

Savage

RULER

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KRISTEN LUCIANI

SAVAGE RULER

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Sinfully Savage: Book One

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Chapter One

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MATTEO

“We need your protection, Matteo, and we will pay anything you want.”

I sit back in my black leather chair in one of my SoHo offices, holding the tips of my fingers together as I regard the two men sitting in front of me.

Declan Mulligan, head of the Irish mafia here in Manhattan, and his oldest son, Conor.

The heir apparent.

Or one of them, at least.

I got the call from Declan a few days ago, and even though I've made a name for myself over the past year since I've set up shop here in Manhattan, it was the first contact we'd had. He never bothered to reach out until he needed something, a fact that irritates the hell out of me.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't come to the city to make friends. Hell, I blew in here like an inferno and snuffed out the splintered Molino family who'd owned Greenwich Village and ran it into the ground in the years before I showed up on the scene.

It wasn't long before they were running out of here with their dicks in their hands.

I raged fast and furious to make sure the other families and organizations understood the type of power I wield and that I'm not afraid to use it when it

suits my purposes. People knew little about me when I came to this city. Sicily is my home, and while my reputation there precedes me, here in the States, I needed to build up my influence.

And now, a year later, they all know what I can do, what I've done, and what I want.

I can deliver anything for anyone...at a price.

I fucking own them all and they don't even realize it.

Mulligan sees that now. But before a few days ago, the guy never once emerged from the shadows of his Midtown hiding places to even acknowledge me. Hell's Kitchen and the surrounding area always belonged to the Irish, and nobody dared infiltrate his lair.

At least, not until now.

And that's why he and his son are here.

"Tell me what I need to know," I say, staring between father and son. They share a lot of the same features — same tall, lanky build, clear blue eyes, and strong jaw. But there are some notable differences. Dark shadows stain the skin under Declan's eyes. His hair is gray and thinning, and his face is worn like a beaten-up shoe.

Yeah, this life definitely takes a toll.

And that expression on his face? I know it well.

He's scared.

That's the only reason why he's here.

Declan leans forward, sweeping his hands through his sparse hair. "I'm sure you know of the Dominguez cartel," he says in a low voice.

I nod. I know everyone.

"There was an, ah, altercation," he grunts with a sidelong glance at Conor, who avoids his critical eye. "In their neighborhood. Conor and his guys ended up killing a couple of their soldiers, but also..." He pauses, clenching the arms of the chair tight. "They killed a lieutenant."

“Santos Rojas,” I say.

“Yes,” Declan concurs.

My eyes flicker toward Conor’s and surprisingly, they meet mine.

I bite back a smile. He thinks he looks like such a badass right now, almost challenging me with that fierce glare, the one that says *I think you’re total bullshit even though my father insists that we need your help.*

Well, fuck you, Conor. My ass isn’t the one with a bounty on it.

“So, Conor, what were you and your guys doing in the cartel’s territory?” I ask. There’s a lot more I’d like to inject into that question, but I’ll let him answer before I nail him to the wall.

He smirks and crosses his arms over his chest, an evil glimmer in his eyes. “Pussy and drugs.”

“Seems like you could get a plethora of both anywhere else in the city. What drew you to Harlem, of all places? You were pretty damn far from home.”

His jaw clenches. “Those assholes have been showing up a lot more lately in their fucking pimped-out cars, doling out their coke like it’s free fucking candy. They’ve been looking for trouble. So I took my guys and brought it to them,” he says darkly.

“And you thought taking out a lieutenant was a smart way to end the night? Mission accomplished?” I lift an eyebrow, and spots of bright red color Declan’s cheeks as he stares daggers at his son.

“Don’t fucking talk to me like that. You’re not my goddamn boss. You don’t get to question me!” he thunders, standing up suddenly, his chair scraping against the hardwood floor.

“Conor, sit your ass down!” Declan hisses. “You’ve caused us enough trouble!”

But Conor, thick-skulled fucker that he is, just stands there. His lips are thin and tight, his jaw twitching as his eyes scout every inch of the office.

Protection from the cartel?

Shit, what Declan needs is protection from his own goddamn son.

My gun is taped to the underside of the desk as always because you just never know. I've learned over the years that being prepared for anything is the best way to stay alive.

Actually, it's the only way.

And the fact that they are here right now tells me the Mulligans don't live by the same credo.

They're gonna learn it fast if they have any hope of surviving.

I narrow my eyes at Conor. "Dominguez will find out who hit his guys. And you know what will happen when, not if, he does."

Conor's jaw twitches but he says nothing.

Declan turns his pleading gaze toward me. "Matteo, I have a family to protect. My daughter, my sons. They're my priority."

"Seems like your priorities aren't exactly in line with Conor's." I lean back in my chair. "And the other families know it." I nod at Conor. "Is he next in line to take over your organization in the unfortunate situation that you're next on Dominguez's hit list?"

Declan raises his pale blue eyes toward me. "Conor and his older sister, Heaven, are my two underbosses. They both are equal beneficiaries of everything I own — all of my businesses, my real estate. Everything becomes theirs."

I already knew this, of course, because I investigate everything about anyone standing in my way. Knowledge is power for the people who possess it.

And that knowledge always uncovers a liability that I can use for my purpose.

Let me be frank. I don't give a flying fuck if there's an all-out war between these clowns.

I just want what I want.

And I need Mulligan's trust in order to get it.

Conor turns to his father, his jaw practically on the floor. “Why don’t you just give him a fucking balance sheet and income statement while you’re at it, Dad? Or maybe give him the password on your goddamn bank account?”

“Because of you there isn’t enough money in that account to buy the kind of protection we need, Conor!” Declan fumes. “And if Matteo refuses to take this job, we’re going to be sitting ducks!”

Protection. It’s an ironic twist since I’ve spent so much of my life hurting others to get what I want.

Now I take their money to keep them safe.

For a year, I’ve established my influence here in the city. I’ve built a taboo underground BDSM empire that hosts an elite clientele for a shit ton of cash. I’ve created pipelines to smuggle drugs and launder money throughout my territories and out of Manhattan, all in the name of expansion.

I want to take over the fucking world.

That’s my stretch goal, although nothing is a stretch when you’re ruthless, power hungry, and well-financed.

And anyone who knows me, knows I am all three and then some.

“Okay, first of all, sit the fuck down,” I growl at Conor, pointing at him. I’m tired of this entitled pain in the ass’s attitude. He caused a whole shit storm for his family because his goddamn ego needed to be stroked. But he didn’t consider the consequences at all.

I glare at Conor as he sinks into his chair.

Fucking guy can never be boss. He’d run his father’s empire so far into the ground, he’d hit the Earth’s core.

And I’m gonna be the one to yank that pole out of his ass.

He just doesn’t know it yet.

“I’ll take the job,” I say.

Declan lets out a sigh of relief and his shoulders sag as he settles against the back of his chair. I’ll let him enjoy this for another couple of seconds until he

asks his next question.

It's one I've been aching to hear and anxious to have answered.

The corners of my lips curl upward a slight bit, knowing I'm about to steal the keys to the kingdom right out from under their noses.

"Thank you so much, Matteo," Declan says. "I know you can help us work through this, that you have the backing and the network to—"

I give my head a slight shake. "I have a different plan for you, one that will prove to everyone in the city...everyone with any stake in Manhattan or the surrounding boroughs...that we are aligned. Unified." I lean forward. "Partners."

"That doesn't sound like a simple security job," Declan says with a hint of hesitation. "I didn't realize this would be made public. Do you usually have that kind of arrangement with your clients?"

"No, this will be custom. Just for you," I reply.

"Okay." Declan's brow furrows. "So how do we make that happen? Name your price, I'll pay it!"

I don't bother to temper the self-satisfied smile that spreads across my face when I speak my next words.

Because...*purpose*.

It's about to be fulfilled.

"This arrangement isn't one that requires a money exchange," I say.

Conor's head jerks upward from his lap, and Declan eyes me with suspicion. Smart man. "What is it that you want, Matteo?"

I pause for a single beat, the silence in the room deafening.

"I want your daughter," I reply. "I want Heaven."

Chapter Two

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HEAVEN

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THREE WEEKS LATER

“This is really fucked up, Heaven,” my younger brother, Patrick, mutters under his breath as he fumbles with his black eye mask. “I mean, I’m all for doing reconnaissance, but going to a sex club with your sister is just...*sick*.” He shudders and adjusts his black suit jacket. “And this mask is really friggin’ itchy. How much longer do I need to keep it on?”

“Everyone enters wearing a mask,” I hiss, my high heels clicking along the pavement where we cross the desolate street in lower Manhattan, the moon disappearing into the overhead trees. Darkness falls upon us, and I suspect people headed our way like the added privacy element. “It’s for anonymity, dipshit. And that’s something I’d really like to preserve, tonight of all nights.”

I loop my arm through his as we hurry into the private entrance of this exclusive Manhattan townhouse deep in the heart of SoHo. The doors opened an hour ago for the event, and to be honest, I needed a few shots of whiskey before heading into this carnal celebration of All Hallow’s Eve.

Attending the soiree is my latest stroke of brilliance.

“I’ve gotta tell you, if I see shit I like, I’m staying,” he says with a low chuckle, dragging me along. I try to match his long strides in my stilettos, but since he’s about a foot taller than me, I’m panting just to keep up with him.

“You’re sick,” I grumble as we approach the doorman. He’s also wearing a mask and is dressed in a full tuxedo. I fumble in my clutch bag for the brass token that was hand delivered via messenger to my Upper West Side brownstone a few days earlier. I’d applied a few weeks ago for membership to this club in anticipation of our upcoming meeting with the Villani family, Sicilian transplants who came to New York to breed their version of deviance in the underground sex scene. As soon as Dad told me about a potential new business partner he wanted us to meet, I flew into private investigator mode, and the first step was getting access to his twisted club scene. And the famed Halloween bash was a perfect idea since you know, masks. He’d never be the

wiser and I could spy freely.

“Clearly. I mean, why else would I be going in here with you?”

“Because we need information on these guys.” I pause to give him a hard look once we’re inside. “And we both know Conor has his head stuck so far up Dad’s ass that he’ll listen to any offer they make us and take it straight away without even knowing who or what we’re dealing with.”

“What do you think we’re gonna find out about these guys tonight, Heaven? How big their cocks are? How many chicks they can bang at once? How is any of that gonna help you at that meeting?”

I press my lips into a tight line. It’s a fair question. And the truth is, I really have no idea what I’m even looking for inside of this palace of hedonism. “Look, I just need to see them in their own element.”

“Speaking of seeing, do you even know who you’re looking for? And how, genius, are you supposed to find them with their masks on?”

Dammit. I was so busy trying to protect my identity that I didn’t consider how I’d find out his.

I grit my teeth and shove Patrick farther into the foyer of the townhouse and a few steps into the place, I almost forget why we’re here in the first place.

Sultry, sexy beats pulsate throughout the interior as the skinniest girls I’ve ever seen wind their way around the patrons with silver trays of champagne flutes and shot glasses of some amber-colored liquid. They’re basically naked with black straps wound around their lithe bodies. And, of course, their masks are firmly in place. Some of them even have on elaborate gold headdresses with dangly crystal drops framing their faces. They kind of look like human chandeliers.

Speaking of which, I’ve never seen anything quite as elaborate as the ones hanging from the vaulted ceilings. The room we’re standing in is draped in red shadows, the dim overhead lights the only way to make anything out.

But then again, this is only step one.

To our left is a narrow, winding staircase leading to the second level, and to the right, a narrow staircase leading to the underbelly of this wanton house of ill repute. I suck in a breath as two of the strapped-up girls, one blonde and one brunette, place their trays on a nearby end table and start grinding together in the middle of the staircase on the left as partygoers pass on either side of them. The girls don't even pause for a single beat, though. The blonde backs the brunette against the wrought-iron handrail, shimmying down the length of the brunette like she's a freaking pole. The brunette throws back her head as the blonde's hands disappear between her thighs. And dammit, I can't tear my eyes away as she sinks down to her knees, pushes open the brunette's legs, and buries her head into her pussy.

Holy fuck.

I've watched porn before, but this?

Chills ripple through me and I trace each movement of the blonde as she works the brunette into a total and complete frenzy, gripping the handrail and letting out a seductive wail that has Patrick groaning next to me.

Despite my goals for the evening, I can't deny that the moans and mewls surrounding me as partygoers engage make me tingle in areas I least expected.

I mean, coming here wasn't supposed to be any bit the erotic experience that it's become in the last sixty seconds of me taking in my surroundings.

And judging from the disgusting sounds coming from Patrick's lips, he is in complete agreement.

Yes, it is fucking sick.

What the hell was I thinking, bringing my oversexed brother along for the ride?

Ugh, no pun intended.

"Jesus, Heaven," he grunts. "This place is off the fucking hook. If we do end up partnering with these guys, I'm gonna be here every night. Who knows? Maybe I'll even perform."

“Shut it, Patty!” I seethe, dragging my eyes away from the sight of the two girls who are still writhing and entwined on the staircase. “Remember why we’re here!”

“Right, right. Tonight, we spy.” He smirks, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously under the lights. “But it’s not gonna stop me from gawking, sis. Sorry, not sorry.”

I throw my hands into the air. “Let’s just take a lap around the place to start, okay?”

But Patrick is already heading off in a different direction, one in which there is a hallway leading to God only knows what.

“Patty!” I whisper-shout, grabbing his wrist and yanking him back to my side.

He turns to give me a wink. “I’m lapping over there. You lap the other way and we’ll meet back here in like, thirty.”

“How am I going to find you? We can’t use our phones! It’s against the rules!”

“What do they do if they find you on the phone?” His eyebrows shoot up. “Do they whip you? Chain you to a wall and use a Hitachi Magic Wand on you until you scream the safe word?”

I press my fingertips to my temples. “Good Lord, why did I bring you here?”

“Because you know I’m all about new experiences,” he says with a waggle of his eyebrows. “How the fuck have I survived this long without ever scoring an invite to a place like this? Look what I’ve been missing!” He grins, flashing his famous bright white smile at me. Patty may not be a frequenter of sex dens, but he sure isn’t hard up for female attention.

But this place is like sex crack of the most theatrical kind.

Instantly addictive.

“You have what you need,” he says. “And if push comes to shove, use it. There’s a reason why you’re the underboss, Heaven. You don’t take shit from anyone.”

My role in the family is the whole reason why we're here in the first place.

Underboss. As in, one step away from the crown.

I share that honor with Conor, a fact that makes me twitch like there are bed bugs nestling into my skin.

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth.

He gives me a little nudge. "Do me a favor and try not to be such a control freak tonight. Just be a, you know, freak. You might enjoy it." He snickers and my mouth twists as I watch him meander through some groping hands and flailing legs.

He's never coming back in thirty minutes.

Maybe thirty days, if I'm lucky.

I rub my hands down the sides of my arms, my skin prickling with some sick combination of arousal, anxiety, and anticipation as my eyes scout the main floor. I walk slowly across the polished marble tile floor, trying not to jerk my head around every time I see a naked member saunter past.

It's just a lot of boobs and balls for me to take in all at once.

My pulse throbs against my neck and I grab a crystal highball glass off of a passing tray, bringing it to my lips and sucking down the cocktail. It burns a fiery path down my throat, landing in my empty belly. The heat swirls around my gut, snaking through my insides as I scour the room.

When I planned to invade the Villani family domain, I figured protecting my identity was the best way to see them in their own environment. I could move around without any worries that they'd recognize me.

But dammit, I didn't think I'd end up wading through a sea of masked deviants trying to find my target.

I take a deep breath as I slither through the crowd. The men out here are all dressed to the nines, and some of the women are in cocktail dresses. Most of them are either in shreds of lace that barely cover or they are completely naked, dancing and grinding in sky high heels.

It's fascinating to me.

At twenty-four, I've seen a lot, much more than most girls my age.

Though not in the sexual sense.

Being the only girl in a family that pretty much runs on testosterone hasn't exactly been a picnic, but it's made me tough. It's forced me to do things for the sake of my family loyalty. And it's given me an opportunity to step into the top seat once I prove to my father that I am best equipped to run the family once he retires.

A pang assaults my heart.

Deep down, I know I don't deserve that honor, not after what I let happen.

No matter what I do, redemption will always be out of my reach.

And the guilt will continue to fester deep in my gut like an infection that slowly poisons my insides, tormenting me for the rest of my life.

Because that's what I really deserve.

I stop outside of an open doorway, shoving those toxic thoughts to the far recesses of my mind as my eyes drink in the performance. I blink fast, trying hard to absorb every detail because there are a lot of them.

And plenty of other voyeurs like me are doing the exact same thing.

My gaze falls to a guy on my left, and he's busy gripping his cock as he watches with rapt attention. I take a few steps away from him since his grunts and groans are distracting me from the show.

The room is entirely lit by candles. They line the perimeter, flickering wildly as the show on center stage heats up. An eerie tune vibrates the floor beneath my feet, and I try not to gape at the scene playing out in front of me. Two naked women are tied to a long pole that stretches across the room. Some kind of silky fabric is wound around their wrists as they sway to the music pulsating throughout the space. Two other women kneel in front of them, feasting on their pussies as what I can only imagine is an appetizer.

Because judging from the shit I've seen here tonight, there's no way that's the entrée.

The room is draped in gray and black, adding to the erotically ominous aura. My breath hitches as four men in full-length black capes appear from the corners of the room. The capes fall open in the front, exposing their hard cocks and washboard abs. Two of them kneel behind the girls face-fucking the 'captives' while the other two position themselves against their backs.

I swallow hard as the orgy commences and the men lose their capes. Hands, arms, and legs thrash around as the captives get fucked from behind. It isn't long before their howls and screams and moans pierce the air and drown out the haunting melody. I clench and unclench my hands, rubbing them against the sides of my dress as my pulse rockets into the vaulted ceilings.

Blood rushes between my ears as the performance reaches its climax.

And fuck me, I'm closer to that than I'd like to admit.

Dammit, Heaven! This whole night is about control, and you are losing every shred of it!

I came here to reclaim control, and every second that ticks by sucks it out of me, shred by shred.

“Permission to touch?”

A deep, seductive voice hums against my ear and I gasp, spinning around and slamming my shoulder into a wall.

A sharp pain shoots down my arm and I clutch it tight, staring into a pair of the most fiery, panty-melting blue eyes I've ever seen.

Suddenly, the pain loosens its grip on me.

And just as suddenly, I become the “captive.”

Chapter Three

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MATTEO

I saw her even before the alert came through from my doorman that she'd arrived.

I stood by the window in my office and watched her enter the townhouse with a tall, muscular guy I take to be one of her brothers.

I followed her every movement through the main floor and watched her gape at the scene that unfolded in the Room of Shadows.

She couldn't see me, but I saw her.

Long, wavy red hair that grazes the small of her back, clear green eyes that give away every lustful sensation coursing through her, even though it's damn clear she's trying hard to resist them.

Oh, yes.

I saw her.

And soon enough, I will have her.

Totally and completely.

The fact that she doesn't know it yet, that she will resist with everything in her, makes the thought that much more enticing.

A present that only I have the power to unwrap.

I'd bet my left nut that Declan doesn't know she's here right now.

And giving myself away now would only ruin the surprise that is so close to being revealed.

It's taken a few weeks to put the plans in motion. I've held up my end of the bargain, doing what I can to establish a public relationship with the Mulligan family, making sure that everyone knows we're aligned.

But I have yet to officially meet my bride, and I think it's time we're introduced.

So I slide my mask into place and take my position next to her.

Before she leaves here tonight, she'll know who I am.

But she won't have any idea what I'm going to take from her.

Her father thinks he's hedging his bets by inviting me into his family.

He doesn't realize that doing so will give me the keys to his kingdom.

Maybe his brain was a little too whiskey-soaked to understand the implications of his request when he made it.

Maybe he was just too panicked about his loose cannon of a son and what hell fire he can rain down on them all.

But his mistake will soon become my gain.

I have no delusions about these people.

They are just some stray stones in my path, small ones I can easily kick out of the way as I leave the lasting imprints of my legacy in their wake.

That's why I'm here in New York City.

And why in the very near future, I will own it.

In the meantime, I can have some fun.

At Heaven's expense, of course.

So I ask her the question, mainly because it's a club rule to ask for consent before touching another patron.

But also because I want to hear her say the word, to give in to the temptation that I've watched her try too hard to resist.

I want to break her.

And this is how it begins...how she will start to unravel...here, now, and with me tugging at that single frayed string.

She turns a questioning gaze on me, her response a garbled mess of sounds tumbling from her deep red lips. I bite back a smile.

Her innocence is a little shocking, considering who she is and where she came from.

Of course, you don't need to indulge in deviant behavior to be an effective leader and master assassin.

But as such you need to be in complete control at all times.

And if tonight is any indication, Heaven Mulligan has unearthed a very important tell, one that can be perceived as a weakness.

People in our line of work, people who hold all of the power in their organizations, need to be very aware of themselves and their reactions to different types of stimuli. We cannot display fear or concern or apprehension or desire.

Exposing any bit of emotion puts you and your whole organization at risk.

It allows the enemy to see things that should be hidden to the world, things that can compromise your power.

Heaven may be in complete control while slicing off limbs and slitting throats, but you never know where your enemy might be lurking. Losing control and giving in to temptation makes you vulnerable to them, something I am about to prove to my future bride.

She stares at me with those shielded green eyes, but it's too late. I've already seen enough. I know what she wants, why she came here, and why she won't leave without it. A quick nod of her head is followed by a raspy, "Yes."

I lace my fingers with hers, a grin tilting my lips as I guide her into a darkened room around the corner. The show is reaching its climax, pun intended, and my cock aches to be stroked.

But that's not how things work here.

Once you've chosen your victim...or rather, partner...you have the ability to take them into a private area where you can explore each other and test inhibitions and limits. Or you can join the masses and mingle around in one of the common areas, pleasuring not only each other, but all of the voyeurs joining in the experience.

I don't want to put Heaven on display.

I also recognize the need for privacy.

She's here to check me out in my own environment, to see if I'm a worthy partner for her family's organization.

Yet, she has no idea what I'm about to do to her life and her future.

Nor does she know that I hold all of the control over her, here and outside of this club.

The plan is perfect.

Foolproof.

And Heaven is just one of the fringe benefits.

My cock twitches with that realization as I back her into a room draped in a deep purple haze with red-tinged lights providing a seductive glow over the furniture. I pull the door closed and lock it since it's my club and I don't want any eyewitnesses observing what I'm going to do next.

My club has strict rules.

I have stricter ones for my own personal encounters.

"I saw you watching the show," I breathe against her hair, inhaling the scent of citrus and coconut wafting under my nostrils. "You liked it, didn't you?"

She nods again. "Yes," she whispers, taking a step back against a wall.

Oh, fuck yeah, I can work with that. There are brass hooks attached to the wall right above her head. I can easily thread a silk wrist wrap through them and make her feel every bit of pleasure as the ones who were just on display outside.

I reach out and graze her arm with my fingertips. She shudders at my touch and recoils as if I've singed her skin. She runs a hand through her thick hair, her gaze moving in every direction except mine.

"You've never done this before, have you?" I ask, creeping closer as she moves back once again.

There isn't much space between her and the wall now. A few more steps and she'll be trapped.

In more ways than one.

I place my hands on either side of her, pressing them into the sheetrock. I dip my head, forcing her eyes upward since I'm so much taller than she is. She carries herself with strength and confidence, something I saw when she arrived at the entrance to the townhouse. But the experience that evolved as she stepped into the doors has her questioning herself.

Her control.

Her resolve.

Her ability to challenge.

Because for as much as she needs to investigate this place and its owners, she's intrigued. *Hot*. And I've effectively sidetracked her from her objective.

Score one for me.

And since she'd so desperate to see me in action, I'm going to give her exactly what she wants.

She will hate me for it, but she'll hate me more when she finds out what her life is about to become.

"You keep trying to escape from me," I murmur, sliding a hand over her hip, my fingertips tingling as they brush against the exposed skin of her lower

back. It's creamy white and soft as velvet. I ache for more, but I learned a long time ago that nothing worthwhile comes quickly. "Don't. Let it take over."

I need to take my time with her, to make her comfortable with me and this whole experience. I need to make her want me, to beg for me, to do something completely out of character because she trusted the wrong man.

And that's when I will pull the rug out from under her.

"I'm not here for...for..." She snaps her mouth closed, those bitable lips so damn close to mine.

"You may not have thought you were here for *that*," I say. "But it turns out that you want it. I can see it in your eyes, in your flushed face, in the way your body trembles each time I get closer. You want to feel the same kind of pleasure that the others felt, the type that's forbidden because you think it will make you lose control of yourself. And you think that's dangerous, don't you?"

"I don't think," she gasps as I press myself against her. But as much as she's fighting against herself, a brutal war waging behind that lust-filled gaze, she doesn't push me away. "I know."

"And yet, you let me touch you." I trail my fingertips down the side of her face, her breath hitching at the sensation. "You allowed me to bring you here, to lock you inside of a dark room. Why?"

Her breasts heave as her chest rises and falls with increasing speed. They strain against the tight fabric of her dress, making my fingers tingle with an electrical charge that crackles in the air between us. I drag them down the slope of her neck, over her smooth skin, until they slip into the neckline of her dress. I move slowly, methodically, just to gauge her reaction.

It's perfect.

