almost there.”

“Me too. I’m so wet. My fingers are soaked. My pussy is soft, but when I put my fingers inside me, I can’t reach the place I ache.” Her breathy gasps echoed through the phone. “Only you can touch me there.”

“Fuck.” Muscles in my abdomen clenched with the rhythm of my strokes, and I came in hard spurts, striping my chest in ribbons of white. As the tension slipped from my limbs, I listened to Allegra reach the pinnacle of pleasure.

Her throaty moans seeped into me. “I’ve missed you, Marco. I’m yours. Only yours.” Her voice softened. “Are you still only mine?”

My throat tightened. She was asking if I'd been with anyone. She worried about Giada and Francesca. We didn't have trust in each other yet, and to tell her about Francesca now, we never would.

The truth would be the end of something good before it had a chance to begin. A lie could be the start of something better that never had to end. My fingertips pressed against my scar.

I broke another promise to her, and I lied.

“I'm yours. Only yours.”

Allegra

Showered, shaved, and moisturized, I dressed in a sexy pair of panties and a matching bra. I wore a maxi skirt that clung to my curves and draped to the floor. I paired it with a tight sleeveless turtleneck that clung to my breasts like a second skin.

I wasn't sure what time Marco would arrive, but I assumed I had a couple hours to pack and get a ride downtown to the Onyx. Because Marco hadn't mentioned how long he'd be staying, I packed a small suitcase.

Sifting through my drawers, I picked out skimpy panties and bras. Mostly I packed casual skirts and tops. If he wanted to go anywhere special, I could always come home for a change of clothes.

Wearing a walking boot on my sprained ankle, I hobbled to the en suite bathroom to gather my toiletries.

“Hi,” I said to Deidre as she came into my room and plopped onto my bed.

“What's going on?”

“Marco called.” The words sent a rush of excitement through me. He'd only been gone for a couple of weeks, and yeah, I was discovering that I

wasn't immune to fits of jealousy. We had ridiculously crazy chemistry.

Or maybe we were just both dark and a little bit psychotic. He'd had me mark him. Giada and Francesca would only need to see him without a shirt to know he was mine now.

At least, that was how I had tempered my doubts when he'd ghosted me for days at a time.

"He's on his way," I said.

Deidre's brows lifted, and a smile curled her lips. Then she glanced at the suitcase. "So where are you going?"

"His suite at the Onyx." I wasn't going to waste a moment of our time together.

"What about Lanny and Emilio?"

I sat on the edge of the bed. "He didn't say, but my guess is that they'll be staying at the hotel, too."

"I assumed they'd be coming here," she said.

"They wouldn't just show up. If they'd planned on staying here, they would've made arrangements."

She pouted. "When will I see them?"

"We'll figure something out for tomorrow. I'm meeting Marco tonight, but I'll call you in the morning."

"Can't you just call me tonight?"

"I'm sure Orlando and Emilio are just as anxious to see you. But they'll be tired from their flight and the time difference."

"Then can I come with you? Please, Ally."

My heart hurt for her. But I needed to be alone with Marco. I didn't just need the physical touch of his hands on my body and his dick deep inside me, but there was the wedding to discuss, how long he was staying, and what happened when he went back to Italy.

“Dee, I need tonight alone with him.”

“But you won’t be alone. Lanny and Emilio are with him.”

“Not in the same room.”

“Then I’ll stay in their room.”

I chuckled, stood, and stuffed a few more things into my suitcase. “You know that isn’t happening. We’d both get our asses handed to us.”

“We won’t tell. You know I can keep a secret.”

“Dee, I can’t.”

She slowly shook her head, clearly pissed, and stood. “You’re selfish, Ally. You know how I feel about Lanny.”

“I do, and I know he cares about you, but you’re sixteen. You can’t stay in his hotel room. They’ll be late, and I won’t be back tonight.”

She stomped toward the door. “Have fun.” Her words dripped with sarcasm. “I’ll figure out something to do here. Probably game. Maybe Lanny will be online.”

My door slammed as it closed.

Hopefully, Orlando would be gaming because just hearing her say she’d be online sent a shiver of worry snapping down my spine. Sixteen and infatuated. I’d been there, and it sucked.

But unlike me and Marco, there was never going to be a Deidre and Orlando.

Once my bag was packed, I hobbled out of my room. I stood at the top of the stairs and grimaced. Holding the suitcase on my left side, I held to the polished mahogany handrail with my right hand, and carefully limped my way down one step at a time.

Tim came around the corner as I shuffled onto the last step.

“I need a ride.” With the boot and limited mobility, I couldn’t drive.

Tim folded his arms across his chest. “Where to, because you don’t

need an overnight bag for a ride to Vintage Brew?”

I braced a hand on my hip. He should be happy I was coming to him for the ride. This was the same guy who gave me shit about ditching him to sneak away.

“I live for more than just coffee. But if you’re too tired to drive me, I can call a rideshare.”

“Let’s go.” He grabbed my bag from my hand.

I shuffled along beside him. At the stone steps, I held on to Tim as I made my way down. Once at the car, he tossed my luggage into the backseat as I slid into the passenger seat.

He climbed behind the wheel. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“The Onyx Hotel, and you can just drop me off.”

“Are you fucking crazy? What the fuck, Ally? Telling you I’d cover for you didn’t mean taking you to fuck around on Marco.” He curled his fingers around the steering wheel with a tight fist. “Fuck, if Marco finds out he’ll kill you.”

I raised a brow but let him continue since he was on a roll.

“I love you too much. Fuck me. No. Do you know what mafia men do to wives who cheat? You’d wish you were dead.” He stared at me across the console. “Do you have anything to say?”

“Yes, take me to the hotel.” I smiled. “Marco is coming back tonight. I’m going to be waiting for him.”

He sagged against the seat. “Fuck you.”

“No, because I’m starting to like you and then we’d both be dead.” I smirked. “I’m glad to know you love me, but you should probably *lock that shit down*, too.” I put on my seatbelt. “And I do want to make a stop at Vintage. I need a nonfat chai, and you look like you could use a shot of

something. Might as well be an espresso. The tequila is in the house.”

He pushed the start button. “I must be a glutton for punishment, or else I have a death wish because you’re fucking killing me.”

Thirty minutes later, I held my drink, and Tim carried my bag. Gone was the easy humor. He walked with a possessive power one step behind me. His gaze marked every person we passed. As I stepped up to the registration desk, Tim stood protectively behind me.

Nothing but luxury ethos at the Onyx. Above us, a bent and twisted steel rail surrounded the mezzanine floor where the bar, boutique, and spa were located. I smiled at the woman behind the desk. “Allegra Jilani. Marco Bruno’s room please.”

Before I could say more, the hotel manager rushed over to me and rested his hands on the marble and brass counter. “Mrs. Bruno, I’m the manager of the Onyx. It’s an honor to have you staying with us. The penthouse is ready for you.” He set an access card on the counter as the porter approached. “We’ll see to your bags and escort you to your suite.”

“Thank you.” I swiped the card into my hand.

Tim handed the bag to the porter. I winced as I turned away from the counter. I’d been putting a bit too much pressure on my foot.

Tim offered his elbow. I gripped his forearm and limped across the elegant lobby. Leather furniture clustered around the massive open fireplace in the center of the room. Two older ladies sat on a small leather sofa sipping tea.

To the left was a year-round terrace with a retractable roof and windows. We were escorted to the glass and mirrored elevators.

“Ma’am,” he said to me. “Your access card operates the elevator.”

I held the card to the black polished panel. The P of the penthouse illuminated, and the elevator doors silently slid closed. A moment later, the

doors opened into the suite.

The porter pointed out the amenities. The complimentary bar, large wardrobe in the bedroom, steam capable shower in the bathroom, and two toilets. He put my small suitcase just inside the double doors of the bedroom.

“Temperature, television, the blinds, and lights are all controlled by the tablet. Butler and turndown services are available as well as twenty-four-hour room service through the guest portal. Someone is always available should you need anything during your stay with us.”

“Thank you,” I said and hobbled over to the sofa in the massive living area. I plopped down and lifted my boot to the glass coffee table.

Tim followed the porter to the elevator.

Once we were alone, he sat in the chair across from me.

“You don’t need to stay,” I said.

He grunted and leaned his head back. “I’ll leave when the boss arrives. When do you expect him?”

“He just said tonight.”

He lifted his head and softened his gaze on me. “I meant what I said to you. You can trust me, Ally.”

“I do.”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “But we can’t talk like this unless we’re alone. Santi is my best friend. We’ve known each other forever, but I know my place. I’m a soldier for your family. I do whatever is asked of me without question.”

He rubbed his palms on his thighs.

“I also know the consequences of any appearance of impropriety. I can’t protect you if I’m not with you.”

“Careful, Timoteo, every time we talk, you’re becoming less of an asshole.”

“Trust me, I’m an asshole.” He stood and crossed to the basket of complimentary snacks on top of the mini fridge. He plucked out a package of cookies and tossed me a dark chocolate and granola bar.

“Thanks.” I peeled open the wrapper. “I need to ask one more favor.”

Tim unbuttoned his sportscoat and hung it over the chair before sitting again. “Is it going to get me killed?”

“Only if Dee finds out. When you get back to the house tonight, I need you to check her chat history. She’s upset because I wouldn’t bring her with me. I’ve talked to her about being careful online, but she’s sixteen and spiteful.”

He nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on her, and I don’t think she’s crazy enough to jump the wall and take off like her sister.”

I snorted. “Even if you don’t find anything, let me know so I don’t worry. But be careful about what you text. I don’t want anyone to know you were checking up on her.”

He nodded. “What do I get in return for this favor?”

“What do you want?” I narrowed my gaze. “And be careful what you ask for. My foot is injured, but I can still hobble over to you and stab you with my knife.”

“Fuck, Ally, just behave, especially while your fiancé is here.”

I was definitely going to misbehave with my fiancé.

“Play on your phone.” I slid off the couch, lumbered across the room to the bedroom, unpacked my suitcase and set my toiletries on the vanity.

The hour grew late. Tim watched television. I wanted to change into a nightgown and robe. I wanted to go to bed. I wanted Marco to get here because I was starving, but he’d asked me to have dinner with him.

“I’m going to rest for a while,” I said to Tim. “You should order dinner if you’re hungry.”

He'd already eaten half of the items in the basket on the mini fridge. I partially closed the bedroom door, leaving just a crack for a stripe of light to cut across the plush, deep-blue carpeting.

Resting on top of the bed, I propped my foot on a pillow, covered my legs with a throw, lay on my side, and closed my eyes. Oh my god. I had died and landed on a cloud of down comfort and memory foam. The mattress molded to my body. I heaved a deep exhale and ignored the rumble in my stomach.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke to the sound of voices outside the room. My heart hiccupped. *Marco*. He was here.

Marco

At the hotel, we left our luggage in the vehicle. I didn't want to be bothered with it tonight. As soon as I entered the Onyx, I inquired with the front desk if my wife had checked in. A smile tugged at my lips, knowing I'd soon have my hands on her, my mouth on her, and my cock inside her.

Ant had requested ground-floor rooms for some of the guards. We parted ways at the elevator.

Orlando, Emilio, and Ant, along with a few more guards, were on the floor below me. After they'd exited the elevator, I'd had thirty seconds alone. All of those seconds were spent anticipating my wife.

The elevator door opened to the penthouse. Timoteo stood, feet planted shoulder width apart, his hand on his gun.

Seeing me, his posture relaxed. "Welcome back, boss."

I cocked a brow and entered the lavish penthouse suite. Technically, I wasn't Timoteo's boss. He was Jilani's man, and clearly close to Santino. That familial connection was the only reason I'd agreed to his continued

close proximity to Allegra.

I questioned his allegiance to me but counted on his loyalty to Santino. If he continued with this assignment, he would answer to me. “Has she gone to bed?” It was easy to see she wasn’t in the room.

He slipped on his sportscoat. “About an hour ago. She didn’t have dinner.” He smiled. “She waited for you.”

“Good.”

“Would you like me to remain in the hotel?”

I shrugged out of my suit coat. “No, but I’ll be working from the hotel. If she leaves the room, I don’t want her unaccompanied.”

“Understood. Goodnight, boss.”

As soon as the elevator doors closed, I toed off my shoes, strode to the bedroom door, and pushed it open. Allegra rested on the bed. Her beautiful body curved in an S shape. Her hair fanned out against the white linen. Slightly parted lips hinted at a smile, and her dark lashes lowered over her warm, penetrating eyes.

My pulse jumped, and the ruby ring on her finger created a dangerous pull in my gut. Adrenaline fired through my blood.

“Topolina,” I said, stepping into the room. Electric current skimmed over my flesh and sent heat searing along my spine and into my groin.

She lifted onto her elbow. “Mi manchi, marito.”

My cock thickened as I stepped closer to the bed. “*I missed you, too, wife.*”

Fingering the edge of the blanket covering her leg, I tugged it down her body. The blanket reached the end of the bed and dropped to the floor.

Her ankle, encased in a black boot, rested on a white pillow. “Allegra?”

What had happened, and why hadn’t I been told she was injured?

She scooted up the bed. “It’s just a sprain.”

I sat on the bed and grazed my fingers over the boot. “What happened?”

“Running near the lake, I stepped wrong and went down. You would’ve been impressed by the way I slid on my ass to the bottom of the hill.”

She shivered as my fingers touched the sensitive skin at the back of her knee.

“I don’t want you to run in the woods anymore.”

A laugh rumbled from her. “Next, you’ll be telling me I can’t climb the trellis or swim in the lake.”

I growled and climbed over the bed and reclined next to her. She inhaled shallow breaths as I hovered over her. “Do I need to lock you up to keep you safe?”

Her palm rested on my sternum, then rose higher over the cut on my chest. Her fingers slipped a button open on my shirt, then another. “We can fight later. Kiss me, Marco.”

My memory failed to capture just how beautiful she was. I slanted my mouth to hers. Full lips parted, tongues tangled, and her soft moan clashed with my feral growl.

I tunneled my fingers under her hair, cradled her skull in my hand, and deepened the kiss. She whimpered, and I sought her tongue, gently sucking, and crushing her lips against mine.

The whimper became a moan. Breathing her in, claiming her, I kissed her until I had her on her back. Her skirt kept me from splitting her legs and settling in the cradle of her pelvis to feel the heat of her pussy. Pressure built in my balls as I ground my dick against her thigh and slid my palm onto her stomach.

I stretched out next to her, partially pinning her beneath me. Her eyes searched mine. Her pulse quivered in the column of her neck, and her hand trembled where it rested on my lats.

Young, innocent, and curious. She was mine to touch and to taste.

Sliding my fingers into the waistband of her skirt, I spread my fingers and pressed against her pelvis. She stilled, her eyes lowered, dark with lust, but hesitant. I'd put this distance between us, not only physical distance, but time apart, and my avoidance caused a chasm of intimacy.

"We're not strangers," I whispered and ran my nose along her jaw, kissing her neck. "You're mine, little mouse."

I slipped my fingers into her panties and split her wet folds with my middle finger. Tunneling deeper, I pushed into her opening, cupping her cunt until my palm ground against her clit.

She gasped, and her hand balled into my shirt. Her thighs clamped against my arm. "Marco," she whimpered.

"I'm right here. You feel so good." I continued to drill into her, rubbing my finger against her satiny walls.

"You feel so good, too." Her back bowed, and her neck stretched. She clawed at my shirt, attempting to thrust her hips with one foot braced against the bed and the other encased in the boot and isolated on the pillow. "Please."

Frustration tinted her words as she tried to buck against my hand.

"I've missed making you come." Missed seeing the tremble of her lips, to feel her breathy gasp just before I crushed her mouth with mine. My cock throbbed, anticipating the hot clench of her pussy. "I missed the taste of you." I sucked the sensitive skin beneath her ear.

She turned her face to me and pressed her lips to mine.

I kissed her back hard, thrusting my tongue into her mouth. "Do you think about my cock being inside you?"

“Yes.” She tugged at the buttons of my shirt.

“I want your sweet pussy on my mouth, Allegra.” I wanted her to come on my face as she trembled and screamed my name.

“I had dreams about you.” She nipped my lip, then licked the sting.

“Were you on your knees, sucking my dick?” Because I wanted her gagging, with tears in her eyes.

I wanted to control her breath.

I wanted to control her pleasure.

I wanted to control every fucking part of her.

“Your silence scared me.” She touched my cheek. “I was afraid you didn’t want me anymore.”

I was more concerned with the way she made me feel. I’d obsessed over her. She was mine, and I’d show her how desperate she made me.

I ripped the buttons open and shrugged out of my shirt. Her nails grazed my stomach as she lifted my undershirt.

“I want you, too.” Her hands roamed over my chest, her fingers stilling on the puckered cut from her knife.

“Never be afraid to touch me.” I grasped her hand and placed it on my cock. “Fuck,” I hissed, and she molded her palm to the length.

I kissed her while I lifted the edge of her shirt.

She raised her arms, and I tugged her shirt off. Nipples, as hard as diamonds, prodded against the sheer lace of her bra. I rasped my thumb over the tip.

Allegra stared at the injury on my chest. First, she traced the jagged edge with her fingertips, then she leaned into me and licked the puckered scar.

I fisted my hand in her hair, angled her head, and ate her mouth. I sucked the air from her lungs, filled my hand with her breast, and played the

nipple between my thumb and finger.

Her fingers gently scraped the tight beard along my jaw. Her touch and the heat in her eyes obliterated any ability to slow this seduction. “Can you fuck in a boot?”

Her lips smiled against mine. “The doctor instructed me to stay off my feet. Pretty sure that means you can keep me on my back for the next few weeks.”

I wanted her on her back, her knees, and riding me, as long as I was inside her. I slid from the bed, unbuckled my belt, and stripped out of my pants, underwear, and socks. Standing nude before her, I gripped my erection at the base, and stroked the length.

She scooted to the edge of the bed and replaced my hand with hers. With her thumb, she smeared the pearly essence at the slit. Her gaze lifted to mine as she brought her thumb to her mouth and tasted me.

Then her mouth was on me, her tongue sweeping over the head. I fisted her hair as she took me into her hot, wet depths. A low moan built deep in my gut, surging into my chest, gaining power, and erupting in a guttural release.

Fucking hell. How could I ever have mistaken her touch for any other?

My brows pinched as I stared hard at Allegra. Her eyes closed as she slurped and sucked on my cock. Twisting and turning her hand, she pumped the shaft.

I swallowed, burying deep any lingering guilt. I grazed my knuckles across her hollow cheek as she sucked. “Only yours.”

Stepping back, I slipped from her mouth. She wiped spit from her chin with her fingers. Squatting in front of her, I tucked my thumbs into her skirt. With her arms braced on the bed, she lifted, and I tugged the skirt and panties over her ass and down her legs, careful of the boot.

“How many weeks?” I asked.

“I think the doctor is overly cautious. He said six weeks, maybe less.”

Six weeks until we married in the church. Six weeks until I bound her to me for life. “Six weeks to plan our wedding.”

With a hand on each of her knees, I spread her thighs. Juices glistened on her smooth pussy.

I glanced up at her face. She sank her teeth into her lip. Bellissima. Gripping her hips, I tugged her closer and licked the length of her slit. She tasted so fucking good. My memory couldn't emulate her salty-sweet essence, couldn't replicate the fire in her eyes, couldn't recreate the feel of her skin because nothing was as soft or tempted me more.

Starving for more of her, I buried my face in her cunt, breathed in the scent of her, and devoured her. I licked, sucked, and nibbled.

“I lie in bed at night and imagine you between my legs.” Her fingers combed through my hair. “Just like this.” Her hips rolled into my face.

I spread her wider, sliding my tongue deeper into her liquid heat. “Did you make yourself come?”

“Yes. But I don't orgasm the same without you. My touch doesn't feel the same, doesn't feel as good. I need this.” Her fingers tightened in my hair. “I need you.”

She had me. I was the only one who would ever taste her. I thrust two fingers into her channel and sucked her clit, pressing against her velvet folds with my lips.

She cried out as her body convulsed, and her channel rippled against my fingers. Fucking hell. I needed inside her.

Grasping her legs, I hooked her knees in the crook of my elbows and thrust my cock into her pussy hard and deep.

Allegra's back arched, and her fingers clawed at the bed.

Scorching, tight walls stretched and gloved my dick in wet ecstasy. Her

breathy gasps were my oxygen. A searing need for control flared like lightning, and my heart boomed like thunder.

I slammed into her again and again. Cream slicked her passage, flooding my cock and trickling onto my balls. I swiveled my hips, latched onto her legs, lifting her ass off the bed, and fucked her hard. Crashing my hips into her and sinking my cock into her, proving how desperate I was for her.

“Oh. Please.” Her lips pulled taut, her stomach clenched, and she careened into her climax. Spasms rippled along my shaft. The telltale signs of my own release tingled at the base of my spine.

“Touch your clit, Ally.”

She reached between her legs and gently slid her finger through her folds. She whimpered and jerked her hand away. “It’s so sensitive.”

“Fucking rub it.” I sank into her, fending off my release. She felt too good. Another thrust. My mind numbed. Her slippery pussy squeezed my cock. My hold on control began to fray. Impatient for more, I gritted my teeth and slammed into her.

I had a dark need to consume her every whimper, to fuck her harder, to force her to fight the pain for pleasure. I wanted her breaking apart for me. My fingers dug into her skin, bruising her tender flesh.

“Fuck, Ally. You feel so good.” Heat scorched through me. Sweat broke over my body.

Once again, her finger glided over her clit, then lower. A moan ripped from her lips as she curved her fingers around my cock as it slid in and out of her core. Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes. “Oh god.”

“I won’t come until you do.” I pulled out and plunged in again. “One more.”

She rubbed her clit as I fucked her pussy. The squelch of our bodies

coming together echoed in the room. Her hips bucked, and her fingers circled and punished her clit.

“Marco,” she snarled. “Oh, fuck, Marco.” Every muscle in her body seized. Her scream rent the air. Fluid gushed, squirting through her fingers as her cunt clamped hard to my cock.

My eyes rolled back as I blindly surrendered. The whirl of blood rushed through my head, my arms flexed as I anchored her to my groin, our bodies joined, one breath, one continuous grind, my cock pulsing and spurting hard, and filling her with cum. Even as the rhythmic contractions became softer flutters, her cunt sucked me deeper.

Tendrils of sweat-dampened hair clung to her face. Her chest rose and fell with labored breaths. Her arms rested at her side, and her legs had become limp in my arms.

Inching back, my drenched dick slipped out of her with another gush of cum streaked with blood. Leaning over her, I pressed a kiss to her belly, opened my mouth over her flesh, and tasted my way to her nipple. I pillowed the turgid tip against my tongue.

“You can kiss me forever,” she whispered and curled her fingers in my hair.

Ah, my sweet little mouse, I'm going to own you forever.

Chapter Nine

Allegra

Marco stretched out on the bed, his head rested on my thighs as I combed my fingers through his hair.

“It’s late, but we can still go out to eat.” His gaze lifted to mine. “But with your injury, perhaps we should stay in.”

“We can order room service, stay naked, and eat in bed.”

“Ah, brilliant and beautiful.” He sat, pressed his lips to mine for a quick kiss, then slipped out of bed.

Muscles in his buttocks flexed as he crossed the room. Broad shoulders tapered to a trim waist. My fingers had traced the hills and contours of his back as he’d penetrated my body with his. A tingle started in my nipples and slithered through me in a tightening coil of desire. It wasn’t just how good he felt inside me. A dark and dangerous aura surrounded him. My pussy clenched in an involuntary spasm, aching again for him to fuck me.

He stepped out of the room and returned a moment later with the hotel tablet. One dark brow rose, and a smile played with the corners of his mouth. As he approached, his cock darkened and thickened.

I swallowed the extra saliva in my mouth. A flush of warmth bloomed

in my chest, seeping out into my limbs and pooling lower into my tender pussy. How could I want more of him when he'd wrung so much pleasure from my body?

"First we order, then I'm going to be inside you again."

I nodded as he lowered to the bed, handed me the tablet, and scooted in next to me. With a few touches, I accessed the limited late-night menu.

"How hungry are you?"

Marco ghosted kisses along my shoulder as he glanced at the menu with me. "Ravenous."

I read the options as he kissed along my neck. "Steak burgers with lettuce, tomato, avocado, and provolone served with a green salad or seasoned potato wedges. Or rigatoni marinara with roasted vegetables and toasted garlic crostini."

"Yes."

A soft moan slipped past my lips as he rolled my nipple between his fingers. "Yes pasta, or yes a burger?"

"Yes, and something sweet I can spread over your tits."

"Or you could just come on them."

As soon as the order was place, Marco toppled me to my back. I laughed as he tried to maneuver my booted leg to the side. He nibbled and kissed my inner thigh, then shifted to kneel between them.

I leaned up on my elbows as he spit in his palm and fisted his cock. With a firm grip, he squeezed the shaft and stroked it from base to tip.

Bending my knees, with my feet planted on the bed, I spread my legs wider. My boot killed the sexy, but Marco didn't seem to care. He leaned forward and teased my folds with the tip of his dick.

My clit throbbed, and my channel contracted, aching to be filled. Finally, he plowed deep into my cunt, completing me, proving he mastered

over my pleasure. With a slow pull and plunge, he fucked me. We both stared at where our bodies joined, his cock wet with my juices.

Somehow, he fit me perfectly. I relished the feel of him stretching me open and mourned the loss as he inched out. Again and again, he surged into me. I'd said he could kiss me forever, but I could spend forever just like this.

A flash of heat, a continuous grind of erotic pressure against my clit, and stars burst behind my eyes. Dizzying waves of pleasure crashed through me, like the break of high tide against the shore. Wet, rushing, and powerful. My body vibrated with the pounding of his dick into me.

Marco ripped from my core, grasped his cock, and jerked his hand hard on the shaft. "Open your mouth," he growled.

Cum jetted from his cock, splashed my breasts, face, and lips. Using my fingers, I gathered his cream, bringing the bitter essence to my tongue. My eyes searched his, desperate to feel connected to him, to know he ached the way I did.

Marco grabbed my hair, angled my head, and crashed his lips into mine. He kissed me when I tasted of his cum. A riot of butterflies swirled in my stomach.

I wrapped my arms around him and ate his mouth with a brutal ferociousness. I kissed him the way he lived, hard and aggressive. He kissed me with the power he commanded. We were a tangle of arms and legs.

He tasted of dark desire and dangerous need. The soft scruff of his beard sent a shiver over me. I scored my nails softly along his jaw as he swept my mouth with his tongue again and again.

I moaned as his hands split, one splayed across my back, holding me close, and the other grasped my ass.

A phone chimed from the nightstand.

Marco lifted his head. I slicked my tongue over my bruised lips for a

last taste of him.

“Do you normally get messages in the middle of the night?” His darkly spoken words sent a shiver along my spine.

“Not normally.” I shifted, but he scooted across the bed, grabbed my phone, and checked the incoming message.

A vein pulsed in his temple and a tendon in his neck stretched. The air between us grew heavy. Those piercing eyes could chill the blood of his enemy. Only moments ago, I’d heated under his stare. Now, I trembled.

Panic seized my breath. I hadn’t considered who might be texting. I feared seeing the name Ashton as I reached for my phone.

Marco didn’t move as I slid the phone from his hand.

I released a slow, shallow breath.

“Why is Timoteo texting you at night?” The edge of his voice cut through the silence in the room.

The tablet lit with a call from room service.

“The elevator is on the way up,” I said.

“Do not move.” Marco stepped into his pants, leaving the button undone and strode into the living room.

I could hear him speak to the server, gruffly dismissing them. A moment later, he stood in the open doorway and leaned against the jamb. “What does he mean by this text? I swear, if he’s touched you, I’ll cut him to pieces as you watch. Allegra, tell me.”

Normally, I loved the way his deep, gravelly voice caressed my name. But the sharp cutting edge tonight sent a shiver over me. Careful of my boot, I slid from the bed, tugging the blanket, and wrapping it around my body. “Is this the way it is always going to be between us? What are you accusing me of?”

“Read the text, and tell me what you would think?”

“It’s not cryptic. It’s two words.” Tim was just letting me know he’d checked on Dee. *We’re good.*

Marco crossed his arms over his chest. “Explain.”

With a pronounced hobble, I dragged the blanket with me and stopped in front of him. “Look at me, Marco.”

His jaw clenched as his whiskey eyes stared into mine.

“I want you to be faithful to me. No Giada. No Francesca. No beautiful women who enjoy sucking the cocks of powerful men. I don’t want anyone touching what I want. But I won’t ask it of you because I don’t want you to lie to me. I’m not a fool,” I whispered. “You went days without talking to me. I haven’t asked you why.”

The memory of him thinking of Giada first when he’d spoken with Stefano, learning of his father’s death, and rushing to her side, still burned into my mind.

“I buried my father and took control of my empire.” Marco grasped my arm. “Why are you good with Timoteo?”

I adjusted my stance, wincing from the weight on my ankle. “Because he’s loyal to both of us. I asked a favor of him.” I shrugged out of his hold. “I can’t make you trust me. My words won’t matter. Let me go.”

I tried to move past him, but he blocked my progress with his arm.

He took a deep breath, the tension slipped from his body, and his gaze softened on me. “You’ll explain, and I’ll listen.”

“In a few minutes, you’re going to feel like an asshole.”

“We’ll talk in bed,” he said.

“Talk, fight, fuck...and eat?” Already, I understood Marco enough to know he wouldn’t be deterred from anything he wanted. Money, power, information, and with the glint in his eyes, and the daring hint of a smile on his lips, he wanted me.

“Yes, all those things. And always in bed. I’ll get our dinner.”

I limped my way back to the bed but took position to one side. I wasn’t going to make this easy on him. How was I supposed to build a marriage when I had to continually defend myself? If I didn’t know him to be a ruthless and brutal mafia underboss, now boss, I’d say he was the one with insecurities.

But it wasn’t insecurity. It was control.

He brought the serving tray into the room and set it on the end of the bed. The burgers and seasoned potato wedges were under glass domes. Gooey baked cheese covered the rigatoni.

Marco crossed to the table in the corner and poured two glasses of wine.

“Tell me.” He handed me a glass.

I wasn’t going to get an apology from him. I took a sip of the wine and set the glass on the nightstand. “Dee has online friends. She’s lied about her age, although I don’t think she lies all the time. Mostly, she likes to talk to boys. And she spends a lot of time on a site for gamers.”

Marco sat on the bed and leaned against the headboard. “You know this, and you haven’t stopped her?”

“Don’t judge.” I dragged the food closer, keeping the tray between us. “You don’t know what it’s like. She has friends at school.” I popped a potato wedge into my mouth. “Santi is overly protective, my dad wants advantageous marriages, and you’ve met my mom.”

Marco groaned and took a hefty swallow of wine.

Here was where I muddied the truth a bit. “I found out she wasn’t being careful. Marco, she could be talking to anyone. She’s sixteen and under constant supervision. She never goes out with her friends from school.” Like me, she’d rather amputate her arm than have it anchored to one of Santi’s

soldiers.

I took a bite of my burger. It was either the best burger I'd ever tasted, or I was starving. I took another big bite. Sauce dripped onto my lip. I caught it with my thumb and licked it.

When I refocused on Marco, his gaze focused on my mouth. I smiled as I pulled my thumb from my lips. Maybe he didn't realize I could eat like a high school linebacker. I could devour a large pepperoni pizza on my own.

"I asked Tim to watch out for her."

"No. Someone else will need to keep Deidre out of trouble. You're Timoteo's only responsibility. I don't want distractions when it comes to your safety."

I set the burger on the plate. "Tim checked her online activity to make sure she's being safe. She's upset with me. I wouldn't let her come with me tonight because I wanted to be alone with you."

He leaned his head back. "I feel like an asshole."

"You are an asshole." I sighed. "But Dee was right when she called me selfish. I don't want to share you. She just wants to see Orlando and Emilio. Tim could've taken her home."

"Orlando and Emilio aren't here to entertain your sister." Marco stabbed a fork into the pasta and held the bite to my lips.

I adjusted my boot on the bed, leaned in, and closed my lips over the food. After I chewed and swallowed, I offered a compromise. "Maybe I can have her come over. She can spend a couple of hours with them, and then she can hang out at the pool with me."

"You can't swim with a boot."

"I can take her shopping, or take her for ice cream, or something. It won't matter as long as she's out of the house for a little while, and she can say hello to Orlando and Emilio."

“They’re working.” He shoveled pasta into his mouth.

“While you stay in bed with me?”

“Yes.”

I laughed. “An entire day in bed, uninterrupted by Ant? I think you’re lying to me, marito.” His lips twitched when I referred to him as *husband* in Italian.

“Allegra, nothing good can come from their association.” He slid from the bed and set the food platter on the small table next to the wine.

“Nothing but friendship. Something they both want. She needs someone she can trust and talk to. And I trust Orlando and Emilio to protect her.”

He climbed back onto the bed. “Invite her to the hotel.”

“We’ll stay out of your way,” I said as he closed the space between us.

He banded an arm around me and tugged me against him. A low growl vibrated from him into me and curled a knot of need in my gut. He nuzzled into my neck. “She can keep them busy. I can’t have my wife thinking I’m a liar.”

“You don’t really need to work?” I asked as his lips feathered over the hollow of my neck.

“I need to spend the day in bed with my wife.”

“Sleeping?”

He chuckled. “Talking, fighting, fucking, eating, and sleeping.”

“We’re good at multitasking.” I curled my fingers around his cock as his fingers slipped inside me.

Marco

Late afternoon sun cut through the blinds. As I listened to Orlando, my

head was still with Allegra as she slept in the bedroom. He and Emilio had gone to the munch at Jay Swings.

“We can get into High Protocol, but we’re not going to get information. The clientele is high-end. I spoke to a Domme called Trinity. Thought I’d get something out of her. She mentioned how familiar I looked to her. Said she loved the accent. I spoke to her in Italian, laid on the charm, but it shut her down faster than Emilio and a blue screen of death.”

Emilio chuckled. “We’re talking total system crash. The bitch knows something.”

“I hope you’re working on that,” I said.

Emilio huffed a laugh. “Boss, she rides a Ninja. I have the plate number. I’ve already acquired her name, address, employer, and the name of the vet for her golden doodle. I’m in her social media, Fetlife, Insta. She has a huge following. It’s going to take some time to scour images and follower lists to find the girl. Nothing yet, but I’m just getting started. This chick is into some serious shit. She’s a fucking hospital administrator by day and a sadist at night.”

“Can you imagine her and Stef together?” Orlando asked.

“Never happen. She has an account on OnlyFans. She pisses on her subs but doesn’t fuck them.”

“We need the girl,” I said. “Mia Toliver. Goes by Tinker.”

“You want me to let this chick Trinity piss on me to get information?” Orlando asked.

I stood and poured a cup of coffee from the urn. “Everyone has something to lose. Find what is important to her, then threaten to take it.”

“There is a house party tonight. Emilio scored the invite.”

“Whatever is necessary,” I said.

The bedroom door opened. Allegra had showered. Her hair fell in soft

waves around her shoulders. Without makeup, I was reminded how young she was because the woman who'd sucked my cock and fingered my ass this morning hadn't been innocent.

A loose skirt swished around her calves as she limped into the room. Like a jackrabbit, Ant jumped from the barstool on the far side of the room to help her to the couch.

"Are you hungry?" I asked her.

"I'll just have coffee." She tickled the gold hoop in her ear with her fingers. "A vanilla latte from Vintage." She nodded toward the door. "Tim is on his way up."

"Now?" I asked because when Timoteo arrived, he'd have Deidre with him. Emilio had only scratched the surface with the Domme. I needed him on the computer.

The elevator dinged.

"Lanny!" Deidre squealed and rushed into the room.

"Fuck me." Orlando jolted out of his chair, tipping it over, as Deidre launched into his arms.

"You're an asshole." She whacked him in the arm as he set her down. "Neither one of you called me yesterday to tell me you were here."

Emilio picked her up and spun her in a circle. "It was late. Figured you had an eight o'clock bedtime."

"You're an asshole, too." She giggled.

Emilio kept an arm around her. "To everyone but you."

Timoteo entered the living room. Allegra stood and approached him. They spoke quietly to each other. His gaze shifted from Allegra to Deidre. When he finally connected with me, he took a step back, and shoved a hand into his pocket. He must have said something to Allegra about my visible irritation because she snapped her gaze over her shoulder. Her brows

furrowed, and her lips pursed.

In a way that shouldn't have been cute, she grabbed Timoteo by the sleeve and hobbled her way onto the balcony, dragging him along.

Emilio returned to his computer.

"I've been so bored without you guys." Deidre plopped down on the couch. "I want to do something fun tonight."

Orlando sat next to her. "Sorry, patatina, can't tonight."

"Why not?" Deidre sat with her legs crossed.

Orlando smiled at Emilio. "We have to work."

"Boss," Emilio interrupted. "The agent for the estate just emailed. The seller's accepted the offer. Paperwork is going to take at least a week, but I've got the access pin code to the front gate and the side door of the main house is coded for entry so we can get started with overhauling the security."

Speaking of security, I handed Emilio Allegra's phone. I didn't need to tell him I wanted every aspect of the phone mirrored to mine. I wanted to be able to know where she was and who she was with. Access to her phone, apps, camera, and cloud.

Allegra separated from Timoteo and made her way to Deidre.

"Are you going to tell us the story?" Orlando asked of her booted foot.

"I'm a klutz. It's already feeling better." She propped her foot on the table. "Let's get out of here for the day," she said to Deidre.

"I want to stay with Lanny and Emilio."

"They're working."

I stepped forward and took Allegra's hand. "They have the rest of the afternoon to entertain your sister. I want to show you something."

"Keys," I barked to Timoteo.

"Do you want me to drive, boss?"

Orlando glanced at Timoteo, and Emilio paused in his work on the

computer.

“Yes.” I sent Orlando a warning glare to behave with Deidre. “Emilio, text him the address.”

“Thank you,” Allegra said once we were in the elevator on the way down to the lobby. She slipped her hand into mine.

“What was on the computer?” I asked Timoteo.

Without pause, he gave me the details.

“She’s on Discord. A few dick pics have made it into her DM. She’s ruthless in her comebacks. She’s only engaging with gamers. A couple guys, but it’s strictly PG on the chat. Mostly, she bitches about her parents. And she’s chatted with a girl about the guy she likes.” He smiled. “Sorry, boss, but she’s got a massive crush on *Lanny*.”