A tiny mewl tumbles from her puckered lips, her eyes floating closed as she rests her head against the wall.

The forbidden.

Fuck me, it's all-consuming.

And now that I have her invitation, I decide it's time to RSVP.

I slide the straps off of her shoulders, not all the way, but just enough so that I can see the tops of her full tits. I bring my hands under them, kneading them as her moans get louder.

This woman.

Did she really think that I wouldn't find out about her plans to come here? To spy on me? To gather ammunition against me?

I can't help but allow the smirk to lift my lips as her back arches, her tits beckoning me to taste.

Did she really think that token she received was just that, a simple gold coin that allows entry into one of the most exclusive and decadently salacious experiences in the city?

I dip my head into her chest, sweeping my tongue over the fleshy mounds as I massage them with growing angst.

Did she really think this was all about a business partnership?

A guttural groan catches in the back of my throat as I take each of her nipples between my teeth, suckling the taut, pink buds. Her hands grip the sides of my jacket, tugging me closer. I use one of my knees to slide between her legs, and they fall open for me as if she can't even remember her objective for the evening.

A most delicious distraction.

I reach into one of my pockets for a scarf, dragging my lips away from her luscious breasts. Her eyes fly open, her lips parted. "What's that?" she asks in a breathless whisper.

I quickly loop it through the hooks and one by one, raise her arms above her head. "You liked what you saw out there," I murmur. "Now I'm going to let you experience it yourself."

“But I...I can’t...” she whispers, jerking her body left and right. “Someone is...I need to...” Her voice trails off because she realizes she has no excuses to make. She wants this...*me*. I just need her to say it.

I stop mid-tie, giving her a hard stare. “If you don’t want this, you tell me now,” I growl. “It’s against club rules to make someone do something without their consent. And I won’t take what’s not been given to me.”

Her green eyes widen as if she’s shocked to hear that I have a code.

We won’t call it moral, of course, but still.

A code is a code and I live by it.

Always.

And as much as I want to break her, I need her permission first.

Her lips stretch into a tight line, angry spots of red coloring her cheeks. “I do,” she hisses, fisting my shirt with her one free hand and yanking me toward her. “And you’ll only get what *I* decide to give.”

I chuckle, peeling her hand from my shirt and wrapping her wrist with the other end of the scarf. “Sweetheart, you’ve already given me everything.”

I slide her dress to her waist, her slim thighs tense beneath the pads of my fingertips. I slide to my knees, looping my fingers around her skimpy thong and pushing it to the floor. I push her legs open, digging my fingers into the smooth globes of her ass. I trail kisses between her quivering thighs, sweeping my tongue over her skin. My cock is thick and rod iron-hard in my pants and I want so badly to pull it out, to fuck her mercilessly, dangling her over the edge of her sanity.

But not tonight.

Not yet.

Her spine stiffens the second my tongue presses against her clit, then delves inside of her velvety walls. With a seductive wail, she tightens her muscles, thrusting her hips against my face. I moan against her pussy, her juices flowing fast and furious into my mouth. I sink my fingers inside of her as my tongue and teeth work her clit, driving them deeper as she arches her back.

Her moans grow louder with each passing second, her knees locking my head firmly in place, not that I need the encouragement.

I've never tasted a sweeter pussy.

Maybe it really is the intoxicating taste of the forbidden...for both of us.

Maybe it's the anticipation of what's to come that has my dick in a twist over Heaven Mulligan.

Or maybe it's just *her*, a disturbing realization that fires off alarm bells in the depths of my mind.

My throat is tight, my heart hammering against my ribcage as her desire fills my mouth, For a second, my own objective for the evening fades to white noise.

Before it has the chance to completely dissipate, I yank it back.

I can't lose sight of my plans.

Because just like her, I have a job to do.

And she is the tool, nothing more!

But dammit, I'm skimming the edge of something very precarious right now, something I didn't anticipate when I lured her into this room, or when I installed the tracker on her token so I'd know exactly when she arrived at the event.

And if I don't stop it right now, if I don't chase away these crazy feelings, the very thing I crave is the one thing that might crush me.

She writhes against my mouth, the hooks clanging against the wall as her wrists flail. My eyes fall to my belt buckle and I grit my teeth to control the urge that is damn close to overtaking me. I want so badly to pull off that scarf and flip her around so she's facing the wall. I want to smack her ass with my belt until I've branded her as mine, and then I want to fuck her puckered hole as she screams for God and for the release only I can provide.

I pull away from her, sliding up the front of her body until my mouth hovers over hers.

It takes every last ounce of restraint I have to leave my belt looped and locked.

I'm nothing if I'm not patient.

Her eyes flutter open, short, sharp gasps puncturing the air between us.

It was thick with sex and promise.

Now it's just permeated with denial.

And she doesn't understand why, once again, she's lost all control.

"You want more, don't you?" I whisper against her lips, toying with a strand of her hair.

She just nods. Doesn't even try to play games at this point.

The lady knows what she wants, I'll give her that.

But how far is she willing to go to take it?

That's the million-dollar question.

And it'll be a lot of fucking fun to elicit that answer from her.

I grip her hips tight, pulling against me. My cock jerks and I rub myself against her pussy, making her squeal.

I want to hear her do so much more than that...

The threat addiction looms lower and lower with each passing second and I know if I don't stop now, I risk losing my resolve.

I risk my future, my organization, and my livelihood.

I've been there before and suffered so much loss because I let the addiction command and consume me.

I almost lost my chance for redemption.

I don't intend to lose it again.

Once I execute my plan...once she is mine for good and for always...only then will I finally be able to reclaim what I lost.

Until then, I have to be strong.

I have to walk away.

I already tempted myself by sampling the forbidden fruit and fuck me, I want to give in to the craving — to bury myself deep inside of her, to slide her up and down my dick, and to make her scream until she is hoarse.

I shouldn't have brought her in here.

I shouldn't have tasted her.

And I sure as hell shouldn't have exposed her to my world.

But once I saw her face and realized that she was as captivated by my world as she was aroused by it, I had no choice.

I needed to feed that desire, and in doing so, I fulfilled my own.

How ironic that to steal away her control, I had to let mine dissolve into thin air.

“I liked watching you lose yourself. I liked seeing you give in to your urges. That's what this club is all about — shedding your inhibitions and experiencing pleasure to the fullest. It lets you give in to fantasies you never even knew you had.” I pause with a smile. “And that, in my opinion, is just a little slice of *heaven*.”

Chapter Four

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HEAVEN

My jaw drops at the sound of my name and blood rushes between my ears.

I don't speak.

I can't think.

I just yank.

His black mask falls to the floor, completely forgotten as I gaze into the piercing blue eyes of none other than Matteo Villani. I'd googled him as soon as Dad mentioned the name, and I can't lie.

With his chiseled jaw, striking blue-green eyes that pop against his darker skin and hair, he's gorgeous.

And evidently as sick and twisted as his club.

"You," I rasp, pulling the hem of my dress down as far as it will go.
"Asshole!"

"It's nice to meet you, too." He smirks, folding his arms over his broad chest.

"How could you...I can't even believe...argh!" I shove him hard, trying to put as much distance between us as possible. "Is this some kind of joke to you? Do you think my father will have any interest in working with a scumbag like you now?"

Infuriatingly enough, he doesn't so much as stumble backward. It's like his feet are rooted to the floor.

"Last I checked, you came to this club of your own free will. You let a stranger take you into a dark room and tie you up. And then you let that stranger—"

"Enough!" I shout, covering my ears. "You baited me! You knew who I was the whole time! How?"

He lifts an eyebrow. "Who do you think runs the council, sweetheart? You submitted a membership application with your real name. You didn't think that was going to raise red flags?"

I bite down on my lower lip.

Ah, dammit.

I didn't actually complete those applications. I delegated that task to my boneheaded brother, Patty Pinkie Rings.

Guess the joke's on the real bonehead in this scenario.

Me.

Matteo smirks. "Lemme guess. You didn't do your due diligence."

"Oh, fuck off!" I snip, flipping my hair over my shoulder. "I came here tonight because I wanted to see how real slimeballs exist in their natural habitat. And I got firsthand knowledge!"

"You didn't seem to take much offense to being plunged head-first into that natural habitat," he says.

My nostrils flare, my lips twisting like he just shoved a lemon between them. Goddammit, why does he have to look like a fucking mythical Greek god? I mean, *of course*, he has to be even more delectable in person than in the tabloid picture I'd grabbed off the Internet, with penetrating eyes that can sizzle the blood coursing through my veins!

Because it's just my fucking luck to have been deliciously assaulted by that demonic mouth!

Jesus Christ, Conor cannot find out about this under any circumstances.

Hell, nobody in my family can!

I'm already fighting an uphill battle to grab that top spot. Dad has been playing me and Conor against each other for the past couple of years with this co-underboss bullshit, and I have worked so hard to prove that I'm worthy of being the boss of my family.

I earned it! Conor knows how to maim, but I'm the one who's established a network, the one who's nurtured all of the relationships with our partners. I've made the family a ton of cash by using my head, not my fists.

Conor can barely string together a coherent sentence sober, much less drunk. And let's face it, he's half in the bag more often than not.

Dad has to see that I'm the more responsible choice to lead our family!

Even coming here tonight...it was about strategizing!

Conor probably can't even spell that freaking word!

I expel a sharp breath as Matteo runs a hand through his dark locks so that they fall right back into place, hanging over his left eye. I clench my fists tight.

Let the berating begin.

Stop it, Heaven!

You do not want to touch his hair, for fuck's sake! You do not want to smooth it back into place! And you most certainly do not want to feel the tickle of his hair against your skin!

I narrow my eyes, glaring at him harder as his lips curl into a mischievous smirk.

Matteo Villani is exactly the kind of partner that would run circles around Conor. He's cunning, calculating, and completely deceitful!

"I can see that there are a lot of things rolling around in that head of yours," he murmurs.

“Oh, really?” I say, sticking my hands on my hips. “Like what, since you’re a dickhead of the all-knowing type?”

He chuckles. “Well, first, you’re frustrated that you let yourself be taken in by this whole experience. You’re pissed off that you couldn’t fight against it hard enough. And you’re angry that someone called you out on it.”

I tap my foot on the floor, tilting my head to the side. “Is that the extent of your bullshit psychoanalysis?”

“Nope,” he says, leaning back against the door. I try to ignore the way the sleeves of his jacket tighten around his biceps as he crosses his arms. His eyes glimmer with lust and passion, and damn those butterflies swarming in my belly!

I detest this man!

Yet, still I listen...

Because, hello, hashtag headcase.

“You’re angry because you lost control of yourself, something very dangerous for a woman in your position. You came in here thinking there was a reason to be wary of me and what I might do to your organization if we should work together, and yet, you can’t report back to Daddy about what you found out, can you?”

I grit my teeth and swallow the screech building in my throat. “He won’t want to be associated with the kind of filth you have going on here. Sex isn’t our business.”

“It’s not my only business, either. But,” he says, dropping his arms and stepping closer to me. “How are you going to tell him about the ‘filth’ you claim you’re so hell bent on avoiding, when only a few minutes ago I had you tied to a wall while I was tongue-fucking you in the midst of it all?” He reaches around my back and squeezes my ass.

I yelp, pushing his hand away. “I got caught up in the moment, okay?”

“Aha,” he says. “Another very fucking bad thing to admit when you’re angling for the top seat at the table. See, getting caught in the moment means

you miss shit. Important shit. So, Heaven, tell me. What do you think you might have missed while I had my head buried between your legs? Do you think you might have missed my guys luring your brother Patrick into the middle of an orgy and torturing him within an inch of his life in an attempt to find out who has been selling laced crank to the staff at one of my sex clubs?”

My mouth drops open. “What the fuck are you...oh my God, please don’t tell me—”

Matteo holds up a hand. “Relax. He’s fine. Just getting his dick sucked. Don’t get your thong in a twist.” He leans closer to me. “But I think now you see where I’m going with this, yeah? You see how losing focus for a single second can really fuck things up, not only for you, but for a lot of other people?” He cups my chin in his hand and tilts my face upward. “I learned that the hard way. But you did, too, didn’t you, Heaven? I can tell that you did. I can see it in your eyes. You want to hate me, you want to believe I’m full of crap, a lowlife not worthy of your time or attention, but deep down you know I’m right. And what infuriates you the most, is that me, of all people, had to remind you of what can go wrong when you stop to take a breath.” His forehead almost touches mine, his breath hot against my cheeks. “And the reality is, it might turn out to be your last.”

“Let’s just get one thing straight here. You came to my father because you obviously need something from him...from *us*. So keep that in mind when you’re speaking to me since I am damn close to running the show for my family. I am your equal, Villani,” I seethe. “I don’t like to get backed into corners. And I don’t lie down for anyone!”

“Oh, that’s right. You much prefer standing,” he says with a snicker.

I swallow a gasp as he pins me back against the wall, and as much as my mind wants to punch him in his perfectly chiseled jaw, other parts of me are battling against every last bit of sanity remaining.

And they are losing.

Big time.

Because all they want to do is melt under the sizzle of his fingertips, to bask in the blissful pleasure consuming every cell and nerve ending, and to bathe in the aftershock of salacious thrills, courtesy of a devilishly devious mouth.

That's what my body wants.

Hence, the war wages on.

His chest is plastered against mine, his hips grinding against me, and I have to silence the moan before it tumbles from my lips, egging him on to take more, do more, make me scream more.

Ugh, control, where the hell have you gone?

How the hell can I expect to take responsibility for my family, to clear my head of anything that can bring danger and destruction to us, and to make the right decisions for our future if I can't even get hold of my own libido, for Christ's sake?

"Should we test the theory?" His voice vibrates against my ear, his teeth catching the lobe between them.

My eyes float closed for a split second before I remember...

Fuck, no!

He needs to see firsthand who he's dealing with.

Maybe that'll make him think twice about laying another finger on me.

I tilt my head upward at him, a smile playing at my lips. "I have another one I'd like to try out instead," I say with a smile playing at my lips.

He grins back, his eyes half-hooded and glittering with the same kind of fire that ignites in my belly.

But I ignore it. Let it rage for now.

I'm about to snuff it out.

He grazes the side of my arm, my skin prickling in response and I almost change my mind.

Almost.

I grab his hand with both of mine, pulling back his fingers until his entire palm is bent backward. Then I press down harder, shoving him away from me as he lets out a loud yelp, followed by a string of expletives in some other language.

Could be Italian.

Could be scumbag.

It doesn't matter.

I proved my point.

I took back control.

And only now do I feel like myself again.

I didn't come here to get fucked.

I came here to do the fucking.

And I finally got the release I needed.

“Don't ever touch me again,” I hiss. “And don't fool yourself into thinking that I'm not a worthy opponent.” I step closer to where he kneels on the ground. “I always win, Villani. At the end of the game, it's always me with the fucking trophy. Just remember that if you think you're going to screw around with things that don't belong to you.” I turn my back on him, ready to yank open the door, and then I turn around, tapping a finger on my cheek. “Oh, shoot, you know what?” I say, not bothering to bite back a self-satisfied smile as a mask of anger shadows his features. “I didn't ask permission to touch, now did I? Guess I broke the rule as well as your wrist.”

Chapter Five

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MATTEO

I pad across the foyer of my townhouse and pull open the front door to find my youngest brother Roman dangling a white paper bag in front of me. He walks inside and hands me a coffee cup.

“What the hell happened to you?” he asks when he sees the black wrap holding my wrist in place. “Things get a little too kinky at the club?” He snickers, dropping the bag on the granite countertop in my kitchen.

I roll my eyes and reach inside for a bagel. “You’re a real smart ass, you know that?”

“It’s one of my more endearing qualities, what can I say?” He smirks at me and gives me a punch in the shoulder...the one opposite my busted wrist. “So, why don’t you tell me how fucking around with Heaven Mulligan is gonna help our cause at that meeting tonight?”

I take a bite of the bagel and chew for a minute before answering.

“I didn’t realize you had X-ray vision,” I grumble.

“Well, much as I’d like to convince you that I really am Superman, I saw you go up to her in that room...what’s it called? The Shadow Room?”

“Room of Shadows,” I grunt.

He shrugs. “Whatever. Anyway, I know what goes on in there. Hell, I’ve had it going on in there plenty of times myself. Always a fun fucking time.” With a snicker, he takes a huge bite of his bagel. ”Mnowwhuhnoodid.”

“English, for Christ’s sake!”

He wipes the crumbs from his lips. “I said, I know what you did. You fucking dog! Nailing the princess!”

“She’s not a princess. She’s an underboss.”

“Call her whatever the hell you want, she’s still a hot piece of ass. And soon to be your wifey.” He gives me an expectant look. “But I thought that was the whole reason for this meeting with the Mulligans, to announce your engagement.” He lets out a chuckle. “So why’d they show up at the club last night?”

I collapse onto the counter stool, running my good hand through my sleep-tousled hair. “To get a look at what we do. She thinks the meeting is to discuss a business partnership.”

“And now she knows you’re the great Matteo Villani, crown prince of the orgy.” Roman snickers. “I think that needs to go on your business card. Really make it clear what skills you bring to the table, ya know?”

I pull the lid off of my coffee before taking a sip. It’s total crap, of course. But none of the places here in the city can make a cup of coffee the way they do back home.

Home.

A pang assaults my chest as the hot liquid slides down my throat and heats my belly.

Not that anything will ever be the same in Sicily, for me or my family.

I made sure of that.

A fact that haunts me every single day and most nights.

And yet, I fell right into the same goddamn trap again last night with Heaven.

I lost myself, the exact same thing I warned her against doing.

It’s what brought me to my knees.

Literally and figuratively.

I can't seem to escape my own fate and yet, here I am, about to drag someone else into my downward spiral because it's the only way I can grasp the power that seems to keep slipping through my fingers.

Nobody understands my struggle, nobody knows my truth.

It's best this way.

They all see me as a ruthless deviant with no regard for emotion. I may as well play the part and take what I'm owed.

I always have my hand out and someone always pays a debt.

But this time, I want more than just money for my services.

Most people come with wads of cash.

The Mulligans have something...someone...else who can make me a whole lot more than any amount of money.

Pretty soon, I will rule all of Manhattan under the guise of protection.

How ironic that the people who pay for that protection don't realize they need it more from me than any of their known enemies.

They never realize that the most dangerous ones are those who lurk in dark places, waiting patiently before they launch their attack.

And the attack always comes because their eyes are never open wide enough to thwart it.

It's always about self-preservation for them.

For me, it's about conquering the world, something I will never stop trying to do because it's the only thing that can redeem me.

I need to be all-powerful, otherwise I'm doomed to suffer the same loss.

"And?" Roman asks with a waggle of his eyebrows. "Did she like what she saw?"

I take another sip of the coffee and my mouth twists. "Let's just say there's a very fine line between love and hate, and there's no middle ground for

‘like.’”

“Uh-huh. It was *that* good.”

Oh, hell yeah, it was. And that fact kept me up all night, tossing, turning, and obsessing about when I can take that sweet pussy into my mouth again. With a little bit of luck, it won’t be long, potential for injury aside.

She’ll need to be convinced that I am the right choice, which is why this meeting is so important.

I can’t see Heaven Mulligan giving in easily to any directive, much less one that puts her dipshit brother Conor in the driver’s seat. That won’t go over well at all.

Fortunately, I have a plan to crash that car.

Fuck, I have a plan to incinerate the whole damn thing if I play my cards right.

I’m not only the crown prince of orgies.

I also build empires on the side, and I’m currently architecting one that will span the entire Eastern seaboard of the United States, city by city.

Manhattan is my first stop and damn, there’s a lot of ego on this island.

Fortunately for me, the egos are so bloated that they block all common sense from penetrating. That’s good for me since my job is to suck out all of the common sense and pave the way for the egos to battle it out in the ring while I collect my prize.

And the only winner in this scenario is me.

“Do you think her father is convinced that you’re the right guy for the job?”

I lift an eyebrow. “He knows he’s royally fucked. I didn’t have to do much convincing.”

Roman munches the rest of his bagel and I study his profile. He’s a good kid. Smart, hardworking, and loyal to a fault. He always gets the job done, no matter what it is. And he doesn’t question shit, unlike my other brothers Dante and Sergio. I swear, sometimes I’d rather deal with my enemies than

handle their messes.

“You know what you’re putting on the line by getting involved with the Mulligans, don’t you?” he mumbles, licking a streak of butter off his lips.

“Yeah.” I know all too well, and if I make one single mistake and trust the wrong person, it won’t just be me who gets fucked.

“It can blow up all over us, Matty.” He looks at me, his eyebrows knotted. “And you know I’m not afraid of going into battle, but there’s a lot of risk with this whole plan of yours.”

I sigh. “I know. But it’s the only way.”

Roman nods. “I’ve got you, bro. Tell me what you need me to do, and I’ll make the arrangements.”

I tap my fingertips against the smooth granite, staring at the black specks in the stone. “I’ll text you the location as soon as I get it. But you can’t be part of it. You can’t be seen, you got that? I want you to get Alfie and Philly for the job instead. I don’t trust anyone else.” I look up at my brother. “And, Romo, one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

I stretch my lips into a tight line. “Nobody gets killed.”

Chapter Six

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HEAVEN

My feet pound the pavement as I round a turn along the East River Greenway, my heart thumping in my chest as I push harder and harder to keep my lead over Patrick. I make this run every day, and this morning, I convinced my brother to come with me. I figured he'd give me a much-needed distraction. And after my night with Matteo Villani and his masterful yet demonic mouth, I decided that I needed a different kind of release before seeing him again.

Tonight.

The thought of seeing him again, in the flesh, makes my skin prickle under my moisture-wicking gear.

And, Jesus, did I see him plenty in my dreams last night.

I still can't believe that I let myself get caught in his lewd net, that I gave up complete control to that man, a money-driven thug who wants to lay claim to all of the hard work we've done here in the city.

Business partnership, my ass.

I've read about Villani. I know exactly what he's all about.

He's more hostile takeover than friendly business arrangement.

There is absolutely no way I'm going to let my father sign away any part of our legacy to that fucknut. I'm sure Conor is on board because let's face it, all fucknuts band together. It's like they can sniff each other out, sensing the

scum on each other and realizing they're one and the same.

Kindred spirits or what the hell ever.

I'm definitely not one of them.

"Heaven," Patrick pants from a few feet behind me. "Slow down!"

"Come on, don't be such a pussy!" I call out with a snicker, barely breaking a sweat at this point. "Do I have to carry you every time we do this? Your stamina is shit!"

"That's...because...I'd rather...lift...weights," he rasps, picking up the pace and joining me along the path. I know it's only temporary, though. He'll fall back and end up collapsing on a bench soon enough. "I don't understand why...you like torturing me...this way," he huffs. "I've been a good brother to you, yeah? Why the fuck...do you wanna kill me off? I'm too young to...die."

I laugh and give him a little punch in the arm. "You're being a baby. Running is good for you. Burns off the booze, gets the blood flowing, clears your mind."

"I screw plenty of chicks. That burns off booze and gets the blood flowing, too. I'm good with cardio as long as it's the kind where getting off is an added benefit."

"You're such a pig!" I squeal, slowing my pace slightly so Patrick doesn't pass out right here in the middle of the path. "I'm just trying to keep you healthy!"

"Seems like the exact opposite," he grumbles. "Just saying."

I take in a deep breath, realizing that our run has come to a screeching halt. I can either accept it or leave my brother sprawled in the middle of this path because judging by the pinched look on his face, he's not going to last another thirty seconds. I slow to a jog as Patrick collapses against the black, wrought-iron railing overlooking the river. He slumps over the railing with an exaggerated breath, resting his upper body on it as sweat drizzles down the sides of his face.

I stand next to him, staring at the sun glittering atop the rippled water. My shoulders sag as I lean into the railing. “It’s so peaceful out here,” I muse.

“As opposed to?”

I roll my eyes. “Everywhere else in this city.”

“And yet, you still wanna be boss.” He shakes his head. “You really think you’re gonna change things, Heaven?”

“I’m going to try,” I say, twisting my ponytail around my fingers. “If Dad leaves things up to Conor, he’ll run our family into the ground and nobody will be safe.”

“Yeah, but remember, not even Dad could deliver on that,” Patrick murmurs. “We still lost a lot that he couldn’t prevent.”

A pang assaults my heart.

Am I really any better than Conor? Than Dad?

I mean, look at what I let happen to my cousin, Molly. She was the sister I never had but always wanted.

I could have protected her.

I *should* have protected her.

But I didn’t.

And that knowledge has been slowly choking me to death ever since that fateful night.

I press my fingertips to my temples to chase away the toxic memories bubbling into my conscious, memories I try so hard to keep buried along with the guilt and the rage.

I completely failed in my attempt to stop the horrors that will haunt me for a lifetime. I watched Molly get taken. I let it happen.

That Heaven Mulligan was weak, scared, and riddled with self-doubt.

She dreamed big but faltered whenever opportunity was presented.

That Heaven Mulligan was erased alongside her cousin.

And this new version has been trying to rebuild herself ever since.

I take a deep breath. “All I know is that it’s time for a change. Conor has been pulling shit for too long, making enemies on every damn street corner, for Christ’s sake. I don’t understand what Dad is waiting for, why he doesn’t just pull the plug and stick Conor in another role where he can’t constantly put us in the line of fire.”

“You know why,” Patrick says. “He’s the oldest.”

“Yeah, and the dumbest,” I grumble.

“Well, last night wasn’t exactly your brightest move, was it?” He nudges me and chuckles. “Admit it, you both have that same hotheaded temper. Maybe instead of constantly undermining and outplaying each other, you come together and use your super-dipshit powers for the greater good.”

I smack his arm. “You’re a real dick, Patty.”

He shrugs. “I’m just happy to be alive after you almost killed me with that brutal run.”

I let my body melt onto the railing, twisting my face toward the hot sun. “I think I’m just in a twist over this Villani meeting. I don’t think it’s a good idea to invite anyone’s grubby hands into our cookie jar, and I know I’m going to be the only one who sees it as a bad thing.”

“Look, Heaven,” Patrick says. “You’re smart. Smarter than all of us. You know what this family needs to thrive, and Conor knows it, too. He’s threatened by you. Always has been. So this time, don’t give him the upper hand. Keep your shit together and grab Dad’s ear when you’re alone. He’ll listen to you.”

“I’m always fighting an uphill battle with Conor. It’s bullshit that Dad keeps him close just because he’s a guy.”

“Dad’s old school. But if he was set on Conor, he wouldn’t have you on his other shoulder, would he?”

“I hope not,” I grumble. “Because I’ve worked too damn hard to get edged out by our dear brother.”

“Then play the game the right way this time.” Patrick winks at me. “Show them all that you’re the best one for the job.”

I smile. “Thanks, Patty.” When I’m declared boss, Patty is going to be my second-in-command.

Conor will be lucky if I let him tend bar at one of our pubs.

He shrugs. “You don’t have to thank me. Just don’t drag my ass on any more of these fucking ‘jogs’, okay?”

“Deal.” I loop my arm through his and we start walking down a path through the trees where Patty parked his H2. I still have no idea why he insists on driving that tank here in Manhattan, but he loves it and refuses to get something even a little more eco-friendly.

It guzzles gas faster than a dog laps its water on a hot summer day, but something about it is so Patty. Maybe it’s the obnoxious yellow color, the way it stands out and screams, *I’m fucking here to play!*

I see it in the distance, just beyond an overpass. It shines bright like the sun and equally hurts my eyes when I stare at it for a second too long.

We’re silent as we walk, and I take the time to process Patty’s words. He’s right. An all-out war with my brother would be counterproductive when we have a new associate to deal with. I went into that townhouse last night just to find dirt on Villani so I could one-up my brother and show my father, yet again, that he needs to listen to my recommendations.

That didn’t work out as I’d planned.

I need to keep my eyes on the prize and forget about the past.

I can’t change it. I can only make sure it never happens again.

Sometimes I think I do shit like storming the Villani lair to prove myself to me more than my family. Those insecurities irking me are hard to eradicate, and I hate myself for being such an approval-seeker.

Conor doesn't give a damn about getting anyone's approval. He just acts with no remorse or regret. And control? Hell, he has none. That's why he's on the hit list of so many of our enemies.

And still my father keeps him at the ready.

All because he's got a dick to swing around.

Yeah, old school definitely equates to sexist.

Whatever. I'll be the trailblazer!

I rub a hand over my stomach as it rumbles. "I'm starving! How does a bacon, egg, and cheese on a big, fat everything bagel sound?"

Patrick chuckles. "Jesus, it's a good thing you run as much as you do or else that appetite of yours would turn you into a candidate for *My 600-Lb Life*."

I laugh, reaching up to pull open the door of the truck when a set of squealing tires and a loud ass motor come roaring around a bend. The scent of burning rubber attacks my nostrils as the car takes a hard left and crashes into the back left fender.

The car practically ricochets off the Hummer, probably the one benefit to having the truck. I fly backward, the impact launching me at the hard ground. My shoulder slams into a rock and I groan, clutching it to alleviate the sharp pain shooting down my arm.

"Patty!" I yell, crawling around the front of the truck. "What the hell is—?"

But the words freeze on my lips as I see two big beefy guys jump out of their car and pummel my brother. They leap at him, launching their fists against his face, his chest, his back.

Patrick struggles against them, putting up a hard fight, but it's hard to recover when you're completely blindsided.

"Heaven, get my gun!" he shouts.

"Someone help us!" I shriek at the top of my lungs. Why the fuck am I not carrying a weapon? Haven't I learned anything?

Tears sting my eyes. I struggle to my feet, blood rushing between my ears. I wince, fighting the pain as I pull open the door. “Please, help!” I yell again, knowing that in this area, it’ll be too late before help finds us.

Alive, that is.

I climb into the truck, slithering over the seat and reaching into the console for Patrick’s gun. I grasp it, pulling it out without even checking the clip.

Mistake number two.

My first one was turning my back for that split second.

A strong hand grips my ankles, and I claw the leather seats as I am dragged out of the truck. My head hits the running board before face-planting into the dirt. My vision blurs, a stinging sensation exploding down the side of my face.

The guy standing over me doesn’t waste a second dragging me away from the truck. I kick and scream, but he barely gives a look back before he positions me next to the trunk of his car.

“Patty!” I yell, my voice hoarse. My brother has managed to slide out from under his assailant and now he’s got the guy on his back, but I’m still dangerously close to being thrown in some crazy fucker’s goddamn trunk.

The guy grabs my hair in his fist, yanking me to my feet. He tries to fling me into the trunk, next to a heap of drop cloths and paint cans, and as I fall backward, I drive my knee straight into his groin. As he falls into me, I grab his hair and shove him ass backward into the trunk, jumping out of his way to help my brother.

“Who the fuck are you?” Patrick yells, still smashing the guy’s face in.

He grunts and groans, covering his head as much as possible until a single gunshot pierces the air, the sharp sound sending Patty and me straight to the pavement. The engine of their car growls behind us just as a police siren blares out. The guy Patty was beating on rolls out from under him and darts over to the passenger’s side of the car. He jumps inside and they peel away from the curb, zooming around the Hummer and disappearing around a corner.

I leap up, running after the car. “You motherfuckers!” I scream, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill over.

Patrick hobbles toward me and puts a hand my shoulder and I yelp with pain. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “Patty, I had your gun,” I say, rubbing my arm. “I had it, and I didn’t fire it. I didn’t fucking fire it!”

“Listen, we were jumped, Heaven, by God only knows who. You did the best you could. We both did.”

I shake my head. “I should be ready for anything,” I grumble. “At any time!”

Patrick looks around the otherwise quiet space. “Come on, we have to get out of here,” he mutters. “We don’t need to deal with the cops.”

A minute later, we’re in the truck and zooming away from the attack scene. My chest heaves, my breaths slicing into my lungs as I fight the sob rising in my throat.

Those guys weren’t muggers.

We were targeted, I’m sure of it.

But fuck me if I know by whom or why.

“I could have done something,” I mumble, clutching my shoulder. “They hurt you and they almost took me,” I say, my voice rising in panic.

“Stop it,” Patrick says in a gruff voice. “You can’t save everyone, Heaven.”

But, really, I’m beginning to wonder if I can save *anyone*.

Chapter Seven

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MATTEO

I jump out of the back of my blacked-out Escalade, straightening my coat as Roman joins me on the sidewalk in the heart of Hell’s Kitchen. Dusk has fallen, hints of the orange sun barely visible through the cracks between tall buildings lining the street. I glance around, not entirely familiar with the area. Red brick buildings with fire escapes command much of the real estate on 42nd Street, save for a few restaurants and bars. I pull my coat tighter to fight against the wind as a chill sweeps over us, courtesy of the Hudson River.

“What’s the name of the place, again?” Roman asks, looking left and right.

“Molly’s,” I say, pointing to a sign hanging over a small pub across the street. I walk around the truck and stop at the driver’s side door. My driver, Gio, rolls down the window.

“Stay here and keep an eye out,” I murmur. “This could take a while.”

He nods at me. “Sure thing, Mr. Villani.”

I walk toward the pub entrance, ready to pull open the door when I hear Roman hiss at me.

“Matty.”

I turn around, shooting him a questioning look.

“You sure this is the best way to handle things?” His brows furrow, his eyes filled with reservation.

And dammit, for a split second, it gives me pause. Not because I think it's a bad idea, strategically. It's perfect. It will get me everything I want.

But the fallout is potentially dangerous, mainly because I let myself get too caught up in a whole lot of very inconvenient feelings the other night with my bride-to-be. I swore I could do this with zero emotion, that it was just a business arrangement and nothing more. My objective was clear...until it got fogged up by a fiery ginger with a sharp tongue and blazing eyes that could boil my resolve down to nothing.

I may have Heaven physically, but I'll never have her the way I want her.

The way I want her to want me.

She will hate losing her livelihood to me, and even if she eventually comes to terms with it, she'll hate me for other reasons.

There will be no shortage of them.

And until Roman opened his big damn mouth, I'd managed to push all of those reasons into the far recesses of my brain. I'd been able to forget about them for a little while.

But the obsessing about Heaven hasn't really stopped since she left me back at the club.

I haven't been able to focus on much else, which is very bad for a man in my position. I need to have my attention in a lot of different places at once or else I risk losing everything.

Someone is always watching and waiting for a slip-up.

Someone is always waiting for a chance to pull the rug out from under me.

Someone who is even more power-hungry than I am.

I let out a frustrated sigh and creep toward Roman so we're out of ear-shot of the pub. "The plans are in motion, Romo. The first part has already been executed."

"Yeah, about that." He shakes his head. "Shit really could have gone sideways today. Philly said the girl had a gun? I mean, what the hell

would've happened if that clip was full and she fucking fired it? She coulda killed both of our guys!"

I sweep a hand down the front of my face. "But she didn't," I say in a terse voice. "I admit, they weren't prepared for that, and I hammered them for waiting until they were back at their car to attack. That was not good."

"Yeah, no shit." He squares his shoulders. "It just doesn't feel right to me, this whole thing."

"Shake it off, Romo. This is happening." I clap him on the shoulder. "And we have a lot to gain from it. You always have to look at the bigger picture. If there's one thing I can teach you, it's that. Things may go wrong along the way, but if you stay the course, you win."

He nods slowly. "Do you really feel like you can win with so much at stake?"

"I always win, Roman," I growl. "No matter what. And this won't be the exception, I can promise you that. Look at how far we've come in a year. And in another year, I'll have everything."

"Will you?" he asks and a sharp pang makes my chest ache.

I remember the days when I lived my life like Roman, when I didn't have to worry about things like building empires and warding off enemies and survival of my family. Those days were fucking great, until that freedom dissipated like a fart in the wind.

I was too busy enjoying my life.

I was too focused on myself instead of the bigger picture.

And something went wrong...very wrong.

All because I lost sight of the bigger picture.

That was the night everything changed, and I vowed to never make the same missteps again.

So I fight back against the ache in my chest because it won't do me any good, or anyone else for that matter.

I let things get out of control too many times in the past, and I've learned the hard lessons.

Now, I live for that control because I've seen what can happen when you have too little of it.

I can see the doubt in his eyes, and it's the same one that's been twisting my gut since I met Heaven.

When I requested her as my payment, I hadn't met her. Hadn't seen a single picture. It was business, pure and simple. I saw my endgame, and Declan was so blinded by panic that he missed it entirely.

What I wanted was within reach. All I had to do was grab it.

I wasn't thinking about the potential aftermath and what I'd risk in return.

I smelled power and I let it infuse my whole being.

I lost sight of everything else.

But then she showed up at my club, and because of her idiot brother's oversight, I tracked her down. Suddenly...and startlingly...she became so much more than the personification of dollar signs. And that's despite the fact that I'd known her for a grand total of about half an hour, and a fair amount of that time was spent with her lashing out at me.

Damn if it didn't make me want to bend her over my knee and show her how mouthy girls get punished.

I live, eat, sleep, and breathe this underground erotic playground, and it took a year for someone to enter one of my parties and actually turn my head.

The last time that happened, things went sideways and never really straightened themselves out. At least for me, they didn't. And that's something I carry with me every day, my secret and burden to bear.

Since then, I always avoided romantic entanglements because who the hell has time? Or energy?

Besides, anything that takes my attention off of my businesses makes me vulnerable to attack. I've seen that firsthand.

Last night was the first time I took my eye off the real prize to indulge in something slightly more salacious.

And dangerous.

I square my shoulders.

I can't let that happen again, no matter how much my cock hates me for it.

"Yes, I will have everything." I grit my teeth and place my hands on Roman's shoulders. "This is happening. *Now*. So let's go."

I take a deep breath and pull open the door to the rustic-looking pub. I walk inside and the floor is sticky beneath my feet. The place is filled with cigarette smoke, the air so clouded I can barely see. I blink fast, my contact lenses now glued to my eyes from the dry heat. There are a smattering of patrons scattered at tables in what looks to be a dining area, and there are a few pool tables in the back left corner. My eyes sweep over the entire place in seconds.

Occupational hazard.

If someone's going to jump out with a machete, I need to be ready to take him...or her...out.

Surviving this life is all about being prepared for the worst and having a battle plan in place.

Be execution-ready at all times.

Those are the words I live by.

I slide a palm over my back pocket where I keep my Beretta.

I don't think I'll need it, but you never can tell.

I walk over to the bar, my feet sticking to the floor with each step I take. A flaming red ponytail peeks out from under a baseball cap, swinging wildly around as the bartender stacks shelves with bottles of liquor and clean glasses.

"Excuse me," I say to get her attention. Declan has a private office somewhere in this building and told me he'd get someone to escort us from

the bar when we arrived.

I guess maybe she's the someone.

The girl whips around with a glass in her hand, startled and looking ready to pounce.

My breath hitches when I see her.

"Fuck," I murmur without even realizing it. "Heaven..."

Even though she's got the bill of the hat pulled down low over her eyes, I can still see the dark bruises on the side of her face and around her eye.

"Villani," she says in a cold voice, not bothering to drop the glass.

But she doesn't fling it at my head either, so that's a good sign.

"What the hell happened?" I grunt, a knot taking up residence at the back of my skull. I ball up my fists, the ache to pummel Alfie and/or Philly into the goddamn ground making them clench so hard that my fingertips start to numb.

"Oh, so you're the business partner who actually gives a shit beyond money, huh?" she snips, twisting around to finish loading the glasses onto the shelves. "Don't waste your breath. I'm not in the market for any more friends."

My pulse rockets, red staining my vision.

And there will be plenty more of it when I get my hands on those two clowns.

My instructions were to rough up Patrick Mulligan.

Heaven wasn't to be touched.

Clearly, something was lost in translation, and it seems like they might need me to clear the fucking wax out of their ears for them...maybe by cutting them the fuck off!

I rub the knot that grows tighter with each passing second, all thoughts of my meeting forgotten as I watch Heaven work.

Roman nudges me. “Are you gonna ask for Declan or what? We’re moving, yeah?”

I nod, swallowing hard. “Where’s your father?”

Heaven sets down a bottle of whiskey and does a half-turn, hiding the bruises. “Go and knock at that door,” she says in a tight voice, nodding toward it. “Conor is waiting and will let you in.” She turns away just as quickly, pouring herself a shot of the whiskey and knocking it back as she works.

I tear my eyes away from her and stalk over to the door, knocking once. It creaks open within seconds and I’m greeted once again by the dickhead who put his family in this situation.

I should thank him for being such a hot-headed ass since his missteps are about to become my fortune. He narrows his eyes at me and then Roman. He eyes my outfit — black overcoat, black shirt, black pants — and snickers. “A little overdressed, aren’t we, Villani?”

“I’m about to be engaged. Jeans and a Whitesnake t-shirt didn’t seem classy enough,” I mutter.

“You think you struck gold with this whole plan of yours, don’t you?” He grimaces, letting us through. “If you think marrying Heaven is gonna get you anywhere close to our fortune, you’re more of a dumbass guinea thug than I thought.”

I turn to look at him, a tight smile on my face. “No more of a dumbass thug than you, right, Conor? After all, I’m not the one who sacrificed his whole world because he had to get into a dick-swinging battle with the wrong crew.”

He pokes a finger at my chest. “Don’t you fucking mouth off to me.” He snickers. “I’m your fucking employer, dickwad. Remember? We hired *you*, not the other way around.”

I glance down at his finger, then up at him before I grab it and twist it back so far, it almost hits the top of his hand. He screams, clutching his now-broken finger, murder spewing from his pale eyes. “You motherfucker,” he seethes.

“Don’t ever lay a finger on me again, Conor, or next time, I’ll snap the goddamn wrist.” I stalk toward an open door at the end of the hall with Roman chuckling behind me.

“Way to make inroads with the in-laws,” he whispers.

I roll my eyes as I step into an office.

Declan’s office.

He stands up from his chair, his eyes blazing with anger. “You sonofabitch!” he hisses.

I grab Roman’s arm and nod toward the doorway. “Give me a minute.”

He nods, a tight-lipped smile on his face, and steps back out into the hallway. I close the door and walk toward my soon-to-be father-in-law.

“You said you would do something that would convince my kids that there is imminent danger at the hands of the cartel. You never said anything about anyone beating my daughter and giving my son two broken ribs!” he thunders.

My throat tightens, the rage bubbling just beneath the surface once again at the thought of anyone hurting Heaven, much less my own hand-picked guys. “Nobody was supposed to touch Heaven,” I grunt. “That was a mistake, and it’s one I will correct as soon as I leave here. But if we let your son get away without a scratch, how does that signify impending danger? The reality is, if Dominguez knew it was Conor who pulled that trigger...and believe me, he’s damn close to that conclusion...he’d have left Heaven and Patrick for dead in that park and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Declan’s nostrils flare, his chest heaving. I can tell he wants to lay me out, and I can’t blame him. I’d kick the shit out of me, too, if I were in his position.

His baby girl, beaten and bruised like that.

Anger floods my veins. It’s because of Conor that this is happening at all.

That’s the bastard who needs to pay.

And he fucking will!

“So how exactly is this going to work?” Declan sneers. “I’m just going to bring her back here and tell her what? That I’ve signed her freedom away as payment for your security expertise?”

Tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Why does it sound like he’s backpedaling? I grit my teeth. Is it because his faith is now tainted by the actions of my idiot crew? Does he now question whether or not I can actually keep Heaven safe? The evidence sure as hell speaks volumes to the contrary. My spine stiffens as the control I long to hold tightly to slowly slips away from me, desperation creeping into my mind. I have to convince him. I can’t lose her...er, lose this job. It’s all part of the fucking plan! “Declan,” I say, keeping my voice as steady and steely as possible. “Because of what happened today, she will understand the risks. Things didn’t go as planned, but the danger is very apparent. She’s one of your underbosses and is supposed to be untouchable. Patrick is supposedly one of your top enforcers. And yet, they were both compromised. That should be enough to convince her to take cover and get the hell out of the line of fire.”

“Then you obviously have no idea who and what Heaven is because she’d never cower!” Declan fumes. “She’d never run and leave us on our own. She’s a leader and loyal to a fault. Heaven would never leave her family in dire straits, especially if she knew the dangers associated with the cartel. She’d take a bullet for any one of us if given the choice!”

“Well, then, you’d better brush up on your powers of persuasion, *Dad*, because I’m not leaving here without her.”

Fear flickers in his eyes and he pauses for a beat. “Do you really think Dominguez suspects Conor?”

I nod. “Yeah. And guess what else? He might not wait for confirmation because that’s the kind of guy he is. He’s the type who slashes first, worries never.”

Declan paces in front of his desk, running a hand over his balding head. “I can’t lose her,” he says, turning away from me. “We’ve already lost so much.”

He murmurs that last part and I don't press because it's irrelevant. The only thing I need to know is that he doesn't want to lose anything else, which he certainly will if left on his own to battle Dominguez.

"Declan, you know arranging this marriage is the only way for you to save your family," I say. "It will preserve your fortune and keep your daughter and your future safe from harm."

He turns to me, a questioning look in his eyes. "Why Heaven when you could have asked for anything else?"

I shrug. "Because I see the value in aligning our interests beyond just protection. We can both benefit from the arrangement, financially and otherwise. I'm looking at the long game here. This arrangement is an investment in the future." I fold my arms across my chest. "You have to explain to Heaven that this is the only way, that our business partnership alone isn't enough to wedge us together as an all-powerful force, that the only way to really keep everyone safe is to ensure that there are family ties that bond us. Tell her the marriage will protect everyone, including her position in your organization. I have a feeling that will strike a chord with her."

"How do you know anything about her?" he asks, narrowing his eyes.

"Because I do my research." Her father obviously doesn't know that she has the same MO as me. And good to know she has a trusted source in her brother, Patrick. Seems like Declan has no clue about their illicit encounters at my townhouse the other night. "I wouldn't just make this kind of offer without knowing exactly what I'm getting in return for my services."

Declan grunts something in reply, pacing once again. He stops near one of the tall windows lining his office, his shoulders slumping. "And Conor... Conor will be safe, too?"

I allow a tight smile to stretch across my lips. "Yes." I pause for a second, letting him contemplate his plight before I hammer him once again with the reality of the situation. The control is so close...just within reach. I just need to grab it! "You know exactly what will happen if you back down from this deal, Declan." Oh, the fucking power. I crave it with everything in me, and having Heaven by my side it exactly what I need in order to keep it. "Don't

challenge me, otherwise you'll find that you have more enemies than you know what to do with. Dominguez will be the least of your problems.”

He looks up, a sneer on his face. “Is that supposed to be a threat, Villani?”

I shake my head. “It’s a promise, one that you can’t afford for me to break.”

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Chapter Eight

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HEAVEN

I pull off my baseball cap and peer into the mirror in the restroom, the fluorescent lights casting an evil glare on my bruised face. Everything happened so quickly this morning — me diving for the gun, that scumbag dragging me out of the truck by my ankles, my head slamming so hard against the running board that I saw stars. I guess all the adrenaline kept me conscious and fighting like a hellcat because if I'd blacked out, there's a good chance I'd be dead in that trunk.

Or maybe anchored to the bottom of the Hudson.

A shiver slithers down my spine.

I was so grossly unprepared for that attack and there's no excuse for it! How the fuck can I be the boss of my family when I can barely escape from that kind of ambush within an inch of my damn life?

And Patrick? He's supposed to be the goddamn enforcer!

We were like the blind leading the blind, and I'm sure Conor loved every second that I spent recounting the story for my father. I fought the angry tears with every ounce of energy I could muster, but the reality was laser-sharp enough to cut through my heart.

I'm vulnerable and exposed.

Fucking *weak*.

All of that equates to opportunity in Conor's eyes.

How can I possibly be a threat to Conor's goals if I can barely survive that kind of attack? I had no weapon, no defense other than my hands and knees.

And if I'm being honest, the only reason why we're still alive is because they wanted it that way.

Anyone who wanted us dead could have delivered on that easy enough.

But who the hell could it have been? Yes, we have enemies, plenty of them, and something about my father's reaction when I called told me that he knew about some kind of threat lurking, which pissed me off more than my inability to defend myself.

He knew and never said a word? Never uttered so much as a warning to watch my back?

Did Conor know too? The smug-ass look on his face told me he did.

Are they kidding me? Patrick is laid up in bed with his chest taped up to keep his two broken ribs in place, for Christ's sake! How could they have neglected to give me the heads-up that maybe some cock knocker out there wanted to send us a message?

I swallowed my anger, though. I stayed with my brother and then came straight here to confront my father.

Except Conor showed up right after I did, and Matteo Villani shortly thereafter.

Seeing Matteo strut in here to talk business is just another slap in the face. No wonder why my father decided to look for an outside partner to handle things he clearly doesn't trust me with. My head falls into my hands, the tears stinging my eyes. And why should he trust me? I've already proven in the past that I falter when push comes to shove.

Those memories haunt me every day.

I clench my teeth and my fists, screaming at the top of my lungs and shattering the mirror in my mind.

In reality?

I take a deep breath, splash some water on my flushed cheeks, tuck my hair under the cap once again, and leave the room. It's only a matter of time before my father summons me to make the introductions since he doesn't know that his newest business partner had his head buried between my legs the night before.

Just one more reason for him to completely doubt my ability to lead our family.

A swift knock on the door jolts me from my pity-party. "Yeah?" I call out to whoever is standing outside.

"Heaven, Dad's looking for you."

I nod. I recognize the voice of my youngest brother, Quinn.

"Be right there." I take a deep breath, my eyes trained on my reflection. I slam my fist on the edge of the sink. "Do not fucking crumble, Heaven," I whisper-shout. "No matter what happens, you do not crumble like a goddamn stale cookie! You go in there and you tell Dad what you see for the future and what you want for the family! You do not back down, ever! You show him your strength! You show him why you're the right choice to lead, not Conor!"

I pull my cap down low and pull open the door, pulling myself up to my full height when I see Quinn out in the hallway waiting for me.

"You okay?" he asks, a look of concern on his face.

"Yeah." I purse my lips. "How's Patty?"

"Resting. I sent a couple of the girls to go and stay with him."

I nod, a smile tugging at my lips.

By *girls*, Quinn means the bleached blonde, fake-boobed bartenders who are always flirting like mad with Patrick. If he were in better shape, he'd be tearing off their panties with his teeth right about now.

Let's just say he was very inspired after we left Matteo's sex lair the other night.

And he's okay. That's the most important thing to remember.

He's safe. Just like me.

Things could have turned out differently, but they didn't, a fact that Dad needs to understand.

Quinn winks at me. "The Italian Stallion is with Dad and Conor in the office."