Allegra chuckled. “I told you.”

“And you want me to leave them alone in the suite together?”

“Yes,” she said. “Because I trust Orlando. I can see how much she likes them, and it’s also easy to see she’s like a sister to them.” She slapped her purse. “I forgot my phone.”

“I have mine.” I led her to the lobby and waited while Timoteo brought the car around.

“I take it you’re okay with Tim now?” Gold flecks in her wide eyes glinted in the hotel lighting. Those long, dark lashes fluttered as she stared into my face. I leaned down and brushed a soft kiss to her lips.

“He’s tolerable. He keeps his eyes off your ass, but I don’t like how close he stands to you.”

“Just like Orlando and Dee, I’m like a sister to Tim. Actually, we spent most of our teenage years hating each other. He and Santi are assholes.”

Timoteo drove the armored SUV under the porte cochere and exited the vehicle.

“Where are we going?” she asked as I opened the rear passenger door and lifted her onto the seat. She adjusted her boot.

“Home,” I said and closed the door.

Timoteo held the rear driver’s side door open for me. I climbed in and pivoted to face her. She leaned against the window, with her arms crossed over her chest.

“I know you’re lying if you want to take me home. You couldn’t possibly want to spend time with your mother-in-law.”

“You know me well.” Twenty minutes later, Timoteo pulled up to the property gate and entered the code into the keypad. The eight-foot-high steel security fencing with a curved top slowly slid open.

“Where are we?” Allegra lowered her window and peered at the house set back about a hundred and fifty feet from the street.

The SUV pulled around the circular driveway. I leaned into Allegra and kissed her shoulder. “Home. Do you want to go inside?”

“Yes.” She swung open the door and practically fell out of the vehicle. “It’s beautiful.”

I stepped out after her. Before she could protest, I scooped her into my arms and carried her.

Instead of fighting me, she wound her arms around my neck. “When did you do this?”

The main entrance to the twenty-five-thousand square foot residence was through a columned portico. We followed Timoteo down the red clay path to the side of the property.

“We’ve already established I can multitask. Emilio will have contractors out tomorrow to begin renovations.”

At the side door, Timoteo entered the code. The chamber locks turned and then clicked. Once Timoteo pushed the door open, he stepped to the side.

I carried Allegra into the open chef's kitchen. Granite countertops covered several workstations. To the left, French doors led to a private breakfast nook with bar and high-top seating.

Allegra clutched me tighter. "I never wanted to feel like a mafia princess, but this is like a palace."

The kitchen transitioned to a reception room with cathedral ceilings, a marble fireplace, and built-in bookshelves. Each room led into another elegant room.

I set Allegra down in front of a three-level bay of Palladian windows overlooking the rear gardens, pool, and outdoor living space.

With my suit coat unbuttoned, she rested her hands on my shirt and ran her palms over my chest. "When will you move in?"

"Next week. It's turnkey. What you see is what you get. You can change anything you don't like."

I sipped her lips, then spun her around. Holding her close, with her back flush against my chest, I pointed out the guesthouse in the distance. "Orlando and Emilio will be on the property. Timoteo will be here in the house with us as will Ant. Your sister will have her own room."

"The house is beautiful, but I'll want a new bed. Our bed." She braced her hands on the window and ground her ass against my groin.

I slid kisses along her neck, traced the knife on her thigh, and hiked her skirt over her buttocks. As the cool air caressed her flesh, she glanced behind us.

"Timoteo is perceptive. We're alone." I pushed her panties to the side and slid my finger along her slit. "Fuck, topolina, you're wet."

"Because you're touching me," she said on a hot exhale.

I flipped open my belt buckle, unzipped, and released my cock. "Spread your legs."

She took a step wider, and I rubbed the head of my dick through her folds. Without hesitation, I thrust inside her. The tight stretch of her channel squeezed my dick as I pressed in a fraction deeper, grinding my groin into her ass.

Allegra cried out, and her back arched. Fisting her long, dark hair draping across her back, I tugged and stretched her neck.

Hot cream slicked her channel. Fucking hell, she clamped hard, strangling my cock. Fuck the house. Allegra's sweet pussy was home.

Allegra

Back at the hotel, the elevator doors opened. My ankle was a bit sore, but I was over the caveman carry. I'd rather crawl, but I suspect my ass in the air would get me pounded again from behind, and my pussy couldn't take another beating. I'm not sure if it or my ankle was more tender.

"I guess they were hungry," I said.

Room service had delivered. There was a half-eaten pizza on the table next to a platter of chicken wing bones. Ice cream melted in bowls next to my phone. I grabbed it and clutched it in my hand.

Tim pulled a slice from the pizza and took a big bite. "Want one?" he asked and ripped off a slice for me.

My stomach rumbled as I bit into the cold, freaking delicious buffalo chicken ranch slice. "That has a kick to it," I said as the heat of the buffalo sauce bloomed on my tongue.

"What are you eating?" Marco asked, coming to stand next to me.

"Here, baby, try it." I offered the slice.

Marco had taken off his suit coat. His black tie hung loose around his neck and blended flawlessly with his black shirt. He didn't open his mouth to

take a bite. The dark hair of his beard shadowed the hard angles of his face. I didn't know how to read him. I only understood my body responded.

My pulse jumped as his eyes drilled hard into mine. A moment ago, I couldn't imagine my vagina would want another erotic battering, but apparently, she liked a bit of pain with her pleasure from Marco's cock, big and brutal just like the man towering over me.

He wiped a smidgen of ranch sauce from my lip, and then pushed his thumb into my mouth. Maybe I was hungry for more than cold pizza. I set my phone on the table, gripped his wrist, and sucked his thumb. I swirled my tongue around the nail.

Tugging on my lip, he smeared spit across my mouth.

"Was it the pizza?" I asked and smiled. "Because there's one more slice."

His thumb stroked my jaw and grazed along my neck. "It wasn't the pizza, *baby*."

Tim grumbled about timing, grabbed the last slice, and headed out to the balcony.

I ignored Tim, pressed closer to Marco, and rested my hands on his hips. The stark desire in his piercing eyes took the breath from my lungs. This was the man who made men tremble with fear, made women weak with lust, and he was mine.

"No one but me will ever call you *marito*. Til death do us part, *husband*."

He leaned in to kiss me.

Before his lips touched mine, I whispered to him. "I'm your *topolina*. Let anyone call you *baby*, and I'll cut their tongue from their mouth."

With his hand around my neck, he forced my back against the wall, slammed his mouth onto mine, and split my lips with his tongue.

The elevator doors opened. Deidre's laughter floated into the room.

Marco growled and rested his forehead against mine. "It's dangerous to tease me with violence, topolina."

Without a shirt, Orlando stumbled into the living room and crashed onto the couch. Emilio followed Deidre into the room. She had a towel wrapped around her hips. The pink sunglasses on top of her head matched her pink bikini top.

"Sounds like you had fun at the pool," I said, slipping out from Marco's arm.

"We did." Deidre slumped onto the couch next to Orlando. "What's next?" she asked him.

He leaned forward and ran his fingers through his windblown hair. "That's it for us. No rest for the wicked. Duty calls." He turned to Emilio. "What time is the party?"

Emilio flipped his phone over and pulled up his messages. "Nine, but we probably should plan to arrive after ten."

"See you later, patatina." Orlando tugged her hair, then he and Emilio headed toward the elevator. "I'm going to grab a shower and take the edge off," he said to Emilio. "I haven't been laid in a few weeks. With all the stimulation, my dungeon name will be the one-minute man."

Deidre stood with her towel clutched in her hand as the elevator doors closed. "Are you fucking serious?"

I crossed the room and wrapped my arm around her. "They have to work, Dee."

She shrugged my arm off. "I'm not stupid. They're going to a party to get their dicks wet." She stomped across the room and picked up her clothes.

I knew how she felt, the tightness in her chest, the burn in her heart, and the tumble in her belly. Orlando and Emilio would do whatever was

required to get information on Luca.

“Orlando is here to work,” Marco said with a dismissive finality as he thrust the hotel tablet at me. “Get housekeeping up here.”

I opened the app on the tablet.

Deidre chewed her lip, and her face pinched as tears gathered in her eyes. “I want to go home.”

“Timoteo will take you,” Marco said.

“Good.” She ran from the room with her clothes.

I dropped my arms to my sides. “Marco?”

His gaze lifted to mine, and one of his thick dark brows rose in question.

“She’s upset.”

“Fuck, Allegra. They’ve spent the afternoon together trashing the suite, swimming, and eating.”

“They had the munchies.”

His mouth pulled into a hard line. “Are you telling me my brother is getting your sister high?”

“Last time, she was the one getting them high. It’s not a big deal.” I wrapped my arms around his waist. Getting high with Orlando was far less dangerous than sitting in her room on the computer.

“She’s a distraction. Orlando will do whatever is necessary, including fucking his way through the BDSM community to find the submissive Tinker.”

“I’ll talk to her,” I said. “She won’t understand. She’s hurting.”

He lowered his lips to mine and kissed me.

Deidre flung open the bathroom door. “Tim! I’m ready.”

Maybe she was more pissed than hurt. Like me, Dee had been gifted with the Jilani gene for flare and dramatics.

Marco poured a drink and headed out to the balcony.

“Stay for a little while,” I said to her.

“Don’t try to make this okay, Ally. They ditched me. They practically ran from the room. It’s fine. I feel like a fucking idiot.” She blinked hard. “I thought they liked me.”

“They do.” I sat on the arm of the sofa to take the pressure off my foot. “They have to go.” I glanced over my shoulder to the patio. Marco and Tim exchanged words. I turned back to Deidre and lowered my voice. “You know they’re looking for information on Luca. They really are working.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Ready?” Tim asked, coming into the room.

“Yes.”

The elevator opened. Two housekeepers entered the room.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I said to her.

“I have plans.”

“Don’t worry,” Tim said. “I’ll watch her.” Then he rushed into the elevator before the doors closed.

I wandered out to the balcony as housekeeping cleaned the suite.

Marco set his empty drink glass on the table. “I need to go out tonight. It’s business. I want you to come with me.”

Mafia men didn’t take their wives to work. “Where are we going?”

He stood and extended his hand to me. “High Protocol.”

Marco

I pulled into the parking garage next to the non-descript two-story building, parked, and went around the vehicle to open her door.

Fucking hell. Allegra was stunning. She’d dressed the part for a BDSM

club. As her legs pivoted, her thigh split the slit in her skirt. I rolled my shoulders. No one should see my wife like this. She lifted her smoky eyes to mine.

“Don’t laugh,” she said as she set one low-heeled foot on the ground, gripped my arm, wrangled her boot from her skirt, and stepped from the car.

“No one will notice your boot.” The skirt rode low on her hips. I rested my hand on the satiny, exposed flesh of her waist. A halter top twisted in front between her breasts and wrapped around her neck. A small black velvet cape capped her shoulders. “No one touches you.”

She smoothed her hands over her hips. “That’s your responsibility.”

On the drive over, I’d explained to her our roles for tonight. High Protocol was a BDSM dungeon. “Stay next to me, little mouse.”

I pressed the button at the heavy door of High Protocol. A moment later, A man in a black shirt with black jeans opened the door. “This is a private club.”

“Marco Bruno. Alex Ferraro is expecting me.”

“Mr. Ferraro is unavailable this evening. You can wait in the foyer while I confirm your guest privileges.”

I squared my shoulders, placed my hand on Allegra’s bare back, and took a step forward. Muted music drifted into the small area. There was a coat check to the left. A large mirror hung on the wall directly in front of us. Allegra met my gaze in the reflection.

“A two-way mirror.” I spoke against the shell of her ear.

Positioned behind her, I banded my fingers around her throat and held her close, her back pressed flush against my chest. Our gazes held, as I slid my lips along her neck. “Protocol is a sex club,” I whispered.

Her pulse fluttered beneath my thumb.

My nostrils flared as I inhaled her scent. “Everyone in there will know

you're mine, that you get on your knees for my cock."

I trailed my fingertips between her breasts. Her nipples hardened, and her palms rested on my thighs. Shivers broke over her flesh. Her lips parted and her tongue touched the corner of her lip.

"They'll wish they could touch you, but you're mine. They'll crave the taste of you on their tongue. I don't need a collar to mark you. You don't need the label of submissive to show you're obedient."

"Will you fuck me in the club?"

"Would you want me to?"

"I need your hands on me. I need you inside me." She swallowed. "I belong to you, Marco."

"No one will ever touch you. I'll kill anyone who tries. I'm the only one who will ever see you come, to hear you scream my name. Does it make you wet to know I'll kill for you?"

"You bled for me. You made vows to me. I'd kill for you, too." Her voice lowered. "As long as I have a blade in my hand and breath in my body, no one but you will ever touch me."

I stared past her reflection, into the mirror. The security guard behind us nodded as he communicated through an earpiece.

"Mr. Bruno, Ronan will be here in a moment to escort you into the club."

"Thank you," –I didn't require a babysitter– "but an escort isn't necessary."

"Topolina." I spoke quietly to Allegra, led her to the polished black door, and pulled it open.

Inside, the main room was steel, leather, and luxury. Club members socialized at small clusters of chairs and leather couches. A bar stretched the length of the west wall. Next to it, a short set of stairs led to an observation

platform. A few people overlooked the demonstration stage.

In the center of the room, under spotlights, a woman was fully suspended on a steel rig. A man worked intricate knots, binding her arms and legs. With a tug, he raised her legs parallel to the floor. Her blonde hair draped in a curtain to the floor.

I took a step closer. I'd only met Luca's submissive at the estate for Savio's birthday. But she'd had distinctive features. She was rail thin, small, and wore her bruises like some women wore diamonds.

"Is it her?" Allegra whispered beside me.

"No." Keeping my hand possessively on her back, I led us around the perimeter of the room.

This had been Luca's playground. I understood the appeal of control in a relationship. But Luca had existed on a plane beyond my needs. Allegra took a half step closer to me. I slid my arm around her, holding her hip. "Breathe, little mouse."

There were small staging areas throughout the room for public exhibitions.

A man approached. I recognized him as Alex's business associate, Ronan. He stuttered in his steps when he noticed my hand on Allegra.

"Mr. Bruno." He extended his hand.

"My wife, Allegra."

Ronan acknowledged her with a slight nod and a smile, then turned his hardened gaze to me again. "The exhibition platforms are available to you, but if you want a private room with your submissive, talk to one of the dungeon monitors. They're aware of your guest privileges for tonight."

I focused intently on Ronan. I wanted him to fully comprehend my intentions. "We both know why I'm here. It's not to fuck my wife with an audience. I want the girl, Tinker."

Tension ticked in Ronan's jaw. "You won't find her here. I know who and what you are. I'm not trying to be difficult. She was private. Only went by the name Tinker. The club promises anonymity."

I took a step closer to him. "I want the girl. When I find her, and I will, I'll remember those who obstructed my efforts. You don't want me as an enemy."

"No, I don't. If I could give you something to get you the fuck out of my club, I would. This is a dead end."

Not yet, but it would be if he lied to me.

Ronan stepped away.

"If we want to get close to those who would've been here with her," Allegra said, "we need to mingle and listen. Maybe a Dom who spanked her? Whipped her? Or whatever she was into. But we don't even know that."

Yes, we did. I'd seen the bruises on her body. I knew my brother. His tastes delved into the extremes. "A spanking wouldn't be enough for Tinker. She liked it rough and brutal. She wanted to hurt."

We slowly sidled around the room, listening to conversations, and watching the scenes in the small intimate corners of the room.

"We've drawn attention," Allegra whispered.

I backed her against the wall. "Where?"

Allegra's arms draped over my shoulders as I ran my nose along her neck. If we wanted information, we needed to blend in. But fuck, my cock wasn't concerned about witnesses. I opened my mouth over her neck and sucked the tender flesh below her ear.

She tipped her head. "Tatted guy with muscles. Looks like he could be one of your soldiers. He's with a tall woman. She's beautiful, and she looks Italian. She's thin, and she's wearing a leather corset, pleated miniskirt, and thigh-high boots. If she keeps eye fucking you from across the room, I'm

going to take out my knife and gut her.”

“Your inclination towards violence fucks with me, little mouse.” I shifted Allegra, barely lifting my gaze to mark the woman.

“Do you know her?” she asked.

“No, but perhaps Luca did.” I smiled with my lips against Allegra’s skin. “We’re about to find out. They’re coming over.” I released Allegra and faced the woman.

“Ciao, Luca, è bello rivederti.” *Hello, Luca, it’s nice to see you again,* she said as she approached. As she stared into my face, the smile fell from her lips. “I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

“I’m sure if Luca were here, he would also think it is nice to see you. Luca was my brother.”

“He was your brother?” Her brows pinched, and her voice cracked on the words.

“He was murdered.”

She gasped, and her fingers covered her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“And you are?”

“Gabriella. This is my husband, Torch.” The man behind her wrapped an arm around her hip.

“My wife, Allegra. I’d like to talk to you about Luca. Would you like to sit down?”

Torch led them to an empty seating arrangement a few feet away.

Once we were all seated, I rested my forearms on my knees. “Were you and Luca friends?” Was she another one of his pets, and how did her husband feel about his wife submitting to another Dom?

“Business associates.”

Unlikely. Luca wouldn’t mix business with pleasure. She was in a sex club. They either fucked, or he was angling for a way to fuck her. If she was

into pain and punishment, she was Luca's type.

"Luca was here doing business with Alex Ferraro," I said.

She nervously glanced to her husband.

"If you want to talk business," he said, "talk to the Boss."

"I am the boss. Why do you think I have access to the club?" A flare of heat rushed through me. I respected a protective husband, but I was tired of obstacles. He could easily be removed as one. "Alex is aware of my purpose here. This was Luca's kink, not mine."

Allegra's hand slid onto my thigh.

"Nah," Torch said. "You're full of shit. The boss would never agree to letting you grill members. Fuck that." He stood, taking Gabriella's hand.

"My brother was murdered." I stood, glaring at the man. "I don't give a fuck about anonymity. Should the conversation need to happen outside the club, it won't be for a social call. Sit down before you draw attention and complicate this situation."

Allegra shifted her legs, allowing the slit in her skirt to reveal the hilt of her blade.

Torch sat next to Gabriella. His hand rested possessively on her bare thigh.

"Who are you?" Gabriella asked.

"Marco Bruno. Your dungeon enjoys labels. Torch, you must enjoy fire. You can call me The Enforcer. I would consider your cooperation a favor," I said. "Our conversation doesn't go beyond this moment." I rolled my shoulders. I'd prefer to coax her to talk. "As long as you tell me what I need to know. If not, I'll find you where you sleep and cut your fucking tongue from your mouth." I glared at her husband. "You don't want me as an enemy. I recognize your ink soldier, and your motorcycle club doesn't mean shit to me."

Her eyes widened. Before Torch could react, her fingers gripped hard to his hand. “What do you want to know?”

“Don’t insult me, Gabriella. I’m sure you can discriminate fact from fluff. I know he fucked in the club. Did he fuck you? How well did you know my brother?”

“What the fuck?” Torch launched to his feet.

“Torch, please.” Gabriella pleaded with her eyes for him to calm himself.

Torch sat again, but his knee bounced, and his hands balled into fists.

“We didn’t socialize on a personal level,” she said. “I work for Alex. I’m sure you’re aware that High Protocol is not his primary business. Alex and Luca were doing a deal. I made sure there were no miscommunications with the language barrier between them during negotiations.”

“While my brother was doing business with Alex, he spent his time in this club with a woman named Tinker. Do you know her?”

“I helped negotiate their first scene. She was a fixture in the club, but she hasn’t been here in months.”

“Who was she involved with before Luca?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only come to the club with my husband.”

“Tinker was known as the virgin demo dolly,” Torch said. “She belonged to the club. Every Dom in here has done a scene with her. She hadn’t fucked anyone until she hooked up with Luca. No one has seen her since.”

“Every Dom? Including you?”

“Fuck, no. She was looking for a Master. Not my scene. And don’t fucking ask me about my history in the club. I don’t give a fuck who you are. I’m not disrespecting my old lady.” He stood, with Gabriella’s hand in his. “Watch your back, Bruno. I’m not your enemy, but if you ever threaten my

wife again, you'll need every one of your mafia brothers for protection.”

“Who said anything about mafia?” Never confirm or deny, yet everyone thought they could spot a member of a mafia family. I crossed my left ankle over my right knee.

“I'm not saying shit. Just like I'm not wearing my cut, but we both know what I am.”

We might both operate outside accepted legal boundaries, but we were nothing alike. I stood and buttoned my suit. “Should our paths cross again, let's hope it's under better circumstances.”

“Fuck off.” Torch banded an arm around his wife and disappeared into the crowd.

No, I wouldn't be fucking off.

“Are you ready to go?”

Allegra slipped her hand into mine. “Do you think they know anything?”

I wasn't sure, but I had ways of finding out.

Chapter Ten

Allegra

For the last two days, I hadn't seen much of Orlando or Emilio. Nor had I heard from Deidre. I assumed she was ignoring my calls and messages to punish me for keeping her from her guys. I had nothing to do with it. Emilio was always on the computer, and Orlando was busy with my brother.

A total shock to me because Orlando was a playboy, and Santi was just an asshole. And lucky me, but I was dealing with my mother. Of course, she also blamed me for Dee's attitude. Apparently, I wasn't the only one she wasn't speaking to. Not only did I hurt to see her hurting, but her silence made me nervous.

I'd had Tim check her computer logs. Another reason for her to hate me if she ever found out. But I didn't trust her not to go into the chatrooms again.

I sat at a table in Sweet Kneads trying six different flavors of cakes.

"No chocolate," I said.

"I like chocolate." Tim said. "Chocolate peanut butter would be even better."

"Thank you, Tim." My mother smiled.

He shoved another big bite into his mouth. “Can I get a bigger slice of this and a glass of milk?” he asked the baker responsible for the delicious masterpieces spread before us.

I laughed. “Maybe we can have milk in the fountain instead of champagne.”

My mom snorted and stabbed her fork into the carrot cake. “Well, we can’t have plain vanilla.”

I took a bite of the banana cake and smiled. “I want the banana.”

My mom loaded a bite on her fork and frowned. “Really? The carrot is much better.”

“Mom, please. Can we not do this again? I would like the banana cake. Marco and I have a thing about bananas.”

“Fine. Get what you want. You do anyway. If Marco finds out I ordered the carrot, he’ll just get Bartolo *buddy* Valastro to pop in and bake you a cake.” She wiped her mouth and set her napkin to the side. “What is your fiancé doing today?”

“He’s out at the estate with Emilio. The security system is being installed.”

“I hate that you’ll be so far away. I’m sure he could get the Elliot’s to sell on the other side of the lake. He would have to sweeten the deal, but since he’s increased the value of the lake by a few million, I don’t see why it would be an issue.”

I sighed. It was twenty miles. It could have been an ocean and a continent away.

“Ready?” I asked. “I want to head back to the hotel.”

“Can I get the cake to go?” Tim hollered to the back of the bakery as he stood and buttoned his sportscoat.

A moment later, the baker handed him the cake in a plastic to-go

container and a soda cup filled with milk. “Thank you for the sweet dinner.”

“We’ll take the banana,” my mom said. “I’ll call you with the details on how I want it decorated.”

I rolled my eyes. She could have this one.

A half an hour later, we were at the house. Mom had disappeared upstairs, and Tim was in the office with Santi. Orlando’s laugh erupted from the room. Maybe he’d found some time to spend with Deidre.

With my booted hobble, I went upstairs, knocked softly on Dee’s door, and waited. When she didn’t answer, I knocked harder. The little shit probably had her earbuds in. I cracked open the door.

“Hi,” I said, but she still didn’t look up from her computer. Her fingers furiously tapped across the keyboard. She smiled at the screen.

At least, she was in a good mood. I fully opened the door, her gaze snapped up, and the smile fell from her face.

“What?”

“Really? How long are you going to punish me for not taking you to the hotel?” I shut the door, limped over to her bed, and crashed onto the end like she’d done a thousand times in my room. “Yes, I selfishly wanted to spend the first night alone with Marco.”

“Whatever.” She went back to typing.

“Be pissed.” I flopped to my back on the bed. “But you should know you’re coming off like a spoiled princess. It’s not appealing.”

“Worked for you with Marco.”

I choked on a laugh. “I was supposed to be married two years ago.”

“He’s here now, and you ditch me to fuck him.”

“Yeah, well, that part is better than I expected, but I haven’t been the only one running to him. He’d still rush to Giada or Francesca if either got a sliver in their finger.”

She spun in her chair. “Who are Giada and Francesca?”

“I have no idea, but I hope they stay in Italy because I know he’s fucked them both.” I leaned up, rolled to my side, and braced on an elbow. “I’m sorry, Dee.”

I’d been in her position. This was her prison. Orlando and Emilio offered a temporary escape.

“I’m good. Orlando has a new best friend in Santi. So whatev’s. You can go now.”

I slid off the bed, came up behind her, and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. She didn’t try to hide her computer. I’d take that as a good sign. “I love you, Dee.”

“Yeah, love you, too.”

Once I left her room, I headed downstairs to find Tim.

Santi, Tim, and Orlando gathered with Rio, Troy, and another soldier in the office. I softly tapped on the open doorjamb. All eyes turned to me.

“I’m ready to go.”

“Now?” Santi’s spine stiffened. “We need a few more minutes.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

He exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. “Thank you.”

What was that? *Thank you.* A few weeks ago, he would’ve told me to get out if he wasn’t ready to conclude his business. I stepped out of the room.

“It’s not her fault,” Tim said.

I paused to listen. What wasn’t my fault? The door closed. A knot tightened in my gut. They were talking about me. My penchant for eavesdropping had no limits. Approaching the door, I tried to listen. The voices inside had grown quiet.

Avoiding my mother, I went to the front porch and sat on the stoop. I was sick of the boot. A sprain shouldn’t need six weeks. I loosened the

bindings, slipped it from my foot, and rolled my ankle.

Although there was still discoloring from the bruise, the swelling had all but disappeared. Other than showering, I'd lived in the stupid boot. Standing, I tentatively put weight on my ankle.

"Ready?" Orlando asked.

I glanced over my shoulder.

"Fuck, are you okay? Is it your ankle?"

"No. I'm fine," I snapped. Then regretted the sharpness of my voice. It wasn't Orlando's fault I was suffocating. "Sorry, but I don't need the boot." I scooped it into my hand. "That doctor is full of shit. Six weeks? Google said two with light activity. I won't run in the woods or jump from the wall."

Orlando bounded down the steps and turned to face me as I carefully stepped on my ankle. "I'll catch you if you fall." He spread his arms and winked.

I rolled my eyes and walked with one bare foot. "Are you worried you'll get blamed if I get hurt? Don't worry. If I get hurt, it *will* be my fault. Where's Tim?"

"He's staying. I'll take you home." He pointed to the black Mercedes sports car. "How much did you overhear?" he asked as I slid into the passenger seat. He took the boot from my hand and tossed it in the space behind me in the two-seater.

Before I answered, he closed the door, went around the front of the car, and slid behind the wheel.

"I heard Tim say it wasn't my fault. Considering I haven't done anything, I'm not sure what I'm being blamed for."

Orlando chuckled as he gave the high-performance engine a bit of gas and rocketed down the driveway. The gate rolled open. Orlando shot past the guard, took a left, and gunned the engine. With a jolt, my back pressed into

the seat, and the G's hit my belly.

He cast me a quick side glance. "Ally, you have no idea what you've done?"

I had a laundry list of transgressions, but I wasn't going to confess to Orlando.

"Marco," he said, as if that explained everything.

"What about him?"

Orlando's mouth tightened.

"Just tell me." Uncomfortable wearing only one sandal, I bent and slipped off my other shoe.

"Fuck, does anyone tell you no?"

"Yes, your brother. He says it often."

"Marco threatened to kill your brother."

"What! Why?"

"Because he called you a whore. Marco stripped him of power and forbade your father from naming him don."

"And my father agreed?" Was he that desperate to see me married to Marco? Maybe I didn't understand how much power the Bruno family had.

"Now that Marco is don, no one will cross him. This is a lesson for Santino. He won't question Marco's authority in the future. In the interim, I'm working with Santino."

"To do what?"

"Recruiting for both families. Stefano will be here to take over training." Training in the mafia meant making soldiers out of hungry young men.

I stared out the window. "My brother questions Marco's loyalty to me."

"He should've known better."

I wanted to fight for my brother, to tell Orlando that Marco's arrogance and entitlement were to blame for my brother's irritation. Calling me a whore had been an insult to Marco for taking my virginity before marriage.

I owned it. I wanted Marco—more than he wanted me.

Orlando rested his arm on the center console. "Be careful what you say to Marco. If you hint that you want someone dead, they won't see another sunrise. Santino understands now, you hold power over him."

"I don't want that kind of power."

"Allegra, he will burn down the world for you."

And I'd sacrificed everything for him.

Once we returned to the hotel, Orlando rode the elevator with me to the suite.

"You don't have to stay," I said, dropping the boot and one sandal next to the door. "I doubt Marco and Emilio will be back for a couple hours. Marco said they'd be late."

"You don't want to entertain me?"

I snorted. "Absolutely not. I overheard you talking to Marco about the house party."

"Christ, Marco's marrying a high-tech surveillance system." He stretched out on the couch.

"Inquiring minds need to know." And I needed to know everything. Maybe it was a side effect of having my entire life planned out for me.

"Spill about the BDSM club," he said. "I didn't get shit out of Marco. Don't tell me you're not into kink. Did you let him spank you? Maybe a gentle flogging."

"Do you use that filthy mouth to talk to my sister?"

"Yeah, but don't worry, Ally. She's my deviant sidekick. Nothing else. We're talking about my brother. Marco loves to get bloody, but he's never

the one bleeding. Not like I'll ever forget the way you flayed his chest."

"No, we're not talking about Marco. I'm going to change."

Skinny jeans and a hoodie made me feel like myself again. I pulled my hair into a ponytail. Back in the living room, Orlando played on his phone.

I grabbed a water bottle and sat on the balcony. With the sun sitting low on the horizon, I braced my feet on the chair across from me and opened my Kindle app. I'd barely started reading when a Snapchat notification came in.

Ashton: I need to see you.

A flash of panic hit my bloodstream. Knox didn't text unless there was a problem. I could think of only one problem. Deidre. Or maybe he had information on Marco, and his retaliation on the Irish.

Knox wouldn't betray the Irish, and he wouldn't betray me. If there was going to be a mafia war, he'd make sure I wasn't in the crosshairs. I stared at the message. He wouldn't ask to see me unless it was important. We both understood the consequences of being seen together. My pulse ratcheted into a frenzied beat.

Mila: I can't.

If my association with him was revealed, my family would kill him for the past, and Marco would torture him because of the present.

Ashton: Where are you? Are you with him?

My stomach swooped. I had a small window of time before Marco would be back. My gut told me it was Dee. Tim had been watching her computer. There had to be a new threat.

Oh god, what was I supposed to do? I had to see Knox. He couldn't risk texting me the information. I wanted to trust Marco, but a sliver of doubt refused to let me. Not when it came to Knox. Marco wanted war with the Irish. If they were courting young girls like Dee, Marco would use the

information to garner support from the other families.

Mila: He's not here.

I glanced into the living room. Orlando's eyes were closed, and his arm draped over his head. I could sneak away for just a few minutes. He wouldn't even know I'd left.

Ashton: I'll come to you.

Mila: Hurry. Meet me in the lobby.

I sent him the hotel address, tucked the phone into the back pocket of my jeans, and choked on the bitterness of defying Marco. I hated this. I wanted to trust in Marco, but I feared The Enforcer. More for Knox than for myself.

In my room, I slipped on my canvas chucks, tying the laces a little tighter to support my ankle. After I slipped a knife into my hoodie pouch, I softly walked through the living room.

Orlando leaned up and blinked sleep from his eyes. "I must be tired."

"More reason for you to go to your own room," I said. And less risk to Knox. I had a few minutes to divert Orlando before I had to lie.

"Are you hungry? Let's grab some food."

"I'll wait for Marco. Really, I'm just going to hang around the hotel. I don't need you to babysit me."

"Good, because I suck at responsibility." He crashed back to the couch. "But I'm working on it. I'm ordering room service. Not that I'd call that chicken and buffalo sauce pie an Italian pizza, but it's pretty fucking good. Are you sure you don't want to eat?"

The phone in my back pocket vibrated. I needed to go.

"Actually, I was thinking of running down to the gift shop. They carry the bath beads I love. Maybe I'll get some massage oil for Marco. Maybe he'll like being rubbed down more than being cut up."

“I’ll come with you.” Orlando slid his legs around and groaned.

“Don’t put yourself out.” I tilted my head and pursed my lips. Inside, I trembled, but I played the game.

“Marco wouldn’t want you to go alone.”

“He isn’t here, and I’ll be back in fifteen minutes. Seriously, what can happen?” I pulled the blade from my front pouch. “I’m good.”

“Does Marco know you’re secretly a warrior ninja with cloak and dagger tendencies?”

“Maybe.” I laughed. “I’m definitely not what he expected.” I wouldn’t make a typical mafia wife any better than I’d make a mafia soldier. I didn’t follow orders. “If you call in room service on the tablet, I’ll be back before it’s delivered.”

I slipped into the elevator before he could follow me. As the doors closed, I released the breath I held and pulled the phone from my back pocket.

Ashton: I’m here.

Mila: On my way.

The doors opened into the lobby. I didn’t want any of the hotel staff to see me with Knox. Shifting my gaze left and right, I scanned the lobby. I maneuvered around the large fireplace and toward a recessed area leading to public restrooms.

Mila: Where are you? I’m in the lobby.

I stared at my phone, waiting for a message.

“Walk with me.”

I jerked my head up. I pressed a hand to my chest. “You scared me.”

Knox placed his hand on my elbow and directed me to a set of double glass doors. “There’s an outside patio. It’s getting dark. It’ll give us some privacy.”

I still had a limp as I struggled to keep up with his wide stride. “What’s going on?”

“Are you hurt?” His forehead furrowed as he scrutinized my body. “Did he fucking hurt you?”

“Of course not. I fell on a run.”

He slowed his steps. As soon as we were outside the doors, we followed the lighted pathway through the gardens to the outdoor bar and patio. People sat at tables near patio heaters. A gas fire blazed in a large square firepit. More people sat on the edges sipping drinks.

A pathway circled the perimeter of the garden. We walked deeper into the shadows. I stuffed my hands into the pocket of my hoodie. We stopped at a metal slatted bench.

Knox kept his attention on the pathway, the bar in the distance, and the entrances into the gardens.

“Byrne and Jessie, they know little potato is Dee.”

I leaned back on the seat. “Is she still in the chatroom?”

“Yeah, but they’re moving slow with her. They don’t want to spook her.” Knox leaned back next to me, our shoulders touching. Skin peeked through the worn thread at the knees of his faded jeans. He wore a faded concert T-shirt under his leather jacket. He rubbed his inked hands against his thighs.

“Oh god.”

“Listen, she’s doing what you told her to do. She’s saying no to meet ups. She hasn’t volunteered any information.”

“Then how do they know it’s her?”

He patted his jacket for his cigarettes. “She agreed to a video feed.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I scrubbed my hands over my face. “I have Tim watching her.” Was he even really looking? Tim promised I could trust

him.

“Ally, they aren’t asking her to show her titties to the camera. They’re talking high school girl shit. She did the video chat with one of Jessie’s girls. She looks sixteen. They want Jilani’s princess. The Irish aren’t the only ones concerned with the Bruno’s moving into their territory.”

My hands trembled as I took the cigarette from him and inhaled a drag. “I don’t know what to do.” I was sick to my stomach.

“You stay on her like fucking glue, Ally.” He slipped his cigarette from my fingers. “The situation has changed. They have me running security at a huge fucking house in the Hills.”

The Hills was an upper-middle class neighborhood. Lawyers, bankers, and doctors with three-story houses and French bulldogs. People that worked for people like my father and Marco.

“Why?”

“For the girls.” He dropped the cigarette and crushed it under the heel of his combat boot. “I’m not there to protect them. My job is to keep them from leaving.” He growled and clasped his hands on top of his head. “Ally, I’m in too deep.”

“What about an anonymous tip to the cops?”

He grunted an exhale. “Fuck. You know how this works. Byrne has his hands in too many pockets. By the time a judge signs a warrant to enter the property, the girls will be gone and a family of five will be sitting down to dinner at the table.”

I covered his hand with mine. “I’m scared.”

“Byrne has a hard-on for Dee. She’s a target. They already have bidders on her.” He flipped his palm and laced our fingers. “You have to tell her. You can’t worry about me. All that matters is keeping her safe.”

“How can she be safe? They keep coming for her.”

“That’s why you have to tell her. Whatever we need to do, Ally. We keep Dee safe.”

“I’ll make her understand.” I leaned my head on his shoulder and just existed for a few minutes with him in the quiet darkness. “Thank you.”

“When do you need to get back?”

“What time is it?” I jolted up and reached for my phone. I was sure I was still good, but I was cutting it close. “I should go.”

He stood, wrapped his arm around me, and held me close. Maybe because we both understood each time we said goodbye, it could be the last goodbye. So, we stayed in the moment a little longer.

He unwound from me.

“I need to get back up to the suite before Orlando comes looking for me.” And I still needed to swing into the boutique to cover my lie.

We made our way to the edge of the patio. “I’ll cut through the garden. My bike is on the street.”

He wrapped his arms around my neck, holding me close. I held my phone with one hand and gripped his leather jacket with the other. The faint scent of cigarettes clung to him. His T-shirt was soft against my cheek. I closed my eyes and breathed in the comforting warmth of him.

“I miss you,” I whispered. “I don’t know how I’d live without you.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I love you, Ally.”

“I hate this. I hate that we have to hide.” I wanted my best friend. I wanted to know he was safe, both from the Irish and the Italians. I wish Marco could know him and not hate him. But not all wishes could come true.

“I’m always going to take care of you.” He took a step back, stared into my eyes, and wiped a tear from my cheek. “Don’t cry.”

I gulped and fought for a smile. “Don’t worry about me. Just take care of you.”

My chest tightened as he walked away. I unlocked my phone and sent a last text.

Mila: Stay safe.

And then I made sure the conversation cleared from my phone. Now up to the boutique, and then to the room to get back to Orlando. Not that I could eat with my stomach in knots.