I roll my eyes. "Great. I can't wait to join the party."

"Maybe they have information about who jumped you guys." Quinn falls into step next to me. "It coulda been really bad, Heaven. You guys got lucky."

Yeah, except I don't feel so lucky. I feel like a girl who's about to have the rug pulled out from under her because she lost focus.

A-fucking-gain.

We reach the end of the hallway and I force a smile for Quinn. He's a good kid. All of my brothers are. Hell, Conor even used to be one of the good ones before Mom died. But we lost him to the life. He never could find balance and is a huge liability to all of us.

But he's a guy in a fucking sexist world so he gets top billing.

And I'm a girl who keeps falling into the same damn traps expecting a different outcome.

Now we have a third party to muck shit up even more.

Then again, nobody ever promised that mafia life would be all wine and roses.

It's more like one filled with toxins, bullets, and machetes — roses only come into play in our inevitable funeral arrangements.

So fucking glamorous, right?

I give Quinn a little punch in the shoulder and he disappears around the corner as I knock on my father's office door.

“Come in,” he calls out.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a split second before pushing it open. My long ponytail spills down my left shoulder, my head held high and steady as I saunter into the room. In my periphery, I can see Conor grimace as I walk past him and sink onto the couch directly in front of my father’s desk. I’ve learned that standing when everyone else is sitting is perceived as being confrontational, and since I already feel like I’m on the defensive, I decide to let my guard down to start.

We’ll see how things go from there.

A knot of warmth coils in my belly as a quick, sidelong glance confirms that Matteo’s gaze is locked on me. I press my lips together, followed by my knees, but it doesn’t stop the tingling sensation that erupts in my core as the scent of his cologne wafts through the air and under my nose.

I lace my fingers together, impatiently waiting for my father to begin this meeting.

The faster it starts, the faster it ends, and the faster I can get away from the man who stripped me down to the studs — literally and figuratively.

“I got some disturbing news today, Heaven,” Dad starts, rubbing the back of his neck. “News that will force us to take action, *swift* action.”

“Dad,” I say, gripping the arms of the chair tight. “I understand your concern about that attack, and I’d like to share some of my ideas about how we will handle the retaliation, but I don’t think we need present company for that conversation,” I say in a sharp voice with a pointed look at Matteo.

I furrow my brow.

Did that cocky bastard just smirk at me?

Dad looks at Matteo, then at Conor, and finally back to Matteo.

Okay, I am thoroughly confused right now.

Why the hell isn’t my father looking at *me*?

How am I the goddamn afterthought?

Blood rushes between my ears, making it near-impossible to hear his voice when he finally speaks.

I take a few deep breaths to calm the war raging inside of me, the one I want to launch on all three of the men in this room. And then I decide to say fuck it.

Why fight this anymore? I need to show strength, dammit!

I spring out of my chair, storming to the front of my father's desk. "Can I know why the three of you look like you're sharing some special secret that you have very rudely decided I shouldn't be part of?" I look around the room. "I mean, you already went behind my back and made some kind of business arrangement with Villani. Now he's involved in a personal attack on our family? What the hell ever happened to discretion and handling our issues *ourselves*?"

"Heaven!" Dad bellows.

But I'm just getting started. I storm over to Conor. "So you and this guy are just asshole buddies now, huh? You really think your little power play is going to shut me down? You think that just because it's a boys' club I can't handle the really heavy stuff? Is that it?" I spin around, my nostrils flaring. "Is it?" I yell.

"You need to calm the fuck down," Conor mutters, and I twist around, shoving a finger at his chest.

"Don't you fucking tell me what to do! You have no control over me, Conor! Do you understand that? None! And if you think I'm just going to stand by and let you run this organization into the ground, you're wrong!"

"Heaven Margaret Mulligan!" Dad shouts, slamming his hand on the top of the desk. "Goddammit, stop this tirade!"

I narrow my eyes, pushing past my brother and rooting him to the spot with a harsh glare before sneering at Matteo. "You know, before you go and open the barn door all the way, Dad, maybe you should consider that Villani here had something to do with that attack. Did you think about that before you invited him in to sniff our pile of dirty laundry?"

“He’s here to help us, Heaven!”

I blink fast. “What do you mean, *help*? I thought this was supposed to be a meeting to discuss a business partnership.”

“It is a partnership,” Dad says, expelling a deep sigh. “Just not the type you were expecting.”

When I look around the room, a sense of impending dread washes over me, and I feel my grip on the future slipping further away from me.

It’s like I’m standing by, completely panicked but unable to do anything more than watch the world around me crumble.

I remember that feeling all too well...

“Tell me why he’s here,” I whisper, clenching my fists tight. “What does he have to do with the attack? What does he know that I don’t?”

Dad looks at Conor again, but this time I can see the disgust in his eyes.

Huh.

Conor sure doesn’t look like the golden boy right now.

At least there’s a sliver of hope for me to cling to.

He walks back around the desk and puts his hands on my shoulders, his pale blue eyes tired and strained, his lined face pinched and worn. “What happened today...” he stops, gritting his teeth. “It was not supposed to happen. But Conor—”

I swing around to grimace at my brother, but he averts his eyes.

“Conor made a move against the Dominguez cartel. He went into one of their neighborhoods and killed one of the lieutenants along with a couple of the soldiers.

My mouth drops open. “Who?”

“Santos Rojas,” he murmurs.

“Oh my God,” I say. Santos Rojas is second-in-command to Dominguez himself. If Conor took out Rojas...fuck. “They’re coming after us, aren’t they? Is that what today was about? Why didn’t they just kill us?”

Dad rubs the back of his head. “We don’t know why, Heaven. But yes, they know what Conor did and they are planning to retaliate. Today was just a warning, to let us know we’re not safe from them. That’s the only reason why you and Patrick are still alive right now.”

I fight the urge to leap at Conor and pound his face into the sheetrock he’s cowering next to for putting me and Patrick in the line of fire.

Me, Patrick, and everyone else!

How could he do something so stupid and selfish?

“What would make you go into his territory and kill him?” I seethe.

“I didn’t plan to kill him,” Conor mumbles.

“Bullshit!” I scream. “Because that’s always your excuse! I didn’t mean it! I didn’t think the aftermath would be that bad! I didn’t want to fucking destroy my family!”

“Heaven, stop—”

“No, Dad,” I say, my voice tight. “I am tired of him getting a pass every time he screws up. Co-underboss, my ass!” I stalk toward him. “You don’t deserve to be in control of anything! Do you realize how bad this is? How you put everything and everyone at risk by pulling that stunt?” I spin toward my father. “Tell me, Dad. Are you going to sweep this under the rug, too? Because he’s a guy? Hm? I mean, when are we going to address the big ass elephant in the room? Because it sure seems that Conor has had his fair share of cock-ups and you never seem to call him out on any of them!”

Dad grips my arm, pulling me close. “Don’t speak to me in such a disrespectful manner, *iníon*. I am still in charge of this family, for fuck’s sake! And don’t you forget that!”

I drop my head. “I’m sorry.”

“What Conor did is inexcusable, but the fallout will be detrimental for our future unless we put a plan in place to stop the bleeding.”

I nod. “Agreed, so then let’s discuss a plan to deal with it.”

Dad shakes his head. “That’s not how we’re going to handle things, Heaven.”

I stare at him, my brows knitted. “So what are we going to do? Just wait around for them to launch another attack, one where they decide that death is the preferable message?”

“Waiting isn’t an option,” Matteo says, standing up from his chair.

I roll my eyes over my shoulder. “I’m sure my father appreciates your input for some reason, but I don’t really care to have you weigh in on our family situation,” I say curtly.

“Well, that’s the thing,” he replies. “I’m going to be part of it.”

I let out a frustrated sigh and lift an eyebrow at my father. “Dad, really? Can you please ask him to wait outside or something so we can figure this out?” I give him another pointed glare. “In *private*.”

Dad gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Heaven...”

My throat tightens, wariness gripping me. I usually have to be on my toes because of whatever bullshit Conor pulls, but this is different.

It *feels* different.

Ominous and nerve-wracking, like I’m the only one standing in a pit of darkness while everyone else is drenched in light.

And I don’t like it one single bit.

Matteo doesn’t leave the office, and Dad makes no moves to escort him out.

Conor continues to stare at the floor, and I am about ready to scream my head off.

Actually...

“Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?” I roar, shaking my fists in the air.

“There’s only one way to stop the Dominguez cartel, Heaven,” Dad says in a strained voice. “That’s why Matteo is here right now, why I reached out to him in the first place. The business partnership...” He grunts, turning away from me. “It’s actually a marriage partnership.”

My jaw damn-near hits the floor. “M-marriage?” I whisper. “You can’t possibly mean—”

“He does,” Conor says flatly. “You marrying the guinea is the only way for us to stay safe.”

“How in the fuck do you figure that?” I screech, clutching the sides of my head. Blood bubbles in my veins, boiling right alongside my temper. “And if this is all your fault in the first place, why don’t *you* marry the guinea?”

“You do know I’m still standing here, right? I’d prefer Matteo to ‘the guinea.’” He smirks. “Especially if we’re going to be one happy mixed family.”

“There is nothing happy about this!” I turn to my father. “Daddy,” I plead. “This is insane! You can’t marry me off to the Italian!”

“Okay, better than the guinea, I guess,” Matteo murmurs.

“Shut the fuck up!” I yell at him before turning back to Dad. “Why is it that I have to be punished? I do the right thing always, and what thanks do I get? ‘Hey, Heaven, how about you take one for the team and marry the ginzo?’”

“Okay, it’s getting a little offensive now.” Matteo rolls his eyes and backs up against the wall.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a long second so I don’t have to see the look of enjoyment on his face.

Calm, calm, calm! We can work this out another way. I just need to figure out what way that might be.

“Dad, I can appreciate your concern for Conor’s actions, but I am not marrying Guido over there.” I shrug, sinking into a chair. “Not happening. I

have work to do for this family, and if nobody else can figure out a way to make peace with the cartel, then as usual, it will be up to me.” I cross my legs and flash a sweet smile at the three men standing over me. “Let’s devise a plan, shall we?”

My father’s shoulders sag as he drops to his knee in front of me. He takes my hand in his, his dry skin scratchy against mine. “Heaven, love, there is no other plan. The decision has been made. You’re my only daughter, the only one who can save us from the cartel’s retaliation.”

“No,” I whisper. “I have things to do...my job, my goals, my whole future! You can’t just sign me away, just like that! Who’s going to run things here?”

“Don’t you understand that I’m doing this to protect you and your future?” Dad whispers.

“I don’t see how stripping away everything I’ve worked for is protecting me *or* my future,” I seethe, yanking my hand away from him. I leap out of my seat, stomping over to my brother.

“You probably love this, don’t you? A way to push me aside so you don’t have to compete with me anymore, huh? Because anyone with half a brain can see you can’t lead your way out of a goddamn paper bag with a map and a flashlight!”

“Little Miss Perfect,” he sneers at me, leaning close, his blue eyes filled with anger and disdain. “You always do everything right, don’t you? You never miss a beat, never lose focus. You never fuck up, right?”

My spine stiffens at his words. He’s taunting me and he knows it, bastard that he is. He knows how devastated I still am over Molly. I swallow hard past the lump in my throat. “Fuck you, Conor,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

I swivel around to look at Matteo. His face is stoic now, like he knows for sure that the outcome of this conversation is going to result in my climbing in the back of his guido-mobile. But he doesn’t know shite! “There will be no wedding,” I say. “And I will find another way to protect my family, without leaving it up to my incompetent brother. So if you’ll all excuse me, I’ve had quite enough of this shit show. I’m out!”

I pull open the door to the office, step into the hallway, and slam the door shut with as much force as I can muster, when all I really want to do is crumble into a ball in the corner and weep for the life that they're trying to take away from me.

I duck into the kitchen, my heart thumping like a thoroughbred. There has to be another way, I just have to figure it out.

It's my job, one I refuse to give up!

"Heaven, *a mhuirnín*. What's the matter?"

I jump at my Aunt Maura's thick brogue, fighting the tears that sting my eyelids. She brings a hand to the side of my face, her own pinched with concern. "Is it your head?"

"No," I whisper, leaning against the sink. I don't want anyone else to see me this way, a sniveling, wet-eyed mess, instead of the strong and confident underboss I've worked so hard to become. "It's worse. Way worse."

"And you just came from my brother's office," she muses. "I'd imagine anything that happened behind that door would certainly cause you more grief than a bump on the head."

"You have no idea," I grumble.

Aunt Maura pours two shots of whiskey and holds one out for me. "Take this, *a leanbh*. And then we'll talk."

I tip my head back and let the liquid sear a path down my throat. It feels good, but nothing can numb the pain clenching my heart. "Mom would never let this happen if she were alive," I whisper.

Aunt Maura places her glass on the stainless steel counter. "Wouldn't let what happen?"

I sigh, scrubbing a hand down the front of my face. "She'd never make me marry someone to save our family. That's what the meeting was about. Well, it was more of an ambush, if you ask me."

Aunt Maura nods. "Well, you're right. Your mother certainly would have an opinion on marriage, Heaven. But it's not the one you think."

I shoot her a quizzical look. “Meaning?”

Aunt Maura leads me through another doorway into a more private space and motions for me to sit down. At this point, my knees are about to give out on me and I gratefully sink into the chair. “You remember that your mother was very young when she married your father, right?”

I nod. “Yes, they were childhood sweethearts.”

Aunt Maura smiles. “It was a nice story to tell all of you, but that’s not why they married so young.”

“What are you talking about?” I whisper, anticipation knotting my stomach.

“They were arranged, Heaven,” she says in a low voice. “Because the families needed an alliance against a common enemy. Your mother was the only girl in her family, just as you are, and she was arranged to marry your father to keep peace.” Aunt Maura shrugs. “It was the only way to defeat the evil force that would have crushed them both.”

“How could you not have told me this? How could you all keep that secret for so long?”

“It didn’t matter why they came together, dear. After years passed, they grew to love one another and they were able to preserve their families through the union. They moved here to the States to raise a beautiful family and grow and prosper. How they got together didn’t much matter after everything they achieved together.”

I press my fingertips together. “Jesus...”

“Now, I’m not sure why your father is asking you to do this, but I’m sure he has a good reason.” She drops a kiss on the top of my baseball cap. “I know how badly you want to lead this family, Heaven. And I know the kind of opposition you’ll encounter, being a woman. But whatever the reason, maybe this is the way to prove your loyalty to the family, to show that you can accept responsibility. It may be a different path than you’d anticipated, but in the end, it is a greater show of strength to make the hard choices and stick by them than to resist them.”

“I don’t want to be the cause of anything bad,” I grumble.

“Your father knows that, too, dear,” she says. “And there is a reason why he asked this of you.”

I snort. Yep, because yet again, I need to clean up one of Conor’s messes. But I reserve this last bit, because even though Aunt Maura has become my confidante over the years of living in the middle of Testosterone Central, and taken on the role of mother figure, there is still plenty she doesn’t need to hear.

“Do you think it’s a good reason?” she asks softly, tilting my chin upward.

I make a face. “It’s a *reason*.”

“Don’t screw up your face like that,” she admonishes me with a playful wink. “Otherwise it might freeze and you’ll have no choice but to marry this man because nobody else will want you.”

I lean back against the chair and stare up at her. “So that’s it, huh? You enlighten me with an anecdote and a pep talk of sorts, and boom. I’m in a wedding dress?”

She shrugs. “There’s no better way to prove that you’re capable of leading the family than by taking control of an issue before it has a chance to control you.”

I stare up at her. She’s damn wise, I’ll give her that. I think she knows more than anyone how badly I want to step into my father’s role, even more than he does.

I could dig my heels in and refuse, but then all of the blood spilled as a result will be on my hands.

Not Conor’s, *mine*.

Which is completely fucked up, by the way. But that’s how things work in our world.

She who has the power to control the bloodshed *must*.

Fuck me.

I have to marry the wop.

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Chapter Nine

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MATTEO

“So what happens now?” Roman asks me when I join him at the bar. He slides an amber-colored ale toward me. “We leaving with your betrothed or what?”

I shrug, leaning on the dark polished mahogany. “Declan said he’d talk to her and try to convince her to go along with it, but she’s a smart girl. She wants to rebel, but knows deep down it’s what’s best for her family.”

“And you,” Roman quips, holding out his glass and clinking mine. “I mean, congrats, bro. You’re definitely marrying up.”

I roll my eyes and take a long sip of the cold beer. I should feel good about this, like I accomplished something big for my organization.

Because I did.

And it’s not just big, it’s huge.

I shake off the needless feelings that are fogging up my view for the future.

I can’t focus on what she does to me. I can’t let that fuck up my plans.

But damn, she stirs up a whole lot inside of me...things I’ve tried to keep buried because letting them out can only be bad. And those feelings have been boiling dangerously close to the surface since I had her tied up in my townhouse the other night.

My job puts people I care about in danger.

So the best thing for me to do is limit that number.

It means throwing up impenetrable stone walls around my personal perimeter.

I have to stick with my agenda.

There's no room for emotion.

Only dollar signs.

"You having second thoughts?" Roman's voice jolts me.

"No," I say, placing the glass on a coaster. "This is the right move — for all of us. It eliminates potential issues and keeps people safe."

"And makes you a shit ton of money."

"That, too." I grimace, clutching the glass tight.

Roman swivels around, eyeing the blonde waitresses hustling around the place with drink trays. "You never marry a blonde. You just fuck 'em. You marry the brunettes."

"What do you do with the redheads?" I grumble.

"You make sure to get out of the way of their temper, otherwise their fire will singe the hair on your ass before you can make a run for it," a thick Irish brogue quips from behind us.

I turn in the direction of the voice to see a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length blonde hair, rosy cheeks, and laughing blue eyes hidden by big eyeglass frames staring at us. She leans toward us, and in a conspiratorial tone says, "I take it you're the Italians."

I grin at her, unable to help myself. She's just so jovial-looking. It's hard to be cold when she's the exact opposite.

Besides, she looks a lot like Heaven, and if we're gonna be family, I should try to ingratiate myself with the rest of the Mulligans, especially since that twat Conor is at the top of my shit list, and I almost put her brother Patrick in the hospital.

I need all the allies I can get.

It's all part of the plan.

"We are," I say, sticking out my hand. "Matteo Villani, and this is my brother, Roman."

She pumps my hand a few times, eyeing us both. "A pleasure," she says. "I'm Heaven's Aunt Maura." She looks up at me like there's something she wants to say but is debating it.

Her lips stretch into a smile. "May I have a moment, Matteo?"

I nod. A tiny part of me wonders if she's here to tell me that this whole wedding is off, that Heaven isn't going along with the wishes of her father.

And the gut twist that accompanies that suspicion makes me grit my teeth.

No fucking emotion, dammit!

That's not what this is all about!

I follow her away from the bar, toward a hallway off the main dining room. Maura stops and turns to face me once we're somewhat secluded.

"Let me start by saying that I have no idea why my brother has decided to marry off his only daughter, but I imagine it's for good reason."

I nod, waiting for the real reason for this little impromptu chat.

She lifts a thin eyebrow. "Heaven is a special girl, and Declan must either think very highly of you or your ability to keep her safe. That said, she absolutely hates the idea of this marriage. Since her mother died, it's been a difficult life for her, money aside. Heaven struggled for a long time to find her place in a family full of big, brutal men, and now that she's found it, she is petrified of letting it go."

"But she doesn't need to let it—"

Maura wags a finger in front of my face. "Zip it. I'm not finished yet."

I snap my mouth closed.

“She needs to come to that conclusion herself, so make sure she’s given the chance. Right now, she feels completely betrayed and cast aside, even though it’s for the good of the family. And she hates not being in the middle of the action, hates that her safety was just basically pawned off to you, a man she has never seen before.”

An image of her arms tied above her head as her body writhes against my mouth flashes across my mind.

Nope, never seen her once.

“She won’t go easy,” Maura continues. “But she’s a good girl — smart, selfless, and sweet when she wants to be.”

My lips curl into a half-smile. “I’ll make sure she’s taken care of.”

“You’d better.” Maura’s expression turns into one of warning. “I’ve seen what she can do with a paring knife, and it ain’t pretty.”

“Noted,” I say.

Maura gives me a long look as she expels a sigh. “Oh, Declan, I hope you know what the hell you’re doing,” she mutters.

“So, *Aunt Maura*,” I say. “Any idea where I can find Heaven? Part of the arrangement is that she leaves with me tonight.”

Maura’s eyebrows shoot up. “Does she know that?”

“She stormed out of the office before anyone could tell her.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she says, patting my arm. “Anything for my family.”

I watch her walk away before I join my brother at the bar again. “Meeting the family, huh?” he says with a grin.

I rub the back of my neck, the reality that I’m about to tear this girl away from everything she loves setting in deep. But I’ve never been the one to snooze on opportunity, and everything is falling into place with such rapid speed that I couldn’t pull away if I wanted to.

And I don’t.

There is too much riding on this arrangement.

I can't let any personal feelings for Heaven blur my vision of the bigger picture. That has to remain clear *always*.

Yes, she's gorgeous, strong, and fiery as hell, but at the end of the day, she serves a purpose.

The fact that I've never tasted a pussy so sweet can't sway me from my goal.

Step one is getting her to leave here with me while wearing my ring.

We can't convince the underworld that this upcoming marriage isn't a sham unless it looks like we actually want to be together.

That starts right now.

Declan and Conor appear from the hidden doorway a minute later and Declan nods his head toward me, a signal to join him. Conor glares at me and pushes past, stalking toward the front door of the pub.

Damn, I was so tempted to sucker punch him.

But it probably wouldn't have been a great idea since I'm trying to ingratiate myself with my future in-laws. Gotta play nice.

For now.

Declan pulls open the door for me. "She's in my office. Take a few minutes with her to figure out logistics. We'll be out here waiting."

I stuff my hands in my pockets, my fingers hitting the tiny ring box. My chest tightens as thoughts of my own mother float into my mind. Even though she'd hate me laying claim to a woman for business purposes, I'm thinking of her best interests. Hell, I'm doing this for my whole family, for Red Ladro, the syndicate we're part of with a group of other families situated around the world. Everyone will benefit from this union, even if they don't realize it yet.

Well, everyone but one person.

But someone has to be the scapegoat.

I knock on the door, expecting that Heaven is alone inside of the office.

“Come in.”

Hm. She doesn't sound hysterical, but then again, I'd only expect her to lash out when I'm in front of her, not shielded by a heavy wooden door.

I push it open to find her leaning against the desk in the center of the room, arms folded over her chest. I can see the bruises more clearly in the overhead light. She's still dressed in the same black t-shirt and jeans, still wearing the baseball cap pulled down low over her eyes.

I don't need to see them to feel the heat they emit.

And it's not the good kind, either.

It's of the deadly variety.

One thing I've learned through my limited interactions with this woman is that her spark is always ready to ignite, and the flames singeing my ass hair will be the least of my concerns.

“How long has this arrangement been a thing?” she asks with a sharp edge to her voice.

“Weeks,” I say, meeting her angry gaze.

She nods. “So the other night when you took me into that room and tied me up, you already knew what was going to happen.”

“I did.” No sense in lying to her now.

“And was that supposed to be some kind of test run, to make sure you were asking enough from my father? That maybe you'd hike up the price if you didn't like the sample?”

I rake a hand through my hair. Why did she have to bring up the other night? Now I can't see anything but her head thrown back against the wall, her eyes squeezed shut, and her lips parted as her moans shatter the air?

My cock twitches at the memory, and I grit my teeth.

Bad fucking timing!

“Okay, let’s get something straight right now,” I say, my voice tight. “First, if anyone is to blame for this shit show, it’s your idiot brother. Second, if you were my daughter, you’d have never been able to leave my sight if I so much as suspected what the cartel would do if they found you.”

“That’s not fair,” she says. “I took my brother Patrick with me—”

“Yes, that’s right,” I interrupt her with a roll of my eyes. “Your big, bad brother Patrick who got his ass handed to him next to his own goddamn car this morning because he missed the fucking attack by a mile!”

“You baited me!” she screams, balling her fists and holding them up at me.

“Are you going to hit me?” I sneer. “Before you do, just remember one thing. This is my job, Heaven. I get paid to deliver protection to those who need it. Don’t take your rage out on me because of your family’s fuck-up!”

Her chin quivers as she stares me down, but those fists remain in front of her face, ready to launch. “Do you know what it’s like to have your life signed over to a fucking stranger?” she screams.

“Your father did the right thing by calling me. He knows what he stands to lose if you and the rest of your family are vulnerable and exposed. This morning was just a warning to let you know that they’re coming in hot. And they will destroy everything, Heaven. Unless someone can ward them off. I’m that someone, like it or not.”

“And just like that, my father trusted you? He basically handed me over on a silver platter with no guarantee that you’d be able to deliver on your ‘job requirements’?”

“He’s a smart man. He knows the risks to his empire if he tries to battle the cartel on his own. They have large armies, not just here in Manhattan but all over New York City and up and down the eastern seaboard. They will incinerate your livelihood.”

“Are you trying to scare me?” she snips, pushing off of the desk and stepping toward me. “Because I’m not afraid. I am capable of defending myself!”

I trace a fingertip over the side of her bruised face. “Yeah, I can see that,” I murmur.

She smacks away my hand. “Take your hand the fuck off of me!”

“Is that any way to talk to your fiancé?”

“There’s no goddamn ring on my finger!” she yells. “And even if there was, it wouldn’t mean shit. I didn’t agree to do this out of the goodness of my heart. I’m doing this to keep the people I love safe.”

“And also to maintain control over the empire you hope to take over one day?” I say with a raised eyebrow.

Heaven gasps. “You think you have all the answers, don’t you, Guido?”

I let out a dry chuckle, closing the space between us. “Trust me, I’ve been called way worse than anything you can come up with, sweetheart.”

“Oh, trust *me*, there’s plenty you still haven’t heard!”

“Gives me something to look forward to,” I hiss, grabbing her by the shoulders, my lips now hovering over hers. Heaven’s eyes pop open wide and her mouth drops open. It’s only then that I realize my fingers are digging into her arms, and that her tits are pressed against me.

Again.

Fuck me, we’ve been here before.

I can’t go back. Not yet. Not until she understands the rules.

I loosen my grasp on her. “This arrangement only works if I keep you safe. Today would never have happened if we were together.”

“Why? Because they’re afraid of you?” she scoffs.

I lift an eyebrow. “That’s exactly why. Same reason why your father came to me.”

“My father isn’t afraid of you!”

“He’s afraid of what will happen if he isn’t aligned with me. He also knows who my allies are and what they can do for him if he goes head to head with the cartel. Your father hasn’t done a great job of networking over the years, so he’s trying to make up for lost time. If he had, you’d be sleeping in your

own bed tonight instead of in mine.”

“Your bed?” she says, a look of disbelief on her face.

“My bed,” I repeat.

“Tonight?”

“I’m starting to feel like a parrot.”

“Don’t you mean *after* we’re married?”

I expel a deep sigh. For someone supposedly so smart, she’s not quick on the uptake. “No, tonight. You’re coming home with me.”

She lets out a snort. “You know I’m Irish Catholic, right? I mean, what would Father O’Malley say if he knew I was living in sin with you?”

“I think if Father O’Malley saw you tied up in my townhouse the other night with your legs open and your mouth begging for me to fuck you, he’d realize the same thing I did.”

“Which is?”

I grin. “I have no delusions about your virginity, Heaven. No innocent would have let me feast on her pussy the way you did. And no virgin would have had her legs wrapped around my head like a vise as I tongue-fucked her into oblivion.”

“You’re a disgusting pig,” she hisses. “You and your freaky, twisted sex shit!”

“You loved my freaky, twisted sex shit,” I growl, moving in once again and blocking her path around me. “Don’t try to deny it. You may have come looking for dirt on *me*, but you found out you liked it even more smeared all over yourself.”

She tries to punch me but I capture her wrist in my hand. “Don’t,” I whisper. “Not unless you want it back.”

“Oh, you’d hit me?” she seethes, shoving her shoulder against my chest. “You’d beat on your fiancée, Matteo? Is that how *your kind* deals with their women?”

“I’d punish you,” I murmur, pulling off her baseball cap and flinging it onto the desk. When she tries to look away, I gently cup her chin in my hands and force her eyes forward. They glitter with some mixture of arousal and fury. “Good Catholic girl, my ass. I saw how turned on you were when those girls were getting fucked six ways from Sunday.”

A bright red flush creeps into her cheeks. “It was just new to me. I’d never seen anything like it before.”

“You fucking loved it,” I say, shoving my hips against her, running my hand down the side of her slim torso. “You wanted so much more, didn’t you, Heaven? So much more than what I gave you.”

A tiny mewl escapes her bruised lips, her head falling back as I press a hand into the small of her back. She arches forward, clearly forgetting her rage and allowing the promise of all things erotic to infuse her body and mind.

“If you behave, I’ll make sure you get everything you want,” I murmur against her ear, brushing my lips against the battered side of her face. “I’ll take such good care of you, you won’t ever want to leave.”

And then I pull away because my self-control is wavering, and if I don’t back off now, I’ll bend her over the arm of the goddamn couch.

Because control is slipping, slipping, slipping.

I need to yank it back.

Her eyes open, a stunned expression on her face when she sees me staring at her with a hardness I reserve for those who deserve punishment.

Real punishment, not the shit that I’m going to do with her if she mouths off again or worse, raises a hand to me.

“What do you get out of this whole arrangement?” Her eyes flash as she straightens up and shoves the cap back onto her head. “How much am I worth to you?”

“In good faith, I didn’t take any money up front for my services. But once we’re married, I’ll own half of your father’s estate since you’re one of his beneficiaries.”

“Then what? You can’t do anything without my consent. How will you get your money?” she snaps.

“I’m not in this for a quick buck, Heaven,” I say, struggling to make my voice sound calm when my body is anything but. “I have plenty of money. I have plenty of *everything*.”

“So why did you want me?” Her voice startles me, the sudden, meek sound giving me pause.

“Because solid family ties are more lucrative than a wad of cash in your bank account. And leverage gives me power. Having you by my side gives me both.”

“I won’t give up on my plans for the future,” she says, sticking her hands on her hips. “Don’t think I’m going to be a good little wifey to you. I have goals and being married to you won’t stop me from reaching them.”

“I sure as hell hope not. I’m counting on you fighting to achieve everything you deserve. In fact,” I say with a smile tugging at my lips. “I’m going to do everything in my power to help you.”

She flounces past me in a huff, but before she has a chance to reach for the doorknob, I pull her back to me. She stumbles backward, not expecting the swift move, and lands cleanly in my arms. “Do you have something else to say?” she asks through clenched teeth. “Because I feel like we’ve covered more than enough for tonight. And after all, we do have the rest of our damn lives, right?” she snarls.

“We do. But there is one more thing we should cover before you leave this room,” I say, pulling out the ring box and flipping open the top.

I hear the gasp and I see the eyes glimmer like the large rock staring back at her. She reaches out to graze it, quickly retracting her finger as if she’s touched a hot coal instead of a diamond.

“I’m supposed to wear this?” she breathes, still staring at it.

“It *is* customary for an engagement.”

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. “How do you know it’ll fit?”

I pull it out of the box and hold it up to her. “Why don’t we test it out?”

Her eyes widen as I slide it onto her ring finger. It fits perfectly.

“It’s gorgeous,” she breathes, holding her hand out in front of her.

“I didn’t think you’d be the type to get sidetracked by jewelry,” I say, not bothering to hide my smile. “You know, all that goal talk.”

Her head snaps up and she narrows her eyes at me. “Don’t think this is going to make me forget my job and my future, Matteo.” Her hand drops to her side and she shrugs. “I mean, it’s pretty and all, but I’m not some shallow, superficial nitwit who is going to drop her panties just because you put a rock on my finger.” She leans toward me. “And don’t get any ‘delusions’ about what’s going to happen when we get back to your place. You’re not tying me up and you’re definitely not getting laid.”

“Well, it’s like you said, right? We have the rest of our damn lives.” I wink at her. “I’m a pretty patient guy. And we’re going to have to consummate the marriage at some point.”

“In the meantime, I hope your hands don’t cramp up,” she says, reaching past me to pull open the door. “Because they’re gonna be working hard over the next couple of weeks.”

“Great, something else to look forward to,” I mutter as she sways her hips with each step she takes into the hallway. I walked into this pub tonight worried that some very inconvenient and unexpected emotions might bubble up to derail my plans. But after spending some time with my bride-to-be tonight, it’s pretty clear that Heaven Mulligan is about to become my own personal hell on Earth.

Chapter Ten

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HEAVEN

My head is woozy from too much champagne. I can knock back whiskey like a sailor, but give me a flute of bubbly and you'll be scraping me off the floor.

Except, I refuse to leave my impromptu engagement party without a few parting words to my father, who has avoided getting too close to me ever since I stormed out here and grabbed a toasting glass. I guess the whole bullshit cork popping ceremony at the bar was to make an unofficial announcement to the neighborhood about our family's impending union.

I narrow my eyes and scour the entire pub, just noticing that Conor must have made a disappearing act.

My brothers, Quinn, Niall, and Liam, stand on my left while my fiancé flanks my right. I catch Aunt Maura's eye and I can see the glimmer of encouragement in the depths. It doesn't comfort me, though. It only makes the waves of nausea crashing over me that much more tumultuous.

I sway into Matteo and he snakes an arm around my waist because that's what a fiancé would do, right? Let you know he's there to hold you steady and make sure you don't wipeout on the sticky floor?

I eye the champagne bottle on the bar and reach out to grab it, draining the last drops.

"You're not supposed to look like you're drowning your sorrows," Matteo hisses through a tight smile.

“If I hadn’t just had my life yanked away from me, I might not be drinking so heavily,” I retort with my own saccharin-y sweet grin.

“Heaven, *a leanbh*,” Aunt Maura interjects, taking the bottle from me. “Why don’t you go and splash some water on your face? Come on, I’ll take you—”

I pull my arm away from her. “No,” I mumble. “I can do it myself. I *want* to do it by myself.” I turn facing the restrooms and slink toward them, my fractured heart shattering faster with each step I take.

Pressing my fingertips to my temples, I lean against the back of the bathroom door and let the tears flow down my cheeks. It stings like a bitch, too, and not only because of the wounds on my face.

But because I feel completely and utterly betrayed by the one person who is supposed to love and care for me above all else.

My shoulders quake and I cover my face, letting the grief consume me.

He’s edging me out, whether or not he realizes it — taking me out of my role and forcing me into one I never wanted. I’ve worked so hard, making the right moves, establishing the right relationships. I’ve made him so much more powerful because of it!

How dare he sign my life away with no regard for how I feel about it?

My gut clenches, and I run over to one of the stalls, dropping to my knees. After a few agonizing minutes, when there is literally nothing left inside of me, when I’m merely the empty shell my father thinks I am, I struggle to my feet and collapse against the stall door. A deep sigh shudders my body and I stagger over to the sink to wash my hands and face.

I finally look at my reflection. Was it only an hour ago that I stared at the same face in the mirror and told her to take what she wanted, what she deserved?

I grip the sides of the sink so tight, my knuckles turn white.

Oh, I took something all right.

Right up the fucking ass!

A swift knock at the door makes me jump, and a sharp pain shoots down the back of my skull. I squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth. “Who is it?”

“It’s your father. Can you please come out here?”

I ball my fists, pump them into the air, and silent scream how much I hate him at this very minute.

Then I let out a deep breath and unclench my fists.

I don’t feel a damn bit better.

I pull open the door and step into the hallway, facing off with my father.

My idol.

My boss.

God, I’d always aspired to be just like him, to rule this family with him by my side as a mentor.

Now as I look at him, all I see is a pathetic coward who chose his only daughter to be a fucking pawn in his quest for more power and control.

I fold my arms across my chest, leaning back against the wall because I’m still pretty dizzy. “You came to check on me? How sweet. Was that your fatherly instinct talking, or were you just nervous I’d made a run for it and left you with nothing to offer the Italians?”

His eyebrows furrow. “That was unnecessary, Heaven Margaret. Do not speak to me in that tone. I’m your boss.”

“You know what? I’d rather you just be a father right now,” I say, holding my throbbing head. “The kind who realizes that he just stole the life and dreams right out of his only daughter’s grasp, and now he wants to fix what he’s broken!”

“I explained why this is happening,” he says in a low voice, looking behind him. We’re in a quiet hallway, accessible only by a door, but you just never know who might be lurking. Interesting that he’s cautious now. I mean, he just signed my life away to a virtual stranger.

And a fucking deviant one at that!

“Well, I didn’t like your explanation,” I shoot back. “It feels like I’m getting screwed because I’m a woman.”

“You want to be boss, don’t you?” he seethes. Don’t you understand you won’t have anything to run if our organization is destroyed by the cartel?”

“I have relationships! Solid, working relationships! I have a network and people who trust me! If you’d have talked to me about this, we could have come up with something! Anything other than arranging my marriage to that goombah prick!”

My chin quivers but I refuse to let any more tears fall.

I will not let him smell that weakness on me!

“The Villani family can offer us protection as well as the opportunity to expand. You are making a sacrifice, yes, but just think about the empire we can build with their resources and connections!”

“You know what, Dad?” I say, swaying a slight bit as I push away from the wall. “I like to think I have enough business savvy to make my own opportunities. I wish you had the same amount of faith in me.”

I tear my eyes away from his tired ones and stomp toward the door, pulling it open. After kissing my brothers and aunt good night, I walk straight over to Matteo and lace my fingers with his. “I’m ready to go,” I say in a raspy whisper because it’s the only way I can hide the crack in my voice.

He nods and squeezes my hand, his forehead etched with concern.

How nice.

At least one person gives a shit.

Chapter Eleven

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MATTEO

Gio sees us leave the pub and jumps out of the front seat to open the doors for us. He shoots me a curious look when his eyes land on Heaven, but I give my head a quick shake to stop any potential questions from leaving his mouth.

Roman gets into the front seat, leaving me and Heaven to slide into the back. She doesn't say anything, she just turns toward the window closest to her and settles against the leather seat. She lays her head against the leather, and a deep sigh deflates her shoulders.

I fight the urge to put my arm around her. Instead, I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to Alfie. I stab the keyboard, the anger channeling through my fingertips.

One of them is gonna pay big tonight.

I want you and Philly in my office in an hour.

Barely a few seconds pass before I get a reply.

Sure, boss.

Boss. That's fucking right! And if I give an order, I expect it to be followed!

I scrub a hand down the front of my face, half-listening to Roman rave about some of the food he'd managed to scarf down in between me getting chewed out by my fiancée for duping her and toasting to our engagement.

“It was the best fucking beef stew and Irish soda bread I’ve ever had!”

“When was the last time you had either?” I ask, pushing my hair back and leaning against the headrest.

“Never, but if I had, this stuff would have beaten its ass, trust me. Fucking amazing! Hey, Heaven, can I hire your cook?”

I let out a snort and Heaven turns slightly toward Roman. “You don’t need to hire her. She’s evidently marrying into your family, so there will be plenty for you to enjoy in the future.” She gives me a sharp look. “As I imagine that cooking will be one of my wifely duties.” Her lips twist into a frown and she turns back to the window.

Roman jerks his head toward me and I throw up my hands.

After the longest ten minutes of my life, we’re at my townhouse. It’s not the one I use for the parties, but it has a few rooms with a similar feel for my own personal use.

I doubt very much I’ll be visiting them with present company, though.

I open my door, but Gio makes sure Heaven has a hand to help her out of the truck. She jumps to the ground and flashes a smile at Gio before walking around to join me. With a cold look up at me, she lifts an eyebrow, waiting for me to make a move.

It takes a second before I realize I need to take a step.

God, those eyes of hers. They’re soul-piercing with swirls of so much emotion, I know that if I stand here long enough, I’ll just float away in them.

Argh, I have to stop thinking shit like that.

Heaven Mulligan is a means to an end.

That is it!

I’m not supposed to have feelings for her. I’m not supposed to give a damn what she thinks about me. And I’m definitely not supposed to fantasize about her body writhing against my tongue.

So the fact that she's staring at me with disdain in her gaze should not bother me in the least.

Except...

It does. A whole fucking lot. So much that I want to figure out a way to eliminate it from her perception of me.

But that's just impossible. Even if I change her mind now, pretty soon, she'll find out who and what I really am.

It always happens. You can't hide the truth forever. You can only hope to cover it up for as long as you need.

And time is short and ticking away fast.

A few days ago, I couldn't wait for things to get moving. I'd waited for long enough.

Right now?

I just want to stop the clock.

I want to take a breath.

That startles the hell out of me because for as long as I can remember, I've charged ahead without ever once thinking about what might happen if I slowed down. I already knew what my fate would be if I so much as stumbled.

I blink fast, stepping back to motion her to the front door. She pulls her eyes away, looking up at the tall, brick-faced townhouse with the big black door with a droop in her posture as the realization sinks in that she's staring at her new home.

Heaven slowly walks up the path leading to the steps and drags herself up the tall staircase. She spins around once she's reached the top. "Are you coming or what?"

I take the steps two at a time and key in the security code to shut off the alarm before twisting my key in the lock.

Well, all three locks, actually.

“Great, I’m living at Fort Knox,” she mutters as I push open the door. I brush against her by accident and she recoils. “I hope you’re not getting any ideas about carrying me over the threshold.”

I smirk. “I’m pretty attached to my balls, and I’ve seen what you can do when people around you don’t mind their hands.”

Her ponytail bobs as she nods. “So long as we’re on the same page,” she grumbles, stepping into the foyer and looking around. There are a few lights on because I always like to look for any out-of-place shadows once I get inside. If people want to get to you, trust me, they will find a way.

I’m a pretty persistent person, so I know that from experience.

“So, you live here?”

“For now,” I say. “I have a few different places.”

“Where?” She narrows her eyes.

“Around.” I shrug. “Sicily, Miami, Vegas—”

“How often do you travel? Do you live in those places?” Her spine stiffens. “Because I’m not moving! Just so we’re clear! Manhattan is my home and I’m not—”

“Heaven,” I say. “Relax. We’re not moving.”

“Okay,” she mutters, walking farther into the place. She examines every last bit of the first floor before she speaks again. “It’s...big.”

Big. That’s all? Jesus, I hired a pretty expensive decorator to make it livable after I bought it.

“But it doesn’t exactly scream ‘married’. It’s more of a place where you’d bring your bitches.” Her eyes widen. “Speaking of, that is a *hard* fucking no, Matteo. I don’t want this arrangement at all, but there is no way you’re going to have sidepieces prancing through here. Girls from your sex parties! Hell no! I’ve been humiliated enough!”

I bite back a smile. I love how fired up she gets. It must be that Irish temper I was warned about. “I’d never do anything here, Heaven.”

She storms right up to me and pokes me in the chest with her finger. “I’m not just talking about here,” she hisses.

“I didn’t realize you gave a shit,” I say. “You’ve made it clear that I disgust you, using a lot of different and colorful words.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she sneers. “It’s not like *I* want it. I just don’t want anyone else to have it once the ball and chain has been attached to my ankle.”

“So then until the wedding—?” I start to joke when she takes a swing at me. I catch her forearm in my hand and twist it slightly, eliciting a yelp from her lips. “I thought I warned you about taking a hand to me.”

“This isn’t the Old World, *paisano*,” she shoots back. “I’m not your property. You don’t get to order me around! Besides, I’m not afraid of you!”

I shake my head. “I don’t want you to be afraid. I just want you to learn your place.”

“My place?” she shrieks. “My place is about ten minutes north of here, in case you’ve forgotten, dickhead!”

“You know,” I growl, pulling her close, trying hard to not get sucked into her funnel cloud because I know if that happens, escape will be damn-near impossible. “I’m trying to be patient with you, Heaven. But you’re making this very fucking hard on me and on yourself. This is it, do you understand? We’re getting married, like it or not. You can throw digs and tantrums, but it won’t change things. It’ll only make them worse. So keep your fucking hands off of me or I will show you what will happen.”

“Is that threat supposed to scare me? Huh? Is that how you ingratiate yourself with your bride-to-be?” she seethes sarcastically, her breath hot against my chin.

I shift, my cock twitching in my pants. Christ, I want to tie her up so badly and fuck that venomous streak right out of her while she screams for me to give her what she wants.

Because from now on, I’m the only one who can.

The only one who will.

Hatred aside, she's fucking perfect.

And just a taste of that pussy wasn't nearly enough.

I want more...need more.

Then again, that's why I'm in this predicament to begin with.

It's always about wanting more, never being satisfied with what I have.

It's why Heaven and I will ultimately crash and burn.

I didn't sign on for the whole big love thing when I made my proposal to Declan.

I did it for the promise of a very lucrative future.

But something about her makes me question my plans.

Something makes me want to shield her from what's to come.

Because she doesn't deserve this.

The only problem is, I can't stop what's already in play.

I have to deliver.

A lump forms in the back of my throat as I angle my body even closer to her. I can feel the thump of her heartbeat against my chest as I press my fingertips into her back, her glossy hair grazing the top of my hand. "I don't want to scare you," I say, my brows pulling in.

Her eyes blaze with unleashed fury, her lips pressed together in a slight grimace. "I hate what you're doing to me," she whispers through clenched teeth, her spine stiff. "What my father is doing to me."

Note that she didn't say she hates *me*.

"I got that," I say. "You've made it pretty clear."

"And I despise my brother Conor for putting me in this position." She spews the words, but still makes no move to break free from my grasp. "I've cleaned up his messes for years and my father knows it. I don't give a damn that he's a guy. Conor didn't earn his place. He doesn't deserve what he's

been given.”

“No, he fucking doesn’t,” I mutter, more to myself than to her.

We stand there, staring at each other for what feels like the longest minute of my life.

I loosen my grip but she stays pressed against me, her back arching slightly. Her gaze, which screamed contempt only seconds ago, has morphed into something much more heated.

Warmth coils in my gut as I slowly run my hand down her spine. She lifts her chin, gazing up at me with a mixture of curiosity and desire in her bright eyes. Her lips part ever so slightly, and my breath stills as I wait for her to speak.

She doesn’t.

But there’s a whole lot she wants to say.

There are chapters upon chapters etched into her conflicted expression.

But then she blinks and the spell seemingly cast over us both shatters. I drop my hands and Heaven backs away, her cheeks flushed and eyes averted.

“I’m tired,” she says. “Where should I sleep?”

I run a hand through my hair as if that alone is going to screw my head back on straight. With a wave of my hand, I motion to the stairs. “The master bedroom is upstairs.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “I think I’d rather a guest room.”

“I’ll take the guest room,” I say. “I had the master made up for you.”

Heaven rests her hand on the polished wood banister and slides it up as she slowly takes each step toward the fourth floor where the master bedroom is situated. With a glance back over her shoulder at me, she twists the brass doorknob and pushes open the door. She stops short, letting out a low whistle. “Wow,” she breathes, stepping farther into the room.

I stand in the doorway, leaning against the door frame as she takes in the space. I had one of my assistants decorate it for her so it didn’t look like such

a man cave. The bedding is bright white with soft furry throw pillows in warm, muted tones scattered across the top. Windows line the wall opposite the bed, and a view of the city lights up the dark night sky. I had the modern furniture in the room replaced with more plush pieces, and a thick, white fur rug now sits in the middle of the room to complete the look and feel of luxe comfort.

It's the best I can offer her right now, and the expression on her face tells me it's enough.

Heaven turns to look at me. "It's lovely," she says in a garbled voice, like her vocal chords are resisting the admission to feeling anything for me other than distaste.

"I'm glad you like it," I say, backing away from the door as the urge to fling her into the center of the bed and strip her down takes hold. I glance at my watch. Not that I have time. I have a date with my trusted crew in about half an hour, and anything I'd do to Heaven would take considerably longer.

Days, even.

I press my fingertips to my temples and her brows furrow.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," I rasp. "I just forgot that I have some place to be. I think you're all set here, though."

She walks over to a tall mirror in the corner of the room and pulls off her baseball cap, then she loosens the rubber band holding her thick, lush hair away from her face. It cascades down her back, the highlights glimmering in the soft overhead lights. With a slow half-turn, she pulls at the hem of her shirt. "I don't suppose you have any clothes I can borrow? I didn't exactly have time to pack, you know," she says dryly.

I swallow hard. Clothes. Shit, I didn't think of that. Maybe it's because every time a vision of her appears in my mind, she's naked.

Exactly the way I want her.

God help me.

I walk over to a dresser and pull out a t-shirt and gym shorts. “I’ll get you anything you need tomorrow. In the meantime, wear these.”

Or, you know, nothing.

I press my lips together, my pulse hammering as she unbuttons her jeans, slowly shimmying to the floor as she slides them to her ankles and kicks them off. Her t-shirt is long enough that I only get a tiny glimpse of her hot pink panties...that is, until she slides the t-shirt over her head to reveal a matching pink bra.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe. I just watch, like some fucking psycho creeper who’s never seen a woman strip before.

The corners of her lips curl upward as her eyes tussle with mine, challenging me to walk away and ignore the vision of erotic bliss in front of me.

She knows exactly what she’s doing to me, too.

My fingertips tingle with the need to reach out and caress her creamy skin, to feel her tremble beneath them like they did the other night. With a seductive grin, she slides her hands up the sides of her torso, reaching behind her back to unhook her bra. The straps slip off of her shoulders and it flutters to the floor, exposing her breasts. The dark pink nipples peak, beckoning me to nip and tug at them with my mouth.

A pang in my chest reminds me that this isn’t play time, that there are issues to be handled.

But the rest of my body doesn’t give a good goddamn about what I *have* to do, only what I *want* to do. Tiny hairs on my arms stand at attention as she takes a few steps toward me, shaking out her hair as she walks. She gazes up at me from beneath her thick lashes and my mouth waters, remembering how incredible she tasted.

“You look like a guy who’s never seen a woman naked before,” she says, grabbing the t-shirt and pulling it on. “Not the kind of reaction I’d expect from a sadist like yourself.”

“I’m not a sadist. Humiliation isn’t my game.” I grin at her. “I’d consider myself to be more of a deviant than anything else.”

“Noted,” she says in a sarcastic tone, pulling on my shorts and flinging off the comforter before climbing onto the bed. She kneels in the center, cocking her head to the side. “I thought you said you had somewhere to be?”

“Yeah, I, uh, I won’t be long. And Gio will be stationed outside in case of anything.”