Marco

Rage. An intense heat boiled up from my gut, burned through my veins, and seeped out of my pores. I stared at my phone as another text mirrored from Allegra's cell popped up on my screen.

"Ant. Emilio." I balled my hands into fists. The roar in my head grew louder and louder, becoming a deafening thunder rolling over me. I trembled with each word I read.

"Boss?" Ant asked, following me out of the house.

"We're needed at the hotel." I handed over my phone.

Ant read the message from Allegra's phone, handed my phone back, and climbed behind the wheel of the SUV. Emilio slid into the backseat.

"My fiancée has a secret. I want to know who he is." Emotions roiled in my gut. What the fuck didn't I know about my wife and her friendships? She claimed a sheltered life, yet she fought with knives, challenged authority, manipulated soldiers, and had secret relationships.

How long had she been meeting Ashton behind my back? My hands balled into fists. There was no question that I was her first. Had she waited until I'd had her, and now she could spread her legs for him?

Another message came through the phone. He was there. My wife was rushing to meet another man. A man who knew about me, yet I knew nothing

of him.

“You have ten minutes to get me to the hotel.”

“It’s a fucking car,” Ant said, “not a time machine.”

I opened the mirror app to Allegra’s phone. I accessed the camera and microphone.

Although I’d prefer not to have my wife’s indiscretions aired in front of Emilio, I shared everything with Ant.

I glanced over my shoulder to the backseat. “We are the only three people who will know about this conversation.”

Emilio nodded once. “Understood, Boss.”

I tapped the audio button and held the phone. The voices were muffled.

“The phone is probably in her purse,” Ant said.

“Shh! The phone is in her pocket. The camera is covered.” I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds to glean a word or two.

I couldn’t understand the words, only one distinctively lower voice, and the other had to be Allegra.

“Tim should be with her. Where the fuck is he?” If he was with her, and helping her with her clandestine encounters, he was dead. “I want tracking on his phone,” I said to Emilio. “Fuck. I want tracking on anyone who associates with Allegra. I don’t give a fuck if all they do is cut her hair. I want to know who she is with every fucking minute of the day. She’s never alone again.”

GPS showed her in the hotel. Would she go to a room with him? I clenched my teeth. Ant weaved through traffic. The only sound in the vehicle was the continued muffled conversation between moments of silence.

The camera picked up an image. Allegra’s voice was clear.

“I miss you. I don’t know how I’d live without you.”

Murderous thoughts pricked at my conscience. I watched the image. A

split-second view of her face revealed tears on her cheek. The phone twisted. She was in his fucking arms. The camera angle held on the leather jacket of a dead man.

“I love you, Ally.” His words punched me in the gut. Ant’s gaze snapped at me.

“Find him.” I wanted his fucking hands for touching my wife.

“I hate this. I hate that we have to hide.”

Did she expect to share her marital bed with her lover? My nostrils flared. Nothing was going to temper my anger.

“I’m always going to take care of you.”

The conversation continued in the silence of the vehicle. And then Allegra sent a final text. Her face stared into the screen, her eyes focused on the messages, the evidence of her betrayal.

The phone twisted and slipped into her back pocket.

Fighting my instinct to react with violence, I clung to fragments of truth that would provide Allegra with an explanation, a reason why she’d hide a man she intimately embraced.

Another man’s lips hadn’t touched hers, at least not this time. Another flare of heat burned in my gut. Not that I’d seen. Perhaps she hadn’t kissed him because they were in public. But his hands had been on her body, his words were whispered into her ear. She was mine.

The final few minutes to the hotel heightened the tension coiling in my gut. Muscles burned with the need to unleash fury. Blood pumped hard and rough through my veins.

Ant pulled up to the front of the hotel. “Circle the block. He could still be here. Leather jacket, tattoos. Emilio, stay with Ant.”

I slid out of the vehicle. Emilio hurried around the front of the SUV and sat in the passenger front seat. As soon as the door closed, Ant sped off. I

walked with purpose to the elevators.

The phone was still in her back pocket, but I couldn't hear any voices. I stepped into the elevator and ascended to the penthouse suite.

The doors opened.

"About fucking time," Orlando hollered. "The pizza is cold." He stepped from the balcony and approached the elevators. "Oh, hey. I thought you were Ally. Are you hungry? There's pizza."

I roared, charged him, wrapped my hands around his neck, and slammed him against the wall. "Where the fuck is she?"

Orlando clawed at my arm. "Shopping," he said on a gasp. "In the boutique."

"Who is she with?" Every nerve in my body sizzled with aggression. A flush of heat surged through me. Muscles in my arms contracted. My fingers tightened around his neck, squeezing.

"Marco. I don't know." He choked as he tried to take a breath. Tears leaked from his eyes as his face reddened.

"Why did you let her leave? Who is he?" I roared.

His eyes rolled, and his hand fell away from my arm. I released his neck. He slumped against the wall, doubled over, clutching his chest as he sucked in mouthfuls of air.

"Where's Timoteo?"

Orlando couldn't speak. He dropped to his knees, dragging in air and protectively clutching his neck. "He's with Santino," he rasped. "I brought Ally home. She left a few minutes ago."

Another wave of rage crashed over me. Adrenaline flooded my system. Hot, volatile need roared through me. The need to fight, to punish, to rip confessions from both my brother and my wife. And I wanted blood.

To harness my anger, I rolled my shoulders. "She's been gone thirty

minutes.”

Orlando ran his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t check the fucking clock. She said she’d be right back. I ordered some food and was waiting for her.”

“She doesn’t go anywhere without an escort.”

“It’s the fucking gift shop.”

My voice lowered. “Excuses. You explain with excuses, never taking responsibility for your failures.”

“What the fuck happened?”

“She lied to you.” I huffed a breath and cocked a brow. “She lied to me.” I walked to the bar and splashed whiskey into a glass. “Get out.”

“Marco, what has she done? Fucking hell.” He paced across the room.

“Orlando, leave while I still remember you’re my brother.”

He grabbed his phone. “I’ll go get her.”

I tipped the whiskey to my lips and drank. “I gave you an order. Go to your suite. Don’t leave your room until you hear from me or Ant.”

“Are you going to tell me what she’s done?”

My jaw tightened as I poured another drink. “No. You won’t speak to her again.”

Orlando snorted a laugh.

Before he could speak, I spun in his direction. “Do not test me, Orlando. Stay away from Allegra. Keep Emilio away from her.” Unless he wanted to meet the same fate as the man in the leather jacket. “I’m in no mood to talk tonight.”

He nodded. “I’ll own whatever my failures, but I don’t know what I did wrong. Where is Ally?”

“Tomorrow, Orlando.”

I kept my back to the elevator as the doors slid closed. I drank another

tumbler of whiskey.

The silence of the suite settled over me. After shrugging out of my suit coat, I walked out onto the balcony. I needed the night and the darkness to drown out the chaos reigning over my thoughts.

A light breeze ruffled my dress shirt and dried the trickle of sweat along my spine.

I'd made mistakes. I'd softened my heart to her. I'd give her a chance to explain. A single lie from her lips would be a betrayal.

Hair on the back of my neck prickled as the elevator doors opened. I took another sip of whiskey as footsteps approached.

Avoiding my holstered gun, she slipped her arms around my waist. "I missed you."

My spine stiffened. I didn't move, didn't turn to her, didn't accept her touch. Not until I heard the reason for meeting the man. Who was he? How long had she been involved with him? What did he want? And why the fuck had she never mentioned him?

I clutched the glass and finished the drink. "Where were you?"

"I didn't leave the hotel." The warmth of her body seeped into my back.

"That wasn't what I asked you." I'd bled my anger out on Orlando. With Allegra, I waited for the knife to sink deep.

She released me and stepped back into the suite. "I stopped into the boutique."

I turned and stalked closer to her. She took another step back. Her eyes were wild. A slight tremble quivered in her lips. She didn't need to speak for me to see her thoughts in the worry of her brow and the tension in her jaw. Grabbing her elbows, she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Just the boutique?" I asked as I loosened my tie and ripped it from

around my neck.

“I...I went down to the patio bar.” She edged around the truth. But once again, her eyes told me everything.

“Did you have a drink?”

“No.” She stared, her eyes wide with fright. Mine narrowed with unabashed hostility. One more question.

“Why did you go alone?”

I stepped closer. She dropped her arms and stared into my eyes. The silence stretched. I waited. The tension became a suffocating shroud between us.

“I was safe.”

I threw the glass against the wall. “Who is he?” I roared. “Give me a fucking name.”

“It’s not what you think.”

I towered over her and put my face closer to her. “The only thing I need from you is his name.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “Marco, please.”

I paced across the room and raked my hands over my head. “Do you know what I do to my enemies?”

“I’m not your enemy.” She walked to the couch, and I noticed she wasn’t wearing her boot. More lies. Was she even hurt?

The elevator opened. I glared at Allegra as Ant strode into the room.

“Nothing. We searched for him in the hotel bars as well. The front desk didn’t get a name. He’s not a guest in the hotel.”

Allegra launched to her feet. “Don’t—”

I stood over her. “Did you have something to say?”

She lowered onto the couch and spun her wedding ring on her finger.

“A little too late to remember your vows.”

“I haven’t forgotten them,” she said.

“Then give me his name.”

Ant sat in the chair across from her. “You should tell him everything,” he said, crossing one ankle over the other knee.

“I don’t have anything to tell you.” Her voice cracked on the words. “I’m sorry, Marco. You have to trust me.”

“Do you think I’m so charmed by your pussy that I won’t care that you allow another man to touch you?” My voice rose, and the words became clipped as fire bloomed in my gut. “I heard him profess his love for my wife!”

“How?” she whispered. “Were you there?”

I spun away from her and crossed the room to Emilio where he sat at his computer. “Who is he?”

“Once I have the IP, I’ll have his location.” He continued to type. “I leave the interrogation tactics to you and Stefano.”

Allegra sucked in a sharp inhale.

“How long?”

“Usually just a couple of minutes.”

Windows opened and closed on his computer. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I lifted my phone.

Another message. A white-hot ball of fury like I’ve never known ignited within me.

Mila: My phone is compromised.

Allegra

Memories of last night were a drugging heaviness resting on my chest, crushing me with regrets. There were always choices. Tears burned in my

eyes. I couldn't tell Marco about Knox. Not while there was a threat to Dee because his hate for the Irish ran deeper than any affection he might have for me.

Marco blamed the Irish for Luca. This would bring the war to Knox. I curled into the pillow and let the tears fall. I could fix this. I just needed to talk to Deidre.

Thumping and muted voices sounded from the living room of the suite. Leaning over, I reached for my phone to check the time. My brows pinched as I rolled over and checked the floor.

My phone was gone. Marco must have taken it. If he came into the room, it wasn't to share the bed with me. His side was undisturbed. I understood why he was upset. I didn't think he'd seen me with Knox. The messages were enough.

Even if I'd known Emilio had installed tracking on my phone, I would've been caught last night. I didn't know about the texting spyware or any other shit he'd put on my cell.

It didn't matter. Marco had my phone.

The door opened, and housekeeping entered the room. "Excuse me, Mrs. Bruno." She went to the closet, pulled out my suitcase, and began taking my clothes from the drawers.

"I need a moment to get dressed," I said.

She dropped my jeans into the suitcase. "I'll wait outside the room."

"Thank you." As soon as she left, I slid out of bed, grabbed what I needed for the day, entered the en suite bathroom, and turned on the shower.

My limbs felt heavy as I slipped off my panties and bra. Then I stepped into the glass enclosure and tipped my face to the overhead waterfall. Tears coursed down my cheeks, washed away in the warm water. Remembering the betrayal in Marco's eyes when the final text came through carved a hole in

my chest.

I slid to the bottom of the shower. My body trembled as I closed my eyes. I considered what would happen if I just told Marco the truth about Knox. Maybe he'd understand and set aside his anger. But what about Dee? The Irish wanted her. No matter how much I wanted to protect her, I couldn't lock her in a tower. I needed Knox on the inside to protect her from Byrne.

Telling Marco carried too much risk. He could hate me, but I couldn't risk Dee. Knox understood. He'd agree.

My heart hurt with the truth. Marco was the mafia man they referred to as The Enforcer. He believed the Irish killed Luca. Knox was his enemy.

Once I'd dressed and dried my hair, I threw it into a messy ponytail. Housekeeping had finished packing my clothes. The bed had been stripped. My ankle was a little tender, my eyes were puffy, and last night had left me broken.

The marriage arrangement was over. Why else would he have my things packed? I went to the living room. Suitcases waited by the elevator.

Emilio sat at the computer. He lifted his head as I entered the room, but he quickly glanced away.

"Good morning," I said to Orlando.

"No, I wouldn't say it is." He stood from the couch and joined Ant and Marco on the balcony.

Ant lifted his head. The glare in his eyes made my breath catch. With a calmness I didn't feel, I crossed the room and stopped at the threshold of the balcony.

My chest tightened as fear coiled like a snake in my gut, the rattle and hiss drowning out the voice telling me to choose Marco. To trust him. But I had to think of Dee. I stayed silent, waiting for him to say something—anything.

I was a little mouse, timid, afraid to run, more afraid to stay.

“Marco?” My voice was barely a whisper. He nodded once to Ant. He and Orlando edged past me.

Marco’s strong fingers, hands that had touched me, sending shivers over my flesh, brought a cup of coffee to his lips.

I sat in the chair next to him and folded my hands in my lap.

“Who is he?”

I lifted my gaze to his. The dark and dangerous intensity in his eyes was a blow to my belly. My gut tightened, and the nausea surged outward. Gone was the man who wanted to devour me with passion. Marco reeked of hatred. And it was all directed at me.

I wanted to tell him something, even a small lie, but I’d promised never to betray him or to lie to him. I hadn’t. So, I stayed quiet.

“Allegra, what would you have me do?”

I’d have him promise to protect Dee and promise to trust Knox. But Knox was Irish, and Marco had a vendetta. “Trust me.”

He tapped his phone and opened the screen. “Trust you, a lying bitch that hides the identity of her lover?”

The words hurt. My eyes burned and scratched with every watery blink. “You know he’s not my lover.”

Marco growled. “I know he had his hands on you.” He stood and leaned over me. “After he spills his blood at my feet, you’ll have to learn how to live without him.”

“Marco, please.”

“You’ll no longer have to hide.” He straightened and buttoned his black, single-breasted coat. He rolled his shoulders, cracking his neck. Then he rubbed his hand over his mouth, tracing his mustache and the edge of his beard. “For a moment, I thought you were mine. Maybe you never were. But

you were *never* his to care for.”

“You know. You listened.” Fear sank her talons deep into my chest, a cry climbed into my throat, and my secret coursed like poison through my veins. “You were there.” He’d seen me with Knox. Those were words we’d spoken, never texted.

“Eavesdropping is an activity you’re familiar with.”

“If you were there, if you listened, you know I only spoke to him for a few minutes.”

“Who. Is. He?” His nostrils flared with heaving breaths. “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

I recoiled from the vehemence of his tone.

He slammed his fist to the table. “I asked you for his name! Who do you know in the fucking Irish mafia? Tell me something because your silence is deafening.”

Oh my god. He already knew too much. He’d never understand. Pain ripped through my chest, tearing my emotional heart in two. A tremor started deep in my core. I couldn’t trade Knox’s life for a marriage to Marco. I needed Knox to protect Dee.

I twisted his ring on my finger, remembering the way I’d fallen when he’d slipped it on my finger. “You can take me home now.”

“Will you arrange another meeting with your Irish lover?”

“He’s not my lover,” I repeated. My denials only seemed to make him angrier. I covered my face with my hands and calmed my racing heart with several steady breaths.

“You refuse to tell me his name. He means more to you than the vows we spoke.” His bitter laugh caused a clutter of spiders to crawl over my flesh.

“No.” But Knox didn’t mean less. And Deidre meant everything. “I’m yours, Marco. I haven’t betrayed you.” Tears filled my eyes again. “You and

our marriage mean everything to me.” I pressed my palm to his chest.

Rather than push him away, he captured my hand under his and anchored it to the ridge of his scar beneath his black dress shirt. With a step back, he pulled me to my feet. He crowded into my space, holding me hostage with the storm of betrayal in his eyes.

“Do you feel it?”

His heart pounded against my palm. Mine raced with the same chaotic pulse. Shallow breaths rushed past my lips. He was too close. The heat of his body burned. I burned.

His grip tightened on my fingers. “This no longer beats for you.” He dropped my hand. “It’s time to go.”

I stood on the balcony. Although Marco had left me feeling cold and alone, the morning sun was warm on my face. Still, a chill settled in my bones. We always had choices. I’d lost the man who’d stolen my heart when I was fifteen.

But no one would die. I’d be back home, and I could keep Deidre safe.

“Ally?” Tim’s voice cut through the disbelief. I wanted to find someone to blame, to make this mess anyone’s fault but my own.

I spun around. Tears streamed down my cheeks. “I’m sorry.” I could barely speak the words.

Tim slid his hands into his pockets. “It’s time to go.” He glanced over his shoulder. Marco stood near the elevator with Ant and Orlando. “We’ll talk later.” He kept his voice low.

I nodded and took a step toward him. “Just take me home. My mom will take pleasure in telling me ‘I told you so’. She can spend the rest of my life blaming me for my failed engagement.”

“You’re still engaged.”

“Not for long. Marco hates me. Orlando hates me. Santi is going to be

livid.” I rested a hand on Tim’s arm.

He pulled back, putting space between us. “Marco isn’t taking you home.” He spoke quietly without appearing to whisper. “The Enforcer wants information. You’ve made yourself his enemy, Ally.”

And the hits kept coming.

No one spoke as I rode down the elevator with Marco and Tim. Ant, Emilio, and Orlando waited in the lobby with several other soldiers. My breath caught at the display of power to see a dozen intimidating Italian men dressed in black suits.

Marco was determined to take over the city. Even my brother’s soldiers deferred to Marco, eager to become part of the Bruno organization.

Flanked by Tim on my right and Troy on my left, we made our way out of the hotel and into the caravan of SUV’s. Tim held the door for me. Troy slipped on sunglasses and slid into the driver’s seat.

Marco joined Emilio and a couple soldiers in the vehicle in front of us. Orlando drove his new sports car and the rest of the men rode in two other Range Rovers. I stayed quiet in the backseat. We drove east, in the opposite direction of taking me home.

“Tim, where are we going?”

He stared out the windshield. “To the Bruno estate.”

“I need to go home.” A tingle chased along my spine. I needed to talk to Dee.

“Boss gave specific instructions,” Troy said.

I chewed my bottom lip. “Tim, can I use your phone?”

His shoulders stiffened. “No.”

I leaned forward. “Why?”

Finally, he spun toward me. “Don’t you get it, Ally? You’re in serious shit. No, you can’t use my phone. We won’t be chatting like friends. I’m no

longer your protection. I'm your fucking prison guard. Sit the fuck back and shut the fuck up."

Holy, fuck. Was he serious?

"It's ten in the morning, and I already need a drink," he said to Troy.

Me, too. I wanted to ask questions and struggled to keep myself composed. Would Marco really make me a prisoner in my own home? Why marry me, knowing I had divided loyalty? I might be naïve, but I wasn't stupid. Marco still wanted the alliance between our families.

We pulled up to the property. The gate swung open, we drove past two soldiers, and circled around to the top of the driveway.

Without waiting for Tim, I swung the door open. A few changes had been made to the estate, and more was still being done. Two work trucks parked along the west side of the property.

Marco stepped from his vehicle. His gaze briefly connected with mine, then he walked ahead with Emilio.

Once inside the house, Tim pointed to the stairs. "Marco would like you to wait in your room until he's ready."

I glanced up at Tim. "Ready for what?"

"Enough with the fucking questions," he said, then lowered his voice. "For once in your life, do what you're told. You've got one ally in this house, me. Don't fuck it up."

I started up the stairs to the second-floor bedrooms. Instead of leading me to the master bedroom, Tim opened a door across the hall. I stepped into the large room.

"I'll bring your bags up. Don't leave the room or I'll lock you in."

And with that, he closed the door, leaving me alone in the suffocating silence. Out of tears, I crossed the room to the large windows overlooking the rear of the property. Just below me, sunlight glinted off the sparking ice blue

water of the kidney-shaped pool. The surface was calm, like glass. Nothing like I was feeling.

Surrounding the mansion, the grounds were immaculate. Lush green grass, terracotta pathways, perfectly trimmed shrubs, and towering trees.

Not much had changed since I was here with Marco. Except now he hated me, and this palace was to be my prison. I'd done this. I'd made choices. I could've allowed myself to be swept away by the magic of his touch. He'd fucked me against the glass here in his castle, but I no longer believed in the fairytale.

Marco wasn't the villain, but I couldn't trust him to be my hero either.

Chapter Eleven

Marco

“Tomorrow,” I said to Anna. There could be no more delays, no interference from Allegra’s family, and no opportunity for her to conspire against me. Forty-eight hours from now, she’d be my wife. Not because I wanted a liar for a wife, but no one else would have her either.

“Marco, be reasonable.” Anna’s voice came through the speaker on my phone. I stood in the office of my new home, my bride locked in her tower, and my fucking empire at risk.

This was me being reasonable.

“People need time to plan. You can’t announce a wedding with no notice.”

“This isn’t a wedding. It’s a marriage ceremony. No reception, no photos. No fucking cake.”

She was silent for a moment on the other end. Then she sighed. “What happened? Did she find out about Francesca? You are so stupid. Why would you sleep with that whore when I know you’ve fallen in love with Allegra?”

My gut clenched, and bile rose in my throat. I wanted to vent to my sister, to disparage Allegra, but the words tasted bitter on my tongue. My

head fought with my heart. For the first time, I refused to trust my instincts.

Unless she confessed his name, her association with him, and the reason she deceived Orlando to meet with her Irish... I couldn't think of his hands on her. Did he kiss her, make her body slick with sweat as she trembled with pleasure, and taste the saltiness of her flesh?

My hand balled into a fist. I remembered the blush of passion, the intimate whispered words, and the silent cries as she climaxed. I lowered my head, my chin nearly touching my chest. Perhaps the man wasn't her lover, but there was still an intimate connection.

He had a piece of her, and she was mine.

"Stefano is going to be annoyed, but Savio asks for you. You know Giada will insist to come along."

Giada would pollute my home with poison, but she was a specter in my relationship with Allegra. Perhaps it would be good for Allegra to see what her duplicity could bring. Jealousy had eaten at her over my relationship with Giada. Let her see how I treated a traitorous cunt.

"Savio needs his mother with him." I walked to the window. I needed someone I could trust with Allegra. "I need you here, Anna." I could feel my control slipping. "I'm going to speak with Cirillo. I want you and Stefano to stay."

There was work to be done.

"For how long?"

"I don't know." I poured another glass of whiskey. "Bring Francesca."

A small gasp echoed through the phone. "Marco. No," she whispered. "You say you'll have a marriage but not a wedding. You won't have either if you bring your mistress into your home."

Once again, images of Allegra in the arms of the Irish tainted my memories. I wouldn't think of her lips around my cock, the way her eyes

sparkled when I placed the ruby on her finger, or the dark and seductive tilt to her lips as she dipped the tip of her blade into my flesh.

She'd been the woman I needed at my side. Now, I wanted to wrap my hands around her neck, force the bitch to confess... and I'd still want to fuck her.

"Francesca knows what I need."

"In the bedroom." Disgust dripped from her words. "I'm not bringing your mistress to your marriage. I don't need to have met Allegra to know you're being an ass to her."

"Don't defend my wife to me!" I refused to feel concern for Allegra, not as long as she twisted her knife deeper into my chest with her lies and defiance.

"Something has happened. You're not the same man who suffered with guilt for what happened with Francesca. You said Allegra would challenge your idea of marriage. You never did like a challenge."

"Enough! The decision isn't yours. Get on the plane. When you arrive, don't interfere. I have enough to worry about with the fucking Irish and Allegra."

"We'll be there tomorrow." Anna's clipped reply was followed with an abrupt end to the conversation when she hung up on me.

I tossed back the rest of the liquor, crashed into the chair in the corner, leaned my head back, and closed my eyes. I was so fucking tired.

A soft knock broke the silence in the room. "Boss?"

I cracked my eyes open as Ant entered. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Ant laughed and sat in the chair next to mine. "Keep me stupid."

"And don't get caught." Two phrases my father had used when we were growing up and looking for trouble. More times than I could remember

Ant and I had come home with blood and bruises from street fights or from the hedonistic play of two young, arrogant mafiosi with too much money in their pockets and no fear of consequences.

Like Orlando and Emilio now.

“You’ve always been my voice of reason” –my gaze met his– “even when we were debating which bone to break.”

Ant rubbed a scar on his knuckle. “Nah, we only ever argued about which girls were mine.”

“Because you wanted them all.” I smiled. “They were all yours.”

“You were too busy working, trying to prove to Roberto you were ready to be his underboss.”

Five years ago, I’d taken position next to my father after my uncle Sammy had trusted the wrong man. He along with two wealthy Americans, a businessman from Mumbai, and a tycoon from Hong Kong had been taken hostage and held for ransom.

No one did a shakedown on Roberto Bruno. When he refused to pay, they were all executed.

“How many rats are in my house, Ant? Luca, now Roberto. I thought they were connected, but now...I don’t know what to think.” I pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes. “Allegra’s never been to Italy. Her family’s established here. She wouldn’t have any connection to Adami. But she’s secretly meeting with Byrne’s soldier. I can’t torture her, but I can’t fucking trust her.”

“The phone is registered to the BrioFagan Group.”

BrioFagan Group was the public face of Patrick Byrne’s crime syndicate. Restaurants, local pubs, and private clubs mostly north into Boston and New York, but he preferred to stay south.

The Irish were busy pimping and prostituting, a den of iniquity full of

deadly vipers. Patrick had a taste for young girls and liked to spread his bounty around to his friends. That Allegra would be within a hundred miles of one of his soldiers tightened my chest.

“Maybe she doesn’t know her friend is connected with Byrne,” I said.

An icepick of pressure pierced into my right temple. I wanted there to be another explanation. But the messages, especially the last one couldn’t be explained away.

Ant finally spoke. “I don’t know why she’s involved with the Irish, but I don’t think she has anything to do with Roberto. Do you want my advice?”

“Always.”

“Keep her close and get her to trust you.”

“Fuck her for information?”

He rolled from the chair. “You’re going to fuck her anyway.”

My dick kicked and stretched at the thought of getting between her thighs and sinking into the soft, wet seduction of her pussy. But that was the fucking problem. Allegra made me weak.

“Play the game,” Ant said. “We both know how this works. If you’re not going to seduce her, then you’re going to have to force the information from her.”

I followed him out of the office. “What of Timoteo? Is his loyalty stronger for Allegra or her brother?”

“He needs to be watched,” Ant said, and rested his hand on my shoulder. “His loyalty to you is because of Allegra. He’s protective of her, but not in a way that should concern you.”

“Go to bed, mio amico.” *My friend.*

We parted ways at the bottom of the stairs. Ant lumbered up to one of the dozen bedrooms on the second floor.

I poured another glass of whiskey. Perhaps I was becoming my father.

A ruthless king incapable of forgiveness. Taking the drink, I climbed the stairs.

She belonged in my room, in my bed. I turned the handle and pushed her bedroom door open. Light from the hall slashed across the room. Allegra slept on top of the cream-colored comforter. Soft tendrils of her auburn hair had come loose from her ponytail and framed her tear-stained face.

My father's words came back to me.

A woman is a beautiful rose, rare in its intricacies, the scent unlike any other flower. Her touch is in the softness of the petals.

Not Allegra. In skinny jeans, a T-shirt, and still wearing her sneakers reminded me of her sheltered innocence. She was young but not naïve. Only a calculating adversary would conceal their co-conspirators. Only my defiant wife would blatantly challenge my authority.

I entered her room and sat on the chair to watch her sleep. Boxes from the Jilani house were stacked against the wall separating the bathroom from the bedroom. Luggage waited, unpacked, in front of the hanging door leading to the walk-in wardrobe.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, with the empty glass in my hands. Already, the room carried her scent. *Allegra was Oleander.* Beautiful, but deadly. I'd had a taste and could feel the poison slipping through my veins.

Only a fool in love would trust her. I was neither a fool nor in love. I set the glass on the floor, then stood and crossed to her bed.

I'd walked away from her this morning, making it understood she was to be left alone. I'd expected more insolent behavior from her. She hadn't settled into her room. Did she think I would allow her to leave, to return to her father's house?

She'd made her choice. I'd make mine. I scooped her into my arms.

A soft whimper escaped her lips. Then she sighed and settled against my chest.

“Come, topolina.” I carried her across the hall to my room—to my bed. Some things couldn’t be changed. She was mine.

Allegra

A mix of emotions swirled together. For a moment, I was in a soft bed, Marco’s strong arms surrounded me, and his cock, hard and tempting, pressed against my buttocks. Words were whispered in Italian. Topolina. Firm fingers gripped my hips. Wetness slicked my thighs.

But only for a moment. My eyes burned as I sat up in bed. Marco’s bed. *Our bed*. The one we were supposed to share. I pulled my knees to my chest. I didn’t remember taking off my shoes, and I did remember leaving them on because I planned to run. I needed to get to Dee.

Marco had been up late. I didn’t remember falling asleep either, but I knew this wasn’t the room I’d been banished to.

I slid my legs over the side. Feeling a little unsteady, I stood, and my stomach growled. The last thing I’d put in my mouth had been a granola bar I’d found in the bottom of my purse.

A knock sounded on the door. Before I could tell whoever it was to go away, the door opened, and a petite, older woman entered the bedroom carrying a breakfast tray of croissants and coffee.

“Once you’ve had breakfast and dressed for the day, Mr. Bruno request you join him in his office.”

She crossed to the windows and pressed the button to raise the blackout shade. I squinted against the glare of the sun.

The little woman propelled me toward the coffee. “Mr. Bruno doesn’t

appear to be a man who wants to be kept waiting.”

I picked up a croissant and nibbled the edge. “May I ask who you are?”

“Romida Grasso, but everyone calls me Romi.” She began making the bed. “My husband is Henley. He worked for the other Mr. Bruno, Luca.” Her lip quivered as she spoke. Stiffening her spine, she smoothed her pressed black skirt over her slim hips.

“Please let Mr. Bruno know that I’m not feeling well?” I couldn’t bear to see the hatred in his eyes again.

“Oh, then you should stay in bed.”

I smiled as she tugged me back toward the bed. I sank onto the edge of the mattress. As soon as she left, I slipped across the hall back to my room to take a shower and wait for an opportunity. I could go to Marco or Tim and ask them to take me to see Dee, but after yesterday, I didn’t need a crystal ball to know my future.

Better to ask for forgiveness, than to ask for permission when the answer was going to be no.

Slipping into the bathroom with my toiletries, I stripped out of my clothes and stepped beneath the hot spray in the tiled enclosure.

I’d been in difficult situations before, almost all of them involved Knox. I needed him now. A moment of clarity loomed over me. Being invisible was easy when no one was looking.

I’d grown up understanding the dangers surrounding my family. Less powerful men would always want from those with more. Those with the most would do whatever was necessary not to lose what they had.

I was no longer invisible.

After turning off the water, I wrapped a towel around my torso and finger combed my damp hair.

I squeaked as if the oxygen was sucked from the room. Marco stood at

the window. A towering darkness in the sunlight. Dark hair. Dark aura. Dark intentions because he wouldn't stop until he broke me.

A starched, white dress shirt stretched across the cuts and sinew of his wide shoulders, defined his back and tucked into the waistband of the black trousers hugging his lean hips and molding to his muscular buttocks. His hands slid into his pockets.

"Your room is across the hall." The smooth, cold tone of his voice rasped over my nipples, sent a shiver down my spine, seeping lower, tempting my pussy to clench. He was so beautifully brutal.

I glanced around the room. My luggage and boxes were gone. I released a shuddering breath. Maybe a night had brought clarity to both of us. I approached him and rested my forehead on his back. The scent of his cologne swirled around me.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

He stiffened. "Sorry for betraying me, or sorry for getting caught?"

I took a step back.

He turned toward me, and the black hole in my chest threatened to drown me again. Whatever this was, it wasn't forgiveness. "I'm sorry that you don't trust me."

"Give me a reason to trust you. I want his name."

Tears filled my eyes. "That's not trust, Marco. It hurts me to hurt you. But I can't." I shook my head. "I can't do this."

He took a step closer. "Be clear, wife. What can't you do?"

"I can't tell you his name. I won't tell you anything about him. Yesterday, I was your enemy, a liar, and a cheater. You want his name to hunt him down. You know he's Irish, and that's all you need to justify killing him."

"He had his hands on you! Professed his love."

I couldn't hide from the truth. If Marco hurt Knox, I'd never forgive him. "If you kill him, you kill me."

Marco thrust his fingers into my hair, fisted his hands, and angled my face to his. "Do you love him? Don't fucking lie to me." He ground out the words through clenched teeth.

Marco wanted my dark truth. My heart pounded. I wasn't in love with Knox, but I'd always love him. Marco wouldn't care. I wouldn't give Marco another reason to kill Knox. "I won't ever see him again."

Marco's eyes narrowed to deadly slits. Still gripping my hair, my scalp stinging from the pull of his hands, he lowered his face to mine. Hot breath warmed my lips. "When I find him, and I will, you can watch him bleed out at my feet."

Our faces inches apart, we stared at each other. The heated words made ashes of everything we could have been together. "I don't love him." My eyes closed, a tear slid onto my cheek, and I lied. "I can't be your wife."

"Because you'd rather be his whore?" His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. "Or to protect him, you'd proposition to be mine?" He released my head and took a step back. "Get dressed. My family is coming to our wedding. They'll be here soon."

"I need my phone."

He paused at the door. "No."

"Just to talk to Dee. Please."

"You'll see her tomorrow for the wedding." He pulled the door closed.

Tomorrow? I dropped to my knees. Something was wrong with me. Part of me was terrified of the man who just walked away. A man who was determined to burn down the world. But a deeper, darker part heated with the ruthless possessiveness he felt for me.

The next day, I stood next to Marco on the portico as a line of SUV's pulled around the circular driveway. My stomach tumbled with anxiety. The space between us whispered louder than the wind through the oak trees during a summer thunderstorm. The air crackled with electricity and chilled the skin.

Things had gone from good to terribly wrong so quickly. But I still felt the black butterflies in my tortured soul standing next to Marco. But I couldn't escape the rush of blood, the needy ache in my nipples, and the pulse deep in my core reminding me of the ways he'd touched me.

Car doors opened. A woman slid from the vehicle. I'd expected his brother and sister. A little boy tumbled out of the vehicle after the woman with shoulder length hair. He scooted around her legs and ran up the stairs.

"My sister, Anna, and Savio." Marco bent as Savio wound his thin arms around his neck for a quick hug. "It is good to see you looking so brave and strong," Marco said in Italian and rubbed his palm over the boy's black hair.

Savio smiled, revealing a gap in his front teeth. Then he glanced over his shoulder to the young woman with whiskey-colored eyes. She ignored Marco and approached me. A soft smile curled her full lips. She was as beautiful as Marco was handsome, her features striking. Her piercing gaze volleyed from me to Marco.

"I'm Anna." She leaned in and kissed both my cheeks.

My fingers trembled as she took my hand in hers. She stood beside me as two more women approached.

My heartbeat ratcheted into a wild frenzy, like prey scenting a predator. Anna stood beside me, protecting me from a threat I couldn't see but felt.

"Allegra, this is Giada," Anna said. "A close friend of the family, and

this is her son Savio. My most favorite nephew.”

He tucked in behind her legs.

Giada rested her hands on my shoulders and kissed each of my cheeks.

“So good to finally meet you.”

Sweat trickled along my spine. *Giada*. Fear clawed at my throat, and a thick, bitter taste coated my tongue.

The other woman approached Marco. She slipped her hands onto the lapels of his suit coat. When she tilted her face to his, her long, straight mahogany hair with amber highlights draped to the curve of her rounded buttocks.

Marco dipped his head to kiss each of her cheeks, only the touch seemed too familiar, too intimate. His lips brushed the tender skin below her ear, a place he'd kissed me as he whispered how good it felt to have his fingers inside me.

My face heated. I didn't need to ask to know. A coiling snake of betrayal twisted in my gut.

Anna's fingers tightened on mine as she spoke to the woman. “Francesca, I'm sure you'd like to meet Allegra.”

She was stunning with penetrating eyes, and long feathering lashes. Blood red lips curved into a knowing smile. I hated that she knew the touch of his hand, the taste of him, the growl of pleasure just before he came. I'd never asked him. Now I wanted to know. Did he fuck her bare? Did he promise her a life by his side, under his protection? Did he promise her children?

“Of course.” An arrogant smirk tilted the corners of her lips as she glanced at me, then she lifted her gaze to Marco's. “Thank you for inviting me. Are you going to introduce me to your fiancée?”

Marco's jaw tightened as he stared through Francesca, refusing to turn

to me. “It’s not necessary for you to be introduced. You’re not here to socialize with her.”

Two men approached.

“My brother Stefano, and our cousin Carmine Pirlo,” Anna said, attempting to be diplomatic in an uncomfortable situation.

My breath caught as the air around me thickened. Marco didn’t have to work at intimidation. He was a man of power. The determined glint in his eyes, the hard lines of his mouth, and his commanding presence made men cower.

But he wasn’t the most dangerous Bruno. Stefano moved with precision focus, cloaked in shadow. Calculated, cunning, he was a predator. His cold, deep-set eyes raked over me. Shivers of fear prickled my skin.

Orlando and Emilio hollered from behind me. In a flash, chaos erupted. Emilio crashed into Carmine. Orlando laughed and the three spoke to a few other men still standing next to the vehicles.

“Stef, you’re scaring her,” Anna scolded.

“I’ve wanted to meet the woman condemned to suffer my brother’s temperament.” Stefano kissed both of my cheeks. He leaned in and whispered near my ear. “But I see now why he was eager to return. Beautiful and deadly. Your blade work is nearly as good as my own.”

I snapped my gaze at Francesca. She remained close to Marco, her hair draping over her shoulder, dressed as if she stepped out of Italian Vogue with flare bottomed pants. No way was Marco not seeing the swell of her tits in her low-cut top.

“Excuse me,” I said, taking a step back. “I’ll see how lunch is coming.”

I extricated myself from Stefano and Anna. As I walked into the house, I fought the urge to throw up. I couldn’t do this. Francesca touched Marco. She had her hands on his chest. His mouth touched her flesh. He’d inhaled,

drinking in her scent.

Mafia men. I hated him, hated that he returned with promises that he wouldn't keep. I hated that I had to marry him while he wanted her in his bed.

I rushed up the stairs. God, I hated that he'd touch her with the same hands he touched me with, hated how he made me feel. I hated myself because I hated that I still wanted his hands on me. I wanted the weight of his body between my thighs, wanted to feel him inside me. Even knowing he wanted her, I still wanted him.

I dashed into my room, slammed the door, and leaned against it. Tears slipped onto my cheek. I hated that I'd fallen in love with him.

A breeze blew through the open balcony doors. I wiped my cheeks and crossed the room. Romi had taken over the duties of house manager. I hadn't been consulted on the young girl making my bed earlier. Scents filled the kitchen, a delicious lunch I assumed was cooked by a chef I'd never met.

I'd been in the house twenty-four hours, and Marco had made it clear I would have no authority in my home. The splinter in my soul cracked, splitting me in two. He'd wanted me broken. By bringing his mistress to my wedding, he'd done it.

Crawling onto the bed, I curled into a ball. The only way I'd survive marriage to Marco was turning off my feelings. The hatred in his eyes gutted me. A dark swirling vortex of regrets sucked me under.

I just wanted to sleep forever and spend the rest of my life blissfully ignorant.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed. A knock softly rapped against the door. "Ally?"

I blinked sleep from my eyes. "Tim?"

He quietly closed the door. "We need to talk."

I slid my legs over the side of the bed. “I don’t need another lecture. Don’t ask me about secret friendships, and please don’t tell me that it’s dangerous to cross Marco Bruno.” Silent tears slipped onto my cheek. “I’m fucked, Tim.”

Mafia men take what they want. Marco was willing to take me. He didn’t want me, but he wasn’t going to let anyone else have me either.

Tim squatted on the floor next to the bed. He didn’t touch me, but I found comfort in the silent understanding in his eyes.

“You won’t tell Marco the name of your friend? Fuck, Ally, whoever he is, he’s a prick. He lied to you. I know you. You’d never knowingly run with Irish mafia, so why the fuck are you protecting him?”

“You don’t know me, Tim. We’re friends, and I trust you to protect me and to protect Dee.”

He sighed, braced on his haunches. “I can’t protect you unless I know who the enemy is.”

“I am.” Because there was no one else to blame. Marco needed a target. I was the only one available. “You can’t protect me from myself, and I can’t make Marco trust me.”

And I was done trying. Freedom had an expiration date. This was mine.

Tim stood and slid his hands into his pockets. “I trust you, Ally. I trust you to tell me if you’re in trouble.”

Other than being engaged to a man who made stalkers and serial killers look like playground friends.

“They’re sitting down to lunch. Marco requests you to join them on the patio. I have a job to do.”

I stood and smoothed my hands over the soft pink boho style dress. I should change. Giada and Francesca were stunningly perfect.

“You need to hurry,” he said to me.

“Whatever.” Why did I care? It’s not like Marco would be coming to my bed. He had Francesca. If I was going to fall, I might as well go down in flames.

We strode down the hall. With a hand to my arm, he slowed our descent on the stairs. “You won’t have any allies in this house.” The left side of his mouth quirked. “Except me and Romi. She asked if you’d be hungry. I put in an order for a burger with extra pickles and French fries with ranch.”

Our gazes met. “Don’t get in trouble for me.”

“I have a job to do. I’ll be harsh. I have to follow orders, but you need to know, you have me. You’re the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met. You’re beautiful, determined, and you’re fearless. Don’t let them intimidate you. Don’t let them break you. Not Marco or the two women who would do anything to be you right now.”

Including fuck my husband.

Marco

Stefano sat to my right, he twirled the cherry of his cigarette in the glass ashtray. “Cirillo is putting pressure on Valentino. He found out Lazo met with a woman in Greece.”

I forced my gaze away from the open doors, waiting for Allegra to appear with Timoteo. “Who?”

Stefano exhaled, a curl of smoke escaping his nose. “Cirillo has an idea, but I don’t know. I’d say he’s off the mark, but Valentino is fortifying his soldiers. If he’s expecting a war, we need to prepare as well. Cirillo is redistributing our forces.”

Ant sat next to Stefano, and Orlando sat across from me. Emilio and

Carmine leaned back in their chairs, listening as we talked family business. Anna kept Savio entertained while Giada and Francesca soaked in the late afternoon sun.

My fiancée was noticeably absent. When she was out of my sight, a twist of uneasiness knotted in my gut. I could blame it on her treachery, but this possessiveness had started with the first challenge.

There was no way she'd admit defeat. She held his name, and this refusal to obey my orders was open defiance. I had to know what she was doing.

"Valantino knows to expect retaliation if the Adami family crosses you again," Ant said.

"Should we be here if our fight is back home?" Carmine ran his fingertip along the rim of his glass.

"This is home," Emilio said.

I sat straighter but couldn't keep my attention off the doorway into the sunroom. Allegra had spent the afternoon in the bedroom. Because of Francesca. I hadn't anticipated the vitriolic surge of emotions. I wanted Allegra to hurt because I wanted her on her knees begging my forgiveness. While she was begging forgiveness, she could wrap those lying lips around my dick.

But I also wanted the fire, the challenge, I wanted her to fucking fight me. I wanted to taste her tears when she finally realized her need to make me bleed ran as deep as my need to make her kneel.

As if she were hosting the alfresco lunch, Francesca's bubbly laugh reached into me and twisted. She sipped Bruno wine and nibbled on cheeses, fruits, and olives from the charcuterie board in the center of the table. I'd done this, allowed them to see the physical distance between me and Allegra.

But the emotional distance had felt like a blow to my gut. I'd spoken to

Francesca, but not my fiancée. I couldn't hear her voice without the poisonous memory of her speaking to the man putting a wedge between us.

"What of the marker?" I asked.

Stefano shook his head. "I don't know. Cirillo thinks Lazaro had a secret alliance with another family. They called for the hit on the Bruno's. Cirillo's guess is that the hit was more about you. Marco, if it was, you could be a target."

I furrowed my brows. "What do they get out of it? We're not at war with any families in the homeland. Our only enemy is here with the fucking Irish for killing Luca and attempting to seduce my fucking wife."

"He may have wanted her, but it's not like she fucked him," Emilio said. "Don't shoot the messenger. The situation is still shit, but—" He sat back in his chair. "I'm just saying, I retrieved the information off the cloud for her phone. Nothing about the Irish was ever said. No photos."

The table grew quiet. I growled and raked my fingers through my hair. If there was no intimate connection, she would have given me his name. She wouldn't threaten to die for him. I couldn't promise she wouldn't if I discovered her with him again.

"Marco," Anna said and stood.

"Stay out of it, Anna."

"How can I when Francesca sits at your table while your fiancée sits alone in the house?" She grabbed Savio's hand. "Let's go get your tablet for games." Her gaze narrowed on me. "Allegra will be my sister tomorrow. In case I wasn't clear, you're an ass."

"I agree with Anna. You're an ass," Stefano said. "If you don't want Allegra, I'll take her. Giada's a cunt. Wait, we were talking about you." He pointed his cigarette at Francesca. "It's hard to tell you two apart."

Giada lifted her sunglasses. "Fuck you, Stef."

“You keep offering, and I keep telling you no.” He chuckled and stubbed out his cigarette. “You wouldn’t survive a night in my bed.”

“Is that a threat? We’re both skilled at killing...and fucking.”

“Cazzo! I’ll send you all back. Tomorrow changes everything.” I tipped my glass of wine to my lips. “My relationship will no longer be up for speculation. Allegra and I will marry.”

“I doubt your wife is going to warm your bed after you’ve had dinner with your mistress.”

I ignored Stefano, my attention riveted to the woman striding across the patio. Timoteo walked beside her. I searched for imperfections, a reason he’d taken eighteen minutes to bring her to the patio.

Francesca tapped her nails against the table. She would understand now why I had desire for only one woman in my bed. With a slow stretch, my cock remembered how it felt to sink into Allegra’s warm, wet center. My memory stripped the thin fabric of her dress, imagining the soft swell and sway of her breasts.

Sunshine kissed the slope of her shoulders. Stefano stood, leaned into her, whispered, and offered her the chair next to me.

“I’m sure.” She tipped her head, smiled, and a blush tinted her cheeks.

I glowered at Stefano. “Something you’d like to share.”

He winked at me. “Just checking to see if she’s content with her choice of Bruno men.”

Romi bustled out of the house. “Here you go,” she said, setting a plate of fries, a burger, and a can of soda on the table. “You need to eat. Extra pickles.”

“Thank you.” Allegra’s lips split into a smile. She rested a hand on Romi’s arm. “But you don’t need to do extra work for me.”

“Bah.”

“Why are we eating rabbit food off a piece of wood and your girl gets fries?” Stefano snatched one of her fries, dipped it in the ranch sauce, and stuffed it into his mouth.

“No. No.” Romi slapped his hands.

Allegra laughed. The sound grated because she tilted her head and gave Stefano a playful smile.

Romi headed back into the house.

Stefano scooted his chair closer to hers. “What did you have to do to get a burger? And what would I have to do to get half?” He was fucking flirting with her.

“What are you willing to give me?” She swirled a fry through the ranch dressing.

I gritted my teeth as she flirted back. Allegra’s gaze dipped, then her eyes sparked with challenge.

“What do you want?” Stefano asked.

I leaned onto the table, a flare of heat snapping across every nerve in my body.

Allegra lifted the hem of her dress, pulled her knife from the sheath on her thigh, and cut the burger in half. “You claim your skills with a knife are better than mine. Prove it.”

“Fuck you,” Stefano said to me. “I want her.”

Allegra chuckled, flipped the tab on the soda, took a guzzle, and then covered her mouth as she belched. Her eyes popped. The sound wasn’t delicate, but bubbled out, unfazed by the two women glaring at her.

Emilio laughed. “Now we know where Dee gets her charm.”

Orlando kicked the leg of Emilio’s chair, clearly still pissed that he was paying a price for her indiscretion.

Francesca scooted her chair back. “I’m exhausted.” She rested her hand

on my shoulder. “Will you take me to my room?”

Allegra stiffened, her eyes glued to Francesca’s palm sliding onto my biceps. Her breath caught, and she twisted the ruby on her finger. My cock stirred, a rush of heat pooling in my balls, not from Francesca’s touch, but the hard set of Allegra’s jaw and the fire in her eyes.

Neither of us was immune to jealousy.

“I’ll see you later,” I said to Francesca. “Allegra, will you show our guest to her room? She’s across the hall from us.”

If she could, I had no doubt my little, lying topolina would take her knife and bury it in my gut.

She glared at me and picked up her burger. “She’s your guest, not mine.” Then she took a bite. A trickle of sauce dripped onto her lip. With only her middle finger extended—toward me as if flipping me off—she swiped her lip and sucked it into her mouth.

Stefano chuckled and plucked the other half of the burger from her plate. “Do you want lessons in hand-to-hand combat, or do you want to know where to stab the human body in a crowded room without drawing attention in order to cause exsanguination?”

Ant stood. “While these two discuss how to make a man, *or woman*,” he mumbled the woman part, “bleed, I’ll show Francesca to her room.”

Giada scooted her chair back. “I’ll go with her.”

Allegra ate another fry, her tongue peeking out from between her lips to lick salt from her thumb. There was more than hunger in her focus on me. “I know how to make a man bleed.”

Allegra slept in our bed, fully dressed in lounging pants and an oversized T-shirt. This girl—too trusting. She allowed a member of the Irish mafia into her life. An enemy of everything we held close. Our family, our

business, our way of life.

Too trusting in me, so sure she could keep her secrets without consequence. I stood over her and watched her sleep. My hand balled into a fist to keep from reaching out and touching her.

If I allowed my needs to control me, I'd climb into bed, split her thighs, and fuck my frustration out on her.

"Sleep well, little mouse." Tomorrow we'd marry.

Tonight, she still had a lesson to learn. In her sleep, would she wonder if I'd taken Francesca to bed? Would the idea of another woman touching me claw at her sanity the way talons of rage tore at me?

Thoughts of anyone touching or tasting her twisted in my gut. In a moment of anger, I'd made the decision to inflict another fatal blow to the trust between us. Now, Francesca was here, but I still wasn't done punishing my little mouse.

I left her to sleep alone, crossed the hall, and opened the door to Francesca's room.

As the door clicked shut, she leaned up onto her elbow. "Marco?"

I crossed to the bed and sat on the edge.

Francesca rose to her knees. She kissed my neck, running her fingers into my hair. "Amor mio." *My love.*

There was no love between us. There were no misconceptions about our relationship. But there were assumptions that needed correcting. I covered her hand with mine. "No. I need to talk to you."

Still holding my hand, she pivoted, sitting next to me. I stayed silent, staring at our joined fingers as she feathered her thumb over the scars on my knuckles.

Francesca's wide eyes searched mine. "She isn't what I expected," she said. The soft, familiar lilt of her voice whispered to me. "I don't want to

make you upset, but she doesn't understand her duties as your wife."

Long black lashes swept over warm chocolate eyes. Those eyes had seen me covered in blood, lurking in my own personal dark rage, when I was high on violence and needed to rut my release.

I didn't turn to Francesca for comfort, didn't allow myself the luxury of softened emotions. I fucked her hard and brutally.

However, she was no longer the one I wanted at my mercy. "You know me, *dolcezza*." Using her nickname, *sweetness*, left a sour taste in my mouth. Another reason I was here, in her room instead of next to Allegra. Because there was only one pet I wanted to fuck, and she was just discovering her place in my life. There was no room for Francesca in my bed.

"I do know you." She brought my hand to her lips. "You need a woman with fire in your bed. Allegra is beautiful, but she's a child. Marry her if you have to, but don't pretend that she can ever understand you."

She was right. I wouldn't be content with a docile wife, or worse, a manipulative bitch like Elise or Giada. But she was wrong about Allegra.

I unlaced our fingers. "She's just like me, Francesca. She's not a child." I stood and crossed to the window, staring into the darkness of the night. "She's defiant, stubborn, and fucking loyal to her own detriment. I made the mistake of underestimating her. I suggest you not do the same."

"What do you want from me? Did you bring me here to show me how much you care for your wife?"

I bowed my head and repeated the words used to describe Allegra. "I'm stubborn, defiant, and apparently loyal to my own detriment. I made vows to her. I promised fidelity."

The bedding rustled. A moment later, she was next to me, comfortable and familiar, but not the woman I wanted.

"That's why you were angry with me?" she asked, referring to the

night she was in bed with me in Italy.

I nodded. Allegra had opened my eyes. I wanted her for my wife, wanted my hands around her throat, and my cock deep in her heat. Nothing could come between us.

Including Francesca.

I fucking hated the Irish bastard who had a secret connection to Allegra. I wanted to cut out his heart, bathe in his blood, and fuck my wife with his corpse at my feet.

Her loyal fucking heart wasn't just mine.

"She pushed, and I wanted to punish her by having you in my bed."

Her hands slipped around my waist. "Then come to bed. I miss you."

I cupped her cheek. "I can't."

She leaned into my touch. "You live by your own rules, Marco. Marry Allegra, but I know she won't be enough for you." She plucked at the closure of my belt. "Does she know what happened between us?"

"Nothing happened."

Francesca raised her brow. "Nothing?"

Nothing that I was going to acknowledge. I was drunk, half asleep, and my father had just been murdered. "Whatever happened between us was a mistake."

"You fucked my mouth the way you have every time I'm in your bed."

I growled, took a step back from her, and raked my fingers through my hair. "Forget what happened. Forget any ideas you have about our future. Francesca, there is no more us."

"I won't. I've always known you'd marry for your family. She can have your name, but she can't take you from me. I won't let her come between us."

"I don't belong to anyone." A hot spike of adrenaline seared through

me. I closed the space between us. Allegra was mine, mine to marry, mine to fuck, mine to punish. “If you think of telling her about what happened between us, understand she is like me in every way. Don’t provoke her.”

My wife was jealous, territorial, and deadly with a knife. If Allegra didn’t kill her for attempting a coup, I would.

Chapter Twelve

Allegra

I sat at the vanity off the master bathroom.

“You should be grateful there is still a marriage,” my mother said as she unzipped the bag containing my dress.

“Mom, I’ve dreamed of marrying Marco since I was fifteen. Excuse me if I’m less than enthusiastic about walking down a hallway to a dining room table to sign a license.” I slid off the seat and took the veil from the bag.

“I can’t believe this is your dress. You know you’d never have been allowed to wear this in the church.”

“Father Josue is going to do whatever Marco wants. He’s just as mafia as the rest of them.” Another branch on the Jilani family tree.

“My mom rested her hand on her hip. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’d hoped you’d change your mind, so I brought your dress. The beautiful one.”

“This is barely a wedding, so it doesn’t really matter.” I trailed my fingers along the beads of the plunging neckline. Sheer, white lace would cover my arms. The backless dress covered just enough not to be scandalous but clung to the curves of my hips. I’d promised Marco there wouldn’t be

tulle, but the simple mermaid bottom of the dress flared, with a slit beginning at my thigh.

“Mom, can you find Dee and ask her to help me?” I’d had a lethal dose of my mother already, and the day was just beginning.

“I would love to, but your sister isn’t speaking to me.”

I groaned. As desperate as I was to talk to Dee, there would be time. I didn’t want a fight before the wedding ceremony. I’d catch her while everyone was drinking and find a quiet corner. I couldn’t risk being overheard when I spoke about Knox.

“Maybe you should go downstairs and greet the guests.”

My mom huffed. “It’s not my house.”

“No, but everyone downstairs is our family. It would be nice if you made introductions to Marco’s family.”

“I don’t know them. Let your brother and father handle it. My daughter is getting married.”

Oh God, save me from my mother. Not that I was superstitious. If there were wedding taboos, I was pretty sure having my husband’s mistress in the wedding party would be at the top of the list closely followed by killing the mother of the bride.

Would my husband’s affection for the day count as something borrowed? Or perhaps I could borrow his brother, Stefano, to stand with me at the altar. I’d rather not have to stare into the eyes of the man who hated me as I listened to him promise lies masquerading as vows.

A hand to my abdomen did little to quell the flurry of suicidal butterflies swarming in my stomach.

I walked into the wardrobe and opened the top drawer to my jewelry armoire. For something old, I could wear my grandma’s diamond earrings. For something new, I had my dress and veil, and for something blue, I had

the hole in my heart.

I paused, staring into the drawer. I snapped my gaze over my shoulder. My fingers trembled as I lifted the piece of paper.

Crying is good luck for the bride, unless she's marrying a Bruno. Then it's fucking shit luck. But you have a thing for the asshole.

Oh, my god, Knox had been here. That stupid boy. I wasn't going to be able to hide him in my closet and feed him cookies this time. Goosebumps rippled over my flesh. Marco wanted to kill him.

I blinked the page back into focus.

At least he qualifies as something old, and I hope his balls are blue. The phone is something new, and the knife is still mine, so it's borrowed. If you need to stab your husband, I want you to do it with my knife.

Always and forever.

I pulled the blade I'd given back to Knox from its sheath.

Fight to the end or live for nothing.

I still had an hour before the service. An hour before I married Marco in front of his mistress. An hour to still be Allegra Jilani and to decide if I was going to fight for the life I wanted. I couldn't change Marco, but I could stop him from changing me.

"Mom, will you go get me something to eat?" I raised my voice from the walk-in closet. "I need something to calm my stomach." And I needed to be alone to turn on the phone and make a call.

"I could use a glass of wine. That dress is awful," she grumbled from the bedroom. Finally, the door clicked shut.

As I powered up the phone, I dashed into the bedroom and locked the door. I chewed my thumbnail while the seconds felt like minutes for the phone to ready.

Finally, I called the only number in the favorites.

“Hey, beautiful.”

Tears filled my eyes with the sound of his voice. “You are taking too many risks,” I softly said. “How did you get into the house?”

His deep, gravelly chuckle pissed me off. “Last night wouldn’t be the first time I’ve watched you sleep. It was the first time I wanted to kill Marco. He doesn’t deserve you. Please, let me get you out. I can hide you. Save you the way you saved me.”

I slid down the door and sat on the floor. “Everything is so fucked up. He took my phone. Even though he knows I’ve never been with anyone else, he accused me of meeting a lover. I think he’s more upset because I refused to tell him who you are.”

“He’s a fucking hypocrite. You saved all your firsts for him, and he’s fucking his mistress while you’re sleeping.”

I felt as if someone dropped me off a steep and jagged cliff. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t focus on his words with my mind spinning and pain tearing through my chest.

“What?” The word was barely a whisper.

I didn’t want to believe it, but I knew it was true. She touched him too freely. She was here, in my home, at my wedding, to fuck my husband on our wedding night.

I closed my eyes to keep tears from falling but failing. I hiccupped, and a sob exploded from my chest.

“I’ll fucking kill him.”

“Knox, no, you won’t. Nothing has changed.” I wiped my eyes with my fingertips. These would be the last tears I cried for Marco. “You told me. Mafia men take what they want.” But it didn’t have to mean he could have me. I’d swallow every regret, every ache, every dark, twisted need.

“Fuck, Ally, you have two choices. If you stay, you can’t challenge

him. I can hear it in your voice. You can't go against Marco alone. If you stay, you're his wife. You'll be at the mercy of that bastard. Or you let me get you out. Right now. We run."

This was what we did. We saved each other. No matter the risk. But not this time. "I can take care of myself. Please, take care of Dee. I haven't been able to talk to her. If you can get to me here, get to her. Tell her. She trusts you. Marco is watching me too closely."

"Fuck."

"He's looking for you." I gripped the phone tight. "He knows you're with the Irish mafia."

"Then he should think carefully about hurting the person I love."

The door handle jiggled.

"I have to go."

"Allegra, open the door." My mom pounded three times.

"He's not the only one watching you. I'm here."

My mom pounded again as I rushed to the balcony. "What do you mean, you're here? Where?"

"Do you really think I'd miss your wedding? He's a dick, but you love him. If you can't kill him, get rid of the chick across the hall. Show him how you'll handle his side pieces."

"I can't kill her."

"Allegra!"

"Coming," I hollered to my mom. "I have to go," I hissed into the phone.

"It's a beautiful day for a wedding. You should have it outside. If you decide you'd rather be a widow, text me."

The call disconnected. As the phone powered down, I rushed into the bathroom, opened the linen closet, tucked it into my box of tampons, and

pushed it to the rear of the shelf.

I dashed back into the bedroom and opened the door. “Sorry.”

“Why did you lock it? And who were you talking to?”

I closed the door behind her. “I was in the bathroom. I told you my stomach is upset. It’s nerves.”

My mom handed me a banana. “Marco suggested this if you’re hungry.”

I stared at it. Damn him. This was perverse torture. I laughed, a maniacal sound as more tears welled in my eyes. This was why I couldn’t hate him. But then I remembered he’d been with Francesca, and I couldn’t love him either.

Finally, I had my dress on. No flowers, no special song, no intimate moments to cherish. I ran my fingers over the sheer lace of my veil. Then I dropped it to the floor. I didn’t need a symbol of purity.

I wore a blood-red stone on my finger, and the dress left nothing of my figure to the imagination. I split the tulle and adjusted the blade from Knox strapped to my thigh.

“What are you doing?”

I lifted my head at my mother’s shocked gasp. “I’m a mafia wife.” I fluffed the tulle. “This isn’t a wedding. It’s executing an agreement.” And I was going to remind my husband of his vows. “I’m ready.”

“You aren’t wearing shoes.” My mom held her hand to her heart.

“No one is going to be looking at my feet.” My ankle was still too tender for heels. I opened the door and strode down the hall.

“Your veil.” Mom snatched it off the ground and rushed to catch up to me. “Wait for your father. He wants to walk you down the aisle.”

“No. He’s not giving me away. I was sold for power and soldiers.”

“You foolish girl.” She grabbed my arm and squeezed. “His mistress is

sipping champagne, greeting your guests, and sparkling like a Bruno diamond.” Her gaze raked down my body. “This dress is indecent. Mafia men don’t share. Every man in this house is going to see your body.”

I ran my hand along the bodice. The lace and fabric played peekaboo with flesh. I’d chosen the dress because the heat of Marco’s eyes made me melt. With every touch, I’d submitted to his fierce, possessive claim over me.

Now his whore was in the room across from mine, and I was a prisoner in my home.

I paused at the stairs. “Where are the vows being said?”

“Father Josue is waiting with your guests in the reception room.”

“Please ask everyone to gather outside near the pool. Out in the open.”

“Everyone is already waiting.”

“I’m not asking.” My voice rose. “Look at me, mother.” Tears filled my eyes again. “Stop criticizing me. Stop arguing with me. Stop pretending that either one of us has a damn thing to say about today.”

I grabbed the veil and tossed it over the banister. The white gossamer lace floated to the floor below.

“This isn’t a celebration. Marco doesn’t want to marry me. If he doesn’t hate me yet, give it time, he will.” I was yelling now. “I’m not wearing shoes or a veil, just like I’m not going to pretend this is anything but a business agreement. I’m a bribe not a bride.”

“Shh.”

Deidre rushed to the bottom of the stairs. “Are you ready for dad?”

“No.” I was ready to shove my mother down the stairs. “Can you please get Romi?”

Deidre nodded and returned a moment later with Romi.

“What’s going on?” Tim stepped into the foyer.

I met them at the bottom landing. Romi pulled a tissue from her sleeve.

“I was prepared to cry, too,” she said and smiled as she dabbed the mascara smudges on my face.

“What do you want?” Tim spoke low, his tone calming the pounding of my heart.

“I want to get married outside.”

“Done,” he said. “Give me five minutes. Anything else?”

I shook my head. Deidre left with Tim. My mom huffed, walked around me, and headed into the other room. And then I was alone with Romi.

“You love him?” She picked up the veil from the floor.

An incredulous laugh bubbled into my throat. “As much as I hate him.”

She stood on a step above me to fix my hair.

“I don’t want to wear the veil.”

She curled a finger under my chin. “You’re fire, Allegra. You burn brilliant and beautiful, but you’re dangerous.” Her gaze narrowed. “A man holds fire too close, he risks smothering the flame. If he allows the fire to burn, he risks the flames becoming uncontrollable. Only powerful men can manipulate fire and not be burned.”

I hadn’t had enough wine for her analogy. “He hates me.” I didn’t have to hide from Romi. I slept alone. She’d know Marco shared Francesca’s bed with her soaked sheets, and the scent of sex on the pillow.

I hated Francesca, hated that he wanted her. Marco and I were falling apart, yet I was still holding on. My body ached for his touch as much as my heart hurt for his whispered words, his laugh, and his trust.

I wanted back what we had, but not everything lost could be found.

“Men like Marco don’t play with fire unless they like the heat.” She tucked the comb of the veil into my hair and spread the delicate lace around my shoulders. “He sees your fire, and he can’t help but be drawn to it.” She smiled. “And he’s yours.”

“My princess.”

I turned at the sound of my father’s voice and glanced into his eyes.

“You’re beautiful.” He stepped closer. His still strong and formidable hand trembled as he grasped my fingers and brought them to his lips.

Romi handed me her tissue. “I’ll make sure everyone is waiting outside.”

She slipped away. My father’s face softened. “It was hard to imagine you as you are now when you were promised to Marco.” His eyes grew heavy as they searched my face. “You were my feisty, little girl, full of mischief and always ready to take your punishment for your disobedience.”

“Punishments always came from mom.” He was busy running his business to concern himself with the weapon he’d had in his wife.

“I’m worried. You’re stubborn, Allegra. You should’ve been a boy. You and Santi are so much alike.” He shook his head. “Maybe I don’t know how to raise girls. Dee is just like you.”

“She’s a good girl.” Maybe a bit less concerned about being caught, but she wasn’t best friends with a boy in the Irish mafia.

“She’s a little shit. I don’t think I can find a husband willing to take her.”

“Maybe you should let her meet a boy, fall in love, and choose for herself.”

His eyes grew glassy. “You grew up, and I’ve worried more. Ally, maybe this isn’t right for you. Maybe he’s not right for you.”

I squeezed my father’s hand. “Take me to Marco. I’m ready to get married.”

Marco

The sun was warm on my face. Thirty people gathered on the patio. Stefano stood next to me as Father Josue situated his binder on the small bistro table on his right.

The chatter stilled as Allegra appeared with her father at the double doors leading from the house. As she walked toward me, the flowing bottom of her dress split, giving a hint of leg and her bare feet. And the knife strapped to her thigh.

A hot wave of need surged through my veins, burned into my gut, and roared into my cock. I tugged on the panels of my suit coat to cover the bulge of my erection.

The dress was a masterpiece. A sheer lace corset hugged her torso. The smooth swell of her breasts crested the top. Sunlight caught the crystals, making the dress sparkle like diamonds.

Stefano leaned into me. "I'll trade you places."

"Fuck off."

Father Josue blotted his face with a handkerchief.

I swallowed, my throat closing with tension. For five years, I'd fought the idea of a wife. Now, Allegra was all I wanted.

I let my gaze linger on hers, then drift lower, across the pillow of her breasts. I'd touched and tasted every inch of her flawless skin. The priest began speaking, but the words faded behind the rushing of blood in my ears.

She stood before me in a dress meant to send a man to his knees, her gaze spearing daggers into my chest, and hate radiating from her. Unless she accepted that she was mine, she was only beginning to taste hate.

"Until death do us part," I whispered to her.

"That parting may come sooner than you expect," she hissed back to me. Her mouth twisted into a smirk. "I'd caution you to sleep lightly, but you prefer to share your bed with a whore."

Stefano bit back a chuckle. Father Josue stuttered on his speech, his gaze slipping from me to Allegra.

“And you choose to sleep with Irish dogs.”

Her eyes sparked. “Dogs are loyal. Unlike Italian mafia husbands.”

“On the day of our wedding, you finally admit to fucking him.”

Father Josue spoke louder.

“You know I haven’t. But you’re not entitled to my secrets when you’ve already broken your vows to me.”

“I’m going to kill the man who put his hands on you.”

“Marco,” Father Josue scolded. “Wait for confession,” he said under his breath.

Allegra took a half step closer. There was no use masking our words. Allegra and I were conducting our own version of a wedding. This was our war.

“You’ll need to kill your brother because he’s going to have his hands on me when he trains me.”

Stefano bowed his head, stifling a laugh.

My jaw clenched. “Train with Stef? That’s never going to happen.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s never going to happen between us.”

Stefano cracked his neck. “Interesting vows.”

Father Josue rolled his eyes, then lowered his voice. “If you want to marry, this is the time to listen and only speak to the questions I ask you. Marco and Allegra,” he began, “without reservation, do you freely give yourself to each other in marriage? Will you honor each other and raise your children according to the law of Christ and His church?”

“I do.” I waited for Allegra to agree.

A tear slipped onto her cheek. She glanced into the trees surrounding the property. “I do,” she finally stated.

“I assume any issues between you can be resolved in the sanctuary of marriage. Marco, do you consent before God?”

The rest of his words were lost as I stared into Allegra’s glistening eyes. I repeated the vows that I would cherish her. I took her to be my wife, and she made the same promises to take me as her husband.

Father Josue put his hand on my shoulder. “Do you have the ring?”

“She’s wearing it.”

Allegra slid the ring from her finger and placed it in the priest’s hand. I did the same with my Bruno family ring. He made the sign of the cross, and then he blessed the rings.

“May you always have a deep faith in each other. Work on that,” he grumbled.

My hand trembled as I slid the ring onto Allegra’s finger. She stared at me as if surprised I’d be affected by our marriage. As her small hand clutched mine, the wind stilled, and silence settled over our guests.

With her head bowed, I couldn’t see her eyes. Eyes that hid secrets, but also spoke truth. Eyes I could drown in when she’d writhe beneath me. A knot tightened in my gut. Did she fear me or did the other man in her life cause the haunting shadows and fear darkening her eyes?

She’d sworn to be loyal to me. Tonight, I’d have the name of the man coming between us.

“Marco?” The priest spoke my name as a question.

I hated shifting my gaze from her, for even a moment.

“You may now kiss the bride,” Father Josue repeated.

She blinked, her hazel eyes more green with unshed tears. Long lashes swept lower, and when they lifted, fire swirled in her irises. I grazed my thumb across her face to the edge of her veil. Sliding my hand beneath the delicate lace, I tunneled through her hair, and banded my fingers around her

neck.

She braced her hands on my chest, pressing her palm against the scar beneath my suit. “You’re not using your tongue on me after you’ve had it in any part of her.”

Father Josue grunted.

Fucking hell. I lowered my face and crashed my lips onto hers.

A soft whimper slipped from her lips. For a moment, she stiffened, fighting against the intense chemistry between us. Two flames becoming an inferno. I growled, and her mouth opened, her arms snaked around my neck, and I slid in for a denied taste of her.

I crushed her closer, the soft curves of her body fitting like a puzzle against the hard edges of mine. She twisted her fingers in my hair, rose onto her tiptoes, and her tongue glided along mine.

Stefano whooped beside me.

“I need a drink,” Father Josue said. “These two are going to kill each other.”

Deidre laughed nearby. “Do you think he’s suffocating her?”

I cupped her skull, twisted my fingers in her hair, and kissed her deeper. Passion eclipsed any anger still simmering in my gut. I sucked her tongue, stole the breath from her lungs, and claimed her as my wife.

“When she said I do, she might have been making a promise to make his life interesting,” Stefano said.

“She’s going to make *my* life hell,” Ant said. “I have to keep him from killing her and anyone who comes near her. Yes, we know you can hear us,” he said to me.

I ignored him, sucked on Allegra’s lip, continuing to tease and taste her warm, wet mouth.

“I’m not sure if she’s thrilled to be kissing him.” Stefano laughed

again. “But if it keeps him from speaking and making a bigger ass of himself, let the kissing continue.”

I deepened the kiss, running my hand along her open back, feeling her satin skin beneath my fingertips. There were issues between us, but in this, she was mine. My cock crushed against her pelvis, and my thigh sliced between hers as she ground against me. I pulled her hard and flush against my body, plundered her mouth, and gripped her ass.

“It doesn’t look like he’s giving her a choice.” Orlando snickered. “Let’s get a drink.”

As the voices drifted away, I parted from her.

“There are always choices,” she said.

Drawing in a deep inhale, I calmed the wild pounding in my chest. “Are we going to continue to argue, Mrs. Bruno, because I’d rather have your mouth engaged in other activities. One toast before I have you in our bed.”

“*Mrs. Bruno* in name only. The kiss was for the two women salivating over your dick. Literally. Do you think I’d let you in my bed when you’re fucking Francesca?”

“I think I could fuck you right here, and no one would question my claim to do so.”

“Are you sure? We both know you have enemies. You don’t want to make another one.”

I banded my arm around her and propelled her toward the door.

“Let me go.” She twisted to shrug off my arm.

I held tighter. “Don’t make this difficult.”

“Allegra—” Elise chased after us.

“Give me five fucking minutes,” I snapped.

She huffed. I didn’t fucking care. Inside the house, I opened the first door I came to and propelled my wife into the library. She lunged away from

me, ripped the veil from her head, and dropped it on the ground.

While taking off my suit coat, I took a step toward her. With a tug, I loosened my tie. “You’re my wife now. Are you going to deny me what I want?” I rubbed the heel of my palm across the scar on my chest.

She took two steps back from me and blew a tendril of hair from her face. “I became your wife weeks ago. That hasn’t made a difference to you. I believed you. I trusted you.”

“You lied to me!”

She was still keeping secrets from me. We were both sleeping with our enemy. Both were convinced of the other’s betrayal.

“But I never betrayed you.”

I’d grown tired of her game. I wanted her to fight with me, not against me. “Tell me who he is to you.”

“He’s everything you’re not.”

With deadly precision, she struck a fatal blow to my control. I roared, grabbed the bronzed sculpture from the corner table, and hurled it across the room. She screamed, and I lunged.

“He’s nothing to you.” I closed my fingers around her throat and forced her against the wood-paneled wall. “Why do you insist on pushing me? Is this a game to you? Do you not understand? You. Are. Mine. Every breath. Every beat of your heart. Every tear you cry. I won’t share you.”

“I never wanted anyone else.” Tears filled her eyes. “I hugged him, but I didn’t fuck him.”

My grip lightened but my gut remained coiled, the tension flowing like acid through my veins.

“But you fucked Francesca,” she spat. “You slept with her after you made promises to me. You know what you do to me, the way you touch me drives me crazy. Nothing feels as good as you, but I’d rather fuck every one

of your soldiers than have your dick in me after it's been in her."

I stroked my fingers along her throat and cupped her jaw. With a firm grip, I held her head immobile. "One of my soldiers touches you, I'll put a fucking bullet through their skull."

She licked her upper lip, and her heart raced, the pulse fluttering in the column of her neck. "You might want to hire more soldiers."

I reached into the slit of her dress. Her breath hitched, and she stared hard into my eyes.

"Or I can keep you locked in a room." I dragged my knuckles over the blade at her thigh. "Chain you to my bed." I grabbed the hilt and pulled the knife from the sheath. "And fuck you until there is nothing left of you or your cunt."

She inhaled sharply as the dull edge of the blade slid along her thigh.

"Be a good girl, and don't move." I glanced down and slid the knife against the slit in her dress. The fabric ripped against the razor edge from her thigh to her throat. Her breasts spilled from the lace, and her belly quivered with the hiss of my breath. I scored the blade across her nipple. Pinpricks of blood dotted the line.

I laved my tongue over the scratch, then closed my mouth over her nipple, and my teeth sank into her tender flesh. "Da quel momento sarai mia moglie e sarai fedele solo a me." *You will be my wife, and you will be loyal to me, and only to me.*

She closed her eyes as I slid the knife through the lace of her panties. The scrap of sheer material fell to the floor. Spinning the knife, I poised the handle at her drenched slit.

The blade sliced into my fingers. A feral need to mark her as mine tore through me like cutting shards of glass. Blood trickled along my hand, onto my wrist, and dripped to the floor. This was the second time I'd bled for her.

I tilted my head to the side. The blade was inscribed. *Fight to the end or live for nothing.*

“You wish to fight *against* me, topolina.” I pushed the handle into her pussy. “Whereas I would wish for you to fight *with* me.”