“Yup, him, the alarm, and the fifty locks should keep me safe.” Heaven flips onto her side, leaning up on her elbow. Her hair falls over the bruised part of her face as she stares at me. Her feet rub together, her bright red toenails a stark contrast to her white skin.

I love her feet.

Fuck, I have to get out of here *now*.

“Call me if you need anything.” I try to move, but it feels like my feet are rooted in the damn floorboards.

“Silly me,” she says in a fake sweet voice. “I didn’t program my fiancé’s number into my phone!”

“There’s a burner in the drawer,” I say, nodding to the nightstand closest to her. “The number is already in there. It’s the only one you’ll need.”

“How lucky am I?” she says in a mock sing-song voice, clasping her hands together. “You’ve really thought of everything. I mean, except *clothes*.”

“Maybe that was on purpose,” I quip, winking at her before turning to leave.

“Pig.” She fluffs the pillow and lays her head into it. A glimmer of a smirk on her face makes my dick jump, and I know for sure it’s time to go.

I pull the door closed and run down the stairs. I set the alarm and lock every entrance before leaving. I have Gio standing guard, but it’s not enough, so I shoot off a text to Roman.

Swing by my place and hang tight until I get back, okay? Gio is here but I need more eyes on Heaven. Be invisible.

A few seconds later, he replies that he’s on his way.

Gio stands in front of the Escalade and I clap him on the shoulder. “I’m going to be out for a little while.”

“You need a ride?” He pulls out the keys but I shake my head, nodding toward my blacked-out Lambo truck.

“Nah, I’m driving. You stay here. Keep your eyes on everything, Gio,” I give him a long look and he visibly shudders.

Another reason why I’m calling for Roman. I’ve already seen firsthand today that my trusted inner circle is not as trustworthy as I’d thought.

Now it’s time for the shakedown.

Twenty minutes later, I’m pulling into the parking lot in the basement of a building I own in the Meatpacking District. I have several ‘offices’ throughout lower Manhattan, but this is where I handle human resource-type issues, like beating the fuck out of a soldier who defied a direct order.

I straighten my coat once I get out of my truck and pull open the door to the damp, dank concrete structure. This is where the ‘meat’ gets delivered. There are offices in the floors above, but I won’t need to visit them.

My work will be done right here.

I lean against a wall facing the door, waiting, my blood boiling violently as the vision of Heaven’s face flashes in front of my eyes. My fists clench when I think about one of my own guys hurting her, the guys I trusted with my own life.

That was before today.

A few minutes later, Alfie and Philly come shuffling into the room. They exchange a quick look, their shoulders relaxing when they see that I’m alone.

Mistake number one.

Never assume that because you aren’t greeted by an army that you’re going to escape unscathed.

“I’d like to go over the ambush on Patrick and Heaven Mulligan,” I say, my back stiff against the cold cinderblocks.

“Um, okay, boss,” Alfie says. He’s the more senior of the two, the one I expect the most from. “What do you wanna know?”

I push off from the wall, taking a few steps toward him. “Well, first, I’d like you to repeat the instructions I gave you.”

He nods, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. “You, uh, said to rough up Patrick. Nothing major, just enough to send a message. And we were supposed to attack when they didn’t expect it. And, yeah, to, ah, to stay away from Heaven.”

I nod. “That’s right, Alfie. Pretty much on target.” I look at Philly. “Who’d you cover during that attack?”

“I was supposed to hold Heaven back,” he says, his eyes darting everywhere.

“Uh-huh,” I reply. “And how’d that go?”

He sneaks a look at Alfie.

“Don’t look at Alfie,” I snap. “I wanna hear it from you!”

“Well, she, uh, she got away and got into their car. She was going to Patrick’s gun, so I—”

“So you...what?” I inch closer still, forcing him to backup under my hateful stare. I don’t know at this moment what I’m more angry about — Heaven getting hurt, or finding out that my trusted guys may not deserve that title anymore.

“I grabbed her by the ankles,” he whispers.

“And?”

“I dragged her out of the car.” His eyes widen with panic. “But I swear I didn’t hurt her. She was going for a gun and I was afraid if I didn’t get her outta the car, the cops would show up and fuck up the whole thing!”

“So you dragged her out of the car and she ended up slamming her head badly enough in the process that she’s got scratches and bruises all the way down her face.

“I-I didn’t know that,” he whispers.

I turn slightly. “Yeah, well, I guess that’s what happens when you don’t plan, huh? You were supposed to hold her back. If you’d have done what you were supposed to, you wouldn’t have been on the defensive, right?”

“Right,” he says, his voice quivering.

I turn back to Alfie. “And you were supposed to ‘rough up’ Patrick. Your version of that almost put him in the hospital with two broken ribs.”

“He was, um, fighting back hard. I was trying to keep him down—”

And just at that second, my blood boils over and I launch a fist right at Alfie’s face. It cracks his jaw and he crashes to the ground face-first with a loud yelp.

I shake out my hand. Fuck, that hurt. I’m not used to the enforcer role. I usually delegate that shit to Roman, but not tonight.

Heaven is my responsibility.

And my liability, so it seems.

I kneel down next to Alfie and pull him up by the collar so I can see his face. Blood pours from his mouth, his eyes glazed with fear.

“You took the order,” I hiss at him. “You were in charge and you deserve to take the punishment.”

He nods, his eyes dropping. “You’re right. I did. It won’t happen again.”

“You’re damn right it won’t,” I mutter. I let go of his collar and stand up, glaring at Philly. “And what about you? Do you think you deserve to be punished?”

“I, um, well, no.” He shrugs. “I had to protect myself, so—”

“Wrong answer!” I thunder, shoving him backward into a wall. “You were supposed to protect *her*! If she pulled a gun on you, then your job would be to get it away from her! That’s why you were brought into this organization, Philly. To take orders and fulfill them, not to make up your own rules as you go!” I walk toward him, closing my hand around his throat. “When she went for the gun, you should’ve gotten into the car and driven away with Alfie.

This was supposed to send a message. That's fucking it!" I scream into his face, his skin getting more purple by the second.

And my vision is so stained with red, I barely notice. I feel him squirm against me as I clutch his throat tighter and tighter, making him sputter and writhe against my hand. Blood rushes between my temples, my pulse throbbing as Heaven's battered face wallpapers my mind.

Every shred of self-control I cling to fizzles away as I slam Philly back against the wall, his eyes bulging from the sockets.

"You didn't protect her!" I scream, my hand shaking as I grip him. "You didn't fucking do your job!"

An explosion of sounds erupts from within the deep recesses of my mind — glass shattering, bullets popping, and the screams that have haunted my dreams ever since. My arm muscles tighten as a guttural roar bursts from my chest. His fingers dig into my hands, his nails clawing at my skin. The stinging sensation that results from the lancing makes me blink fast, clearing my vision enough that I can see his lifeless face and vacant gaze.

I release my grip and Philly drops to the concrete floor like a bag of cement. I turn slowly toward Alfie, short, sharp gasps slicing at my lungs. I take a few steps toward him, my mouth twisted into a grimace as my shoulders heave.

He scrambles away, backing himself into a literal corner before struggling to his feet. "Please, Matteo, don't. I'm sorry I didn't follow instructions. I'm sorry I didn't stop Philly from hurting Heaven. I'm sorry—"

I hold up a hand. "Stop," I snarl. "I don't want to hear it. Consider that *your* message, Alfie. Take care of the body." And without another word, I walk out of the room. A faint bleeping in the distance amplifies with each step I take away from the scene I just enacted. It must be some far-off alarm buried somewhere in the basement of the building. But by the time I reach my truck, my ears are ringing from the blaring sounds going off in my head.

Adrenaline courses through me as I slide into the driver's seat and turn on the ignition. I grip the steering wheel tight, shaking it with the same degree of violence I just displayed back at the building. I let out a thunderous yell, my teeth clenched as the realization washes over me. I maneuver the truck out of

the parking lot. With a rocketing pulse, I drive through the darkened streets of Manhattan back toward my townhouse.

Tremors assault my body as I swing the steering wheel around a series of turns.

For years, I'd controlled it, kept it buried deep because I knew the damage it could do if it was unleashed.

Tonight, I let it all out. I let my emotions command me in a way they never should again.

For the first time in years, I freed them.

All because of Heaven.

As much as I try to convince myself that she's only a speed bump along my path, soon to be steamrolled, the more control I lose.

And before tonight, only I knew how dangerous that could be.

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Chapter Twelve

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HEAVEN

I roll onto my back, letting out a deep sigh as I stare out at the sun peeking over the tops of the buildings in my view. And the view is amazing, I have to admit that to myself even though I won't give Matteo the satisfaction of hearing it.

I grab a pillow and press it over my head, groaning into it. It's been a week since I've seen or spoken to my family, save for a call to Aunt Maura to arrange the transfer of my things to Matteo's townhouse, and one to Patty to see how he's feeling. He was, of course, more concerned about *me* because he's just that good a brother. He also feels hella guilty about his part in all of this. He believes that if he'd have been able to overtake those assholes who assaulted us in the park, that Dad would have had more faith in us standing up against Dominguez and let me stay instead of marrying me off the Italian.

I tried to convince him that it was way more than just us getting jumped, even though in the back of my mind I wonder the very same thing.

It doesn't really matter now. The stage has been set, contracts signed, and lives sold. I haven't reached out to my father at all, even though he's passed a few message on to me through Matteo. And even though I miss him, I know I can't have a conversation with him. I'll end up saying something I'll regret because even after a week, the latent anger still festers deep in my gut.

Let's just say there's a very fine line between love and hate and right now, I just don't know which side he falls on.

I've been out a couple of times with Matteo glued to my side. They're almost like PR appearances, for Christ's sake. We go to places to be seen together so that the entire underworld knows we're really doing this and blissfully happy while we make our bullshit wedding arrangements. We peruse flowers, taste cakes, and visit venues, not that any of it will come to fruition. I made it clear in my father's office that first night that this wedding will be small. I'd like to not humiliate myself in front of a cast of thousands, thank you very much. The smaller, the better in my opinion. My family, his family, a few business associates. *Small*, much to my aunt's dismay since she's always wanted to plan a big wedding. We traipse all over the place, making fictional selections, smiling, and hugging. Matteo always has an arm draped around me or snaked around my waist.

And for as much as I detest this situation and the sham we're trying to produce, I can't deny that I like the feeling of his muscles holding me close enough that I can breathe in his delicious and intoxicating scent. There have been far too many brushes against him in the past week, ones that make every nerve ending tingle. I've caught him staring at me more than a few times from across a room while we're both at the townhouse. When I call him on it, he makes up a bullshit excuse as to why...like, he's just checking out how my face is healing.

But I can still feel the heat in his gaze. And it's even hungrier now than it was when I first laid eyes on him, although he hasn't come near my bedroom since that first night. I don't know. Maybe he feels like he can't control himself. Lord knows, I taunted him with that striptease. He might be afraid of losing control if he becomes a regular spectator.

I'd like to see that happen. He's usually wound pretty freaking tight. I'd be nice to see him let go and give me the upper hand for once!

Speaking of...

I swing my legs around the side of the bed and run my fingers through my sleep-tousled hair. My fiancé doesn't know it yet, but today is the day *I* set the agenda for our outing. After a quick shower, I pull my hair into a slicked-back ponytail and dab some makeup onto my face, adding extra layers of mascara to make my eyes really pop. A little pink lip gloss completes my transformation and it's back to work I go.

Whether Matteo likes it or not.

I walk down the staircase and wander into the kitchen, the scent of rich Italian roast wafting in the air. My mouth waters as I open a cabinet above the sink and grab a big white mug, filling it with the delicious coffee and then dumping in spoonful after spoonful of sugar. I've tried Matteo's espresso, but it's too strong for me, so I always come back to this. A little cream and it's absolute perfection. I blow on it gently and take a sip, letting out a low moan because it's that good.

Matteo walks in wearing nothing but a pair of running shorts, the muscles in his chest rippling as he twists his baseball cap backward. I try not to stare but it's difficult. I bite down hard on my lower lip. Mm, just yummy. He's strong, flavorful, and hot as hell. Just like my favorite coffee.

Minus the sweat.

But even that makes my belly flutter...just seeing him standing there, glistening, flexing...

Oh, Christ. It's been a long time since I've gotten off. Ten days, to be exact, since his mouth feasted on me at his sex party.

And every time I think of that scene in the room that preceded my own salacious encounter — the most sensual gang bang I think I've ever seen — I want to feel his lips on mine and on a whole host of other places. And I don't just fantasize about his lips. I fantasize about other parts of him, too, one in particular that I only had the pleasure of jerking.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I'd very much like to have the pleasure of *riding* said part.

This is what happens when you are too embarrassed to ask your aunt to please throw in your vibrator collection when packing up your things.

You're left with your hands, and they don't come close to comparing with a certain other tool that is always within reach.

Pun intended.

Good God, I really do need to get back to work!

I take another sip of my coffee and gaze at Matteo from over the top of the mug. I place it back on the counter. “I was thinking that maybe we could go back to my old neighborhood today,” I say.

He looks at me, his perfectly shaped blue eyes making my heart thump a little faster, much to my dismay. “Why?”

I roll my eyes and walk around to his side of the counter. “Because I need to do something productive, Matteo! I walked away from my family because I was ordered to. But I will not walk away from my job! I made that very clear the night we got *engaged*,” I say, sarcasm dripping from the word. “I’m sure you remember.”

His gaze darkens. “It’s not smart for you to be there right now. Dominguez won’t dare come for you here in my area of the city. But you’re fair game in your father’s domain.”

“I’m not afraid,” I whine, feeling a little like a petulant child. “Besides, I’m not suggesting that I go alone. I mean, you won’t be in the meetings with me, but—”

“There’s the deal breaker,” he snaps, turning away from me to brew one of his tiny cups of espresso.

“Why? Am I supposed to have a bodyguard for every single meeting I take?” I shout. “Let me ask you something, Matteo. Is this really going to be it for me? Am I just going to live out the rest of my days as your trophy wife? The one you parade around and grope in public and ignore in the bedroom?” I snap my lips closed. Oops. I didn’t mean for that last part to slip out. Shiiit.

He swivels around, an expression of surprise etched into his features. His lips curl upward. “I didn’t realize any of that bothered you, especially the last part.”

“It doesn’t. I-I, um, didn’t mean it the way it came out,” I sputter. “I just meant, you know, we’re more, ah, connected when we’re out of the house.”

He holds out his espresso cup and takes a sip, his eyes never leaving my face. “So, lack of connection. That’s your gripe?”

“No!” I yell, slapping my hands against my legs. “My ‘gripe’ is that I am losing credibility with each day that passes! Do you think that the people who work for me are going to take me seriously now that I’m out of the picture and Conor is running the day-to-day? I mean, it’s pretty damn clear that he’s the one to beware of right now. My role is fading away more and more and I can’t...” My voice cracks, and I stop talking before the sob I’m trying to choke back erupts out of my chest.

Matteo sets down his cup and walks over to me. He tries to tilt my chin upward but I jerk my head out of his grip. “My life is in complete upheaval,” I whisper. “I need to get it back. Please understand that. I’ve worked too hard. I need my father to see that I’m the right one to lead my family, not Conor. I can’t lose that fight. There’s too much at stake.” I stop talking when my voice wavers again, my eyes tangled with his.

After a few seconds, he nods. “Okay. We’ll go. But you don’t go into any meetings alone.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Forget it,” he says. “You of all people should know that someone can always be watching and waiting for a chance to strike. And in your old neighborhood, there are plenty of weak links.”

I throw my hands into the air in frustration but I want to let out a gleeful yell.

I’m back, Conor. So get the hell out of my way!

Chapter Thirteen

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HEAVEN

“These numbers don’t look right, Sean,” I say, staring at the computer screen. “For the past week and a half, you’re showing a profit every day.” I glare up at him. “Where are you tracking the shipments that are going out?”

I glance over at Matteo standing against the wall, but he’s busy studying his phone. Or at least, he’s pretending to be.

Sean follows my gaze, visibly shaking as he looks back at me, his eyes as big as saucers. “I, uh, I’m tracking everything in the main system. All of the receipts have been entered.”

“Sean,” I say again, trying to control my anger. “On a daily basis, you have liquor, beer, and food being delivered to this restaurant. The invoices are all inflated by the drugs being smuggled in those crates, and you’re supposed to separate the money for the drugs to avoid a paper trail. Instead, you’re using the total invoice amounts for tracking. Why?”

“Um, well, last time Conor was in here, he said to keep everything together so it’s all in one place. You know, more organized.”

“Oh, so that way you can make it easier for the Feds to see that we’re laundering money if they should happen to raid us?” I snap, slamming my hand on the desk.

Matteo looks up from his phone at that moment but says nothing.

I stand up suddenly, scraping the chair back against the scuffed floor. “I’ll take this up with Conor,” I grumble. “Is he at this regular office today?”

“Yea,” he mumbles, sneaking another look at Matteo.

“In the meantime, go back to the tracking method I showed you, got it?”

Sean nods and backs away as I storm around the desk and out the office door. I stomp out the back and pull open the door to Matteo’s truck. He slides into the driver’s seat beside me and I press my fingertips to my temples, trying to process what I’ve seen and heard today.

“He’s completely undermining the way that I direct,” I mutter. “I mean, how fucking stupid is he? Logging payments for drug shipments with legitimate food and spirit costs? I mean, how can you fucking justify a five-hundred-dollar crate of red potatoes and cabbage? He has no clue what he’s doing.”

“Yeah, he clearly missed Money Laundering 101.” Matteo lets out a sigh. “I’ll talk to Declan.”

“No,” I say. “I will handle it myself. *Now.*”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Look, Heaven, I know you’re upset, but we’ll figure out how to handle it together. It’s as much my problem as it is yours.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not. I mean, yes, from a financial perspective since you’re almost bound to me, but from a personal one? This is all on *me* to fix. He cannot be allowed to run this organization into the ground, Matteo! I’ve been out of the game for a week, and look at all of the issues I’ve found with our business records! All of the accounting is fucked! Every business is using a different tracking method, and why? Because the asshole is skimming! He was just waiting for me to get pulled out so he could do what the hell ever he wants! This the last straw and I’m not going to cry to my father. He already made it clear that I’m on my own. It’s up to me to prove he’s fucking everyone!” I point to the steering wheel. “So, drive!”

He presses the ignition button and the engine growls with the same kind of ferocity bubbling in my veins. “Where are we headed?”

“42nd Street and 11th Avenue,” I say. “He’ll be down there today. And just so we’re clear, this is a meeting I’ll take by myself.”

Matteo's jaw tightens but he doesn't argue. I don't know if that means he's saving it up for when we arrive, but I'll deal with it then.

After twenty minutes of fighting city traffic, we finally roll to a stop in front of a warehouse-type building. Matteo stares up at it, his brow furrowed. "This place looks like a breeding ground for scumbags. You're not going in there alone."

"The hell I'm not," I snap, pushing open my door and hopping onto the curb. Matteo turns off the car and jumps out, grabbing my wrist before I make a break for the black steel door. "This isn't a smart idea. You asked that guy Sean where Conor is. What if he made a call to warn him that we're coming? I'm going with you, Heaven. I don't trust that asshole."

"Which asshole? Conor or Sean?"

"Both of them," he grumbles.

"Well, guess what?" I yank my arm away from him and straighten my jacket. "You don't own me yet. And I'm going in there by myself, whether or not you approve."

But before I can twist away from him, he wraps an arm around my waist, dragging me toward him. "Don't test me," he murmurs, his fingertips digging into my hip.

Suddenly, the desire to do just that crashes over me like an all-consuming wave, the kind that threatens to sweep you away as you tumble right, left, forward, and backward, desperate to regain your footing. Oh God, do I want to test him. I want him to show me something...any emotion at all...that tells me he gives a shit about more than just money and power.

Because after a mere ten days...I swallow hard, his hot breath fluttering against my cheek...regrettably, I do.

Then his grip loosens and the shield slams down in front of his ice-blue eyes.

I see nothing because he feels nothing.

My nostrils flare and I back away, my head shaking as I stomp across the pavement.

I guess I have my answer to the question I asked him this morning. There is a reason why he avoids me when we're behind closed doors.

And it's because he doesn't give a damn.

Looks like I need to take a page from his dickhead playbook.

But I'll worry about that later. Right now, I have a more pressing problem, one that is threatening my fucking livelihood.

"Heaven!" he calls out just as his phone rings. I hear him let out a few tense words in another language that tell me he's less than pleased with the person on the other end of the line. "Yeah, I forgot about our meeting," he mutters. "I got caught up with something else. No, I haven't forgotten about our arrange—"

I pull open the door in a huff, not in the least bit interested in whatever other 'arrangement' Matteo has concocted for the benefit of his organization. I head straight for the office my brother keeps at the other end of the hallway. I scrunch up my nose. The place reeks of sex, weed, and cigarette smoke. Super classy digs for an aspiring mob boss. I roll my eyes, my heels clicking along the scuffed floor. My skin crawls as deep voices get louder and more rowdy. Then, I hear a female squeal and my throat tightens.

Oh, fuck. Please don't let me walk into a goddamn sex fest.

I can already feel last night's dinner churning in my stomach as I knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Conor barks out.

I don't reply, though. I just throw open the door. I don't need to announce my arrival. Why give him any chance to prepare for the lashing I'm about to deliver?

"What the fuck, Heaven?" he yells as the squealing girl rides him. She gasps and twists in my direction, clutching her breasts, despite the fact that two of my brother's dipshit guys are smoking in the corner.

Right, so *I'm* the intruder here.

I walk into the office, a scowl on my face as I glare at my brother. “Get rid of the bitch now. We have something to discuss.”

He takes a long drag of a joint and drops it into the ashtray to his right, giving the girl a loud smack on the ass. She practically falls off of him, he hits her so hard. I shoot a pointed look at the other guys, Maze and Dax. “You, too! Out, now!”

Conor gets up, pulling on his jeans. He walks around the back of his desk and takes a swig from a near-empty whiskey bottle. “Where do you get off giving my guys orders?”

“Please, let’s not talk about getting off, okay?” I sneer. “That image is permanently branded into my memory for fucking ever!”

He flashes a lopsided grin. “You can use it for your own personal highlight reel. You’re welcome.”

This time, when the bile rises in my throat, I’m almost certain it’s going to spew all over the place.

“By the way,” he says. “What the hell are you doing outside of your ivory tower, anyway? I thought that was the deal. You stick by the side of the Italian until you get hitched and officially hand over the reins to *me*.”

“In your dreams will I hand over anything to you!” I swallow hard, clenching my fists so my hands don’t shake. “Tell me, Conor. Did you really think you were going to get away with it? Screwing with the books like you did? Making it easy for you to skim from the top since nobody is watching anymore, right?”

His bloodshot eyes narrow and he grabs the joint and takes another deep drag. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re even talking about.”

“Really?” I sneer. “So, it’s just coincidence that in the week and a half I’ve been out of the game, you’ve given the order to completely change the bookkeeping for our businesses? Get off it! You were hoping my new role as wifey-to-be would keep me out of your hair, so you jumped on the opportunity as soon as I left! You figured nobody would finger you, right? And that you’d be able to steal from your own fucking family? Well, guess again! You’re caught!”

Conor drops the joint back into the ashtray and downs the rest of the whiskey before shattering the neck against the side of his desk. He leaps at me like a rabid dog, throwing me against the wall, holding the splintered glass bottle at my neck. “I figured when Dad signed away your pathetic excuse for a life, I’d be spared the job of fucking slitting your throat. Looks like I was wrong!” he roars, spittle flying out of his mouth.

I scream, driving my knee straight into his groin before kicking my foot into his chest with all the force I can muster. He flies backward into the desk but doesn’t drop the damn bottle. I search the space, looking for anything to use as a weapon.

Anything besides my knee, that is.

But my search is futile, unless I can get to the joint and snuff it out in his eye.

He slices the air with the bottle and it whirs past my ear. I dodge and duck away from it with not much of an option to escape. My eyes fall on a pen close enough for me to grab.

“You think Dad will believe you, Heaven? He sold you off to Villani to get you out of his hair! Because you’re such a pain in his ass, always looking to take, take, take! Marrying you off was the only way he could shove you out of the picture.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I yell, grabbing the pen as inconspicuously as possible before I make my move.

“You were never gonna be boss, Heaven,” he growls. “You’re a fucking girl and you’d never be taken seriously.”

“Oh, so if I’m a lying, scumbag pig, I’d have a better shot?” I yell.

He lets out a loud grunt and jumps at me, swinging the jagged head of the bottle. I yelp as one of the sharp slivers slices at my arm right through the fabric of my jacket.

“I hate you!” I screech, driving the pen right into his shoulder.

He finally drops the bottle, stumbling backward against a chair, moaning like a bitch. He pulls out the pen and turns his crazed eyes at me before grabbing

a knife from the back pocket of his jeans. He creeps toward me, holding it above his head, and I scramble backward toward the door.

“Ahh!” My leg gets caught on a nearby table and I fall onto it as he closes the space between us, the knife clutched in his hand. He holds it over my head, ready to drive it into my chest. Just as his arm comes down like a goddamn guillotine, I roll to the side and he jams the blade right into the wood.

I struggle to my feet and jump as I hear a gun cock.

“Make a move, you fucking piece of shit. I wanna pull this trigger so fucking badly, you have no idea!”