She moaned as I pulled the knife from inside her. “I’m not your little mouse anymore. You brought *her* here.” She choked on a breath, fighting her emotions. I felt the hollow ache in her voice deep in my gut. I’d caused her insecurity. I wanted her broken, to depend on me to put her back together.

“I did, but you’re the only woman I want to touch.” Still holding the knife, I dropped to my knees before her. I pressed a kiss to her stomach. My wife. The woman who would be the mother of my children.

I smeared my blood, painting her pussy. With my tongue, I spread her lips. “You’re the only want I want to taste.” I licked the length of her pussy. She was soft velvet and fiery heat. Temptation, but I wasn’t worthy of salvation. I wasn’t worthy of her, but I was still going to take her.

Her sweet cream coated my tongue, moistened my lips, and her scent only fed my hunger for more of her. “The only one I want to fuck.”

I dropped the knife, gripped her leg, forced her open, and sucked hard to her clit. Blood from my hand smeared along her thigh. She clawed at my scalp, grinding her cunt into my face.

“Have you been with her?” Her quivering voice echoed through the room, needing the truth I couldn’t give her. Not now, not when this was all we had between us.

I licked and sucked, working her clit against my lips.

“Marco,” she cursed my name as she came. Tears glistened on her face, her eyes closed, and she broke against my mouth.

Her plaintive wail pierced deep into my soul. I recognized that I was the monster in her story. I wanted to dwell in the darkest parts of her mind,

twist her emotions until she craved only me. I would own her soul the way she owned mine. Because somehow she'd crawled under my skin and become something more, something dangerous to my sanity.

I wouldn't let her go, and I'd never give her to another. A feral need surged through me. I stood, fought the buckle to my belt, and lowered the zipper. "I need inside you."

"I need you, too." Allegra freed my cock as I lifted her. Pressing her against the wall, I angled my hips and thrust inside her. Her tattered dress ripped and fell from her body. Her bare feet locked around my hips as I thrust, and she bucked against me.

I opened my mouth over her neck, abrading her skin with my beard, and sucking her flesh. Her tits crushed between us, and her fingers clawed at my shoulders while I speared hard and fast into her.

I needed more. Holding her tight, I withdrew from her body and lowered us to the floor.

"On your dress." I flipped her over. Lace, tulle, and satin pillowed beneath her hands and knees. Positioned behind her, I pushed my trousers and boxers onto my thighs, aligned my cock to her opening, and plowed hard and deep into her.

She grasped handfuls of her dress, her back arched, and she braced against my punishing thrusts. I dug my fingers into her hips, forcing her to rock into me, and I shafted into her again and again, a wild cyclone of heat, pleasure, and curses.

"Mine to fuck, until death do us part." And then I'd fuck her in the afterlife. Her juices glistened on my cock. I slid deep into her channel, the firm globes of her ass nestled against my groin. "Do you want to come, little mouse?"

"Marco. Please. Make me come. Oh god, make me come." Her head

and shoulders lowered, her forehead touching the ground as she rocked on her knees.

Momentum built. I slammed into her, hitting the top of her core. Tight walls surrounded my dick in slick, wet heat. Her body trembled beneath my hands.

“We can’t lie, not about this.” I leveraged higher, fucked her harder, fucked her until she pleaded, my name on her lips, to make her come. “Who am I?”

“Marco Bruno.”

“*Who am I?*” I asked again.

“*Tu sei mio marito. You’re my husband.*” She cried out with a shattering climax. A violent storm of whimpers and gasped poured from her lips. Her body convulsed, strangling my cock in hard pulses, and bathing my balls in her release.

A string of curses fell from my mouth as I came, shooting hot spurts of cum into my wife. I fucked, and she submitted, taking every hard thrust of my cock into her body. I fucked her through the last fluttering ripples, through her tears, and shivers.

Sweat slicked her skin. I pressed my lips to her spine as I slipped from inside her. She collapsed to the floor, curling onto her side on the rumped remains of her wedding dress.

I tugged up my briefs and pants and zipped up. Blood stained her flesh, and cum smeared between her thighs. Angry welts from the knife scored her chest, and blood darkened the lines cut into her skin with the tip of the blade.

With a hand to each of her thighs, I pushed her to her back, and opened her legs. I trailed my fingers through the slickness of our releases, rubbing cum and blood into her skin, my masterpiece painting of torture and carnal pleasure.

She took my hand in hers, turned it, hissing at the deepest gouges on the pad of my pinky.

“Does it hurt?” She put pressure on the swollen flesh.

“Not when I have you beneath me.” Pain only made the pleasure more intense. Sitting back, I leaned against the wall, and she curled into my lap.

“When you’re inside me, that’s when I hurt the most.”

I stilled, my hand on her shoulder, her hair tumbling over my knuckles and her skin soft beneath my fingertips. “Because of Francesca?”

Her palm slid along my thigh, and her head rested in my lap.

“I didn’t fuck her.”

A small exhale ghosted past her lips. “You were in her room last night.”

I’d been sure she was asleep. “Nothing happened.”

She leaned up, her eyes searching mine for lies. “Did you kiss her?”

“I haven’t kissed her, haven’t fucked her, haven’t put my mouth on any part of her.”

“You kissed her neck when she arrived.”

“To punish you.”

She shuddered with an exhale. “Did you bring her here as your mistress?”

I tucked her hair behind her ears. “Do you want the truth? Because there are too many secrets between us.” And still one that I would keep. I hadn’t touched Francesca. What she’d done to me in Italy had been a mistake. One I’d remedied after our conversation last night.

“No.” She pulled away. “You’re allowed your secrets, just as I have mine.”

I growled, pulled in one leg, and draped my wrist over my knee. “You still choose him over me.”

“Don’t ask me to choose.” She wiped between her legs with the edge of her blood-stained wedding dress. “Trust in this.” She pointed to the floor, the rumbled dress, blood, and cum. “Trust that I’m yours.”

I stood, unbuttoned my shirt, shrugged it off, and handed it to her. “You won’t see him again. He’s dead if he comes near you.” He was dead when I found him. He had too much influence over my wife.

She slipped her arms into my shirt. “Get rid of Francesca or I will, and I’ll bury her in the backyard.”

Chapter Thirteen

Allegra

With a glass of champagne in my hand, I mingled with my family. I was intimately aware of Marco. He stayed close to Ant, but his gaze never drifted from me for long.

With my dress destroyed, I'd changed into a white skirt and sleeveless turtleneck to cover the redness and bruising on my neck from both his hands and his mouth. A violent necklace from my fierce husband. Dangerously brutal. He was power. He was destruction. But he was also everything I needed.

I wanted to believe I was everything he needed. I'd hold onto the encounter we'd had in the library. He lifted a drink to his mouth.

A white bandage wrapped his palm. The triumphant gleam sparking in his eyes stripped me bare. Raw emotions swirled in my belly, taunting me to give in to him again. My pussy was wet with arousal, my nipples tight with need, and my heart dangerously close to breaking open.

Before I could fall, I needed to speak with Dee. I assumed she'd be with Orlando and Emilio, but they were sitting with soldiers drinking shots and laughing.

I approached Orlando. We'd barely spoken since the night I'd met with Knox. "Have you seen Deidre?" I asked him.

Orlando leaned back in the chair. "Congratulations, Mrs. Bruno. You're my sister now, so I suppose I can't ignore you. At least not without pissing off your husband. You don't have exclusivity on that."

I didn't have exclusivity at anything to do with Marco.

Emilio leaned forward, refusing to get involved in the conversation.

"I know you're upset with me," I said to him. "I'm sorry you got caught up in my drama with Marco." I wasn't going to beg him to forgive me, nor was I going to make excuses or say I'd never do it again. That would be a lie.

"I'm out of here." Orlando stood.

I put my hand on his arm. "Wait. Have you seen her?"

"Yeah, I've seen her."

"When? I'm looking for her."

"A while ago. I wasn't in the mood to be social."

"Did you talk to her? You're important to her. I know she can be clingy, but she needs you."

"She's cool, but I can't. It's done. I liked her." He rolled his eyes. "I still like her, but I'm not fucking risking my brother's anger for you or your sister. You're not worth it, and neither is she."

I snatched my hand back.

"Don't. Don't act like I'm the dick in this. You were still out fucking around on my brother while he had his hands around my neck. Before you, he'd never threatened to kill me. I don't know what the fuck you're up to but leave me out of it. I don't have a fucking death wish. I'm his fucking brother, and he still nearly choked me out."

"What?"

“What the fuck did you think would happen? I didn’t know the rules he’d set for you, but you did.”

Guilt brewed in my belly because he was right. I didn’t want him involved, but this was their world. I didn’t make the rules, so I couldn’t help breaking a few. When it came to Dee, I would again.

“I only planned to be gone for a few minutes,” I said. “I had no idea he was on his way home.”

“You fucked us both. You’re trapped here with no phone, and I’m on probation. I’m a fucking capo, and I have a fucking babysitter. It’s all work and no fun for me.”

“I’ll talk to Marco. It wasn’t your fault.”

He snorted a laugh. “Are you for fucking real? Leave it alone. I don’t need you fighting my battles for me.”

“I understand why you’re angry with me, but don’t shut out Dee. She needs you.”

His shoulders softened. “I don’t want to hurt her, either.”

Emilio rested a hand on Orlando’s shoulder. “Yeah, she’s our little patatina. Until Marco loosens the restrictions, we’ll hang out with her online.”

“Thank you.”

Emilio cocked his head to the side. “Yeah, well, it’s your fuck up, not hers.”

I smiled. “I’ll keep you out of my fuck ups in the future.”

“Try not to piss off Marco,” Orlando said. “The rest of us suffer for it. Keep your knife out of our back.”

“Use it on Marco. We much prefer his mood after you’ve carved him up with your blade.” Emilio chuckled. He and Orlando walked toward the guesthouse.

My mother came along beside me. “You look lovely.”

I turned to her. “I’d still be wearing the dress if Marco hadn’t ripped it from my body.”

“Oh no. Was he furious?” She covered her mouth with her fingers. “I warned you it was too much, and that he’d hate it.”

A laugh bubbled up my throat and out of my mouth. “Mom, he didn’t hate it. You can calm down now. The marriage has been consummated.”

She inhaled sharply. “Really, while we were all out here waiting for you?”

My belly tumbled. Marco and I weren’t fixed, but we were better. “You were right, he has his whore sipping champagne, but it’s not Francesca. It’s me.” I took a sip from the tall flute.

She tsked. “Do you think he’ll approve of that language?”

When had I become so hateful toward my mother? Maybe I’d always just been afraid of her punishments. I hadn’t lied to my father. Mom was the disciplinarian, and she always found fault.

“Have you seen Dee?”

“Yes, she was on her phone in the kitchen with Romi.” She tipped her glass to her lips.

There was Bruno wine, champagne, platters of food, but this wasn’t a wedding reception. There was no cake, no photographer, and no plans for dancing into the night. The license had been signed, Father Josue had gone from traumatized to intoxicated, and the sun was dipping low on the horizon.

If I didn’t get to Dee now, I’d lose my opportunity. Just because Marco had thoroughly fucked me on the floor, didn’t mean he was going to give me back my phone or let me leave the house. My husband, his capos, and soldiers were all an impenetrable wall of scrutiny.

When it came to Knox, I couldn’t trust Marco. This was still my

prison. Marco would still see Knox as a threat, and that made Marco lethal. And if I didn't want to be the match to light the fuse on the Irish and Italian war, I needed Knox standing between Dee and Patrick Byrne.

Dee wasn't in the kitchen. Worry wormed into my thoughts. Would she sneak away from my wedding?

I checked the library, game room, front entertaining room, even the formal dining room. I headed upstairs. Perhaps she'd wanted to lie down in one of the unoccupied bedrooms. I stopped at the master bedroom. With my fingers on the handle, I heard voices from across the hall.

My stomach plummeted. My first thoughts were laced with fear. Francesca was poison in my mind. I imagined her in Marco's arms, his hands on her, his dick taking her to the precipice of pleasure. I hated her.

I stepped closer to the door. With the blood roaring through my ears and the rampant pounding of my heart, I could barely hear the muted voices on the other side of the cracked open door.

I stepped closer, stood beside the doorjamb, and out of their line of site. Inside, I trembled, their voices sending an icy chill over my flesh.

"Of course, he wants you here," one of the women said. My Italian was good, but the woman spoke quickly. It had to be Giada speaking to Francesca. "He came to your bed last night."

"He didn't stay." I heard the pout in her voice. "I needed him, but he wouldn't fuck me."

"How could he with the American bitch across the hall?"

My breaths came fast and shallow.

"He doesn't want her to know about us."

There was rustling. I closed my eyes, focusing on the words, translating in my mind, but I had to be wrong. There couldn't be an *us* between them.

“Now that they’re married, he’ll be back in your bed. He couldn’t risk losing the family association.”

“He’s never kissed me the way he kissed her.”

How did Marco kiss her? Part of me delighted in knowing she was jealous of the way he’d kissed me. The rest was of me pissed.

I brought my fingers to my whisker burned lips, remembering the feel of his mouth on mine and the taste of his tongue. He didn’t just kiss me, he wrecked me, leaving a path of destruction. One touch and I’d forgotten to protect my heart.

Giada laughed. “I’ve seen him kiss you. You please him in ways she would never understand. She’s practically a child. Don’t be fooled. He is only interested in building the Bruno empire.”

I leaned closer to the door.

“He was mine. Two weeks ago, I had his cock in my mouth, and he wasn’t calling her name as he was coming down my throat.”

“I told you. He’s still yours. Marco is not a man in love with his wife. If you want him, he’s yours. We just need to get rid of Allegra, give her a reason to go home to her mommy and daddy. She’ll scare easy enough.”

“If Marco finds out, he’ll be furious,” Francesca said.

“And just like he’s done to both of us, he’ll fuck his anger out.”

“Oh, I need him angry. A hard, angry fuck. But, Giada, you need to pick a different Bruno. Marco is mine.”

“Oh god, we were over a long time ago. I still need to be close to him. I’m not going to let him push me out of the business. I have too much invested, and Savio is a Bruno. I have to protect his place in this family. Orlando is too young for me. I’d break him, and Stefano is unpredictable. I think he’d break me.”

Francesca laughed.

“Ant is always going to be close to Marco.”

The need to vomit surged into my throat. I couldn't swallow. I could barely breathe.

Marco lied to me.

I told him we could have our secrets, but Francesca wouldn't be one of them. A surge of heat warmed my blood. My fingers itched to feel the weight of my blade. This was the last time. He could trust me or not. I didn't care anymore. I wanted Francesca alone. The next time she spoke my husband's name, she'd feel the sharp edge of my blade when I slit her throat.

The door opened. Giada startled.

“Marco is looking for you,” I said to her.

Giada and Francesca exchanged a glance. “I'll go with her,” Francesca said.

“He didn't ask for you. I thought we could chat for a couple of minutes.” I pushed open the bedroom door and backed her into the room.

“I'll be right back,” Giada said. “I'll let Marco know you're with Allegra.”

Francesca went deeper into the room and crossed her arms over her chest. “You obviously want to speak to me.”

“I do.” I left the door open and prowled the perimeter of the room, letting the tension build to a suffocating intensity. “Do you know that my marriage to Marco was arranged when I was fifteen? A three-year engagement, and then to be married after I turned eighteen. Two years ago.”

“Twenty is still young to be married,” she said.

I shrugged. “Even before the announcement of my engagement, I knew I'd marry a high-level mafioso. It's the way things are done. I assume you aren't in the same position since you're Marco's whore and not a wife to a don.”

“A whore?” She laughed. “Marco and I are exclusive.”

“Not that exclusive. My husband fucked me on the floor of the library this afternoon.” And swore he wasn’t fucking this manipulating bitch.

“Are you really going to try and play the jealous wife? You can’t expect fidelity, not from a powerful man like Marco. If he wants me in his bed, I will be. There’s nothing you can do about it. Men like Marco take what they want. They never want their wife.”

“I heard you speaking with Giada.” I crossed to her, lifted the hem of my skirt, and pulled my blade from the sheath.

“What’re you doing?” Her voice cracked as she took quick steps back from me.

I ran my finger along the dull side of the knife. “Don’t try to run. I’m just as deadly throwing the knife as I would be sliding it between your ribs and watching you bleed out.” I tilted my head at her and narrowed my gaze. “But then you should know that. If you’re fucking my husband, you’ve seen my blade work.”

She gasped. “You cut him.” One palm slapped over her mouth and the other covered her chest, as if protecting herself from a vicious cut to her breast. “I thought he’d been in a fight. You scarred him.”

A shadow of black bled into my chest. She’d seen Marco without a shirt. I didn’t need any more proof of his infidelity. He might consider me his, but he was a liar. The vows were broken before they ever slipped past his lips.

“Listen to me. Any part of you that touches my husband, I’m cutting off. You claim to understand Marco and mafia men. Maybe you do. You may even know Marco better than I do. But understand this. He owns me. He knows it. I know it. And you fucking know it.”

I poised the blade at the hollow of her neck. The blacks of her eyes

widened. Tears trickled onto her cheek.

“I’m a prisoner in my marriage. Nothing you plot with Giada will give me my freedom. So don’t fucking push me.” I let the knife sink into her flesh until blood bubbled to the surface.

“You can’t kill me.”

I dug the knife into her a little deeper. “Why? Do you think my husband will protect you?”

Her gaze shifted to the door.

Giada gasped from the doorway, and I glanced over my shoulder. Marco stood next to her, his hardened gaze on mine.

“Stop her,” Giada hissed, attempting to come into the room.

Marco extended his arm, blocking her way.

I turned back to Francesca. “Ask him to save you, to prove how much he loves you.”

Her lips trembled. “Marco?”

He entered the room and came up behind me. Giada scrambled in after him. He cast a daring glare at her, forcing her to pause.

“Stay out of this,” he said to her.

His voice deepened with a dangerous edge if that was even possible.

Then I remembered his lies.

“Are you going to allow this?” Giada’s voice raised. “Marco, stop her.”

His breath was warm against my ear. “What do you want?”

“A confession from you. You said there was no one since me.” My heart slammed into my ribs, trying to break. “You lied to me.”

My body vibrated with adrenaline. Every muscle tensed. We’d attracted an audience. Ant and Stefano stood behind Giada. Santi stood in the doorway with Tim and Carmine.

Marco was quiet. “This isn’t the place.”

“Tell me! Stop lying to me!”

A guttural roar vibrated out of him. “Do you want to hear how she sucked my cock? How I was drunk in my bed, dreaming of your wet mouth surrounding me, how I called out for you, *topolina*, as I spilled my seed down her throat?”

I gasped, the blade slipping on her flesh.

“When I woke with her in my bed, I wanted my hands around her neck, to squeeze the life from her body for causing me to break my vow to you.”

Tears coursed down Francesca’s face. Defeat reflected in her dark eyes. “I didn’t know.”

How could she? Nothing Marco said explained why she was here now. “And yet you bring her here to humiliate me. You take pleasure in hurting me.”

“No, to motivate you. We’re the same, wife. We don’t tolerate interference. I won’t stop you from killing her. Do whatever you need to do,” he said. “And then give me *his* name so I can do the same.”

I lowered the knife. “Decide if I’m the one you’d rather fuck—and fight—with because one of us is leaving. But I won’t barter her life for another.”

Francesca covered the cut on her neck with her palm and sobbed. Giada clutched her close.

“I’ll take care of her,” Ant said to Marco.

I turned to Marco. “Don’t follow me. I’m too angry, and you need to decide who you want. If it’s me, you need to trust me.”

Stefano stepped out of my way, however he wore a big fucking grin. I couldn’t stop the tilt of my lips. I walked out of the room with Santi next to me. Tim followed behind.

“Are you okay?” Santi asked as we walked down the hall.

“You don’t need to worry. I can take care of myself.”

He curled his fingers around my elbow. “I know. But be careful. They call him The Enforcer for a reason.”

“We’re defining our marriage.” I wasn’t going to be like my mom, suffering the role of a mafia wife in service to her husband. The only power she ever had was over us kids, so she reigned like a dictator.

Tim chuckled. “I have a feeling you’re going to put a strain on the alliance between the Bruno’s and the Jilani’s.”

We made our way back out to the patio.

“Santi, have you seen Dee?”

“She was bored and wanted to play video games. One of the guys drove her home.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek. “As for a wedding with no planning, your dress was too sexy, and I wanted cake. But I loved seeing you put Bruno in his place. My sister is fierce with a knife. I don’t want to know where you learned or which one of my asshole soldiers taught you.” He glared at Tim. “You got something to confess?”

“Fuck no. It wasn’t me. But I’m glad she’s sending that smirking bitch back to Italy.”

Francesca hadn’t left yet, and I wasn’t the one who could make her leave. Marco had to decide. Even if he chose me, I wasn’t sure he’d send her away. I doubted anyone but his father had ever given him an ultimatum.

Santi walked away, but I took a step closer to Tim. “I need to patch things up with Dee,” I said. “She’s avoiding me. You know that I can’t leave, and I don’t have my phone.”

“Don’t do it, Ally.” He glanced around. “Don’t ask me to do something you know is going to get one or both of us in trouble.”

“I won’t. When you come over tomorrow, bring Dee with you. You’ll probably have to lie a bit because if you tell her you’re bringing her to me,

she won't come."

"Why?"

"Because she's a shit, and I miss her. I've made a mess of my relationship with her, but I can fix it if I can just talk to her."

She hated me right now because I'd alienated her from Orlando and Emilio. She could hate me more tomorrow after I confessed. She could hate Tim for checking on her online activity. And she could hate Knox, although that was unlikely since she'd always been protective of my best friend, too.

But she'd be safe. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to her. If she wanted to be stubborn, I'd even tell Santi. I might not be able to stop her. He would.

Marco

Finally, the house was quiet. I sat in the library with Ant, smoking a cigar because my father should have been here today. He would've loved Allegra. She was fearless, beautiful, and deadly. And she pissed me off and made me hard in equal measure.

She had me wanting to strap her to my torture chair and make her confess her secrets, and wanting to tie her to my bed so I could fuck her into submission.

A highlight reel of the day played through my mind. The vows followed by the sweet heat of fucking my wife. But nothing had ever turned me on as much as seeing her with a blade to Francesca's throat.

Not that I wanted to see Francesca dead. I had no doubt Giada had instigated the confrontation. She wasn't happy unless chaos reigned.

"Francesca needed stitches," Ant said.

I rested the cigar on the ashtray to burn out. "I shouldn't have brought

her here.” I growled my irritation. “I’m out of my depth with Allegra. How can she be raised in a mafia family and fear nothing? I spent my childhood high on anxiety. Fear of failure, fear of disappointing my father. Fear of his wrath should I have disobeyed one of his orders.”

“You’re a boy. She’s a mafia princess.”

I lifted my head, my gaze meeting Ant’s. “She looks like a mafia princess. It’s a façade. You saw her. In ten minutes, she’d intimidated Francesca into a confession.” I stood from the chair and paced. “She had me confessing. A fucking lap dog husband attempting to appease his wife. And she still defies me.”

“An unsupervised Allegra is dangerous. Can you trust Timoteo?”

I shrugged. “He’s loyal to her, and because she’s mine, I believe he’s loyal to me.”

Ant leaned forward in his chair, hands clasped, and fingertips pushing off each other. “Santino is his best friend, yet Timoteo wants to be here.”

I’d thought about this and how I felt about Anna. “I think it’s Santino’s way of ensuring I don’t mistreat his sister.”

Ant chuckled. “Maybe you should consider another soldier. I doubt Santino would approve of the way your hands fit around her throat.”

“It’s a beautiful neck.” He followed me to the door. “Santino may have concerns, but he won’t challenge me. He’s already paying a price for his interference. Besides, Timoteo’s the only option. She’ll castrate any other soldier we try to assign her.”

Ant was quiet for a moment. “I think we should watch him.”

“Agreed. We all make sacrifices for Allegra.” Even Irish mobsters. Who was my wife? She commanded allegiance from even the enemies of her family.

Ant and I parted ways in the hall. I opened the bedroom door, not

entirely sure what to expect from Allegra. She sat on the balcony bundled in a blanket, watching the stars.

I tugged off my tie and unbuttoned my shirt as I crossed the room. “Were you waiting for me?”

She refused to look up at me as I stood beside her. “I feel like I’ve spent my whole life waiting for you.” She pulled the blanket tighter around her. “Is she still here?”

I sat in the chair next to her. “She’s leaving in the morning.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, and I don’t want to see you as long as she’s in this house. And I most definitely won’t be fucking you as long as she’s in your life.”

A slow smile found my lips.

“Do you think it’s funny?” She threw off the blanket and lurched to her feet.

“No.” I grabbed her wrist before she could walk away. “I don’t find it funny that you spoke of my private business in front of both our families.”

“Everyone already knew, Marco. You invited your mistress to our wedding. You put her in the room across from ours. She acted as if this was her wedding, her house, and she touched you like you belonged to her. You spent more time with her than you did with me, including last night.”

By the time she finished, she was flushed, her voice was raised, and her eyes were lit with fire.

“I’m tolerant to a point, topolina. Don’t mistake my leniency for weakness.” I held her wrist and pulled her back into the room. “I’m tired, and I’ve heard enough about Francesca.”

“I don’t want to hear her name either. I hate the way you say it. I hate that you think of her when you’re with me.”

I cradled her face in my palms. “When have I given you the impression

I think of her when I'm with you?"

"I've only been with you, and I think about how you touch me all the time. Having you inside me completed me." Tears slipped onto her cheeks, and I gathered them with my thumbs. "And you went to her." She stepped away from me. "Don't tell me you don't think of her." She pointed toward the door, and the room across the hall. "How could you not when two weeks ago, you were in bed with her."

"I wasn't in bed with her," I roared.

"She was just in bed *with you*," she snapped.

"Yes, but I didn't want her there." I took a breath. She tempted my temper as no one ever had. I didn't know whether I should kiss her to keep her from talking or fuck her so hard she'd only be able to scream my name.

When had I ever explained myself to anyone except my father? Yet, with Allegra, I felt the need to defend myself.

Her eyes told me everything. I'd broken her. It was what I'd wanted, only now, I hated what I'd done. The dark hole in my chest where I wanted to feel for my wife festered with rot, becoming septic with the mistrust between us. Lies we both clung to rather than admit to our secrets. My indiscretion with Francesca had been exposed, but Allegra still held onto hers.

"You want Francesca out of my life. Yet, you won't give me the name of the man who holds your loyalty. You don't want to share a bed. You don't want to fuck your husband."

"I said I *wouldn't* fuck you. I didn't say I didn't want to." Her lips tightened with determination, and her arms crossed over her chest. "I hate that she sucked your dick. I hate you because I know you liked it."

I growled. The zipper to my trousers bit into the hard swell of my cock. "If you want proof that I prefer your mouth, get on your knees." I took a step toward her.

I'd risen in rank within the family because of my unflappable adherence to my pursuit of power. I'd been called brutal. I made men bleed.

For two years, I'd avoided the responsibility of marriage because I loathed the idea of being obligated to share any part of my life with Allegra Jilani.

Yet, now, I hated that any part of her life could exclude me. She was toxic to the control I needed to run my empire. I'd become addicted to the taste of her cunt. I couldn't forget how good it felt to be inside her.

But I also couldn't forget that she was somehow connected to the Irish. Once I discovered how, and if she had any connection to Luca, she'd discover why they referred to me as The Enforcer.

"I'm not fighting with you any more tonight. You're my wife. You're going to sleep in our fucking bed."

"I'm not sleeping with you." She grabbed the blanket, dragging it with her.

I banded my hand around her arm. "I don't care if you stare at the ceiling all night and pray for my death." I released her and yanked my shirt from my body. My cufflinks clattered against the wall as they popped from the sleeves. "You will be in my bed tonight and every night." I unbuckled my trousers. "Get undressed, Allegra."

"No." Her chest rose and fell with heavy breaths.

My pants dropped to the floor. I grasped the blanket, jerked it from her hands, and tossed it onto the bed.

"Marco, wait."

I was done fighting and, done coddling her. "Don't make me ask you again." I grazed my knuckle along the bruises and hickeys on her neck, trailed my finger lower, and tugged on the collar to her V-neck night shirt. "Take it off, or I'll tear it off."

With her eyes staring into mine, she slipped the shirt over her head. Only wearing her panties, she turned away from me, crawled onto the bed, and adjusted the blanket to cover herself.

If a threat was what it would take to get her to obey me, we were going to have a volatile marriage. I turned off the light, climbed onto the bed, and slid beneath the covers.

Her soft breaths echoed in the room. Turning onto my side, I curled my hand over her hip. She stiffened as I slid in close to her, aligning my cock with the roundness of her buttocks. “I don’t wish to spend my life fighting with you.”

“Going to war with your enemies is what you do.”

“I’ll fight for you, for us.” I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re my wife, not my enemy.”

She sighed. “Those are just words, Marco. You hate that you can’t control me. I’ve asked you to trust me. You won’t. You threaten the one thing I keep to myself.”

“I won’t have another man in our marriage.”

“I hope when you realize you’re the only man in our marriage, it isn’t too late because we’re killing us. One day all that will be left will be the ghost of what we could’ve had.”

Silence stretched between us. Time slowed, and the quiet of the night saturated the air. The soft scent of her perfume clung to her skin. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The warmth of her body seeped into me. I relaxed into the intimate embrace, and tension bled from my muscles.

I slid my hand over the slope of her hip and into the dip of her waist. Her belly quivered under my palm. Much about us was laced with lies and desire.

Perhaps she was right. I had blood on my hands from men who’d

betrayed me. I lived with their ghosts.

I could live with one more.

A light knock on the bedroom door woke me. I untangled from Allegra's soft limbs and slid from the bed.

I opened the door to Ant's hard glare. "Emilio got a hit. I didn't think you'd want to wait until morning."

My pulse spiked. Leaving the door open, I crossed to the closet and grabbed a pair of jeans and a Henley from my limited wardrobe. Something that would need to be remedied now that we were staying.

Allegra leaned up, noticed Ant, and snatched the blanket to cover her beautifully bare breasts.

I leaned over her and quickly kissed her lips. "Stay in bed. I'll be back soon."

"What is it?" she whispered.

I didn't know yet. There were only two options. Emilio was running face recognition software on Luca's girl and voice recognition on Allegra's secret.

"Go back to sleep."

I strode alongside Ant down the corridor.

"Everything good with you and Allegra?" he asked.

Ant had been by my side since childhood. There was never competition between us. I trusted him, but I didn't reveal my weaknesses to anyone.

"I need to sever all connections to Francesca. Deed her the property in Milan. I can't have her near the estate. Give her a settlement contingent on no contact and a confidentiality agreement. Make sure she understands the consequences of failure to comply with my request."

Ant led the way to the rear of the property. Emilio and Orlando had

taken over the guesthouse as living quarters, and Emilio had set up one of the bedrooms as his office with his computer systems.

Stefano leaned against the porch, smoking a cigarette. He stubbed it into an ashtray and followed us into the house.

“Who is it?” I asked, coming into the room.

Orlando sat at one desk and Emilio at another. A bank of computer monitors had images frozen on the screen. Another monitor was flipping through images in a virtual environment.

“I have the package running.” Emilio took a breath. “Basically, I took the image of Alex Ferraro and asked the system to show me repeat associations, ran searches on those connections, marking any hit that included the characteristics we know about the woman called Tinker, and I also did a search on any association between Luca and Alex.”

“Did you find her?”

Emilio pulled up a grainy image. With a few keystrokes the image became clearer. The petite woman had long blonde hair. A large man stood protectively, next to her, erect but relaxed. His arms were at his sides, hands crossed in front of his groin. Professional muscle. Dark glasses shielded his eyes.

“I don’t have a definite match on her bodyguard, but eighty percent chance his name is Keith Hudson. Former Navy Seal in the American military. I have confirmation of the two of them going back more than a decade.”

“Is that the woman?” I’d only spent a few minutes with her over a couple days. I couldn’t be sure. “Have you found anything connecting her to Luca?”

Emilio leaned back in his chair. His gaze connected with mine, then turned to Stefano.

Orlando moved out of the chair for me to sit next to Emilio.

“You need to sit down, Marco.”

I ignored the chair. “Who the fuck is she?”

“Her name isn’t Mia Toliver,” Stefano said. “She goes by Tinker in the club, and she’s the last person to see Luca alive. And she’s definitely an enemy of the Bruno family.”

My hands balled into fists. “Who. Is. She?”

“Mia Thomas.”

A hot ball of rage exploded in my gut. “Fuck. Fuck!” I yelled. “Was Luca retaliation?”

Thomas. I hadn’t heard the name in five years. Not since they were executed along with my uncle Sammy. Husband and wife diamond dealers, smugglers, American, and dead because my father refused to pay the ransom. “How is she related?”

“The daughter,” Emilio said. “The son is dead as well. He buckled under the pressure of the business. She’s worth billions. That’s not all. For years, there was no activity on her. In the last few weeks, she started making connections, all former military. Heavy guns.”

One by one, the images on the monitor became clearer. I stood next to Emilio and leaned my hands on the table. “Is she working with the Irish?”

“If there is a connection,” Emilio said. “I’ll find it.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. My enemy wasn’t in Italy, wasn’t Adami, and if the Irish were involved, Mia Thomas had brought them into the fight.

“Find her.”

Stefano stepped away from the wall. “Marco, you need to hear the rest. Mia isn’t working alone. She knows a fucking lot more about us than we do about her.”

Another image materialized on the computer screen.

Recognition slammed painfully into my chest. I dropped into the chair. My throat tightened. *Fucking breathe*. I tried to inhale. *No. Fuck no.*

Reality warred with perception. Impossible. A ghost in the system. “When was the picture taken?” This couldn’t be a recent picture. There was no other explanation. The picture had to be months old. “When?!”

“Last week.” Emilio’s voice was barely a whisper.

A knife of betrayal twisted in my gut. There was no doubt the whiskey-colored eyes were those of my brother. Dark hair, tall, Italian, mafia. Like looking in the fucking mirror. Luca was alive.

I roared, surging to my feet and tipping over the chair. “Where the fuck is he? Where is the woman? What the fuck is he doing with Mia Thomas?”

In one of the pictures, he had his arm around her. The situation didn’t make sense. Why would Luca let me believe he was dead? No. He wouldn’t traumatize Savio.

Luca had claimed Savio as his son. Giada had been fucking both Luca and my father while she was pregnant, but Luca hadn’t known until it was too late. Savio was always his, regardless of paternity.

“I have verified linked associations between them in the hundreds now. Restaurants. Credit cards. Investments under the name of Lucas Thomas.”

Orlando leaned his head against the wall. “Why?”

Why turn against his own father? His brothers? His son? For the woman?

Not Luca.

“Where is he now?”

Emilio’s fingers flew across the keyboard, bringing up an aerial map of a massive estate. “You’re practically neighbors.”

“We know where he is,” Ant said. “Do you think he knows you’re

here?”

“Probability is high,” Emilio said as he continued to pull up still footage of Luca and the woman.

Nausea churned in my gut. I’d mourned my brother, spent nights comforting our grieving father, then looked for my enemy in the eyes of everyone close to me, including my wife.

Emilio sipped his energy drink. “I’m finding connections back to Ferraro. The bodyguard has ties to a local motorcycle club, but I’m just starting to get the context for those.”

I turned to Emilio. “At the BDSM club, I spoke with a woman who knew Luca. She works for Ferraro. Her husband is part of a motorcycle club.”

“I’ll find him.”

“The Irish didn’t kill Luca,” Orlando said. “But we know he was shot. They have the evidence of his death. How is that possible?”

Luca was the only one with the answers. Could my own brother be responsible for our father’s assassination? Mia’s family smuggled diamonds and were heavy into overseas investments, but they weren’t mafia. Money had been their only motivation, which was why they paid the ransom. They’d been willing to barter for their lives.

My father had been unwilling to give up power to tribal guerillas. My uncle Sammy had known the risks. He would have made the same decision. Never show weakness.

Was Luca helping Mia retaliate? Would he turn on his family for her? Cazzo! I pinched the bridge of my nose to keep tears from my eyes. Trying to determine who my enemies were had become exhausting, but I couldn’t let my guard down, couldn’t afford to become complacent. I’d rest when I was dead.

“What do you want to do?” Stefano asked.

I stared at Luca on the computer screen. If he was in bed with the enemy, could I kill my own brother? I’d killed men for less.

“Do we tell Anna?” Ant asked.

“What about Savio?” Stefano plucked a cigarette from his pack.

“Outside, asshole,” Emilio said. “You can’t smoke in here. It’s bad for the computers.”

Orlando retook the seat next to Emilio. Emilio pointed out files he wanted him to look through. “Put in a new filter for the motorcycle club. See if we can find any cross associations with High Protocol and the people we met at the munch.”

Ant and I followed Stefano outside.

I sat on the stoop as Ant and Stefano smoked.

“I’m not going to war with Luca,” Stefano said. “I know my brother. We’re missing something.”

“Then find a way to get him here,” Ant said, blowing smoke into the night sky.

“The Thomas family has a vendetta against the Bruno’s.” I rubbed my fingers along my beard. “He’s not one of us anymore. He’s no longer a Bruno. He’s Lucas Thomas.”

Back in the house, I sat in the kitchen with Ant. Early morning light spilled into the room through the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the patio.

Neither of us knew what to say. Disbelief morphed into a volatile combination of rage and resentment. Emilio had discovered irrefutable proof that my brother wasn’t dead. But had he betrayed his family? He’d supposedly been killed making a diamond delivery. My brother would never

steal from his family.

If he had, the woman had to be the reason. For months, I'd been searching for the killer of a man who wasn't dead.

"Why would he let us believe he was murdered?" I asked Ant not expecting an answer to the rhetorical question. We wouldn't know until we spoke with Luca.

We'd buried the memory of my brother. If he'd aligned himself with Mia Thomas, I couldn't stomach the man he'd become. Had my brother become my enemy?

If so, my brother really was dead. I didn't know the man who could deceive his family.

"My father died believing his son was murdered. I've had an appetite for vengeance for so long, I can't spit the taste from my mouth."

"Luca wouldn't kill your father." Ant leaned forward. "If he was anyone else, I'd want him in the basement and let Stef extract the truth from him."

Could I torture my brother for the truth?

"But this is Luca," Ant said. "You haven't always gotten along. You both allowed Giada to come between you."

We had, but Savio had healed any lingering hurt between us. "He's taken her name." We could continue to hypothesize why, but never know the truth. "I want to talk to him. Maybe he's in trouble. If he's betrayed us, I'm the one who pulls the trigger. No one knows but us. I don't want Anna and Savio to have to grieve again."