Matteo’s deep voice makes my shoulders slump with relief, and I collapse against him, still clutching my bloody arm. “Are you okay?” he murmurs.

I give a quick nod.

“Get over to the door,” he says under his breath. “Run if you need to.”

My jaw drops as he moves toward Conor who just pulled the pen out of his shoulder. He flings it at me, a murderous smirk on his face. “Is that how it’s gonna be, Heaven? You get hitched and inherit all this new muscle to back ya up?” He sways toward Matteo, who still has the gun in his outstretched hand. “You think I’m afraid of you, you dumb guinea? You think I’m intimidated by your fucking army and your family?” he hisses. “Well, I’m not.”

“I know,” Matteo says in a tight voice. “You’re clearly too stupid to be afraid of anything. And let me be the first to tell you that pride and ego will kill you before any of your other...” he looks around the room. “Hobbies.”

Conor’s face flushes, his eyes glassy. “So now you’re giving me life advice, *brother*? Guess what? I don’t need it. I have everything, or did you not get the fucking memo? This organization is mine.”

“It’s half yours,” Matteo corrects him. “And soon it’ll be half *ours*.”

A tiny shiver runs through me when he says the word *ours*.

Huh. *That’s* what elicits an emotional response from me? Not the fact that my brother just attacked me with a knife?

“You’ll never get your goddamn greasy hands on anything I own,” Conor growls, swinging the knife in Matteo’s direction. I yelp as he jumps out of the way.

But Matteo isn’t the kind of guy to be on the defensive for too long. He lunges for Conor, closing his hand around Conor’s throat, and throws him backward against the wall. He lets out a loud groan and rolls over, clutching his head. Matteo steps next to him, and then presses his shoe against Conor’s neck. “Next time you so much as look at your sister wrong, I won’t just throw you into a wall. I’ll put you through the goddamn thing.” He kneels down next to Conor, who is still groaning. “*Brother,*” he seethes, contempt dripping from his lips. “You just make this whole thing too easy for me.”

I furrow my brow.

What’s that supposed to mean?

Matteo straightens up and sticks his gun back into the waistband of his pants before helping me out of the dingy building. My teeth chatter so hard, I can barely speak a word through them. Once we’re back in the truck, he examines the slash on my arm, but I pull away, my body trembling. I clutch the sides of my head, my skin tingling as beads of sweat pop up along the back of my neck. “He...was...going...to...kill...me!” I sputter. “Holy fuck, he’s goddamn sick!” I pull my clothes away from my body, fanning myself with the material. “Matteo,” I choke out. “If you hadn’t come in when you did... oh my God, one more second and I would have been—”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” he says, pulling me into his arms and holding me tight. “He’s a sick bastard, but you managed to get away from him before I got there because you’re strong, probably the strongest woman I know.”

I tilt my head back to look up at him. My breaths are short and sharp and my heart is about to erupt out of my chest at this moment. I knew Conor was fucked up, but this little visit took things to a whole new level of deranged. He smooths back a stray strand of hair that dared escape my tight ponytail and reaches past me for the glove compartment. “Take off your jacket,” he says, a mini first-aid kit in hand.

I wince when he dabs alcohol onto my skin. “It’s not deep enough for stitches,” he mutters, patching me up like an emergency medical technician.

“What a pro you are at this,” I say with a small smile.

He shrugs. “Occupational hazard, I guess. I think the biggest danger to you is probably tetanus.”

“I’m up to date on my shots.”

“Good,” Matteo murmurs, running his fingers over the bandage, his blue eyes dark. Lust and rage battle in the depths, causing warmth to coil in my belly. It’s silent between us, but yet so much is being spoken.

I finally clear my throat. “Thank you. For everything.”

A hint of a smile plays at his lips, and I sweep my tongue over my own, in anticipation? Maybe. I know that since we’ve met, I’ve never wanted to kiss him more than I do at this second.

“I, um, I think you should take me to see my father,” I say, turning away and effectively breaking the spell. “He needs to hear about this, all of it. The money, the attack, everything.” I tug at my ponytail, waiting for Matteo to start the truck. The rush of anger comes fast and furious, immersing me in Conor’s toxic aura. “I won’t let him get away with this. He’s going to pay!” I tap my foot against the floor. “Come on. What are you waiting for? We need to handle this now!”

But instead of hearing the car ignition start, I feel his fingertips graze the top of my hand. I jerk my head toward him, surprise gripping me.

“Matteo,” I say, my eyes darting from his hand to his face. “Let’s go!”

He shakes his head. “Heaven, you can’t see your father like this. Once you storm in there, you’ll spiral out of control, and if you think he doubted you before, he definitely will now if you go in there on a rampage.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I yell, yanking my hand away from him and cringing at the same time because of the sudden jolt of my arm. “I’m just supposed to go home, pack away the shit show that almost just got me killed, and forget it all?”

“I’m not suggesting that we forget about it. I’m just saying that you need to be in a calmer place before you go to him.”

“Oh, so now the King of Cool is giving me advice?” I give my head a swift shake. “I can’t believe this is actually happening right now! You saw what he did!”

“And I also know how these things work. Listen, Declan knows Conor is a fuck-up. Trust me on that. But you won’t gain anything by shoving that into your dad’s face. He doesn’t need anyone to tell him what a liability Conor is.”

“Then how can he possibly think that Conor can run things?” My voice breaks, and I know tears are coming. “Conor said I’d never be boss, that Dad was never going to give that role to me. What if he’s right? After everything I’ve done, could my father really fuck me like that and put that asshole in charge?”

“Conor is digging his own grave,” Matteo says darkly. “So far into the ground that he’s gonna hit the damn core of the Earth. Your father knows who and what he is, but you rubbing his face in that knowledge isn’t going to work for you. Running in there, making accusations, telling him you know better than him...what’s that going to do for you?” He runs a hand through his hair and a thick lock falls over one of his eyes. My fingers itch to push it back, to run down the side of his face, to stroke the back of his neck and—

Oh, crap.

That was an inconvenient time to tune out his voice.

His eyes narrow, jolting me back to my reality, the one where I’m trying to keep my head from spinning off my neck. “You need to pull it together before you take this to him. Conor expects you to run right to Declan. Don’t do it. Don’t give him the satisfaction. Guys like Conor always fall hard if you lead them to the edge of the cliff.”

“Okay.” I swallow hard past the growing lump in my throat. “Let’s go home.”

He nods after a silent minute of staring at me, then starts the engine, maneuvering the truck back onto 42nd Street and turning right onto 11th Avenue.

I tap my fingers against the window, watching the buildings whizz past. “I’m

losing control,” I mumble, more to myself than to him. “And I can’t seem to stop it.”

“You only think you are,” he says in a low voice.

“No, I know it!” I cry out. “And I’m not just talking about today. Do you even know what it feels like? You, who never loses his shit ever!”

“The reason why I never lose it is because I, unlike your dipshit brother, have learned my lessons. I’ve seen exactly what can happen when I lose control, which is why I work so hard to keep it.” He grips the steering wheel tight, his voice strained.

I twist my ponytail between my fingers. “My life is completely out of my hands, Matteo. It was evidently in my father’s and now he’s delegated that responsibility to you. I have no voice anymore. Maybe I never even had one to begin with,” I huff. “Maybe it was all bullshit done to pacify me and keep me quiet and productive.”

Matteo eyes me as he stops for a light. “Look, Heaven, your father called on me because he knew he couldn’t keep you safe. And you’re special. An asset to your family. He knows it and so do I.”

I roll my eyes. “He fed you all of that crap, but at the end of the day, he did it to save his own ass, didn’t he? If what Conor said is true and he really never intended for me to take over...” My voice trails off.

“Conor is full of shit and he was also higher than a damn kite back there.” Matteo presses his foot on the gas. “He didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, and pretty soon, it won’t matter anyway.”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t understand. Why do you keep saying that stuff about him? I mean, you were hired to keep all of this in check with the cartel. Why are you talking like he’s on some collision course?”

Matteo’s back stiffens and his jaw tightens. “Because guys like Conor can’t be saved. They always fall because they’re never smart enough to learn from their mistakes. They just keep making new ones that are more dangerous than the last ones.”

“Well, he *is* an idiot,” I say with a dry chuckle.

“So why do you care what he says?”

I lean my head back against the leather seat. “Because he’s got all of the power right now. And I have nothing.”

“That’s not true at all. You have a future. He’s the one who has nothing.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” I whisper, my head rolling to look at him. “It feels like I’m just kind of floating out in the wild blue yonder with no destination. I’m just...out there. Alone. Clueless about what to do next.”

“We’re going to get married next,” he says. “That’ll save your future and your role within your father’s organization.” He gives me a quick wink. “And you’re not alone. I’m next to you to make sure nothing goes off-course.”

“Right, because of your whole long-term strategy,” I snip with a roll of my eyes.

“Don’t make fun of it. You’ll benefit, too.” He smirks. “If I don’t get tired of you first.”

I smack his arm and the truck squeals to a stop in front of the townhouse. I bite down on my lip as he shuts off the ignition and twists around to look at me, a glimmer of hunger in his heated gaze.

Oh, *snap*.

Is he going to punish me now, or was that just a bunch of empty threats?

A tingle between my thighs makes me clutch the sides of the seat.

Please don’t let them be idle threats.

Please make good on your damn words!

“Didn’t I tell you what would happen if you did that again?”

I nod wordlessly, cowering slightly.

He moves closer still, his lips hovering over mine. “No wife of mine will ever raise her hand to me, do you understand?”

My eyes widen because I am just flat-out shocked that I'm more turned on than offended in this second. How ridiculous? I mean, this isn't the Dark Ages! If I want to give him a smack, I shouldn't have to pay with my body.

But on the other hand, I want to pay with my body...

Until I'm freaking bankrupt!

"You can't be serious," I finally rasp.

His eyes spit fire...white hot flames that singe my insides.

"I think I'm going to need to show you exactly how serious I am, Heaven." He pushes against me, backing me against the door. But chivalry isn't dead. He makes sure that my injured arm is protected. "And I know just the place for you to learn your lesson."

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Chapter Fourteen

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MATTEO

“Here, put this on,” I say to Heaven after I park my car in the private lot of Risk, one of my SoHo sex clubs. “Everyone wears a mask as they walk inside.”

“Okay,” she says, a glimmer of anticipation in her bright eyes. Her lips curl upward as she settles the black mask into place.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

She nods. “As ever.”

My dick jumps at those words. I didn’t bring her here tonight to watch a show.

I brought her here to star in it.

But she doesn’t know that yet.

I walk around to her side of my truck and help her out. Her tits brush against me, her cheeks flushing bright pink as she sneaks a look up at me. “After you.”

I lace my fingers with hers and pull her toward a private entrance. *My private entrance.*

“Good evening, Mr. Villani.” The doorman, Jase, pulls open the door and ushers us inside.

“Thanks,” I say, my hand on the small of Heaven’s back as she enters the darkened labyrinth of sex and sin. I walk down one of the corridors shadowed by a deep red glow that drenches the atmosphere with taboo allure. Her hand clenches mine, and I see her study everything in our path as we move into the central part of the club.

“Can I take this off?” she asks as we wander down the corridor.

I nod, pulling off my own. A jolt of desire zips through me as she removes her mask.

Unafraid and uninhibited.

It makes me want to back her against a wall and plow into her wet pussy with all of the pent-up lust that’s been festering inside of me since the first time I had my head between her legs.

But I know I have to wait. I want her to experience this place...all it has to offer...and then I want her to beg me for my cock.

Judging by the look on her face, I know that’s no longer a pipe dream.

The parties I host are basically just pop-ups throughout lower Manhattan. They are invite-only, for the most frequent clubgoers and their carefully vetted guests. But the clubs each have their own aura. Risk is my personal favorite to visit. Each room hosts a show with a viewing area, and an area for eager participants who are angling to make their own action.

We pass a room where a rope bondage event is taking place, and Heaven stops short right outside the doorway as one of the goddesses...that’s what we call them...winds one of her gold ropes around her captive. She slides slowly, methodically, and temptingly down the torso of another woman as she captures her wrists and legs with the rope. Spectators sit on the velvet couches scattered around the room, some watching, some stroking themselves, some stroking other guests. House techno music pumps through the speakers, although it’s not loud enough to drown out the orgasmic screams of some of the more adventurous guests who are plastered against the walls on either side of us, fucking like they’re being filmed for PornHub.

Heaven backs against me as the bondage continues, the goddess now on her knees, sucking on the clit of her captive. Two other goddesses emerge from

corners of the room wearing massive strap-on dildos. Each has on a headpiece in a different color. The one with the red headpiece sidles up to the captive, flicking her clit as she thrusts the dildo into her ass while the goddess on the floor wearing the blue headpiece is flipped onto her stomach on the black fur rug. The goddess in gold slides against her, grasping her tits and kneading them as she thrusts the dildo into her pussy.

Heaven watches, her mouth parting slightly. Her eyes are glued to the erotic scene in front of us, and I see her run a hand down the front of her dress. I don't even think she realized she did it, but it tells me she's enjoying the view, and that makes my cock strain against my pants.

"Come on," I murmur against her ear, gently tugging her backward.

She looks up at me, lust pooling in her heated gaze.

"You liked it," I say, a seductive smirk tugging at my lips.

"I loved it," she breathes.

"It's complete freedom," I murmur. "No inhibitions, no judgments. You just do what feels good."

She backs up into a wall, looking up at me from under her long, thick lashes. "Is that how you let go?"

I close the space between us, my mouth hovering over her deep red lips. "Out there, maintaining control is the most important way to gain respect and loyalty, the only way to become all-powerful."

She nods, breathless. "And in here?"

I slide my hand against the wall nearest her face, leaning closer still, her heartbeat thumping wildly against me. "In here, I don't worry about loyalty or respect. I can let myself go, be whoever I want to be, do whatever I want to do."

"You don't care about control in here?"

"I always care about control, Heaven."

“So how can you relax and enjoy yourself if you’re so worried about controlling everything?”

“Because the kind of control I crave here doesn’t have to do with my livelihood. It has to do with pleasure — for me...” I pause. “And whomever I’m with.”

She swallows hard. “Show me more,” she rasps, arching her back and pressing her tits against my chest.

Show me more.

Is she kidding me?

I’m so fucking ready to explode, that the next room I want to show her is my own private one.

It’s hard to tear my eyes off of her body poured into that tight black dress. It’s a different one than she wore to the first party when we met, but it’s equally scandalous.

And it’ll look even more fucking incredible puddled on the carpet in my VIP room.

Heaven looks at me, piercing my soul with those crystal-blue eyes, her red lips parted seductively. “I need more.”

It takes everything in me to not unzip her dress right here in the hallway. And even though my fingers twitch with repressed wanting, I resist the temptation. It almost chokes me, but I ignore it.

For now.

She grabs my hand and slides away from the wall, pulling me along as she wanders farther into my erotic playground. Heaven teeters backward, her heavy-hooded gaze making the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

A fireball of heat explodes in my gut, smoldering desire flooding my insides. I walk, letting her lead the way toward her next guilty pleasure.

Christ knows, there are plenty to choose from down here.

She presses herself to my side as we explore the different viewing rooms until she pushes her way through a crowd gathered at the end of the corridor. The walls shake from the vibration of the music, and in the center of the room is a large California king bed adorned with wine-colored silk bedding and matching throw pillows scattered around the space. The room itself is paneled with gold, but the lack of light casts shadows that make it look darker than it actually is.

So does the scene unfolding in front of us.

A muscular man is on his knees fucking a new goddess adorned in silver against the headboard. He pounds her like a dog in heat, the elaborate wooden board thumping hard against the wall. She sits on her knees, matching his intense thrusts. Her tits bounce as he drives into her, harder and faster, her screams piercing the air. Two other goddesses in gold move toward the bed, their arms and legs entwined as they devour each other before getting in on the fuck fest happening right next to them. Within seconds, the guy is on his back, feasting on the pussy of one of the goddesses, while the other two take turns stroking his cock with their tongues. Other couples and threesomes move into the room, taking over the couches and wall space, the smell of sex and animal lust thick in the air. Heaven's choked gasp makes my pulse throb.

My dick, too.

Heaven moves toward the bed as if in a trance, her hand still squeezing mine.

She drags me behind her, not once even looking at me for approval.

Sliding the straps of her dress off her shoulders, she stops at the foot of the bed, turning toward me. She reaches for me, her hands tight around my hips as she lets her eyes drift closed. Her body sways to whatever tune is looping between her ears, her lush tits peeking out of the top of her dress. I run my hands down the sides of her bare arms, dragging them down to the small of her back. They graze the ends of her hair and I fist the thick, glossy locks, pulling her head backward. Her eyes float open, a vixen-like smile tugging at her lips.

She closes the space between us, plastering herself against me, my cock thick against her. Heaven rubs herself against it, letting out a tiny moan, beyond

intoxicated by the carnal bliss consuming us both.

And that's when I almost lose my shit...in a very bad way.

The guy, the star of the goddess orgy, crawls over to Heaven, wrapping his thick arms around her waist. Her eyes fly open as she peeks over her shoulder, a look of shock blanketing her features. As quickly as the shock appears, it's replaced with an inviting smile.

What in the ever loving *fuck*?

"Come here, gorgeous," he growls, pulling her toward the bed. She falls back onto the comforter, her dress riding up as he drags her toward the other goddesses.

It takes me a second too long to process what's happening right in front of my disbelieving eyes, and before I can speak a word, my hand is pressed against the guy's jugular. "Since you didn't bother asking permission, I'm not either," I hiss. "Get your fucking hands off of her now."

The guy's eyes widen, and he lets her go immediately when my grip on him tightens. "Sorry, man. I just figured since she came over, she wanted to get in on the action."

I pull Heaven away from the bed and drop my hand from the guy's neck, an angry red mark branded onto his flesh. "Don't fucking *figure* ever again."

I twist around, my arm tight around Heaven's waist as we push through the crowd of voyeurs still gaping at the scene. We sidestep the people spread out on the floor, fucking like rabbits, trying not to stumble and make any of them unintentional threesomes.

I finally get Heaven out of the room and push her against the wall, my throat tight and my cock dripping with precum just from watching her, enraptured with the salacious scene. My voice is low and harsh as I hiss into her ear. "Did you like his arms around you? His fucking sweaty body against yours?" I wind my fingers through her hair, rage flooding my veins for some crazy reason.

Of course, the guy would have thought she was down to get gang-banged.

He really should have asked her first before touching, but in the heat of the moment?

I get that the lust clouded his judgment.

She's fucking incredible and I'd be focused on getting her naked, too.

But still, *she* let him grab her...let him put his hands all over her...let him feel her tits and her ass.

My tits and my ass.

She gasps and I pull harder on her hair, this woman, this 'means to an end' of mine.

I've been feeding myself the same bullshit since she wiggled her way under my skin, and now it's prickled and crawling with all things her...all things I want to feel...all things I want her to do to me.

I can't deny these feelings anymore.

Now I just need to figure out how to keep them from completely derailing my plans.

Tomorrow.

Because tonight, I want my hands all over her, to caress them over every inch of her luscious body as I bury my dick deep inside of her perfect, pink pussy.

I'll worry about everything else, including how to deal with her asshole brother, in the morning.

Late morning.

"Answer me," I growl louder.

Her eyes are so wide, they look like they might just pop out of her skull. "I... I didn't want his hands." She pauses, biting down hard on her lower lip. "I wanted *yours*."

"Do you think you deserve them after that?" I press my forehead against hers, her lips close enough for me to bite.

She pauses for a split second, then nods.

“I told you I’d bring you here tonight to show you what happens when you disobey me. Now you’ve let someone else touch you, which is even worse.” My pulse throbs against my throat, adrenaline flooding my insides. So much control, lost in a goddamn hot second. These are my fucking rules, nobody else’s! My skin crawls with the knowledge that the curves of her body were just worshipped by another pair of hands. An overwhelming urge to go back into that room and strangle that guy takes hold, and the only thing that keeps me rooted to this spot is Heaven and her wide-eyed stare. “Nobody touches what’s mine. Do you understand that? I don’t fucking share...ever.”

Her hands travel down the sides of my torso as she nods. “Okay.”

“No wife of mine will ever disobey me,” I hiss. “Or there will be consequences.”

“Are you going to punish me now?” she says in a sultry tone. “Because if you don’t, I have to warn you...I might keep being bad...”

My self-control is almost all but lost at this point.

A chill shuttles through me as I dig my fingertips into the small of her back, drawing her near. She’s goading me because she wants this...wants me. “Are you threatening me? Do you think that’ll make me back down?”

She cocks her head to the side. “I’m just saying that you’re making a lot of promises about keeping me in line. When are you going to deliver on them?”

I lace my fingers with hers and wordlessly pull her along next to me. We walk down the hallway, toward the direction of the back entrance. I dig into my pocket for a key ring and slide one of the keys in the lock, pushing open the door to reveal my own private space. No clubgoers are permitted in this area. It’s for my use only, for times when I was so choked for control that I needed to release the negative energy pumping hard through my veins.

Like now.

I step aside so that Heaven can move into the space, and I lock the door once it closes.

She does a half turn, gazing at me from under her eyelashes, a challenge sparking in the depths. “So, what are you going to do with me?”

“I’m going to show you what it means to be mine.”

Heaven runs a hand through her flaming red hair, bringing that hand around to her front and running it down the front of her dress. Her fingers get caught on the neckline, pulling it down to expose the peaks of her tits. Her lips curl upward in a seductive smile, and I know she needs this release as much as I do.

Maybe we are kindred spirits.

“If you think that tempting me with what’s underneath that dress is going to make me forget that you need to be punished, you’re wrong,” I say, grabbing her wrist.

“Oh, I don’t want you to forget. I want you to speed things up,” she whispers, pulling at my belt and drawing me toward her as she creeps backward toward the bed against the wall.

I graze her bare back, bringing my fingers to the hidden zipper of her dress. I slide it down all the way, the dress melting off of her creamy white skin. Her cheeks flush pink as she stands before me, naked.

Completely fucking naked.

Shit, if I’d have known she had nothing on under that dress, we might not have made it out of the house.

She gathers her hair off the nape of her neck, her bright eyes glittering with unbridled lust.

I run my hands over her smooth skin, flicking her taut, pink nipples and kneading the lush flesh. A tiny mewl escapes her mouth and she bucks her hips forward, her tits beckoning my mouth to taste.

Christ, how could I have let this happen? My craving for control and power could never be sated before Heaven barreled into my life.

And now that craving has been replaced by my rapidly growing need for the woman standing in front of me...my future wife.

Each day, I feel a little more lost in my quest to rule...because of her.

Now I'm going to show her exactly how I plan to deal with the inner battle raging in my head and in my groin.

I breathe her in, the scent of her musk mixed with the sweet smell of perfume infusing me with an insatiable need to bury my cock deep in her pussy. But that's where the control comes into play. I can't have that...won't have that... until she begs for it.

Only then will I give in to my cravings.

"Bend over the side of the bed," I say gruffly, spinning her around. Her hair flutters against my face as I jerk her toward the plush comforter. She leans forward, her hands on the mattress, her ass in the air. I step toward her, sliding my dick against it. I take in a sharp breath, the head of my dick screaming to push into her tight, dark hole, but I silence the angry voice. I run my hands over the plump globes, dropping to my knees. My tongue pokes between her cheeks, sliding into her most forbidden spot, prepping her for anything and everything I want to do to her, and she shudders, a gasp shattering the still air. A grin tugs at my lips as I rise to my feet. I fist her hair, my voice terse against her ear. "Did you like that, Heaven? Did it feel good?"

Her knees quake and she squeaks out a "Yes."

"Do you want me to do that to you again?"

"Yes!"

Then, without warning, I bring my free hand against her ass, the sound of flesh smacking against flesh making my dick throb. She yelps and I spank her again, harder. She squeals each time I bring my hand to her now-bright red skin.

"Are you going to ever tempt another man into touching you?" I seethe, spanking her before she can utter a response. "Tell me what I want to hear!"

"N-no!" she rasps as I slam my hand against her once more. This time I grasp her flesh in my hand, bending down to nip at it with my teeth. My God, I want to devour this woman, bite by delicious bite.

“And are you ever going to defy me again?” I grunt, my lips plastered against the side of her pinched face.

She chokes on a pant. “Yes!”

“Why did you say that?” I snarl, flipping her around so that she’s now on her back. I drag my fingers down the front of her abdomen, taking her tits in my mouth one at a time and flicking the nipples so hard with my teeth that she screams out.

“Because I want you to punish me!” she squeals, squirming under my relentless and taunting grip. “I want you to make me feel like this over and over again. I want *you*, Matteo.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Ahh!” A throaty yelp erupts from her lips as my fingers slide into her wet pussy. She clenches tight as I slide them in and out, slick with her juices. “Oh my God, yes!”

I work her clit with my thumb, my eyes falling on some rope on the night table. “Then let’s see how much you can take,” I say, sliding her farther onto the bed. I gather both of her wrists together and wrap them against one of the bedposts so that her arms are overhead. “Tell me what you want, Heaven.”

“I want your mouth, your hands, your cock,” she murmurs, her eyes closed. “I want it all.”

I unbuckle my belt and pull it off, flinging it to the floor. I shove my pants and boxer briefs to my ankles and kick them off. My cock is stiff as a corpse, the tip glistening with precum. I straddle her, inching upward. The swollen head drags along her skin until I reach her mouth. I stroke myself a few times, hovering over her lips. “Like this? You think you can handle this cock, Heaven?”