"I'll need Emilio. He can track their movements, find an opportunity where he's vulnerable. Might take a couple days."

Troy, one of Orlando's crew, came into the kitchen, took a mug from the rack, and poured a cup of coffee.

“You’re up early,” Ant said.

“I’m taking your girlfriend to the airport.”

I paused with the cup halfway to my mouth.

“Fuck,” Ant said with a laugh. “You’re pissing the boss off early.”

“No disrespect intended. Miss Giada warned me that you were possessive over Francesca. She said you’d slit the throat of anyone who spoke her name.”

“Take a breath, boss,” Ant said. “Giada is a cunt. She likes to stir up trouble.”

I leveled my gaze on Troy. “Francesca is a family friend here for the wedding. She’s returning to Italy. If my wife hears you refer to her as my girlfriend, I won’t have to slit your throat. She will. You’ll feel the razor’s edge of her blade before your next breath.”

“I won’t make the mistake again.” Troy sat next to Ant.

“No, you won’t.” I stood and headed out of the kitchen. “Ant will be accompanying you to the airport.”

Troy swallowed hard. “Fucking hell.” His voice quivered.

“Calm the fuck down,” Ant said. “I’m not going to kill you...yet.”

A small smile tugged on the corner of my mouth. Ant would have the legal documents ready for Francesca to sign before she boarded the plane. She wouldn’t be returning to the estate but would land at Milan Linate Airport, and our association would be over.

I paused at the bottom of the stairs as Francesca froze on her way down. Our eyes connected. For a moment, we stared at each other. I moved first, approaching her.

Tears slipped onto her cheeks. She brushed them away with her fingertips. “Goodbye, Marco.”

Relief washed over me as she hurried past. I didn’t need another battle.

My concern over the Irish seemed insignificant when measured against the revelation of Luca.

Chaotic thoughts twisted in my mind. I wanted Luca in front of me, wanted to demand an explanation of why he'd make his family suffer his death while he fucked around with a submissive whore.

Regrets burned like acid in my gut. I had betrayed Luca. I'd fucked Giada. I thought about the man I'd been. Jealous of Luca's freedom to live outside the scrutiny of our father. Orlando was pampered, too pampered to get his hands dirty. Stefano relished the kill. He lurked in the shadows, drawing strength from the darkness.

I was groomed to be just like my father. Then Allegra had crawled under my skin. Without words, but with her fierceness, she'd dared me to be different. She forced me to bend.

I entered the bedroom, quietly closed the door, and stood next to the bed. The blanket molded to her sleeping form. A rush of warmth slipped along my spine and seeped lower. My cock stretched. To get inside my wife again, I needed Francesca out of my life.

I climbed onto the bed next to her to watch her sleep. I traced the soft shape of her slightly parted lips. She stirred. Warm breath ghosted over my fingers.

Did Luca see Mia as his enemy? Or perhaps he felt as I did when I searched for truth in Allegra's eyes. Even if she'd befriended the Irish, she wasn't my enemy. I didn't need her confessions. I heard the truth in the way she whispered my name when I touched her.

I'd given into her every demand, and yet she still defied me. And fuck me, but the more she resisted, the more I wanted her.

Chapter Fourteen

Allegra

I showered, used a straight iron on my hair and donned a thigh length floral print dress that showed off my legs. The room across the hall was empty, and all traces of Francesca were gone, leaving only the bitter memory that she'd been here at all. Marco hadn't come back to bed. I hated that I cared, but I wondered if he comforted her before she left. Had he kissed her goodbye?

The aroma of coffee and croissants permeated the air as I made my way to the kitchen.

"Good morning. That smells amazing," I said to the chef creating something that smelled absolutely heavenly in a frying pan on the stove. I picked up one of the croissants, pulled off a piece of the flaky pastry, and popped it into my mouth.

"Mrs. Bruno."

Mrs. Bruno. I'd become Marco's wife the night he claimed my virginity, but now, I was legally his wife. This was my home, and these people didn't just work for Marco. They were part of the Bruno family. I was part of the Bruno family.

The chef pulled a coffee cup from the cupboard. “Would you like a cappuccino with your croissant?”

“Just coffee would be perfect.”

He smiled and nodded. “Master Savio has asked for apple and pear puffed pastry.” He set the cup of coffee in front of me.

“Thank you. Has my husband had breakfast?”

“Only Savio.”

As if his name summoned the little boy, he came racing around the corner. He jolted to a stop and stared at me.

“Buongiorno,” *Hello*, I said.

“Ciao.” He climbed onto the barstool. Chef placed a plate of puffed pastry in front of him with a bowl of powdered sugar. He barely turned his head, giving me the side eye and then dug into his pastry.

I smiled at him. Romi came into the kitchen with an empty stainless steel French press. Chef began preparing it for another brew.

“Have you seen Marco?” I asked her.

“Yes, he’s working in the guesthouse.”

I slid off the stool. “Thanks. I’ll take these with me.” I grabbed the tray of croissants. “I’ll see you later,” I said to Savio.

“I don’t think this would be a good time,” she said softly. “There is a soldier at the door. No one is allowed inside.”

I’d just say good morning and leave the croissants. The sun was warm on my face as I walked barefoot to the guesthouse in the northwest corner of the estate. A couple of soldiers sat on the front porch.

They stood as I approached.

“Good morning.”

Troy blocked my path. “Strict rules today. No one goes in.”

I reached around him and knocked on the door. “I’d call Marco, but he

still has my phone.”

One of Troy’s brows lifted. “No one is coming to the door.”

“Fine, but I need to call Timoteo. Do you want to give me your phone?”

He huffed. “I value my life.”

His chest blocked my view.

“Then you might want to step aside. I’m going through the door even if I have to go through you.”

“Fuck. Wait.” He pulled out his phone and made a call. “Mrs. Bruno is here.”

A moment later, the door opened. Orlando blocked my way. “Not today, Allegra. He doesn’t need to deal with any more shit.”

“I need to call Tim. Dee is coming over. I want to know when. I thought they’d be here by now.” I stepped around Orlando and entered the house.

An eerie silence filled the living room. Orlando closed the door behind him. “Wait here. I’ll get him.”

Ignoring Orlando, as soon as he walked out of the room, I went to the kitchen. I didn’t care about their mafia business. I set the croissants on the counter.

Marco came into the kitchen. Shadows darkened his whiskey eyes, and his brow furrowed. A muscle in his jaw ticked. Damn my traitorous heart. Something wasn’t right.

“What’s wrong?” I crossed the kitchen, rested my hands on his chest, and stared into his eyes. “Tell me.”

Marco fisted his hand in my hair, then let the strands slide through his fingers. His lips pulled taut. Fear slipped into my veins, burning through me.

He seemed upset. But I wasn’t sure what I’d done. His eyes searched

my face, and he continued to feel my hair. His touch was possessive, seductive, but his hardened gaze condemned me for yet another transgression.

“I told them no interruptions.” He backed me against the counter. “You shouldn’t be here.” He lowered his head and breathed in the scent of my skin. “But you never listen.”

“I always listen, but you’re not always right.”

He crowded his body against mine. “I’m angry, Allegra, and you’d be a respite from the rage inside me.”

As his fingers gripped my hips, he licked the edge of my jaw and ground his rigid cock against my pelvis. I felt his tightly held control slipping.

“I hate what you do to me. I hate that I’m weak around you.” He clawed the front of my dress down, exposing the swell of my breast. My nipples tightened beneath the sheer lace of my bra.

I didn’t care that my heart still hurt, didn’t care that this wasn’t about us. He was drowning. I tilted my face to his, wrapped my hands around his neck, and pulled his mouth to mine.

My mind clouded with the taste of his tongue. Hot, wet suction sealed my mouth to his. He kissed me like he owned me, sucking my lip and stealing my breath. His grip on my head tightened, and he kissed me deeper, an erotic tangle of tongues, lips, and teeth.

Starved for more, I became aggressive, eating his mouth with a frantic wildness. I rolled my hips into his groin, needing the friction of his erection to ease the ache in my core.

A feral, possessive growl ripped from his mouth. He reached under my dress, between my thighs, and found my center wet and needy.

After pushing my panties to the side, he thrust two fingers inside me. I

gripped his shoulders, and my head fell back as he rammed deep and hard. A desperate hunger inside me needed to be everything to him. I wanted his rage as much as I ached for his passionate touches. I didn't know if he'd ever trust me or if he could ever love me.

I didn't care. This was us. Raw, carnal, and obsessive.

"Marco," I wailed as I came in a blinding explosion of light and color. My body shuddered, and cream soaked my channel.

"I'm going to fuck you."

"Yes," I whimpered.

"I wasn't asking for permission." With a surge of power, Marco spun me around. "I won't be gentle," he ground out as he unzipped.

"I don't care. Just fuck me."

He roared, spread my legs, and speared hard and deep. "Cazzo!" He slowly pulled out, then plunged deep again. "I don't want to feel this."

I wasn't sure if he was speaking to me, but his pained voice cracked in my chest.

I wanted all of him. The possessive, the brutal, the intimidating. *I was his wife. His whore.*

The edge of the counter bit into my hips as he thrust into me with a savage intensity. He held me immobile with a hand to my back, crushing my chest to the counter. I rested my face on the cool granite as he railed into me again and again.

He held me in his bruising grip, and his dick stretched me and filled me. He completed me.

I gasped as he ruthlessly fucked me. I gloried in it, teetered on the brink of another release as every thrust knocked the breath out of me.

With a final hard slam, his groin grinding against my ass, he came.

And I fell. A beautiful, triumphant climax quivered around his cock

buried full hilt inside me. Hot spurts of cum bathed my core. Sweat beaded on my upper lip and dampened the hair at my temple.

With a slow pull, he slipped from inside me. Our mingled cum dripped down my thigh.

Marco caressed my ass with his palm, then tugged my dress down.

“What is so pressing that you once again directly disobey me?” he asked.

“Tim was supposed to bring Dee over. They aren’t here. I thought you could call him or let me use your phone.”

“Ah.”

“You know, if you gave me back my phone, I wouldn’t have had to interrupt you.” It wasn’t as if the phone wasn’t mirrored to his.

“You know what I want.”

“Oh god, please stop. I don’t want to fight. Keep my phone, but I need to use yours.”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and set it on the counter.

I glanced at the screen. “Marco, you have a dozen missed calls. Tim, Santi, my father.”

His jaw ticked. “I don’t have time for your family.”

I scrambled through the text messages. Panic ripped at my mind, splintering my thoughts. “Oh god.” Tears built in my eyes. Please no. I said a silent prayer as I called Santi. I put the call on the phone speaker.

“Fuck, Allegra, is she with you?”

I was too late. “She’s not. What happened?”

“She’s too much like her sister,” Santi snapped. “No one knows where she is or when she left. Is she with Marco’s asshole brother?”

“My asshole brother is here with me,” Marco said.

“Sorry.”

“Apology accepted, but I would caution how you speak to Allegra. She’s your sister, but my wife.”

“Can we focus on Dee, please?” I asked. “Besides, if she were with Orlando and Emilio, she’d be safe. Have you checked her phone?”

“Of course. It’s off. She met up with friends. Tim checked the keystroke log. She had plans to meet them last night. Has she tried to call you?”

I wouldn’t know. Marco still had my phone. I glared at him.

“I’m coming home,” I said, choking on a sob.

Santi was quiet on the other end. Finally, he muttered, “Hurry.”

“We need to go.” I scrambled past Marco.

“If she’s with friends, I’m sure she’s fine.”

“She’s not fine,” I said. “She’s missing. Her phone is off. And she’s hurting because of what I’ve done. So don’t tell me she’s fine. Just give me my phone and take me home.”

“This is your home.” He rested his hands on my shoulders.

I shrugged off his touch. Tears slipped down my face and dripped from my chin. “I’m leaving.”

He nodded. “I’ll have someone go with you.”

“You should be with me.”

“Don’t fight me, Allegra. I know your family’s important, as is mine, and right now, I’m needed here. Don’t ask me to explain. I’m trying to protect *this* family. I’m not going to waste time chasing down your sister. She’s reckless and irresponsible and not my problem.”

My chest tightened at his callus words. “Nothing is more important than Dee.”

“You want to go, and I’ve given you permission.” He waved me away.

“Just to be clear. I don’t need your permission, and I won’t be back

until she's found. Are you going to give me my phone?"

"No. Stay with Timoteo at all times."

He walked away. No kiss, no words of affection, and still no trust between us. I had bigger things to worry about. I was too late. A turbulent cyclone of emotions twisted through me as I rushed back to the house, up to my room, and into the bathroom.

I dug for the box of tampons and grabbed the phone. Oh my god. What was I supposed to do? I needed Knox, but if Marco caught me with the phone, he'd take it, and I'd lose the only way I had of communicating with him.

Adrenaline had my nerves firing. I needed to hurry. Knots coiled in my gut. My brain wouldn't stop roiling with sick and twisted thoughts. If Dee had been taken, she must be scared. She had to wonder if anyone would come for her.

I would, but I couldn't focus with my panties sticky with cum. Slipping them off, I cleaned up and pulled on a new pair. Then I scrambled to the closet, grabbed a big shoulder bag, and tossed the phone into the bottom. I threw in a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Finally, I slipped on canvas sneakers and dashed back downstairs.

Voices sounded from the kitchen. "I'm ready," I said to Troy. "Let's go."

"Do you want to say goodbye to the boss?"

He'd said enough already, and I was afraid to say more. "He knows I'm leaving."

Troy followed me out the front door. I couldn't calm the racing of my heart. How long ago had Dee left the house? If they had her, she'd fight. She would.

I wanted to take out the phone, turn it on, and get to Knox. "Hurry," I

said to Troy as he navigated through traffic.

“I know you’re scared, but Dee’s a smart girl,” he said. “She’s also a little wild. Knowing Dee, she’d sober up before coming home. Breaking curfew or sneaking out would be less punishment than getting caught drunk or a bit high from smoking a bowl with a bunch of boys.”

God, please let her be doing any of those things, and not in the hands of the Irish.

I sat in the front seat, staring out the window, mentally kicking myself in the ass. So many wasted chances to talk to her. Tears leaked onto my cheeks. I swiped them with my fingers. I’d blame myself if something happened to her. What the fuck was I thinking? Something had already happened.

Whether the Irish had her, or she’d just snuck out, she was without her guards. And she didn’t have Knox lurking in the dark to save her.

Or maybe she did. My thoughts spiraled. Maybe it was already too late.

The guards posted at the gate waved us through. Before Troy had the engine off, I was out of the SUV, up the front portico, and throwing open the door.

My mother rushed into the foyer. “Have you heard from her?”

I shook my head. “Where’s Tim?”

“With Santi. There going over the security footage from last night.” She rung her hands. “That foolish girl. You know she tries to be just like you. Anything you do. She does.”

Guilt slammed into me. I wasn’t the only one blaming me.

“Did she say anything to you?” she asked.

I shook my head. “She wasn’t talking to me either.”

“I’m going to go check my room. Maybe there’s something I can do to help.” Like call Knox.

Spinning on my heels, I jogged up the stairs two at a time. Once I was in my room, I closed and locked the door. Dropping the bag on the bed, I fished the phone out and pushed the power button.

I paced as the phone activated.

Ping. Ping. Ping. Text messages flooded into the phone. I had twenty-three missed calls and sixteen voice messages.

The messages started with the wedding.

Knox: You look beautiful.

Knox: I'm getting a semi from the kiss.

Knox: Get a room. lol. Congratulations. He's still a dick. Always and forever.

A few hours passed until the next text.

Knox: Call me.

Knox: Where the fuck are you?

Knox: Ally, it's about Dee. Please call me when you get this message.

Knox: Fuck, shit is happening. I can't come to you.

Another gap in time and then he started to text again.

Knox: Dee is here. Fuck. I'll get her out.

I'd scanned the text messages in less than thirty seconds. I didn't waste time listening to the voicemails. I called Knox.

He answered immediately. "Fuck, Ally. They have her. They fucking have Dee."

I dropped to my knees. Silent sobs wracked my body. "Tell me what to do," I said as I gulped air.

"Fuck. I don't know."

There was silence on the phone.

I closed my eyes and uttered words that nearly took my breath. "It's

my fault.”

“We’re not doing this. Fuck. Okay. Fuck.”

I cried, sucking in deep breaths.

“This isn’t your fault. Jessie and her girls are good at this. It’s what they do. They offer sweet temptation and deliver poison. They weren’t going to stop until they had her. I should’ve gone to Dee.”

“How? Security here is tighter than it is with Marco, and he has me on a leash tethered to Tim.”

“It’s too late for whatever we should’ve done.”

I was going to be sick. Dee was feisty, yet sweet. Insolent, yet naïve. I could barely form words with the thickness of fear in my mouth. “Have they hurt her?”

“They want the girls compliant.”

“Oh god, what does that mean?”

“They’ve drugged her. When I last saw her, she was out of it.”

I rested my forehead on my bent knees. “We need help.”

Guns, soldiers, and a plan. Knox couldn’t take on the Irish mafia on his own.

“From the Italians? How are you going to deal with the guilt when your brother or husband ends up dead?”

He was right. Asking Marco, my brother, or even Tim was out of the question. Oh god, and if Knox’s bosses ever found out he’d betrayed them and brought the Italians to the fight, they’d kill him.

“Fuck,” he cursed. “This is going to be bad. There’s no way the Irish and the Italians don’t go to war after taking Dee. I don’t fucking care anymore, but you and Dee aren’t going to be caught in the crossfire. I promise, I’ll get her out.”

“Not alone. How many dead Irish are you going to feel guilt over?”

“None. I can’t be a part of this anymore.”

I couldn’t help Knox from here. “Come get me.”

“I’ll always need you, but you’re not coming within ten miles of here.”

I took a deep breath. “You’ve trained me for this.”

Breath echoed through the phone, but he wasn’t saying no.

“It’s too dangerous,” he said.

“And neither one of us can live with the consequences if we don’t try.

You need me.”

“Always,” he whispered.

“And forever.”

“How long will it take you to get out of the house once I send you a text?”

Five minutes to make an excuse, get to my room, another ten minutes to climb down the trellis and make my way to the wall. I had to avoid the cameras, the guards, and Tim. “Fifteen minutes.”

“It might be a couple of hours. Be ready.”

I hung up.

I needed a plan. I changed into jeans and my hoodie and tucked Knox’s phone into my front pouch with the ringer on silent. I hiked up my pant leg and strapped a knife to my ankle. Ready to scramble, I had my shoes on and a strategy.

I stared at the ruby on my finger. I couldn’t take Marco with me. This was deliberate disobedience. I didn’t know what was happening in the guesthouse. He wrestled with his own demons, his wars, and his enemies.

But I wasn’t going to give him more to worry about. I’d take the blame and punishment.

I slipped off the ring. Once Dee was home, once she was safe, I’d find a way to get through to Marco. Maybe he’d never forgive me, but I couldn’t

live with myself if I endangered anyone else.

Sunlight glinted off the stones of my wedding ring as I set it on the nightstand. I was in love with my husband. I'd wear his ring as his wife, or I wouldn't wear it at all. Our marriage couldn't be a war. He claimed to want me to fight with him. I would, but not against Knox.

Once Tim swore to me he'd be there for me. Now was his chance to prove it. I stepped from my room, headed downstairs, and found him in the office.

"Any word?" I asked, knowing they'd never find her. I sat in a chair and tucked my hands into my pouch to grip the knife and the phone.

"She met a girl at the skate park last night," my dad said.

"Her phone isn't pinging her location." Santi scrubbed his hands down his face. "I have a crew searching the area."

My mom paced the floor. "Have we checked with her friends from school?"

"What friends?" Santi asked. "All she cares about are her fucking video games."

A little while later, Cary brought in a tray of sandwiches. Time passed from one argument to the next. Soldiers came in with the same updates. Nothing. She was gone.

And I sat there with my stomach in my throat. I knew where she was. They were all suffering. I should just tell them. Tears filled my eyes again. How could I do this? How could I sit here quietly while my best friend, my sister, had to be petrified with fear?

Another hour passed. Finally, my phone vibrated. I jolted, my heart slammed against my ribs and began to race.

"I can't sit in here," I said. "I'm going stir crazy. I'm going to my room."

Santi nodded and kissed my forehead. Tim's gaze met mine. I tilted my head, hoping he understood I needed to talk to him. I walked out of the room, past the kitchen, and into the foyer.

"What's going on?" he asked, coming along beside me.

I glanced over my shoulder, assuring we wouldn't be overheard. "I need to get out of here."

"No."

"I'm not asking for permission. I have to go now."

We ascended the stairs to the second floor.

"Do you know where she is?" he asked.

My skin tingled with electricity. I was beyond wrecked. Explanations were going to slow me down, and I was out of time. Knox would be at the corner in a few minutes. I led Tim into my room and closed the door.

"Don't ask me for details. Just tell me if you're willing to help me."

"I fucking knew it. This is why you've had me babysitting her fucking computer."

"Shh. Keep your voice down." I put my hand on his arm. "You told me I could trust you. Yes, she's in trouble, and I can help her. But you can't say shit. You can't come with me."

"If she's in trouble, you need to tell Santi."

Tears filled my eyes. "She's in trouble, and you *can't* tell Santi."

"It's him, isn't it? You fucking led the Irish to her."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Fuck you, Tim. You can't help her. Neither can Santi or Marco. By the time you get to her, she'll be gone, as in sold, or she'll be dead. I won't be able to live with myself if that happens. Will you?"

"Fuck." He raked his fingers over his scalp.

"You and I have both made choices that put us in this life. My friend can get her out. He's waiting for me."

Tim closed the space between us. His face a breath away from mine. “Are you telling me the Irish have her?”

My hands balled into fists. “Decide what is more important. A war with the Irish or Dee?” I rested my forehead on his chest. “I’m just asking you to turn your head so I can leave. Marco will blame you, but you’ll be able to tell them you last saw me here in my room. Once they figure out I’m gone, check the security feed. They’ll see me go over the wall.”

A shuddering exhale from him vibrated through me. “If something happens to you or Dee—”

“I’m not going alone.” I put a hand to my belly to quell my rioting nerves. My pocket vibrated again.

“Are you in contact with him? Do you have a phone?”

“Tim, I have to go. I’m trusting you. I know you trust me, and I trust him.”

“What if he betrays you, and this was his plan to get you both? Tell me who he is. If something happens to you, I’m not the only one who will want Irish blood.”

I lifted my gaze to his. “He’d die for me, and he’ll kill for me. He’s the only one who can get to Dee.” I glanced over my shoulder toward the balcony. “I have to go.”

He held me tight. “I’ll cover for you as long as I can.”

“I promise, Knox is the only one who can get her out without starting a war.”

“They started the war by taking her.”

“Maybe, but she’s not going to be caught in the crossfire.” I slipped from his arms, hurried to the balcony and climbed over the rail.

Once I was on the ground, I cast a last glance at Tim as he stood on my balcony. Then I spun around and dashed across the yard. Ducking under

branches, I watched where I stepped so I wouldn't reinjure my ankle.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I climbed the tree, hauled myself over the wall, and made my way down the backside. As soon as I dropped to the ground, I turned at the rumble of Knox's motorcycle.

In a flash, I had my hand on his shoulder, my leg over the back, and settled on the seat behind him. My arms wrapped around his waist, clutching the soft fabric of his hoodie as he rolled the throttle and sped away.

I didn't know where we were going, I only knew I felt calmer. Tears still slipped onto my cheeks. Knox released the handgrip for a moment, laced our fingers, and squeezed my hand.

He slowed as we approached a house with a manicured lawn, potted plants, and a swing on the porch. It was an older neighborhood, but the yards were huge.

I loosened my hold as Knox pulled into the driveway alongside an older Lexus. The evening sunset reflected off the jet-black paint.

Knox held the bike as I climbed off. "Where are we?"

"A friend's house." He opened his saddlebag, grabbed his gun, and slid it into the back of his jeans. "We need her car."

"Her?" I arched a brow at Knox. "Who is she?"

"We're not talking about her."

"Knox, this is about Dee. Can we trust her? Is she helping us?"

"Fuck, yes, but unlike another girl I know, she knows not to ask questions." He handed me two knives, both in sheaths.

I checked the blades. One attached to the waistband of my jeans. The other was a small dagger. I lifted my jeans and showed Knox I had a third blade at my ankle, the one he'd loaned me for my wedding. I moved it to my thigh and put the smaller dagger at my ankle.

Knox opened the car door. The keys were on the seat. He popped the

trunk. I joined him as he checked his supplies. Guns, AK's, other rifles and IED's.

"Is that a grenade launcher? What is she? An arms dealer?"

"She's inconspicuous. She's not Irish or Italian."

"Who is she? Oh shit. *What* is she?"

Knox reached into the trunk, grabbed another firearm and two magazines. He checked the slide and chambered a round. "Russian."

"Really? As in Bratva? Or just a Tinder hookup with an expertise in weapons who also happens to be Russian?" I glanced into one of the plastic bags of supplies from the store. "Is she a butcher, too?"

There were a couple packages of steaks and a clear glass bottle of liquid. He opened a duffel bag and checked the tools inside, including a massive pair of bolt cutters.

"She's resourceful." Knox grabbed the bag, the steaks, and slammed the trunk closed. "Let's go."

I raced around to the passenger side. "Does she know what we're doing?"

"She doesn't care. Focus, Ally. You're going to do exactly as I say."

I nodded. "How are we going to get Dee?" We wouldn't have the cover of darkness. "Do they have guards on her?"

"She's still at the house in the Hills." His tattooed knuckles whitened as he held the steering wheel. "We need to talk."

The darkly quiet severity of his voice sent a frisson of fear along my spine. "Don't hide anything from me."

His nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath. "There's only one way I can get her out, and that's with a lot of dead bodies."

Heat and pressure surged through me as my body flushed. "Knox," I cautioned. "We need to think."

“When I last saw her, Byrne had one guard in the room with her, another at the door. She was on the second floor. There’s no trellis for her to climb down, and there are dogs on the property.”

My stomach rolled. I guess I understood what this was going to cost him, but I didn’t think of what that meant. Knox was going to lose the only life he’d ever known. Friends, the only people besides me he could call family, his job, maybe his life.

“Wait, listen, maybe we should call Marco.”

“Byrne already has a buyer. He’ll move her tonight, and she’ll be gone.” He reached across the console and covered my hand with his.

“But these men are your friends.”

“Don’t. You know you’re the only thing that matters to me. I’m always going to choose you.”

This was what Marco would never understand. Knox and I both changed the night we met. Our lives became entangled in ways that no one would ever understand. I found a lost boy who wanted to die. And he found a young girl who needed someone to save. Nothing had changed, except today, he was going to save Dee.

“Rule one,” he said. “Stay in the fucking car.”

I pulled my hand out from his. “No.”

“Allegra!” He took his cigarettes from his pocket and tossed them to me.

I pulled one from the pack, lit it with an inhale, and handed it to him.

“I get it.” I exhaled the smoke and cracked the window. “You can’t get us both out, but you can’t watch your back and fight what’s in front of you. How many times have you told me to watch my six? So don’t change the rules of engagement now that I’m fighting with you. You need me.”

“Fuck. I’m going to clear my way out on my way in. Anyone at my six

is going to be dead.”

“Good. I’ll be safely behind you.”

Marco

“Any word on Deidre?” I asked Orlando.

His knee bounced as he sat next to Emilio. “Tim is keeping me updated. Still no sign of her.”

Emilio leaned back in his chair. “I’m in her account. I’m running a package on the IP’s she’s connected with, but she’s a hardcore gamer. Her interactions are all over the place. I’ve narrowed the parameters to isolate the search to local contacts.”

“Anything?”

“Friends from her school, but there’s one with a VPN that has me hopscotching across the globe.” He pulled up another screen. “As for the other search, I’ve finished scouring Alex Ferraro’s system at High Protocol.” His gaze locked with mine. “She’s in his system.”

I slid my hand into my pocket. “I think we need to explain to the boss of the BDSM club that he’s no longer the person in charge.”

Ant stood and pulled on his suit coat. “Stefano, Carmine, you’re with us.”

“Emilio, keep working. Find Deidre. Orlando, get into the gaming chatrooms and see if there is chatter on her.”

I slipped on my suit coat, slid an extra magazine into my pocket and checked my gun. “Let’s go.”

On the way to High Protocol, I rode up front, and Ant drove. Carmine and Stefano were in the backseat.

“Do we leave a mark on the club, or do you want Ferraro at the

estate?” Stefano asked.

“Is the room ready?” I asked. The new house had a six-car garage and a secondary RV garage. Stefano and Carmine designed the remodel with specific needs in mind.

“It’s not finished, but the drains are in.” A cement room with soundproof walls like the one on the Bruno estate.

“Boss, careful on this one. Ferraro isn’t a low-level businessman who would disappear without notice. He’s international.”

I nodded. “We’ll talk to him first. If more lies leave his lips, he won’t be leaving his club tonight.”

There were only a few cars in the club parking lot. Ant walked a step in front of me, willing to take a bullet meant for me. Stefano and Carmine protected my rear.

At the door, I pressed the buzzer, announced myself, and waited. “Marco Bruno for Alex Ferraro.”

A moment later, the door opened. Before the bouncer could speak or deny my entry, Stefano had him pushed against the wall and a gun in his side. “This isn’t a social call. Where is your boss? My boss would like a word with him.”

“In his office.” The bouncer nodded toward a polished black door.

Carmine held his gun in his right hand and opened the door with his left.

“After you,” Stefano spoke low and controlled to the bouncer. “We’re here to speak with your boss, but my boss doesn’t bring me with him for my great conversation skills. So don’t be a fucking hero. This is a private matter that doesn’t concern you. Don’t involve yourself.”

Inside the office, there were chairs in an open area. Beyond the seats, Alex sat behind a desk in a glassed off area. As soon as we entered the room,

he stood, holding out his hand to his business associate to sit back down.

Stefano shoved the bouncer into a chair. "Wait here."

He nodded. Ant opened the inner office door, and I stepped into Alex's office. We stared at each other.

"You know why I'm here." I sat in the chair across from his desk. Stefano stood next to me, his gaze focused on the other man. I'd met him before, Ronan.

"I do," Alex said and sat behind his desk. "But I still don't have anything else to say to you."

I leaned back in the chair and wrapped my hands over the edge of the armrests. "That's disappointing."

Ant closed the door, leaving Carmine with the bouncer.

"My associates can be persuasive."

Alex leaned forward and rested his clasped hands on his desk. "I was alerted to the security breach the moment your guy hacked into my system. Nash wanted me to tell you, your guy needs to update his steganography system. Your tech is good, but mine is better."

"I'm looking for a killer of a man who isn't dead! I've been lied to by you, and by your associate," I said, indicating Ronan as he leaned against the wall with a stoic tilt to his lips. Not to mention the Italian woman and her biker husband. "I failed to impress upon you the consequences of fucking me over."

Ant pulled his gun but kept his arm at his side. Stefano simply smiled in a way that would make most men nervous.

"I'm not your enemy, nor am I one of your associates. After our last conversation, I made a few inquiries into your holdings. Don't fuck with me. I might not carry a gun, but I never go into business without knowing the players."

“This isn’t business,” I seethed. “If you are as good as you say, then you had to assume I’d find the girl.”

Alex arched a brow. “And if you found the girl, you’d find Luca.”

The secondary door to his office opened, and two men entered.

Breath rushed from my lungs. Like a constrictor had coiled around my throat, I couldn’t swallow, couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t find words.

Luca...and Carlo, his best friend and confidant.

“What the fuck?” Stefano straightened. A suffocating cloak of silence descended on the room.

“Stef,” Luca said. “I’m surprised he pried you out of your dungeon.”

“I’m surprised we’ve found you in yours.”

The large office felt too full, I had too many questions, and the bite of betrayal pierced my heart. Fuck. Tears built in my eyes. I wanted to rip the reasons from his mouth, but I was so fucking relieved he wasn’t dead.

“Alex didn’t lie to hide Mia. He lied to protect me.”

Alex stood. “No one dies in my club. You want to take your vendetta out on each other, do it somewhere else.” He nodded toward Ronan, suggesting they should leave the room. “Are you safe?” he asked Luca.

“If I want him dead, you couldn’t stop me from killing him,” I said.

Luca’s penetrating glare drilled into me. “Do you want me dead, Marco?”

Alex and Ronan left the room and waited in the outer office with the bouncer. Carmine stared through the glass at Luca.

“I want to know why my brother would let me grieve him.” I stood and faced Luca. “Why you’d leave Savio to mourn his father?”

Luca took a step back as I prowled closer.

“Why you’d allow your father to bury his son? Fuck you, Luca! He died believing you were murdered. Instead, I find that you’ve changed your

name, and you've aligned yourself with our enemy. Was her pussy so sweet you'd betray your family?"

"Mia isn't my enemy, but she is mine. I don't question her loyalty, but I have concerns about yours."

"You arrogant fuck." I surged toward him. Carlo stepped next to Luca, but Ant lifted his gun.

"Step back, Carlo. This is between brothers."

Luca's spine stiffened. "Carlo and I would've died without her."

"Mia fucking Thomas. Her brother vowed to retaliate. When his attempt failed, he took his own life. Apparently, Mia found a way to break the Bruno family. Does her body still wear your bruises, brother? Or is she the Dom in your relationship now?"

Luca rubbed a hand over his forehead. "If you wish to know how I pleasure my submissive, we can arrange a demonstration in the club."

"I wish to know many things, Luca. Our father is dead, Andre is dead, Adami is dead, Greco is dead. Now, my wife's sister is missing. How are you involved?"

"I'm not involved. Luca Bruno is dead, too."

"I buried an empty coffin. Convince me I shouldn't put you in it."

"Marco, we need to talk. Can we please just sit down?"

I returned to the chair, and Luca took the seat next to me, our knees nearly touching.

"I know you're confused," Luca said. "Maybe we've all been betrayed. I don't know. You're here so somehow you discovered I'm alive."

"Emilio found you."

"God, to see you, and for you to mention names I only hear in my dreams." He took a deep breath. "Does Giada know you've found me?"

I snapped my gaze at Stefano.

“Possibly by now,” Stefano said. “She hasn’t been around much since Francesca left. I figured she’s forming a new plan to fuck over Marco. She’s a pain in my ass.”

“After we buried papà I relegated her to a soldier under Stefano.”

Luca smiled. “At least I know she suffers.”

“Not as much as she makes the rest of us suffer.” Stefano grinned. “She’s still a cunt.”

Luca leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. “The day of the diamond delivery, something was off. Timing was off, the location was shit, but I admit, I was distracted. Mia had disappeared. She’d given me a fake name. I had no way to contact her, and I had already decided she was mine. I had to find her.”

I could relate. Allegra was mine. If she tried to run from me, I’d chain her to the bed.

“Mia was young, too young to know her parents were international diamond smugglers. Too naïve to know her brother attempted to blackmail the mafia. Only the stars understood how we would come together.”

He rubbed his palms on his thighs.

“Marco, it was Giada. She made the mark, she initiated the drop, she pulled the fucking trigger, and she wasn’t working alone. If it weren’t for Mia, Carlo and I would both be dead. With no body, I wasn’t sure she’d accept my death.”

My gut clenched. “Giada is a made woman for the Bruno family. She has Savio. She slept in our father’s bed.” My voice grew louder. I surged to my feet and paced across the room. “Are you sure?”

“Until today, the only thing I was sure about is that she wanted me dead. I didn’t know if it was on your order.”

“*My order?* You think I’d put a hit out on my own brother?”

Luca shrugged. "You've betrayed me in the past."

"Christ." I had. I bowed my head. Neither of us would ever forget I'd betrayed him with Giada. I wasn't sure he'd ever forgive me, but that he could believe I'd orchestrate his death had guilt ripping through me.

Gripping his arm, I tugged him to his feet, folded an arm around his shoulders and hugged him hard to my chest. For two beats of my heart, he froze, then his arms went around me, and his body jerked with an excruciating release of emotions.

For a moment, I simply held my younger brother. "I'm sorry," I whispered as I cradled his head in my palm. "I'm sorry that you would ever doubt my loyalty to you." I pulled back. There was only truth between us. "I made mistakes, but never have I ever wished you dead. You're my brother. Nothing is more important than family."

Tears slid down Luca's face. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there for papà. Do you think he would've forgiven me?"

His tears seeped into my palm as I cupped his cheek. "There's nothing to forgive."

"He's here with us," Stefano said. "He'd want the cunt to pay."

Carlo leaned against the wall. "I think we all want a piece of her, and I'm not talking about her ass, since we've all had access to that, or her heart since she doesn't have one. I want one of Stefano's knives. I'll take an arm since she cost me mine."

For the first time, I noticed the way the fingers on Carlo's left hand curved into a claw.

"I'm working on getting mobility back, but the bullet damaged the nerves and tendons." He flexed his fingers, but the slight movement was limited. "I've got about thirty percent usage."

I glanced at both of my brothers. "Nothing meant more to papà than his

sons.”

“Which is why she’s angled for a way to get to all of you,” Ant said. “She’s going to hear about Luca. There were soldiers in the house when we found the evidence of your life with Mia. And soldiers are worse than women. They talk.”

“Giada knows about Mia,” Luca said. “Her name and who she is.”

A hot ball of fury boiled in my gut. “She knows?”

“Marco, she knew before I did.” Luca sat on the edge of the desk. “She’s not working alone, but my operation is just getting underway.” Luca clasped his hands together. “I’m running Mia’s empire, but I won’t expose her to any more violence. The mafia took everything from her. Alex and Ronan lied to you to protect her.”

“Does she know of our family’s connection?”

“She knows everything. There are no secrets between us. Her life is mine, and I’ve vowed to always protect her. My connection to the Bruno mafia is severed, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see Stefano extricate information from Giada. But as I said, she’s not working alone. Someone has a vendetta against the Bruno’s.”

“How is your security now?” I asked Luca. “Do you trust your ex-military and motorcycle club muscle?”

“I trust Hudson. He’s only brought in guys he’s served with. The motorcycle thing seems to be a part of it.”

Stefano twirled his knife, the point resting on the tip of his finger without piercing the skin. “Did she do it?” He lifted his gaze to lock with mine. “Did she kill him?”

I didn’t know how to answer him. Did she kill our father? She claimed to love him. Giada wanted power, but my father kept nothing from her. And only a ruthless woman would put a hit out on her son’s father. Savio hadn’t

been the same since losing Luca. Neither had Stefano.

“If she did, I’ll make sure she suffers,” I said. “I need Emilio to do a deep dive on Giada. See if there is a connection to Jilani. She was against my marriage to Allegra.”

“We need to find out if she had an association with Adami.” Stefano slid the knife back into the sheath. “She was quick to pull the trigger.”

What I’d assumed was her grief over my father, could’ve been self-preservation. She’d been too familiar with him, using his first name.

“Giada can’t know we’ve talked, or that we’re suspicious of her.” Ant took out his cigarettes and popped one between his lips. Then he held the pack out to Stefano. “Not if we want her, along with her associates.”

Was she a soldier for another family, or was she the head of the snake trying to take mine?

I took a quick glance into the outer office. Carmine still watched over Alex, Ronan, and the bouncer.

“We need to keep up the ruse,” Carlo said. “Luca Bruno is dead.”

And Lucas Thomas was an enemy of the Bruno family.

Chapter Fifteen

Allegra

Sitting in the darkened car, we watched the house for thirty minutes. Parked across the street and a half a block away, I could make out the shadow of the recessed side entrance. Periodically, a soldier would cross the slice of light from the streetlamp.

Wearing thick leather gloves, Knox saturated the steaks with the clear liquid. “Don’t worry. This turns rottweilers into basset hounds. Quiet and lazy. I’ll be back in a couple minutes. Time to feed the dogs.”

Staying to the shadows, he jogged across the street and crouched near the fence line. He reached between the bars, and tossed the steaks a few feet into the property, then with the edge of his blade, he tapped the wrought-iron fence.

Two huge rottweilers ran along the fence line. Scenting on the steaks, they growled and shredded the meat, kicking up dirt with their massive paws.

Knox backed away but didn’t turn his back on the fence until he was a few feet from the car. I exited the vehicle with the duffel over my shoulder.

“Ready?” Knox grabbed the duffel from me.

I nodded and followed him back across the street. “I’m scared.”

“I know.” He crouched and set the bag on the ground. “Listen, I can’t do this if I’m worried about you.” He opened the bolt cutters over the joints of the security gate in the fence. “I need you to wait in the car,” he whispered. “There’s another gun in the glovebox. No one comes near you.”

“I still think I should come with you.”

“Fuck that. You walk in there, you’ll be seen as merchandise. Don’t ask me to choose between you and Dee. I can only keep one of you safe.”

“Dee.”

“Then stay in the fucking car.” His gaze briefly met mine. “Ally,” he quietly spoke my name. “I’m not me without you.”

The fight left me. I nodded and held the fence as he worked on the hinges. Finally, the metal pin snapped, and the gate creaked on the broken hinge. “If she’s drugged, you’re going to have to carry her out.”

“I know.” He stood and aligned the cutters with the top hinge. “A lot of shit needs to go right for us.”

“A lot of shit can go wrong.” The fence dropped at an angle into the soft soil. One of the dogs lifted his head, then rested his snout on his paws again.

Knox dropped the bolt cutters into the bag. He checked his gun, twisted on a silencer, and then checked his magazine and made sure to have extra clips.

“Get in the car and stay there,” he said. “I need you behind the wheel. Keep the engine running. Any sign of trouble, get the fuck out of here. Once I’m inside, give me ten minutes to get her out. If I’m not out in fifteen, get the fuck out of here. If you hear gunfire or see cops, get the fuck out of here. Call Marco. Tell him everything.”

“Be careful. I’ll watch for you. I’ll be ready.”

He squeezed my hand. “Ten minutes.”

Knox lifted the gate and pried it open. I hauled the tools onto my shoulder and quietly made my way to the car. Knox had turned off the overhead light. I set the tools in the backseat, started the car, grabbed the gun out of the glovebox, and checked the exact time. Ten minutes. Then I stared at the property, my gaze shifting from the broken gate resting askew and the side door to the property, waiting for it to open with Knox and Deidre.

Time seemed to slow. I rolled down the window so I could listen. Rationally, I knew the engine purred, yet because of my heightened senses, the quiet rumble sounded like a freight train in my head.

Crickets chirped in the distance. A motorcycle revved its engine somewhere down the block. Blood rushed through my ears, and my heart didn't seem to beat at all.

Voices sounded from the shadows. I leaned back in the seat and scanned the surroundings. Listening. Shallow breaths floated past my lips.

Three men approached the fence. The gate squeaked.

Shit. Maybe it was stupid, but Knox wasn't here to scold me. I turned off the ignition and held the gun in my lap. Breathe. Focus. I remembered my training. I needed to be invisible to my opponent.

"Call it in," the man inspecting the gate said.

"I'll check the door." The third guy pulled his gun and slipped into the darkness.

Making a split-second decision, I shoved the bottle of liquid into my pocket and exited the car. With the knife from my thigh in one hand and my gun tucked in the back of my jeans, I jogged up to the two men. "Excuse me."

They both jerked in my direction, guns in their hand.

I feigned a startled gasp. "I'm sorry. I..I just need help. My car won't start."

“Call in the breach while I help her,” the bigger man on the left said, tucking his gun into his holster. A scar stretched from his eyebrow to his ear.

“That won’t be necessary,” I said now that their guns were holstered.

“What the fuck?” The other man went for his weapon again.

Light glinted off the polished steel as I acted on instinct, trusting my training, and threw my knife, embedding the blade into the soft tissue where his arm met his shoulder.

A guttural moan burst from his mouth. The gun fell from his hand and clattered on the ground. He dropped his phone and grasped the hilt of the knife.

In the confusion of the moment, I pulled my gun from my waistband and leveled it at the head of Scar. “If I sliced your axillary artery,” I said to the bleeding man, “you’ll spurt blood like a broken pipe.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he asked.

“The bitch with the gun. Drink this.” I tossed Scar the bottle of dog tranquilizer.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but it didn’t kill your dogs, so it shouldn’t kill you.”

Scar looked over his shoulder at the drooling beasts rolling around in the cool soil. He twisted off the lid, tipped the bottle to his lips, and swallowed several mouthfuls.

“Save some for you friend,” I said.

He handed the bottle to the other man. He shook his head. Blood coated his fingers as he protected the knife protruding out of his shoulder.

“Just fucking drink it,” Scar demanded. His gaze shifted around us. “She’s a dead bitch with a gun once the boss sees her.”

The bleeding man took the bottle and drank the rest.

Scar leaned against the fence and slid to his ass. “What the fuck is this

shit?” He slowly waved his hand in front of his face. Drool trickled onto his chin.

“Sit,” I said to the bleeding man, like he was a dog.

Protecting his arm, he lowered to the ground. I didn’t like leaving them here, but there was a third man. Knox would be vulnerable. “Give me your weapons.”

Both reached into their pockets and handed me their guns. On my way toward the house, I tossed them into the bushes. My hands shook, and my pulse pounded hard enough to hurt.

Training hadn’t prepared me for the lethal dose of adrenaline frying every nerve in my body and firing every synapse in my brain.

I relaxed, inhaled, exhaled, and slipped into the huge house through the side door. Knox had said she’d be on the second floor. Did he pick this door because of proximity or ease of access? My footfalls were whisper-quiet, but my ears were screaming from the silence.

I jolted. My heartbeat spiked. A man crumpled in the corner of the room. I didn’t see any blood, but he was dead. His open eyes seemed to stare through me.

In a house this size, the stairs would most likely be in the center of the house off the main room.

As I wandered toward the right, I listened for voices. How many minutes had passed? Five, definitely not ten. I moved a little quicker. Off to the left, a grand staircase circled up to the second-floor landing.

Not hearing or seeing anyone, I made a dash up the stairs. I froze as a man came around the corner. His gaze took in my face, dropped to the knife at my waist, and landed on the gun in my hand.

He pulled his weapon, and I fired. The bang blasted through the house. My arm recoiled. Blood exploded from his chest. He dropped to the ground.

Someone screamed, but it wasn't me.

Chaos erupted. Voices charged from every direction. Oh, god. What had I done? I'd shot a man. I vibrated with fear and adrenaline as I ran down the stairs. Shit. Fuck. I jumped the last few stairs, landing in a crouch. No way would I make it out the way I came in. Spinning left, I rushed toward the foyer.

Almost there. A huge male body slammed into my side, forcing me into the wall. The gun flew from my fingers, skittering across the tile entryway.

I thrust my elbow back, catching the guy in the gut. He grunted but didn't release the hold he had on my hair.

"Bitch!"

"Fuck you." I spun, attempting to ram the heel of my palm into his chin. But he was too fast. He grabbed my arm. I stepped into him and smashed his jaw with my elbow.

I reached for the knife at my waist. In the two seconds it took me to pull the knife from the sheath, the man overpowered me. His fist connected with the side of my face.

Stars exploded behind my eyes. The copper tang of blood filled my mouth. My teeth ached, cutting through the tender flesh of my inner cheek. I dropped to my knees as a wave of nausea crashed over me. Tears burned behind my eyes, and a piercing ringing in my ears drowned out the sounds around me.

A massive hand gripped my wrist and pried the knife from my fingers. "You're feisty. I like when they fight."

"She fucking killed Niall," a man hollered. "He's fucking dead."

I rose to my hands and knees, but his booted foot landed on my back, pinning me to the floor. Pain tore through my shoulder, and a heavy weight

settled in my gut. I was in trouble.

“Do you know where the fuck you are, bitch?”

Where was Knox? I prayed he had Dee. With the voices and bodies filling the room, I was the main attraction. Maybe this would give Knox a chance to get her out.

Turning my head to the side, more Irish soldiers filled my peripheral vision.

“Who is she?” a deep voice with a thick accent asked.

The booted man squatted next to me and touched the immediate swelling on my cheek. Blood filled my mouth. I gagged with a swallow.

“Don’t know, but I’d like to be the one to find out.”

“I want to see her.”

The man grasped my arms in his meaty hands and hauled me to my feet. Pressure exploded in my head. I opened and closed my mouth, the tightness already making my face numb.

With my arms pinned behind my back, he stood me before an older gentleman with a bald head. His deep-set blue eyes narrowed on me. His full lips twitched beneath his mustache, and a burnt auburn beard covered his jaw.

“You’re trespassing,” he said.

Liquid fear pumped through my veins, fueling a burning heat deep in my gut.

The man behind me felt my pockets. He slid his hand into my hoodie and grabbed my phone. “You won’t be needing this.”

I was quickly running out of options.

I had one weapon left, but no way to reach it, and nothing good would come from using it now. Skinny black jeans hugged every inch of my hips and thighs. As long as they didn’t pat me down, I still had the knife at my

ankle.

A couple of men moved the dead guy. Others watched me tremble in the bruiser's grasp. I scanned the group, shifting my gaze to the upper floor balcony. My pulse spiked as tattooed fingers curved around the balcony railing.

Knox momentarily stepped into my line of sight. Our gazes held for two painful beats of my heart. He was wrecked. His mouth pulled into a hard line, and his hand balled into a fist.

Oh god, he was alone, without Dee. I couldn't explain why I was in the house, couldn't let him know my fear for him and Dee had me making a rash decision.

I thought of Marco. God, I was stubborn. I'd lied to myself more than I'd lied to him. Trust had become a weapon for me. He'd wanted me to confide in him, to give him my secrets.

A tear slipped onto my cheek. I thought of his contradictions. The way he touched me, the way he spoke to me when he thought I was asleep, that he needed to be next to me at night contradicted his words of betrayal.

Marco had changed for me. Maybe he'd just been waiting for me to trust in us. We'd both made mistakes.

Then I thought of the times he'd put my feelings first, my needs first. Maybe he would've believed me, believed in us... if only I had.

The man who touched me with tender possessiveness was the same man who'd rain down destruction. I needed The Enforcer next to me, the one who made men tremble with his name. Men like the ones in front of me. Perhaps they didn't fear Salvatore Jilani, but they shouldn't underestimate don Bruno.

With the slightest movement, I shook my head, hoping Knox would know I was communicating with him. If he interfered, he couldn't get to Dee.

He wouldn't be able to get to Marco. With his body tight with rage, he shifted back into the shadows. I blinked tears from my eyes.

Patrick Byrne nodded to the man holding me, and he released my arms.

"I'm not trespassing," I said, crossing my arms in front of me and rubbing circulation back into my biceps. "You have someone that doesn't belong to you."

"Ah, you're too young to have a daughter I'd want." He walked to the foyer. The man behind me closed the space between us, forcing me to follow Patrick. "Maybe a sister?" He poured a glass of something clear, probably gin or vodka. "A friend?"

I swallowed the bloody spit in my mouth. "My sister."

He took a sip of the drink. "And this gives you the right to come into my home and kill Niall?"

Panic simmered low in my gut. I didn't dare glance at the foyer or try to see the second-floor landing, afraid I'd see Knox watching. "If you've hurt her, I'm going to kill a lot more of your men."

He actually smiled. "You're brave when you should be begging for your life."

"I'd beg for my sister's life. Fear doesn't make me weak, Patrick."

"You know my name. I should know yours."

"You should, but I'll leave it to my husband to make introductions. You'll want to slit your own throat when he finds out you've allowed your man to touch me, and he will find out." I hoped Knox could hear me, and that he'd understand what he needed to do. Maybe more terrifying than betraying these men, he'd have to get to Marco.

Patrick crossed to me and touched my cheek. "Your sister is mine if I say she is. Perhaps I'll have you both." His gaze narrowed on me, as if seeing the color of my eyes and familiar features. "Ah, your sister is my special

guest. I should've known by the fire. Allegra, isn't it? How did you know where to find her?"

Hearing my name on his lips made my stomach clench. Shivers chased over my flesh as his vile gaze raked down my body.

"It will be a pleasure to get to know you, Mrs. Bruno. And I intend to know everything about you. Such as how it is you're here to rescue your sister, and not your husband or your brother. Are you fearless or foolish?"

Foolish. Foolish not to let anyone know where I was, who I was with, or why I'd left. Foolish to think I could save Dee, protect Knox, and keep it from Marco. I'd foolishly endangered all of us.

Patrick set his drink to the side. "Your sister is nothing more than a commodity, Allegra. She's business. However, breaking you will be my pleasure." He turned to the husky man who'd held me down. "Bring the car around." He grabbed my arms. "You're with me."

I stiffened.

"Relax. Your husband will be joining us soon. Ryan, make sure the phone is on. I want to make sure the new don knows where to find his lost wife."

Marco

Ant drove to the Jilani house as the stress of the day dug deep into my thoughts. For now, Luca was safe under his false identity and cloaked in the ambiguity of the internet, we'd work together to take down our enemy.

Giada had used Luca to step one of her stilettoed heels into the Bruno family. Not long after, she'd bounced into my father's bed. I'd always believed I had simply been an insurance policy for her. A transgression to hold over me should I get in the way of her relationship with my father.

At the time, she hadn't known me well enough to know I didn't give a

fuck. I had my father's love, and his acceptance. As did Luca, but my father had a desperate attraction to Giada. Ultimately, his failing because she'd fucking killed him.

I'd been blind or perhaps just unwilling to confront my father where Giada was concerned. Yes, his sons were important. Savio was one of them. Giada had trapped both my father and my brother.

That niggle of uncertainty dissolved with any doubts I had of her guilt. Cirillo had said Lazaro met with a woman in Greece. If he'd met with Giada, not even Saint Faustina would show her mercy.

Ant paused at the gate and spoke to the guard.

Neither Allegra nor Timoteo had called or sent a text throughout the day, but I wasn't surprised. The antics of a sixteen-year-old brat were nothing but a distraction.

Ant parked in front of the house.

"We won't be here long," I said to Stefano and Carmine. Just long enough to collect my wife. I buttoned my suit coat as I walked up the steps of the portico. Ant knocked on the door.

"Marco." Timoteo heaved a sigh. "You're here."

I stepped into the foyer. "The delay was unavoidable. How is Deidre?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "No news. There is no location on her phone after the park. Security cameras in the area see her getting into a white Camry. The vehicle is a dead end. We can't get a view of the license plate. There are a fuck ton of white Camry's registered in the city."

"She's not here." I'd assumed... Fuck. "Where is Allegra?"

He led us toward the library. "She's resting in her room. She's worried. I think the stress wore her out."

I paused at the threshold of the library. They'd set up a command center. One of Jilani's men worked on the computer.

“Emilio sent over his package results.”

“Got it.” The man at the computer clicked a few keys. “The phone is registered to the BrioFagan Group.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. The hair on my neck prickled.

“Yes, do we know them?” the guy at the computer asked.

My gaze met Santino’s. We both knew the name. I doubted the Jilani family understood the connection to my wife and her fucking secret.

“Fuck!” I spun on my heels, ran through the house, and rushed up the stairs two at a time. Fuck. I stormed down the hall and threw open her bedroom door.

The room was empty. Rushing across the hall, I checked Deidre’s room.

I spun toward Ant. He, Stefano, and Santino had followed me up the stairs. “Where is she? Where is my wife?”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Santino demanded. “Have you already made a move against the Irish? Why do they want Dee?”

“Where is Allegra?”

“How the fuck should I know?” He pushed past Ant.

Stefano entered the bedroom, presumably to check the bathroom and balcony. However, if she were here, she’d already be involved in the argument defending the Irish.

“Find her,” I said to Ant. “Get Timoteo, order a search of the house and the property.”

“What about Dee?” Santino asked. “Marco, what’s going on?”

I flared my nostrils on an inhale. “I’ve recently discovered one of their soldiers has an interest in my wife.”

“As a way to get to you? Killing your family wasn’t enough. Now, they take my sister.”

I closed the space between us. “The Irish aren’t responsible for my brother’s death.” I glared at Santino. “The Irish had infiltrated your family before my arrival. If you want answers, find my wife.”

Santino turned and went down the stairs.

Stefano came up behind me. “I didn’t want to speak in front of anyone.” He held out his hand. “It was on the nightstand.”

My gut pitched and rolled. A wave of dark energy crashed over me. I was drowning. I touched the ruby. My pulse raced, and my heartbeat raged. They wouldn’t find Allegra. There was only one reason for her to remove her ring.

Perhaps my wife failed to understand the meaning of ‘til death do us part.’

“We need to go.” She would take advantage of the empty house. “Get Ant and Carmine.” I slipped the ring onto my pinky. “Bring Timoteo.”

“There has to be another explanation,” Stefano said. “Could Byrne have gotten to Allegra?”

“It wasn’t Byrne. It’s *him*.”

Five minutes later, we were in the vehicle, tires squealing, as we raced out of the driveway. For a few minutes, silence filled the car. My jaw ached from grinding my teeth, and my hand cramped from clenching my fists.

Timoteo sat between Carmine and Stefano in the backseat. Ant raced through the streets, heedless of posted speed limits.

“Tell me everything that happened today,” I said to Timoteo. “Did Allegra use your phone?”

“No. Your orders were expressly followed. No phones. No outside communication.” Timoteo went over the day.

Somehow, she’d managed to leave the Jilani estate undetected, have transportation waiting, and because I’d taken her fucking phone, I had no

way to know where she was, who she was with, or if she was in danger.

“The Irish have Deidre,” I said to him. “We both know the implications. My wife’s loyalties are divided.”

“I’m her protection,” he said and rubbed his hands on his thighs. “But I can’t be with her one hundred percent of the time.”

I shook my head. “Not good enough.”

“Not to be disrespectful, Boss, but I’m not following your wife into the bathroom or watching her as she lies in bed. When we arrived, she spent a few minutes in her room, and then she sat with her mother.”

“For how long?” How long ago had she left the house... How long ago had she left me?

“A couple hours.”

“Timoteo, if you’ve lied to me, these will be the last words you’ll speak.”

“I serve the Bruno family, but Ally isn’t just an assignment. I will always protect her with my life. I would lie for her. I have lied for her. I’d kill for her, and I’d die for her. But I would never help her to betray you. You think her loyalties are divided. I know they aren’t.”

That my wife had left her ring belied his assumptions.

Ant pressed the automatic opener, and the gate slid open. Then he gassed the engine and raced to the top of the horseshoe driveway. I was out of the vehicle and in the house before he’d turned off the ignition. Stefano was right behind me.

“Allegra,” I hollered, striding into the house.

Romi rushed from the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

“Is Allegra here?”

She rung her hands. “No, I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

Ant, Timoteo, and Carmine entered the foyer.

“I’ll check with Orlando and Emilio.” Carmine rushed through the foyer, toward the patio to get to the guesthouse.

I charged up the stairs.

“Allegra!” My ragged breath came hard and fast. The bedroom door was open. I paused just inside the room. A soft glow from the bedside lamp lit the room. The bed was made, the pillows perfectly fluffed. The closet door was open. Shoes lined the racks, and her dresses hung on the rods. Nothing seemed out of place. If she’d left, she hadn’t taken her clothes with her.

Finally, I checked the bathroom. Nothing had been taken, but the linen closet was open. I dropped to a squat and picked up the box of tampons. Several scattered across the floor.

“What’s going on?” Giada stood at the threshold of the room.

“Nothing that concerns you.” I left the box on the shelf and went downstairs.

Ant and the others waited in the kitchen. “Has anyone seen her?”

Ant shook his head. “Not since this morning.”

“I know she’s with him.” I forced down the lump in my throat. “I’ll be in my office.”

I had her phone in my desk. It was time I had a conversation with the man who had too much influence over my wife. A man I hated because he had something that belonged to me. Not just my wife, but something I’d yet to earn...her loyalty.

I opened the door to my office.

Cazzo! *Fuck!* Perhaps the Irish weren’t done with their offensive. I slowly closed the door. Then stood with my feet shoulder width apart and slid my hands into my front pockets.

“Where is my wife?”

In one tattooed hand, the man held a Russian PB with a silencer. With

the other, he nervously plucked at the holes in the knee of his jeans. Tattoos covered his forearms. “I don’t know.”

“Wrong answer.” I walked to the bar and poured a drink. Anything to keep my hands from trembling. “If you wish to leave this room on your feet, you’ll tell me where she is.” He’d walk out of the room, and into the garage where I’d let Stefano hone his technique to extract information.

“You need to fucking listen to me.” He leaned forward, letting the gun rest between his widespread thighs.

“I am listening. Tell me what I want to know.”

“This isn’t about you. I don’t give a fuck if you hate me. I’ve hated you for five years. I wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t sent me. I need your fucking help.” He surged to his feet and scrubbed a hand down his face.

I pulled my gun and leveled it at his head. “Where. Is. Allegra?”

The man dropped his arms to his side. “Fuck you. I could’ve put a bullet through your head the half dozen times I’ve been inside this house. I gave Ally a phone when you took hers. I don’t know what she sees in you. I think you’re a dick, but you can’t convince her for shit once she’s made up her mind.”

“Yet, you keep inserting yourself into my marriage.”

“Fuck you, Marco. Apparently, I love her more than you do. I’d rather eat shit than ask you for anything, but I’m here, for her, because I need your help.”

I glared at the man who vehemently fought for my wife. I hadn’t realized the depth of devotion he had for her. “Who are you?”

“Knox. Get used to me. I’m never walking away from Ally. While you’re pointing your fucking gun at me, Byrne has her. He has Dee, too. I can’t get them both out.” Knox released a heavy breath. “He knows who she is, and he has a hard-on for you. She told me she trusted you. When she

fucking needs you, your arrogance is going to get her killed.”

“What happened?” I slid my gun into my holster.

“I failed to remember she doesn’t listen for shit, either.”

“When did you last see her?” I flung open the office door, then glanced over my shoulder. “Are you coming? Or are you going to sneak out the way you came in?”

He followed me out of the office.

“Tell me everything. Start from the beginning.”

Knox filled me in on the situation. “Byrne is into some serious shit. He has a buyer for Dee. We have to get to her first. Trust me, Ally will never forgive herself if something happens to her sister.”

“When did you last see them?” I asked again.

“Dee is in a house in the Hills. Byrne will move Ally. But she has a weapon and Ryan has her phone. It’s traceable even if it’s off.”

I spun and glared at him. “You’re tracking my wife?”

“I don’t trust you with her.”

Wasn’t that fucking perfect. “I’m her husband.”

“I know. I was at the wedding.”

“Fuck.” Once she was safe, Knox might still find himself eating the end of my gun. “Fucking Irish,” I said.

“Yeah, I can’t believe she married a fucking Italian.”

I led us out onto the back patio and down to the guesthouse.

Stefano and Tim stood on the porch. A ring of smoke circled Stefano’s head. He tossed the cigarette and closed in behind Knox as we entered the house.

“This is Emilio,” I said to Knox. “He’ll trace the number.”

Knox relayed the information. Ant entered the room and leaned against the wall.

With each moment that passed, I could feel my control slipping. I wanted blood, and I wanted Patrick Byrne. “Byrne has Allegra. He knows I’ll be coming for her.”

Ant nodded. Nothing would stop me from going after Allegra, and nothing would stop Ant from protecting me. “He has Dee. We’re out of time.”

Ant pulled Troy aside, and they both stepped out of the room.

“Dee is in a big fucking house in the hills,” Knox said. “Heavily guarded. There are six or seven other girls. The buyer is flying in late tonight. Now that Byrne has Ally, he could move the delivery location. I don’t have a way to track Dee. We have to go now.”

“How many men?” Orlando stood.

Knox’s gaze locked with mine. “Five were down when I left. I took out four, and Ally shot Niall before Ryan took her down.” Knox’s jaw clenched. “He’ll fucking pay for hurting her.”

I cracked my neck. “They’re all dead.”

Emilio’s fingers flew across the keyboard.

“We go after Dee first,” Knox said. “I promised Ally.”

“My wife is my priority,” I said.

“I’ll go with Knox.” Timoteo checked his weapon.

My shoulders stiffened. I slowly turned to the man I’d trusted with my wife. Assumptions aside, I hadn’t shared Knox’s name. What other secrets was he keeping for my wife?

Ant and Troy entered the room with suitcases in each hand. Ant set them on the table and popped open one and then the other. I pulled a Glock with a silencer from the molded foam padding. With urban warfare, silencers would give us some cover from inquisitive neighbors.

“Two crews,” I said. “Knox is going after Deidre.”

“I’m going with Knox.” Orlando selected a gun from the case. “Troy is with me.”

“Gather your men,” I said to him.

“I’ve got a location on the phone,” Emilio said. “Ten minutes from here.” He stood and turned to Orlando. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” I said. “I need you on the computer in case the location on Allegra changes. And I need a pin code for the gate. You have ten minutes.”

“Fuck.” Emilio sank back onto his chair.

“Knox, how many men do you need?” I buttoned my suit coat. Ant and Stefano stood with me. Timoteo sorted through the rest of the weapons.

“I assume your men are adequate.” Knox raised a brow at Orlando.

Orlando chambered a round. “After we get Dee back, we can talk about who was the better shot. Are you going to have a problem turning on your Irish friends?”

“You fail to understand the depth of my commitment to Allegra.”

I bristled at the way Knox spoke about my wife. But a glimmer of understanding took root. His loyalty was to Allegra. Without him, she would’ve been lost to me.

Chapter Sixteen

Marco

Money created an inner circle of privilege. Benefits unattainable by the worker bees content to live in three-bedroom, two bath homes, with vinyl fencing, and Ring doorbells for security.

A toxic fuel of adrenaline slipped through my veins. I craved the scent of fear, needed to feel the life and blood drain from my enemy. I didn't live in the shadows. I was the darkness dressed in a black suit and reeking of wealth and brandishing power.

Tonight, Patrick Byrne would serve as an example. The Bruno family had moved into the neighborhood.

"Slow," Stefano said as Ant drove down the street in front of the Byrne estate. "But fast enough not to draw attention." From the backseat, he stared through binoculars at the location of the phone trace. He spoke into a radio to relay the information to the second vehicle following. "Three soldiers at the gate. Two on the peripheral with AR15's, and another pacing the front entry."

Ant drove a half mile down the winding road before making a U-turn. Unlike the Bruno estate in Italy, this part of the city was the upper echelon of money and power. Luca wasn't my only neighbor. Neighbor being a relative

term. Some estates covering the equivalent of several city blocks. Patrick Byrne's multimillion-dollar mansion sat relatively close to the street.

"Assume there are twice as many we can't see," Ant said. "Byrne will be expecting you."

"Everyone except my wife is a target. Leave no one."

Ant turned off the headlights a full block away from the gate. At the last moment, he killed the engine and drifted to the side of the road. To avoid the glaring red lights of the brakes, he engaged the parking brake to bring the SUV to a jerking stop.

My phone pinged with the code from Emilio.

Emilio: Smarthouse. Front door is open. Alarms are disengaged. Camera feeds are down for a system reboot. Confirmation on Allegra.

"We're in," I said to Ant. "And Allegra is there."

"Damn, that kid is good."

Stefano coordinated with the second vehicle. They parked farther down the block and would move in to eliminate secondary threats.

"Once Ant and I take care of the guards in the shack, Timoteo, neutralize the soldier on the porch. Stefano, you have the two flanking the drive. Gunfire isn't going to go unnoticed," I said. "Tell the others to keep it quiet as they secure the perimeter."

They nodded. We were silent as we exited the vehicle. I held my gun in my hand, the high of hunting my enemy only paled in comparison to sinking my cock deep into Allegra's wet heat. Once I had her, I was going to fuck the reckless disobedience out of her.

I approached the guard. He opened his mouth to speak. Fire ripped through my veins. Time seemed to slow as I lifted my gun, pulled the trigger, and jolted from the recoil. Pop, flash, and my first kill of the night.

The man crumbled to the ground, blood seeping from his chest. Ant

discharged his weapon into the guardhouse, hitting the second man in his forehead. He fell forward, cracking the glass, and his blood leaving a macabre trail of death.

During the commotion, Stefano entered the code into the security box.

The third man fired, but in the fear and bedlam, he missed. I didn't. Brains and blood sprayed the brick wall of the guard shack.

Ant walked next to me, our long stride eating up the distance to the front door.

Pop! Pop! A few more shots reverberated from the darkness. To the left, a man grunted. A moment later, Stefano was beside me, changing out his magazine. "I miscalculated."

Before we emerged from the darkness, the man guarding the door slumped to the ground, blood pooling from the hole in his chest from Timoteo's rifle.

Ant and Timoteo took cover to the right of the door. Stefano and I stood to the left. Stefano crouched, his gun at the ready as Ant swung the door wide. Bullets ricocheted off the porch. Another whizzed past my ears. I dropped to a crouch.

Stucco on the pillars exploded. Stefano squeezed off several shots, cutting a line through the opening. I aimed over his shoulder, clearing the path to the right.

Timoteo sidled around Ant. Using the door as a shield, he emptied the magazine of his AK at the men positioned on the second-floor landing overlooking the entryway.

One of Byrne's soldiers had a line of sight on Timoteo. I spun into view, lifted my gun and fired.

"Fuck!" Timoteo crouched, taking a defensive posture.

My men entered from the rear of the property. More gunfire ricocheted

in the distance.

Then there was silence and the heavy perfume of gunfire. Stefano and Ant pressed into the room.

“Find her,” I said, replacing the magazine in my gun. “And bring me Byrne.”

Allegra

My face throbbed. The tender tissues around my eyes swelled, and the hinge of my jaw ached with the slightest movement. I tenderly touched my cheek, feeling the heat in my flesh.

After they'd thrown me into a vehicle, I'd had to listen to Byrne plot the demise of my husband. The house in the Hills would leave Byrne vulnerable to attack, whereas his fortified mansion would give him the advantage.

They expected Marco to negotiate for me. To give up his interests to the Irish, but Luca was the negotiator. Marco would come in scorched earth.

That was if he listened to Knox.

“He'll agree or I'll ship his wife home to him in pieces,” Byrne said to Ryan. I sat on a chair in a ground floor room in Byrne's mansion.

Ryan stood in front of a wall of monitors. Images throughout the house and property were displayed on the closed-circuit surveillance system. Another guard stood in the doorway.

“Bruno will be cautious. Allow him to get close to the house before making a move. I don't want him getting away.”

“He won't be alone,” Ryan said.

“He's the only one I care about. Cut the others down like the dogs they are.”

Tightness coiled around my chest. I had no way to warn Marco. I could only imagine what he must be thinking. How much had Knox told him?

God, I wanted to see him one more time, to tell him the truth, to trust him with all my secrets. But just as I'd once told him, after a secret was exposed it was too late to confess.

Marco was brutal and brilliant. But I couldn't squash the fear simmering in my belly. Every inch of the estate was under surveillance. Byrne would see him coming, be able to lure Marco in, because of me.

Byrne sat across from me, reached out, and touched my face. "We have unanswered questions between us."

A tide of panic surged through me. His touch twisted my guts, forcing bile into my throat. This man preyed on young girls. Just breathing the same air as him made me sick.

"And what would those questions be?" I asked.

"How did you know where to find your sister?"

The lie formed instantly. "She tells me everything."

"And you allow her to meet online friends?"

"If you drugged my sister, you know you don't allow her to do anything. That's why I have tracking on her."

He laughed and leaned back in the chair. "And you came alone, with none of your father's soldiers, and without your husband?"

I shrugged, although my nerves felt like live electrical wires. "I can admit my mistake. I didn't see you as much of a threat. You're Irish."

The reaction was instant. His hand connected with the side of my head. The force of the hit tumbled me off the chair. I scrambled to my hands and knees and crawled.

"Words can end your life."

So could my knife if I stabbed it into his neck.

Grasping a handful of my hair, he tightened his fist and jerked me to my knees. I snapped my hands to my head, trying to keep him from ripping the hair from my scalp.

“You look good on your knees. Maybe we should allow your husband to find you with your mouth full of my cock.”

I’d bite. I’d fight. No one would ever touch me except Marco.

He jerked my head back, forcing me to look up into his face. “A beautiful Italian whore.”

“My husband’s whore. Never yours.”

He unhooked his belt, unzipped his pants, and released his cock. “Open your mouth.”

Disgust churned in my gut. Saliva coated my mouth with the vile thought of having any part of him touching me. I spit. The wad of saliva missed my intended target, but the sentiment landed with deadly accuracy.

“Open your fucking mouth, cunt. Or perhaps you’d rather I take that pretty ass. Either way, you’ll be full of cum when I send you home to your husband.”

I swallowed hard, tears filled my eyes, and regrets burned like fire in my stomach.

“Tears will come when you’re choking on my dick. Open yer fucking mouth. Bite me and I’ll put a bullet through your head and fuck your corpse.” His accent grew thicker, along with the girth of his cock.

I closed my eyes, revulsion flooding into my throat.

Bang! A pause. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Rapid gunfire shattered the quiet of the house.

“Where the fuck is he?” Ryan circled through the monitors, presumably looking for Marco.

My pulse fired at the same tempo as the rounds of bullets from outside

the door.

“The screens are frozen.” Ryan’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “The whole fucking system is down.”

“Go,” Byrne screamed to the guard at the door. “Bring that motherfucker to me.” With his fist still ripping my hair, and his cock still thrust out of his jeans, he turned to Ryan.

My heart pounded against my ribs. Adrenaline mixed with fear in a volatile, reckless desperation. I lunged for my ankle. Hair ripped from my scalp. I slid the cold steel handle of the small two-inch dagger between my fingers.

Byrne jerked hard on my hair as my arm thrust upwards. With his movements, I missed the femoral artery. My blade sank into the soft skin of his groin.

“Fuck!” He released my hair, lunging back.

My knife slipped from his skin. Blood squirted onto my face. Clutching the knife in my right hand, I wiped my eyes with my left.

“Bitch!” he seethed.

“Patrick, I don’t have eyes on Bruno.” Ryan scrambled to help his boss. “We need to get out of here.”

Fear clawed at my mind. If they took me now, I might never have another chance to escape. With wild abandon, I sliced through the air with the razor-sharp dagger, catching Byrne high on the thigh. Blood splattered my arms. My fist was coated with blood, but the small knife was firmly wedged between my second and third fingers.

Muscles burned, but I kept fighting. I stayed on my knees, bracing for an attack from either or both of the men.

Gunfire exploded outside the door.

“Safe room, now,” Ryan screamed.

Byrne grabbed my hair and pulled me.

“Fuck you!” I screamed and stabbed at his calves and thighs.

Byrne stumbled. Blood soaked his cut jeans.

“Leave her,” Ryan begged.

“No,” Byrne roared, dragging me by my hair. “She comes with us. I need leverage over Bruno.”

A thump thudded against the door.

“It’s too fucking late to get out. He’s here. You need to get into the safe room.”

I took my knife and stabbed it into the top of Byrne’s foot, yanked it out, and stabbed it in again. A guttural howl ripped from the bowels of his body.

A hard kick thrust against my ribs, another kick landed on the side of my head. Pain exploded in my brain and sent shock waves through every muscle, every strand of my DNA.

I sprawled out on the floor, my body beaten and my heart aching. I needed Marco, needed him to know I was sorry. I breathed the bad feeling out, only to have it rush back in with my next breath.

Blackness encroached on my peripheral vision. The roar of voices faded, and a mellow heat bloomed in my gut. I crumbled to the floor, and the room went dark.

Marco

A potent storm of emotions built within me. Every thought was of Allegra, of the sinful tone of her voice, the way she whispered my name, fuck, the way her eyes darkened with lust and sparked with mischief.

And the way her lashes glistened with tears as I broke her.

Nothing mattered but her. I couldn't think of what Byrne would do to her. Instead, I focused on the pain I'd inflict on him for taking the only thing that mattered to me.

My gut clenched with regret. If I lost her...if she never knew the depth of my feelings for her. I'd abandoned her and failed in my responsibility to protect her. Fucking hell. I died a little with every minute that passed, knowing she was in my enemy's hands. Nothing hurt as much as the thought of living without her.

Dead men littered the foyer, the corridors, and the courtyard. None were Patrick Byrne. Ant and I made our way through the house, clearing rooms. Timoteo and Stefano secured the open areas and monitored the entries for additional soldiers. My other men secured the perimeter.

A guard slumped against the solid door, a gaping injury from Ant's weapon tore through his neck. His head listed to the side.

I crashed open the door. My arms dropped to my side. A whirl of noise grew louder in my head. The room spun. Violent nausea crawled up my throat as I tried to make sense of the scene in front of me.

Allegra, my beautiful topolina, lay crumpled in a ball on the floor. Breath swooshed from my lungs. Pain tore through my chest. I wasn't sure if my heart beat at all.

Ant moved in. I shoved him out of the way rushed across the room. I dropped to my knees and carefully lifted her head.

"Fuck! Fuck!" I roared as her head lolled. Blood smeared across her swollen and bruised face. "Ant," I wailed. "Oh God, help her."

I cradled her limp form against my chest. Her arm fell to the side, and a blade tumbled from her bloody fingers.

Tears burned in my eyes. Blood soaked her clothes. Her lips were puffy, and bruises darkened the tender flesh around her eyes. I gingerly

brushed hair from her forehead. The skin at her temple and into her hairline bled with an abrasion.

Ant crouched next to me and pressed two fingers to her neck. “She has a pulse.”

“There’s too much blood.” The words would barely form. “Take the knife.”

Ant picked up the small dagger. His gaze met mine, and I nodded. He split her hoodie down the middle. I held her, my jaw tight as he checked her for injuries.

“She’s bruised,” he said, carefully running his fingers along her sides. “She could have broken ribs.” His gaze met mine. “I don’t think the blood is hers.”

My fierce fighter. “Topolina,” I whispered. “Please, don’t fucking leave me.”

Allegra moaned and curled into my side.

“Oh, fuck.” I heaved a breath and pressed my lips to her forehead. Relief washed over me with an incoming tide of emotions, surging through me, easing the dark terror of losing her.

“Marco,” she barely whispered, and her hazel eyes fluttered open. “My head.” She reached up, but I caught her arm.

“I’m here. You’re hurt.” As much as I wanted to end Byrne, Allegra was injured. Nothing else mattered.

“Byrne can wait,” I said to Ant. “She needs a doctor.”

“Panic,” she mumbled and swallowed hard. “Room. I stabbed Byrne. He’s bleeding.”

Stefano strode into the room with Timoteo.

Timoteo blanched.

“When I’ve finished with Byrne,” I said. “He won’t beg for me to

spare his life, he'll beg for me to end it."

Timoteo nodded and raked his fingers through his hair as he stared at the woman in my arms. My woman. The one he'd endangered with his secrets.

"She's alive." I turned to Stefano. "Byrne has a panic room."

As much as I wanted to, there wasn't time to continue the fight. "Next time." With one arm around her back and shoulders, and the other under her knees, I scooped her into my arms and stood.

Allegra lifted her arm and rested it against my chest. "Please, you need to kill him. He's injured. He has one soldier with him."

I paused. Tears slid down her cheeks. She wanted Byrne dead.

"Stef, call Emilio."

A moment later, Emilio was on the speaker phone.

"There's a panic room. Can you find it?"

"Hold on." The echo of keys hitting the keyboard sounded through the phone speaker. "Allegra?"

"We have her," Ant said. "Find Byrne."

Within moments, Emilio had access to the power grid. "There is a ten-by-ten dead zone in the house. Find the central control room. You should see a lot of monitors. No windows. Near the rear of the house on the main level."

Monitors lined the wall of the room we were in. "We're here," I said.

"The dead zone is on the left side of the room. Look for a keypad. I'm getting a pin code for the door."

Several bookcases lined the left wall. A watercolor painting of Ireland hung in the center of the wall at eye level. Timoteo checked beneath the painting first. "Clear." He laid his face against the wall. "Emilio, I'm not seeing a seam. Entrance has to be behind one of the bookcases."

Stef began shifting items around on the bookcase. "I have a keypad."

“Fuck,” Emilio cursed. “It’s going to take me some time to break the encryption.”

“How long?” Ant asked.

“Best guess? Six months.”

Silence hung in the room. There was no point in searching for the entrance.

“Burn it down.” I headed to the door. “Byrne dies tonight.”

Allegra’s arm curled around my neck, and her face rested against my chest. The warmth of her body seeped into me, drowning me in the scent of her.

I carried Allegra from the house. The night was soundless. No sign of police. As I suspected, the gun silencers concealed the battle from any distant neighbors.

“Did Knox get Dee?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said to her as I carried her to the vehicle. We were done with lies. “Orlando and Troy are with him.”

Tears leaked from her swollen eyes. I entered the code into the car door and the lock popped.

“I can stand,” she said.

I carefully set her on her feet. She climbed into the middle row of the SUV. The hoodie gaped, revealing the lace of her bra.

“Take off your hoodie.” I didn’t want her wearing anyone’s blood but mine. She slipped the cut shirt from her shoulders, revealing the full extent of her bruising. I shrugged off my suit coat, entered the vehicle, and closed the door. I kneeled on the floor in front of her, held her hips, and gently kissed the dark red trauma to her ribs.

Her fingers threaded through my hair. “I’m sorry.” Her voice slipped over me like warm rain.

I shook my head and tightened my hold on her. “This was my fault.” I rested my head in her lap. “Fuck, I thought I’d lost you.”

When her hand stilled, I lifted my head.

“I thought I’d lost you, too. I didn’t know how to warn you. Byrne wanted to take everything from you.”

“He did. He took you.”

More tears glistened on her cheeks. I took my jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. She slipped her arms into the sleeves, then brought them to her nose and inhaled.

The door popped open. Ant slid behind the steering wheel, and Stefano sat in the passenger seat, rolled down the window, and lit a cigarette. I sat on the seat and settled Allegra on my lap as Timoteo climbed into the third-row seating.

She could sit beside me, but I needed her close. I needed to feel the warmth of her body, to feel her heart beat with mine. I wanted to breathe her in. I clutched her closer. Understanding my desperation, she rested her hand on my jaw, and her nails combed through my beard.

“Do you want to watch it burn?” Stefano glanced over his shoulder at Allegra.

“No. I want to find Dee.” She laced her trembling, blood-stained fingers with mine, noticing for the first time her wedding ring on my finger. Her gaze snapped to mine.

I curled my hand into a fist, denying her the ring. Not because it didn’t belong on her finger, but when I offered it to her again, there would only be truth and trust between us. Not the promise of something neither was prepared to give.

“We need to get you to the house.”

“Not without Dee and Knox. You have to find them, Marco. Please.”

Byrne sold her. There are other girls in the house. We have to help them.”

I met Ant’s gaze in the rearview mirror and gave him a slight nod. He quietly spoke to Stefano.

Ant drove while Stefano spoke on the phone. Allegra glanced at Timoteo and quickly averted her gaze.

“No more lies,” I said.

“No more secrets.” She shuddered in my arms. “What if we’re too late?”

“You trust Knox, and I trust Orlando. They’ll get Dee.”

She covered her face with her hands as a sob rolled from her throat. She dipped her forehead to my shoulder. I held her and whispered to her in Italian.

“My wife, a beautiful warrior. She fights for her family.”

“Emilio has a location,” Stefano said. “But Orlando isn’t answering.”

Allegra lifted her head. “What about Knox?”

My grip on her hip tightened.

“Fuck,” Stefano flicked his cigarette out the window. “Emilio is monitoring the police scanners. The cops are at the house in the Hills. Gunshots were reported. Several fatalities and medical transports are on the scene.”

Allegra squeezed my hand.

“Don’t,” I said.

“Oh god. Marco, if something happens to them, it’ll be my fault.”

“This wasn’t your fault. We’re Italian mafia, and Byrne is Irish mob. This is the danger we live with. Why it’s important for you to understand why you need soldiers surrounding you. Why Deidre should’ve known not to leave the house without her security. We’ve both made mistakes,” I said, gently brushing her bangs from her eyes. “Tell me about Knox.”

“A few weeks ago, he found out Dee was in the gaming chatrooms. I asked Tim to check her keystrokes.” She glanced at Tim. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t tell you why.”

Tim sat back in the seat and kept quiet. Secrets were being exposed. Deadly secrets. Secrets that could have cost me Allegra.

She shifted on my lap. “I couldn’t expose Knox,” she said too quietly. “He’s a soldier for Byrne, but he’s not like them. When he discovered Byrne’s plans for Deidre, he came to me. Once they took her, I made him take me with him. He couldn’t get her out alone. After everything that happened between us,” she said about me. “I couldn’t take the chance you wouldn’t listen to me.”

“I wouldn’t have listened.”

“You hated him simply because he’s Irish.”

“No, because you have feelings for him. I will never see reason when it comes to you. My wife. Amore mio.” *My love.* “I won’t live without you.”

“I’ve always been yours. Io sono tua. Tu sei mio.” *I’m yours. You’re mine.* “Knox knows how I feel about you. It doesn’t change how I feel about him or how he feels about me.”

“And he takes you to fight?”

“He taught me how to fight, but no. He told me to stay in the car.”

“I should feel better knowing you don’t follow his orders either.”

“You have to protect him,” she whispered. “Please. The Irish will kill him. If my family discovers who he is, they’ll kill him.” Tears shimmered in her eyes.

I stilled as she confirmed my suspicions. “He’s the boy?”

She barely nodded.

“Cazzo.” I pulled her against me. “We still have much to learn about each other.” Had I known, I would have protected Knox. Perhaps my

jealousy would still have come from their closeness, but there would've been no doubts about her loyalty to me.

Even if I didn't like another man having an intimate connection with my wife, I understood her devotion to Knox.

Ant slowed his approach into the Hills neighborhood. Up ahead, blue, white, and red lights cut through the darkness. Neighbors sat on their porches watching the commotion.

"Let me out." Allegra scrambled to get off my lap.

"Not a fucking chance." I held tightly to her.

"You can come with me, or wait here, but I'm going."

Stefano checked the magazine in his weapon, then handed it over the seat to Allegra. "The trigger is short and smooth."

I glared at Stefano.

Allegra stared hard into my eyes. "Fight with me, not against me. Those were your words."

I cradled her head in my palms, brought her face to mine, and slanted my lips against hers. With a soft whimper, her lips parted, and her tongue slid along mine. To taste her again, to feel her soft skin against me, to breathe in her scent.

"Sei la mia vita." *You're my life.* "Stay close to me," I said.

We quietly exited the car. Allegra pointed to the shadowed area farthest away from the streetlamp. "We were parked there earlier."

Now, that would be an impossible escape route. Police surrounded the house and blocked off the street. Paramedics scrambled to move girls into the waiting ambulances. Some were on stretchers.

"They drugged Dee," Allegra said.

Ant and Stefano headed right. Timoteo, Allegra, and I stayed in the shadows on the opposite side of the street to avoid the police. Allegra kept an

arm wrapped around her middle to keep my jacket closed, but she was also protecting her ribs.

I kept in step beside her. “Easy, little mouse. Don’t draw attention by rushing through the crowd. Assume Knox and Orlando are also watching for us.”

She slipped the gun into the pocket of the suit coat.

Timoteo peered into cars as we passed.

Allegra paused and stared into one of the backyards with a shed and a children’s play area. She squinted into the distance. There was movement near the hedge.

“He’s there,” Allegra cried. Mindless of her injuries, she took off across a yard. I sprinted next to her, tracking through someone’s flowerbed, and running into the darkness.

Timoteo held his gun in his hand as we approached.

Allegra

Light from the police cars glinted in the eyes staring from the distance and reflected off the metal rings on the man’s fingers.

I would recognize Knox’s shadow. Tears fell from my eyes, and I choked on a sob. I stumbled, my ribs aching with every step of my feet pounding against the ground.

Orlando stalked toward me. I passed him and rushed to Knox.

Knox leaned against the shed. He held Deidre in his arms. She curled into his bare chest. The only thing she wore was Knox’s shirt.

“Fuck.” His jaw clenched. “Fuck.” He couldn’t hug me and hold onto Deidre. “Are you hurt? Fuck, Ally, what did he do to you? Fuck.” Muscles strained as he held Dee but wanted to touch me.

“It’s Byrne’s blood.” I leaned into Dee, caressing her tangled hair with my palm. “Oh baby, I’m so sorry.”

Dee blinked, tears wet on her cheeks. She clutched Knox. He adjusted her weight in his arms.

“I’ve been going crazy,” he said as he leaned into me.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and buried my face in his neck. The familiar scent of cigarettes and motorcycles surrounded me. I breathed deeply. He was safe, and Marco was here. We’d be okay.

“Ally, you’re hurt,” he said more forcefully, noticing the blood on my face and hands. “I’ll fucking kill him.”

“He’s already dead. At least he will be. Did he hurt Dee?”

“She’s scared,” he said. “The drugs are still fucking with her. She hasn’t spoken. She just cried when she saw me, and she hasn’t let go.”

Knox focused over my shoulder as Marco and the others approached.

I slowly released Knox and took a step back. I turned to Orlando. I didn’t know if he was still angry with me, if he blamed me, but I was so desperately grateful. A heavy exhale racked my body as I sank into his arms. He held me tight as his body trembled against mine.

“Troy...” He shuddered. “Troy didn’t make it.”

I sagged against him, a silent cry burning in my chest.

“We can’t get to him,” Orlando said.

“I’m so sorry.” Pain ripped through me. “I’m so so sorry.”

He nodded. “It was bad.”

“What about the girls?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know.” He tried to wipe blood from my cheek. “Knox was merciless. I should’ve trusted you. Nothing mattered but getting to Dee. He made enemies of the Irish tonight.”

Stefano and Ant appeared from the shadows. “We need to go. Cops are

canvassing the area.”

Tim stepped up to Knox. “I’ll take her.”

Deidre whimpered and held tighter to Knox.

“Nah, I’ve got her.”

Warmth surged through me. Another wash of tears filled my eyes. As long as she was with Knox, she was safe. I knew that feeling—the silent strength and the barely contained chaos.

Marco stepped up behind me, his hand possessively rested on my hip. “Stay in small groups. Stefano, take Orlando and Timoteo to the vehicle. We’ll meet you three blocks south.”

Ant tossed Stefano the key to the SUV.

“Salvatore and Santino need to know what has happened,” Marco said to Stefano. “Allegra and Deidre both need medical attention.”

Stefano nodded, and then they disappeared around the hedge.

“We need to stay off the street,” Ant said. “Can she walk?” he asked Knox.

“No. She’s still crashing from the drugs.”

The Hills was an upper middle-class neighborhood. A gun battle and raid in the middle of the night didn’t go unnoticed. And neither did two Italian mafiosi in their black suits and dangerous aura. Even if Knox wasn’t carrying a nearly naked, barely conscious girl, his ink, grit, and appearance definitely defined his attitude.

My face throbbed. I could feel the bruises darkening my eyes and the swelling in my mouth. I wore Marco’s suit coat, and my skin was smeared with drying blood.

As I walked next to Knox and Dee, Ant scanned the area in front of us, and Marco continued to check to make sure we weren’t followed.

“What happened, Ally?” Knox’s jaw ticked. “Do you know what it

fucking did to me to see you with Byrne?”

I rested my hand on his arm. “I know. I panicked.” I squeezed his arm. “Three men found the gate. One went in after you. Not the guy Niall that I killed on the stairs. I was scared you’d have Dee and not be able to fight. I stabbed one of Byrne’s soldiers outside, and then I gave both of them the dog tranquilizer.”

Marco’s stepped closer and banded his fingers around the back of my neck. “I will have every detail.” His gaze darkened on Knox. “Her *training* ends.”

Knox smiled. “Get used to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

I lifted my gaze to Marco. I opened my mouth to speak, then stopped. Knox had my sister in his arms. My husband had set aside his anger and jealousy and trusted in a man he hated. I loved Knox, but Marco needed to know my heart, my life, my loyalty was his.

I stayed quiet, letting the two men in my life define our relationship.

“You’ve made enemies of the Irish and the Italians,” Marco said. “You’re not in a position to make demands.”

“Do you really want to test my loyalty to your wife?”

“I believe that test was answered tonight.”

Ant abruptly stopped. A patrol car turned the corner up ahead.

Knox shifted against a tree, shielded Dee, and held perfectly still. Ant positioned in front of them.

Marco took my hand, stepped into the glow of the streetlight, and tipped my face to his. “We need a distraction.” He lowered his head. My eyes slid closed as he gently held my cheek and feathered a kiss against my lips.

With Marco, there would always be pain with pleasure. Our beautiful sunsets would be bathed in blood. Our oaths carved into our flesh, and our enemies would be slain at our feet.

My mouth opened, and I tasted his power. His claim wasn't gentle. He was fierce and brutal. I slid my hand over his chest, finding the edge of the scar that bound me to him. He growled and kissed me deeper. The coppery sweetness of blood tainted our kiss as I bled for him again.

I was his, and tonight, he proved he'd burn down the world for me.

Chapter Seventeen

Marco

Knox sat next to the window in the middle row of the vehicle. Deidre slept in his arms. I was next to him with Allegra in my lap. My hand rested just inside the suit coat, against her warm, smooth skin. The roundness of her ass fit snugly against my groin.

She was intimately aware of me, shifting against me as if she couldn't get close enough. Her broken and blood-caked fingernails clung to the hard meat of my shoulder.

Yet, she spoke to Knox as if she wasn't turning me inside out.

"I lost something that belonged to us," she said to him.

I listened to them speak with the sweet torture of her scent in my nose and the softness of her skin beneath my palm. Every shift, every breath sent another pulse of primal, heated energy through me.

"I don't think it's lost," Knox said and smiled.

"It's lost to me. I'll never have it in my hand again. The weight of it was perfect."

What the fuck were they talking about? It'd better become clear quickly. There would be no more intimate exchanges, secret looks, or

clandestine encounters. And nothing of his was going to be in her hand.

“I don’t think I can get it back.”

Knox chuckled. “I’ll buy you a new knife.” He smirked at me. “Although being married to you, I should probably get her a set.” He winked at Allegra. “Consider it a wedding gift.”

She leaned her head against my shoulder as she stared at her sister. “You’ve done enough for me for a lifetime. You saved her. Thank you.”

His smile softened as he stared at my wife, revealing the depth of his devotion to her. “Always.”

She sighed and relaxed into me. “And forever.”

“Emilio is monitoring the explosion and fire at Byrne’s estate,” Orlando said from behind us in the third-row seating with Timoteo. “The fire department is on scene. No reported fatalities.”

“Fucking asshole had a chem lab in the garage.” Stefano, sitting in the front passenger seat, inhaled off his cigarette. “Enough accelerants to light it up like America’s Fourth of July.”

Allegra sat up, her spine stiffening. “Will the safe room be fireproof?” she asked. “I did as much damage to Byrne as I could, but the stab wounds were all survivable injuries.”

“We’ll work on that.” Stefano glanced over his shoulder. “You just need more training.”

“Whether Patrick is dead or not, doesn’t eliminate the threat,” Knox said. “His brother Ian will assume leadership.”

Allegra laced her fingers with mine.

“Don’t worry, topolina.”

Tonight hadn’t just been a message to the Irish. The new don Bruno didn’t negotiate. Attacks of any kind wouldn’t be tolerated. Reprisals would be swift and deadly.

And my wife was untouchable.

Ant pulled up to the gate, then to the top of the drive, and parked. Anna burst through the door. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Stefano exited the vehicle.

“Why didn’t you tell me where you went?” She slammed her fist against his chest. “I’ve been going crazy. Emilio wouldn’t tell me shit. Giada is useless for information.” The Italian flew from her lips. “The soldiers won’t let me in the guesthouse. You didn’t tell anyone where you were. Allegra is gone. No one answers their phones.”

Ant opened the door. Allegra slid from my lap and ducked out of the vehicle. Before she could take a step, Anna had her wrapped in a crushing hug.

Allegra flinched.

“Anna, she’s hurt,” I said.

She reared back. “Oddio!” Her gentle hands cradled Allegra’s face. “What happened?”

“We’ll explain later,” I said as I positioned for Knox to brace his shoulder against me as he exited the car with Deidre still in his arms.

Allegra pointed to the house. “Take her to the room across from mine and Marco’s.”

Knox nodded and headed up the front steps.

“He knows which room is ours?” I asked.

Allegra chewed her lip. “He’s been in the house. We don’t know how to be apart. I’m his family.” She rested her hand on my chest. “Please don’t hate him.”

I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her flush against me. “I’m trying not to, little mouse.”

Headlights cut through the darkness at the security gate. “Your father

and brother are here.”

She trembled. “They can’t see me like this. Or Dee. Santi will lose his shit.”

I kissed her forehead. “Go with Knox.”

Clutching my jacket around her torso, she scrambled up the steps and into the house.

Anna stood next to me. “What happened to Allegra?”

“Before I found her? I don’t know. She hasn’t said.” My jaw ached from clenching. “I didn’t want to ask her. She’s focused on her sister.”

Anna glanced over her shoulder to the doorway. Giada leaned against the doorjamb with her arms crossed.

“Keep her away from Allegra and Dee. But don’t leave her alone.” I met my beautiful, trusting, sister’s eyes. “Do you remember our conversations at the funeral?”

She nodded once. “That our enemy was in the family. Is it true?” she whisper-asked. “About Luca?” Tears welled in her eyes.

I nodded, and she gasped. I brushed my thumb across her cheek. “Later.”

Our father confided in Giada more than his flesh and blood. Now, he was dead.

The sedan stopped. Timoteo met Santino and thumped his back with a fist in a rough hug.

Don Jilani approached me with a man who might have been a few years older than me, but not what I expected for a family physician. He carried a small medical suitcase. “Where are my girls?”

“Inside. Anna will show you to the great room.”

“I want to see my daughters.”

I rested my hand on his shoulder. “It’s been a long night, Salvatore.

They're both here and safe. They both require medical attention." A father didn't need to see the trauma to his daughter...neither did a husband. My gut tightened when I thought of what Allegra might have suffered.

Byrne's sexual appetite was no secret. Pressure coiled around my throat, strangling me, the thought of him touching my wife slipping into my thoughts like poison. Had he violated her?

Deidre had yet to speak. She clung to Knox, a ghost of the girl who'd been feisty and full of mischief.

"Felix Senna," Salvatore said. "The doc."

The doctor followed me into the house and up the stairs to the bedrooms. I knocked once and opened the door.

Knox sat on the chaise, his head tipped back, and his eyes closed. Covered with a throw, Deidre curled up next to him.

Knox lifted his head. "She cried when I tried to set her down."

Allegra sat on the edge of the bed, still wearing my suit coat. "Hi, Felix."

Felix glanced from Allegra to me, and then he squatted next to Deidre and Knox. "What happened?"

"She's hurt," Knox spoke quietly. "I don't know how bad. She's scared. But that might be the drugs. She keeps saying my name." His gaze shifted to Allegra. "She was tied down when I found her. There were three men in the room."

"Did they...did they touch her?" Allegra spoke so quietly I almost didn't hear her.

"I don't know. She was sold as a certified virgin." Knox banded his arms around Dee, holding her tighter. "They had her arms strapped to the headboard." Tears filled his eyes. "Her legs were spread and tethered to the posts on the footboard. She has bruises everywhere, from where they held her

down.”

I gritted my teeth and growled. Rage burned in my chest. “They’ll all fucking die for this.”

“When I saw what they’d done to her, I saw red. I slit their throats. With their blood coating my knife, I cut her loose and put my shirt on her.”

“Hi, Dee, it’s Felix.” He softly spoke to Deidre as he unzipped his suitcase. “Can you tell me what you remember?” He gently tugged on the blanket.

She stiffened and tightened her hold on the throw.

“Maybe you should give us a little privacy,” Felix said.

“I’m not leaving her,” Knox said. “She’s fucking terrified. I can feel her trembling.”

“I’ll go get her clothes,” Allegra said. I followed her out of the room. Once the door was closed, I leaned against the wall. Allegra stepped into me and wrapped her arms around my waist. Tears slipped onto her cheeks.

“Come.” I scooped her into my arms, carried her into our room, and set her on our bed. I kneeled on the floor in front of her.

Allegra slipped her fingers through my hair. I lifted my face, took her hand in mine, and rubbed a dried blood stain with my thumb.

“I want to take a shower.” She tightened the jacket around her. “I need to wash tonight off of me.”

I released a long steady exhale, fighting the emotions burning through my chest. Certified virgin. But Deidre’s virginity wouldn’t matter if they broke her mind.

And my beautifully brave wife wasn’t cowering from her experience, but they’d broken her body. Bruises marred her once flawless flesh. Hazel eyes still sparked with fire but now darkened with a dangerous perception. They’d taken her innocence. She’d killed men today.

Had they taken anything else from her?

I stood, laced our fingers, and led her into the bathroom. As I started the shower, she paused in front of the mirror, touched her face, and carefully traced the bruises. Her fingertips brushed along the edges of her cracked and tender lips.

Her gaze lifted to mine. "I'm sorry."

I closed the distance between us. "Are you sorry for protecting your sister?" I kept my eyes on hers in our reflection as I pressed a kiss to the delicate spot beneath her ear. "Sorry for trusting the only man who has never wavered in his loyalty to you? Sorry for risking your life? Sorry for bringing me to my knees? For forcing me to admit my weakness?"

"Weakness?"

With a gentle tug, the suit coat slipped from her body. She gasped at the black and purple injury to her ribs. Bruises marred the flesh of her breasts and discolored the skin around her clavicle.

"Emotions make a man weak. I think of nothing but you. I want only you. Topolina, my *little mouse*, I'm nothing without you. I have nothing without you."

With a featherlight touch, I trailed kisses along her shoulder. She trembled with every whispered breath over the rim of her slightly parted lips.

"You're the air I breathe." I rasped my thumb across her tightened nipple. "The fire in your eyes heats the blood in my veins." I sucked a kiss to her neck. "I need to be where you are. I'm yours."

"I have only ever been yours." Her gaze softened. Her words became a whisper. "You don't have to ask me. I'd slit my own throat before I let another man touch me." She turned in my arms. "I will only ever be yours."

Pain clawed its way into my throat. The tightness, the fear, the suffocating truth that she could've been taken from me.

“Fuck, don’t ever leave me.” I slipped her wedding ring from my pinky. The red stone blinked and sparkled.

“You’re all I want.” She exhaled, her body leaning into mine. “All I’ve ever wanted.”

Steam filled the small space. She was all I could see, her scent surrounded me, and a turbulent spiral of possessiveness coiled tightly inside me.

I rested my forehead against hers. “I’ve made promises to you. But those were made by an arrogant man who failed to realize he owed more to his wife than the protection of his name.”

She touched me, her fingertips soft against my beard. “We both made empty promises.”

“I can change.” I would for her. “I’ll never doubt you again, never question your loyalty to me, and I’ll never betray your trust in me.” My voice quivered. “I never want you to fear me, Allegra.” I stared hard into her eyes. “I know I left you broken.”

I slid the ring onto her finger. “I only took it off because I knew I was breaking my vow to you. I couldn’t wear your ring when I knew I was breaking your trust in me.”

I kissed her fingertips. “I’ll be by your side. I’m going to spend my life loving you.”

She lifted her face to mine. “I love you.”

Allegra

I curled my fingers around his neck and pulled his mouth to mine. His touch branded my body, and his kiss caught fire to my soul.

With one hand, he cradled my head and the other slid over my hip and

onto my ass, crushing the contours of my pelvis to the rigid length of his cock stretched along his groin.

“You’re mine.” Tilting my head, he kissed me deeper, sweeping my mouth with his tongue, tasting me and claiming me.

I was his, coming undone with a desperate ache to have him inside me. This violent mafia man was my every breath, every beat of my heart.

“Marco.” Need soared through me. Slipping my hand between us, I worked the buttons of his shirt open as I followed the tendon of his neck with gentle sucking kisses, and wet touches of my tongue to his flesh.

“Topolina.” Breath mingled. The moment grew heavy between us. Where he touched me, heat slipped beneath my skin. His strong hands made me feel safe...made me feel desired.

I kissed him again. Sweet tastes became a wild lashing of tongues. His lips crushed mine. Another wet stroke of his tongue sent heat pooling in my pussy. I rocked into his groin, desperate to slake the ache in my core.

With his mouth still sipping mine, he inched back and shrugged the shirt from his body. I broke the kiss and rested both of my hands on his chest, tracing the curve of his pectoral with my thumbs and grazing my fingertips over the scar on his chest. Reaching lower, I flipped the bar and hook closure of his trousers. The whir of the zipper lowering echoed with the sound of the water from the shower.

A thousand promises were made with his hungry stare. His gaze followed my fingers as I unbuttoned my jeans and pushed them past my hips. Tucking my thumbs into my panties, I slowly pushed them down.

A low, feral growl vibrated through Marco. “Are you sure?” His palm gently touched my bruised ribs.

I wouldn’t pretend my ribs didn’t ache or that my body wasn’t as battered as my soul. Bruises painted my body in a tapestry of color. We’d

been to war together, emotionally scarred but stronger because we were together.

I curled my fist, feeling the bite of his ring. "I'm your wife. Take what you need from me."

He shrugged out of his slacks and backed me into the shower. The warm waters cascaded over us but paled in comparison to the heat of Marco's mouth on mine. Water soaked my hair. Wet strands clung to my cheeks and dripped from my lashes as he cradled my face and kissed me.

There was nothing hurried about the way he made love to my mouth. He licked my lips as he curled his tongue around mine, tempting me to taste more of him.

As his mouth caressed mine, his cock rocked against my pubic bone. Reaching between us, I curled my fingers around the thickening girth and stroked him from root to tip. The velvety smooth skin slid over the solid steel beneath.

Water continued to rinse away the reminders of the night. There was only the two of us, cocooned in this intimate moment.

I lifted my gaze to his. "Please, Marco, I need to feel you inside me."

He turned me, one hand collaring my throat, the other gently cupping my breasts, his fingers pinching my nipple.

"I don't want to hurt you." His fingers splayed across my abdomen, slid lower, parted my folds, and grazed my clit.

"With us there is always pain with pleasure."

He rimmed my opening and dipped a finger just inside me. With my hands braced against the shower wall, I arched my back and widened my legs.

"Fuck." Bending his knees, he fisted his dick, nudged my center, and with a slow stretch, filled me. This was where I belonged, falling with Marco.

His guttural moan echoed with my surrendering whimper. He pushed deep into me, slowly withdrew every inch of his wet cock, and slid back into me.

Nothing was rushed, yet his grip was firm, both on my neck where my pulse fluttered, and my hip where he braced me against his thrusts. With his lips against my flesh, he whispered words in Italian.

“You feel so good inside me.” I closed my eyes and arched more. “I need you, too, Marco.”

His palm sluiced along my belly and cupped my pussy. As he fucked me unbelievably deeper, he split my folds and centered his fingers over my clit. Oh god, he touched me where his cock stretched my opening, gathering the wetness where our bodies joined.

Little sparks of heat burst into shards of electric pulses. Muscles burned and tensed. My legs began to tremble.

The strength of his body against mine, the power of his cock sliding in and out of me, and the harshness of his breath against my skin sent me spiraling. A maelstrom of emotions twisted within me, coiling tighter and tighter.

“I’m going to come.” The words escaped my lips as a plea to push me to the edge.

“Come on your husband’s cock, topolina.” He powered into me, penetrating hard and deep, then sliding out, to possess me again.

I forgot to breathe. Marco was my only thought as my mind numbed and my body melted. The heat and steam of the shower surrounded us. My breasts crushed against the shower wall, and my hands balled into fists. My heart rabbited as he covered my hand with his, flattening my palm and lacing our fingers.

“Fuck me. Fuck me.” Hard convulsions rocked through me as my inner

walls gloved to his shaft.

Marco roared as his cock surged. Hot spurts of cum slicked my channel. He fucked me through his orgasm, taking the last of my strength. Unsteady, my knees buckled, but he was there, holding me, surrounding me with his strong body and tender touch.

His head tipped forward, water cascading over us, as we both gasped for breath, holding onto each other. Finally, he tilted my face and sipped my lips. “Ti amo.” *I love you.*

I loved him, too, with the same ruthless intensity, violently, with the ferociousness of a lion.

After the shower, I gathered clothes for Deidre. Just a pair of panties, sweatpants, and an oversized hoodie. Probably one I’d taken from Knox at some point.

Marco dressed in casual linen pants and a tunic. Heat flared within me. My husband was dangerously handsome, fearsome, and don of the Bruno family. He was a king among men. My mouth salivated.

He stared at me with hypnotic whiskey-colored irises, piercing my soul. He crossed the room on his long powerful legs, cupped my cheek with his strong, long and thick fingers, and those lips tilted at the corner.

“I’ve missed this, the way your eyes darken with passion but brighten when something feels good for you. Your eyes tell me everything.” His mouth tightened, and his eyes glistened with moisture. He glanced away, took a breath, then met my gaze again. “They told me when I broke you.”

I pulled his open hand to my mouth, then lifting my gaze to his, I kissed his palm. “I’m not broken. I’m stronger. I’ve learned what being your wife means.” I held his hand. “I know you can’t allow insubordination within the ranks, especially now. But what happens with Knox?”

Marco growled, but he squeezed my hand and sat next to me on the bed. “I’ve been considering options. I don’t know. Knox should eat my gun. He’s lured you away from your home, endangered your life, and confessed his love for you.” He stood and paced. “Fucking hell, he’s trained you with knives, tracked you, left you in that house with Byrne. You could be dead.”

I stood, sidled up behind him, and wrapped my arms around his waist. “If you’re going to make a list, I’ll tell you how many times he’s protected me, defended me, and was the only glimmer of happiness in my life.”

Shifting in front of him, I stared hard into his eyes.

“And he’s doing the same thing for Deidre. I love him, Marco. I’ll always love him.” I grazed my nails along the hard line of his jaw, combing the soft hairs of his beard. “But what I feel for him is nothing like what I feel for you. I don’t shiver at a glance from him across the room. I tremble for you.”

Stepping closer, I needed to touch more of him, to soothe the ache in my nipples and the needy clench of my pussy.

“No one has ever touched me the way you do, has ever set fire to my flesh. I dream of you. My heart bleeds for you.”

He fisted my hair and savagely claimed my mouth. He kissed me breathless. Kissed me completely. And then he smiled against my lips.

“I suppose you’ll make similar arguments regarding Timoteo?”

“Why would you punish Tim?” I sucked in a breath. Then bit my lip. Maybe he’d discovered the deleted footage, the distractions, or the stories he’d told to cover my activities.

“You require another list?”

“Um...”

“I didn’t think so.”

“I put him in an impossible position today. Without Knox, we

would've lost Dee. Tim is loyal to you. I asked him to trust me.”

“His lies began long before tonight.”

I shook my head. “No, tonight was the first time I've ever asked him for help.”

“Allegra, he knew Knox's name.”

I shook my head. “I must have let his name slip. He only helped me today because of Dee.”

Marco sighed, wrapped his arms around me, and held me close. “Perhaps you can come up with a fitting punishment for the two men who risked their lives to protect my wife.”

Relief surged through me as I grabbed Dee's clothes. “I think working for you is punishment enough.”

“However, my little mouse, your punishment will come later when I tie you to our bed for a month.”

We crossed the hall, softly knocked, and opened the door.

“Any change?” I entered the room with Marco.

Knox sat on the bed, on top of the blanket, with his phone in one hand, and Dee's hand in the other. Tucked under the blankets, she slept.

I set the clothes on the end of the bed and sat next to Dee. I gently brushed my hand over her hair. “What did the doctor say?”

Knox rubbed his thumb over the back of her small hand. “She freaked out when he tried to examine her.” His gaze met mine. “They fucked with her head. Byrne sold her virginity.” He shook his head. “But I don't know, even if they didn't rape her, they still fucked her up.”

Marco stood at the window as dawn crested the horizon. “She's in shock. The drugs are warping her perception. She'll need time.”

I bent over her and kissed her cheek. “My dad and brother are going to want to take her home.” I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “I don't

know what to tell them about you,” I said to Knox.

“Tell them nothing,” Marco said, his voice edged with a hardness. “Knox is my man, part of this family.” He turned to Knox. “You need my protection, and I don’t trust anyone with my wife...except you.” His eyes narrowed on me. “Mostly because I don’t have a choice,” he grumbled.

Knox tilted his head and smiled. “Yeah, you can’t win with her. She doesn’t listen for shit.”

“What about Dee?” I asked Marco. Even in her sleep, she clung to Knox.

“I’ll explain to Salvatore that she will be safer here until we know Byrne is dead.”

Marco stepped toward the door and waited for me to join him.

“You gave up everything to help me,” I said to Knox.

“I didn’t give up shit.” He tugged on my hair. “You’ve always been the only good thing in my life.”

“I’ll be up later. You’re home now.” I stood. “You should get some sleep.”

Marco rested his hand low on my back as we walked to the stairs.

“Allegra, my father is dead. My brother...my brother was deceived.” His spine stiffened, and his focus narrowed on the voices coming from the great room. “Lies and treachery have tainted my family.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I’ve allowed my enemy into my home, to become a part of this family.”

His voice cut with the ragged edge of a deadly blade.

Emotions boiled in my stomach and crawled up my throat. Did he still hate Knox? “Marco, Knox isn’t your enemy.”

His gaze turned to me. “The same person who betrayed my father attempted to kill Luca. The Irish were never responsible. Luca isn’t dead, but

he believed I'd ordered the hit on him. My own brother."

Breath froze in my lungs as a tidal wave of panic washed over me. "Who—who would want both your father and brother dead? Oh god, and does that mean they'll come after you?"

He combed his fingers through my hair. "Giada. And I'm more afraid she'll come after you."

Marco

I stood at the threshold of the reception room with Allegra at my side. Timoteo and Santino chatted in the corner. Orlando, dressed in a black suit and reeking of Bruno power, stood next to them with Emilio at his side. These men, fearless, brutal, and protective, were my capos.

Across the room, don Jilani sat next to Anna. She held his hand, no doubt offering him comfort as he worried about his daughters. I couldn't promise Deidre would smile the same, or have the same flirtatious laughter, but I vowed all involved in breaking her would suffer in death.

Stefano sat alone, cloaked in the shadow of the room. His darkened gaze narrowed on Giada as he cleaned beneath his fingernails with his knife. My underboss wanted blood.

Patience, brother.

My gaze shifted to Giada, and her focus was on Ant. She took a sip of wine and licked across her upper lip with a sweep of her tongue. A lethal adversary, she conspired to strike where I'd be vulnerable. My consigliere. I intended to keep my enemy close.

The pieces were in place. My family. My rise to power. My reign.

My father left a legacy as a ruthless king, unforgiving and brutal. But he had a treacherous snake at his side.

Whereas I would rule with a queen.

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About the Author

KyAnn Waters is a multi-published, award-winning author of romance. She lives in Utah with her husband. Her two boys are grown and out in the world making mischief of their own. Never believing she was a pet lover, she still has made a home for a menagerie of animals. She enjoys sporting events on the television, thrillers on the big screen, and hot scenes between the pages of her books.

Visit her website www.KyAnnWaters.com

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