She eyes me with the hunger of a voracious jungle cat. “Let me taste,” she whispers, licking her lips. “I can’t touch it, so I need to feel it in my mouth. Against my tongue.”

I thrust my hips forward as she opens for me. She sucks and strokes and tugs on my dick with her lips as I face-fuck her as hard and as deep as she can

take. I sit back on my heels as she sputters and moans with every flick of her tongue. I hit the back of her throat and she eagerly swallows me whole, her legs falling open for my greedy fingers. I flip myself on top of her, my face in between her thighs as she continues to drink me in. I spread her pussy lips with my fingers before probing her folds with my tongue, my teeth nipping at her clit. I feel her tremble beneath me, her pent-up desire flowing into my mouth.

Oh, fuck, how have I slept in the same house as this woman for the past week and a half without tempting myself with those sweet juices again?

And how will I ever be able to live without them forever?

Because once she finds out the truth, she won't give herself to me like this ever again.

The trust I've built will be crushed, never to be erected again.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Goddammit! I don't want to think about any of that, about what will certainly happen once everything is exposed.

Toxic thoughts capture my mind and my cock deflates slightly.

I pant, dragging my mouth away from her pussy and flipping onto the mattress.

"Matteo," she breathes. "Please don't stop. I need you."

My gut clenches. Yeah, but for how long?

I drag a hand through my hair, sliding my body against hers. She snakes a long, lean leg around my waist, pushing me close, my cock grazing her slit. "Fuck me, Matteo," she moans. "I need your fat cock deep inside of me."

"You're so fucking dirty," I grunt, pushing the poisonous thoughts to the far corners of my mind as I ravage her mouth with mine, swirling my tongue around hers, heat rising up from the core and exploding out of my limbs. She has me smoldering under her heavy-hooded gaze, and I just want to sink deep into her.

To command.

And to forget.

I pull off the ropes restraining her because I want to feel her hands on me, touching me, tormenting me.

I need to know what I'll be missing.

I need the memory of what I'll never have again.

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her so that she's sitting up and plastered against my chest. I trail my hand down the column of her spine, angling her hips upward as the head of my cock pushes into her. We let out a simultaneous groan as I drive deep, my dick stretching her wide. Her walls close tight around me like a glove, her legs clamped around mine. I lift her onto my lap and she leans back against the mattress with one hand, meeting me with each hard stroke. Our bodies slap together, our skin pebbled with sweat. The air is so thick with heated lust, it's hard to breathe.

But I'd welcome death if it means I can feel like this for an eternity.

I roll onto my back, pulling her with me. Her long hair grazes my skin as I circle her hips over me. She squeezes my cock with every thrust into her, dragging her pussy lips to the head of my dick and then sinking all the way down again. She does this over and over, her pussy quivering uncontrollably as my cock pounds her with relentless vigor. Her tits bounce as she rides me, and she throws her head back, her mouth singing the exact song I want branded into my mind forever.

Her screams pierce the stillness, and my mind short-circuits from the waves of euphoria rippling through me. Bright white flashes of light blind me despite the dimness of the room. My teeth are gritted as the tingling sensation intensifies, shooting out from my core to the ends of my fingers and the tips of my toes. I grip her hips, grinding her clit against my cock as it erupts into her.

A guttural roar rumbles deep within my chest and I can't focus on anything except my undoing...

And hers.

The connection, the bright white flames raging between us, and the all-consuming carnal bliss...fuck, yeah.

The bliss.

I've never felt anything like it in my life.

And it's nothing I want to feel with anyone else.

Just like that, the toxins seep into my conscious to once again pollute my mind and my hopes for the future.

A future, with Heaven.

She collapses on top of me, her hair splayed across my chest, her arm slung across my torso. "Holy shit," she murmurs. "So if you hadn't ruined things the other night, I'd have experienced this...then?"

I let out a dry chuckle. "No. Wasn't it a good surprise, though?"

"Oh *God*." She giggles breathlessly. "And I'm not normally a fan of surprises. The last one I got before tonight was pretty awful." She covers her mouth with a hand, looking around the room before whispering conspiratorially. "I got a husband."

"Hmm," I say with a smirk. "And he didn't turn out to be all you wanted?"

She shakes her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Not at first. But he's starting to grow on me. And he just grew *in* me, too, so...I don't know. He seems promising." She shrugs, and I pull her tight against my chest.

"Promising, huh?"

"Well, we evidently have a whole lifetime to make progress on that, so don't be too deflated." With a wink, she plants a kiss on the tip of my nose, flinging her leg over me as if I'm her own personal body pillow.

I like the idea of that, her naked body clinging to me all night long like an erotic security blanket.

"So, your whole control issue," Heaven says, leaning up on her elbow. "Did you get your fix?"

“For now,” I say, smacking her ass and grasping a handful of flesh, giving it a good squeeze. “But my need is pretty damn insatiable. I think you should probably be prepared for that kind of release pretty often. I expect my wife to help me work out the stresses of my job.”

“And will you do the same for me?” she coos. “I think today proves just how nerve-wracking *my* work is, and if I’m going to be at risk for frequent stab wounds, I’m going to need some stress-relief myself. *Pretty damn often.*”

“See? This is what they call progress,” I quip. “We’re starting to understand one another.”

And fall for one another.

Ironically, that’s the biggest pitfall for me.

“So now what?” she asks, trailing her fingers lazily down the front of my chest. I quiver, her touch is so light, it makes me yelp. Her eyes widen and she lets out an incredulous laugh. “Wow, Matteo. Is the big, badass gangster *ticklish?*”

She digs her fingers under my arms, jumping on top of me and attacking me with her long fingernails. I ball myself up, trying to keep her fingers away from my more sensitive areas but she finds a way.

The woman is relentless. I should have known she’d uncover my weakness.

One of them, anyway.

It’s only a matter of time before she figures out the rest.

Minutes later, we’re both breathless, her hysterics matching my gasps for air and mercy. I roll on top of her, pinning her hands to the comforter. “Just remember that tickling me is against the rules. It means I’ll—”

“Punish me?” she interjects with a seductive grin. “Didn’t I show you how much I liked that part? You think that threatening me with your version of punishment will stop me from taking what I want from you?”

Of course I get arranged to a woman who is clearly as much of a deviant as I am.

I think she likes that she uncovered that little tidbit about herself.

I know I appreciate it.

We take our time getting dressed. I pour us a couple of shots of whiskey from my liquor cabinet and we knock them back. It's the most comfortable we've been together since the engagement was officially announced.

Better late than never, I suppose.

Heaven sucks down her third shot, giggling as she places her glass down. "I really hated you, Matteo. Like, a *lot*."

"And now? You're cool with me?"

"More than cool," she whispers, her lips stretching into a bright smile. "I guess we just needed to fuck out all of the animosity, yeah?" She smirks. "A good fucking always makes things look better in the morning."

I gather her in my arms. "Shit, we really need to wait that long for another one?"

Heaven cocks her head to the side. "Well, you're kind of an older guy. I didn't think you'd be able to handle any more tonight."

"I'm thirty, thanks," I say with a roll of my eyes.

"Well, lucky for you I'm not even close to my sexual peak," she says with promise that has my dick jumping. "Which is around thirty-five, from what I hear. So it's gonna be a fun decade for you."

A pang assaults my heart.

If only...

I grab her hand once we're ready to leave and pull her close, pressing her lips against mine. "I have a damn good rebound rate, just saying."

I twist the knob on the door and push it open. Since my room is buried in the back corner of the building, I know we can make a quick exit and then get home for part two.

And three, if she can handle it.

I guide her into the hallway. It's a little quieter at this end with most of the lascivious activity taking place on the opposite end of the space. I kept my room here on purpose because I didn't really want to listen to moans, groans, and screams unless they were coming from me or the women who accompanied me into my den of sin.

I snake an arm around Heaven's waist, holding her body tight against mine as we walk toward the exit as I recount the events that just took place.

"Oh wait, can I just run to the ladies' room?" She looks at me and giggles. "I mean, is it safe to go in there? Or will there be some kind of orgy happening in the stalls? Or outside of them, for that matter?"

"Enter at your own risk," I say with a snicker, nodding toward a door across the hall.

She winks at me and disappears inside, leaving me flabbergasted at what just transpired between us.

Tonight was supposed to be a way for her to unwind with a scene that clearly intrigues and arouses her. I wanted her to relax, to let go of the shit with her family that's been plaguing her, especially after what happened with that asshole Conor today. She needed a release and knew the pain would help her let go of the angst and the stress, to make her feel like she was more in control and less doubtful of herself and her future.

I know *I* fucking needed a release, especially since I've managed to let my growing feelings for her interfere with what I really need to focus on...the arrangement she knows nothing about.

I thought if I put myself in a position where I could just be cold and robotic about the sex, to punish her in my own deviant way, I could release the tension choking me.

It didn't work.

Seeing her so enraptured by the event incited me, fueled flames of passion deep inside of me where I thought only flickering embers still remained.

And then watching that guy pull her into the fray, watching her go with him...leaving me...that just tore me open that much more.

I knew I needed her, all of her.

But at the same time I knew I could never give her all of me.

I still wanted to try.

Taking her into my room to punish her...that was all about me trying to grab back control I'd lost in the middle of that orgy. And it only resulted in me losing more of it.

Disciplining her wasn't enough to satisfy my need for dominance over her.

It only made me spiral downward into a very complicated rabbit hole fraught with consequence.

Other emotions bubbled up, ones I can't seem to ignore or bury any more. They keep gathering the power that I'm so desperate to cling to, and tonight, they won.

I'm falling in love with my fiancée.

And that realization tells me I'm really fucked — figuratively and literally.

“Matteo Villani.” A smooth, deep voice jolts me from the war waging between my mind and my heart.

I look up, a gasp making my throat hitch. Fuck me.

Jorge Dominguez stands in front of me, all five foot six of him. But what he lacks in height, he makes up in brute force. As the head of his cartel, he singlehandedly ensures that money is always lining his pockets, and that revenge is always served to those who deserve it.

“You missed our meeting the other day while you were out prancing around the city with your future wife.”

“I know, and I explained what happ—”

Jorge holds up a beefy hand, smoothing the front of his dark gray suit with the other. The suit probably cost him a cool five grand, although dressing to the nines doesn't really add much appeal to the overall package. His dark hair is slicked back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, his face pock-marked, scarred, and his body portly. A faint scent of rice and beans wafts in the air

around him, and my stomach clenches. But sights and smells aside, he's got a shit ton of money, and that's his claim to fame. He doesn't need to look like a billion to have it stashed away, that's for fucking sure.

"I'm growing tired of your excuses, Matteo. We had a deal and you aren't making any moves to fulfill your end."

"Listen, Jorge," I say in a low voice, my eye on the door to the ladies' lounge. "I told you the last time...it's too soon to do anything. We agreed to the timeline! You can't just pull back now. Too many things need to—"

"Excuses, excuses," he says with a shake of his head. "Tsk-tsk, Matteo. I'm disappointed in you. I thought you wanted to build an empire."

"I do," I say through gritted teeth. "But I can't do it if I make stupid moves just to satisfy you."

"So first, you 'miss' our meeting using some bullshit excuse of your new, blended-family obligations, and now you disrespect me by calling me stupid?" he growls, stepping closer to me.

"I didn't mean any disrespect," I grunt. "I'm just saying that it's not the time to make any impulsive moves. I understand your needs and wants. We discussed them and you know I'm onboard. But you have to trust me and give me some time."

He points a finger at my chest. "Don't fuck me, Matteo. Or I will destroy everything you've built here. And it won't stop there." He smirks, the thick mustache lining his upper lip curling upward. "I think you know what I mean by that."

And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he heads down the hallway, his stout body swallowed up by naked, writhing bodies.

If I'm lucky, maybe he'll get smothered by tits and ass and I won't have to worry about the arrangement that is making me lose more and more sleep each passing night.

The door to the ladies' lounge opens and Heaven saunters out, a smug smile on her gorgeous face. "Nothing crazy to report. Just a couple of girls scissoring." She winks. "With anal beads."

I force a smile, my gut clenched tight from the thinly veiled threat Jorge just put out there during our exchange. “Did they ask you to join in?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Of course. But I declined the invitation since I saw how *well* you took it the first time around.”

“Yeah, but two girls propositioning you is a whole different ballgame.”

“Balls,” she says with a snicker. “No pun intended, right?”

I drop a kiss onto her lips even though my throat is so tight I can barely breathe. “Pun always intended,” I rasp.

Heaven furrows her brow and peers at me with that sharp gaze that bores into my soul. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

She shrugs. “You just look...I don’t know, off.”

“Maybe I’m just preoccupied with getting you naked again.”

“Oh. Well, in that case,” she quips, looping her arm with mine. “We’d better get home. *Fast.*”

Chapter Fifteen

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HEAVEN

I stumble out of *The Temple Bar*, a pub in Dublin, clinging to my cousin, Molly. She's trying hard to slick a lip gloss wand across her lips, but I'm making it difficult since I keep swaying into her. She has only succeeded in coloring her cheek and chin so far.

"Heaven forbid you learn to hold your liquor," she quips, steadying me against the wall. "You've been in New York for too long, love."

A loud chuckle erupts from my throat and I take a swig of the pint clutched in my hand. "You've, ah, got some lip gloss on your nose, too," I say, backing into the railing as I point it out to her.

Molly rolls her eyes and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one up and taking a long drag. "Breathe, Heaven. You desperately need air right now."

"If I sober up, I'll just have too much crap running through my mind. It's better this way," I grunt, teetering in my heels.

"Listen, I know you're preoccupied with that meeting," Molly starts but I hold up a hand.

"Stop! I'm compartmentalizing!" I roll my eyes. "I'm not going to think about that tonight. I'm only opening the fun box tonight."

"Sounds so dirty," Molly says in a mischievous tone, taking a drag of her cigarette and blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

I force a giggle, even though the so-called fun box has just been doused by a big ass bucket of water courtesy of my cousin.

The meeting.

The reason my family is here in Dublin in the first place.

But I didn't want to think about that tonight.

I'd already thought about it plenty after I overheard Granddad speaking to my father earlier. Snippets of the conversation bubble up in my mind, and I clench my glass tight, imagining it's one of their necks.

Or both of them.

Molly gives me a curious look. "You sure you don't want to let it out, Heaven? I mean, the booze will only help until you wake up tomorrow. And then you're gonna have to deal with reality and a nasty hangover. Talk to me."

I shake my head, my lips tight. "I'm fine. Really."

Except I'm not. At all!

Molly takes a final drag before stomping on the butt with her high-heeled boot. "Well, if the fun box is still open for business, let's go find some cute boys to play in it, yeah?"

I force a smile, chugging the rest of the beer. "Yes, that sounds like a good plan." We head back into the pub, and the heavy sounds of the Dropkick Murphys blaring through the deejay speakers make my ears ring.

And I'd gladly welcome tinnitus if it can help block out all of the other things battling for airtime.

We push through the noisy, sweaty, and rambunctious crowd as we head for the dance floor. I really need to work my way out of this funk and figure out a plan for tomorrow.

Tomorrow, when Granddad announces that Conor will be the successor for my father.

Just thinking those words makes my heart clench.

What would Mom think if she was still here?

A pang assaults my heart, and the inside of my nose tickles as if I'm about to cry.

But she's not, Heaven. You're on your own here.

God, I miss her so much.

She was the one person I knew I could always count on. I spent endless hours with her, preparing food and slaving over the stoves at our pub in Hell's Kitchen, famed for her specialty Irish fare. She taught me everything I know about cooking...and about how to shine in a houseful of men.

It wasn't easy growing up as the second eldest Mulligan with four brothers flanking me on all sides.

And after tomorrow, it will be downright hellish, especially with my brother Conor at the helm.

Fucking Conor?!

How could they?

When I heard Granddad tell Dad that he thought Conor was the best choice, my blood simmered. And when Dad agreed, after all I'd done to prove myself most capable, I let it erupt. I'm younger by less than a damn year, but that's not what's holding me back.

It's the fact that I don't have a cock swinging between my legs.

Molly gives me a little shake as if she knows what toxic thoughts are flowing through my mind and wants to snap me out of my poisonous bubble. I take a deep breath and just dance, trying desperately to lose myself in the pulsating beats. I look around through the haze, seeing lots of smiling faces surround me.

I wish I could say mine matched all of them.

But I can't find a single shred of happy inside of me. Seems like those all deserted me when Mom died. For the past six torturous months, I've been focused on helping my father run things back home in the States, even though

I knew Mom would hate the role I'd taken on.

She never would have approved of me becoming my father's successor.

She wanted me to be successful doing something legitimate — like becoming a doctor or a lawyer. When I started college, she was elated. Mom always taught me to shoot for the stars, never to let myself get caught in the muck of organized crime. I know she always hated her own circumstances, with her father being so ingrained in the Dublin mafia. She lived a life she hated, one where she was pretty much living in a gilded cage because Granddad had a lot of dangerous enemies who were always lurking and ready to pounce on anyone in his care.

Revenge was always being served for one indiscretion or another.

But Dad rescued her from all of that and gave her meaning and purpose in America. They worked hard to build their businesses and little by little, took more and more control over midtown Manhattan, where they originally settled and raised us all.

Then, a few months ago, life imploded and she was taken from us.

Stage four stomach cancer was the diagnosis.

And six weeks later, she was gone.

Forever.

It didn't have to be the case, though.

That was the jagged pill that still tears up my insides. The doctors all agreed that it could have been treated if she'd have spoken up sooner instead of fighting the pain.

But she always fought, always battled against anything perceived as a weakness.

So stubborn, so hot-headed.

Something I'd always admired so much about her ended up being the very thing that snuffed out her life.

How fucking ironic is that?

Maybe I'm doomed to suffer the same fate.

Like mother, like daughter.

A pair of strong hands from behind me grips my hips, jerking me backward, and I gasp, losing my footing. Molly giggles at the look of shock evident on my face. "Just go with it," she whisper-shouts. "He's hot!"

But my supper of soda bread and stew continues to churn in my gut.

Could be from too much beer.

But it's more likely because of the impending disaster that my life is about to become in only mere hours.

And since the booze isn't working, maybe the cute guy can do the job I need him to.

The guy and maybe an edible.

Anything to distract me.

I let his hands roam my torso and the curves of my ass before I swivel around to look at him. Truth be told, I don't give a damn what he looks like. If I can't drink away the frustration and the anger, I can sure as hell fuck it away.

And from the looks of it, Molly is already well on her way. She gives me a nudge, and I twist around, not expecting much because that's just how my life is going lately, and why should it be any different here on foreign soil?

When I see the guy standing over me with his crooked smile and laughing brown eyes, I bite down on my lower lip.

Well, well, well.

Someone decided to throw me a bone.

And I'm about to enjoy it.

I wrap my arms around his waist and he pulls me close, brushing his lips against my ear. "What's your name, beautiful?" he murmurs.

"Heaven," I say, grinding against him.

He slides his leg between mine, his fingers toying with the hem of my shirt. "Yes, you fucking are, sweetheart." He backs me into a corner off the dance floor, far enough away from Molly that I can't reach out and grab her.

An inexplicable ripple of doubt thrums in my belly.

This is ridiculous. I'm being insane!

I wanted a distraction, and just like that, this very delicious one drops into my lap, almost literally.

I swallow my apprehension and tilt my head back to stare up at him. His gaze is heated and filled with longing. He stares at me for a few seconds before his lips come crashing down on mine, urging them open with his tongue. He hugs me tight as he plunders my hungry mouth. His fingers scorch a path over my skin, sliding over my bra.

And then a shiver snakes through my insides, chilling me.

It feels right.

But very wrong at the same time.

His hands get more demanding, his body almost overpowering.

I'm down for a little shifting, but something about this is definitely off.

Besides, he doesn't look like the typical guys from around here.

I let out a muffled yelp, pushing him away.

I twist around, searching the dance floor for Molly but she's gone.

Vanished.

"I need to find my cousin," I rasp as he grasps my wrist.

"Look, I'm sorry if I went too fast," he says. I can't hear too well because of the pounding music, but I detect a bit of an accent, though I can't exactly place it in my current state. "I guess I just got caught up. You're so hot and sexy and—"

"Thanks very much," I interrupt. "But I've gotta go."

Since I'm right near the restroom, I run in there, just to make sure she's not passed out in one of the bathroom stalls. But even as I cut through the line, I know she isn't. Molly can hold her liquor better than anyone I know, including my brothers.

I search the stalls, pounding on the locked ones, but sure enough, she isn't there.

She wouldn't have just left me here, even to hook up with some guy.

I pull out my phone and dial her number.

It goes straight to voicemail.

The panic that rippled through me only moments ago now crashes over me like a goddamn tsunami.

I rush back onto the dance floor, trying like hell to remember the guy who'd had his scumbag hands all over her. But try as I might, I can't remember. He'd been wearing a baseball cap, just like pretty much every other guy in here.

It's not exactly a distinguishing characteristic.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to clear my head and think.

It's amazing how sober I feel in this moment after being damn-near inebriated such a short time ago. But Molly is gone and pure, unadulterated fear has chased away the fuzzy, drunken cobwebs that were hanging low in my mind. I have to find her! I push my way through the crowd and run out the front door of the pub. "Molly!" I shout.

The pub is located on a corner, and the cobblestone streets surrounding the entrance are quiet. It's late, so the restaurants on the street are closed. I run around to the side of the building, my high-heeled feet pounding the slick stones as I scream for Molly. There's a darkened alley in my view and I hear loud voices erupt from about twenty feet away.

"...let her go...distracted...now she's gone!"

My brow furrows, the foreign accent making my throat tighten.

Sounds like the guy from the pub...

I jog toward them and a faint shriek pierces the still air.

Molly!

I pull off my boots because I can't risk them hearing me coming.

And the thought occurs to me that I might need to use them as weapons.

I ignore the pain, the bottoms of my feet being sliced by sharp stone edges as I run.

More angry yelling ensues and this time, they aren't speaking English at all. They're arguing in their own native tongue and it's vicious judging by the disdain dripping from their words. I strain to hear something, anything I can recognize.

One thing makes bile rise in my throat...one spoken name makes my throat clench.

"...Eamon Mulligan..."

I clap a hand over my mouth.

Uncle Eamon.

Molly's dead father.

He only died recently. It was an 'accident', although I'd never heard that anyone found the people who caused it.

Hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end as I creep closer to the voices and hear another whimper and plea. I reach a desolate parking lot surrounded by trees and brush and I inch closer, peering around a bush.

Molly, oh God, Molly, what have they done to you?

I see my cousin lying on the ground, writhing against a guy with his jeans around his ankles. Another guy has his hand slapped against her mouth to silence her.

"Do we kill her and let her family find her?"

“No,” another guy mutters. “Get her into the car and go. Now! They’ll find her when we want them to.”

“No!” I scream, darting toward the group, my heels in my outstretched hand. I swing, kick, and yell until the guy who’d had me pressed up against him in the club pulls out a gun.

He walks toward me slowly, pointing it at my forehead. “Your job is to notify the family, sweetheart. Can you handle that for us?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see one of the guys shove a needle into Molly’s arm. Her body goes limp almost instantly, and they throw her in the back of the nondescript sedan with no license plate.

“Help!” I scream as loud as my voice will allow. “Please help me!”

The guy’s face is a tangled mess of fury, his lips twisted into a scowl. “Shut up,” he growls.

I let out another bellowing scream. “No!” I jump at him, slashing his face with one of my boots. The narrow heel catches on his cheek and he sputters in whatever the hell language he speaks, blood streaming down his face. “You can’t save her, Heaven. You never could.”

I recoil at his words, my eyes wide, my body rooted to the spot as he comes at me, swinging the gun at my temple.

As I crash to the ground, one last thought paralyzes my mind.

He’s right. I couldn’t save her. I couldn’t save myself. Dad and Granddad were right.

I didn’t...I couldn’t...I won’t...

And the world, as if it wasn’t black enough before, drowns out all remaining hope.

For Molly.

For me.

“*Molly!*” I shriek, shooting straight up in the bed, tugging the sheet to my throat. I gasp, my eyes darting around the room...the once which has become so familiar to me after almost two weeks.

Matteo rolls over, pushing off of the mattress to gather me in his arms. It’s been two nights since our erotic encounter at Risk, and more than anything, I need to hear his soothing voice right now. I need someone to fool me into believing that I’m not to blame, that I’m not the reason why she’s gone. “Heaven, it’s okay,” he murmurs, holding me tight as tears stream down my face.

But it’s not okay.

I don’t think it ever will be.

It was so real...

The nightmare.

I’ve lived it so many times, I can’t even count.

“No,” I whimper against his shoulder. “It isn’t at all.”

“Tell me what happened,” he says, trailing his fingertips down the sides of my face.

So I do. I choke and sputter on the words, recounting the horrifying memories as they pop between my temples like bullets.

“Molly,” he repeats once I finish. “Like your family’s pub.”

I nod, swiping at my damp eyes. “Yes, we named it after her after...everything.”

“Babe, it’s not your fault that she was taken. You did what you could—”

“I could have done more. I watched her get raped. I watched them stick a needle in her arm. I watched them drag her into a car!”

“You couldn’t have taken on an armed group of men,” he says. “You never should have gone in there like that, not knowing what they might do to you if they had the chance.”

I melt into him as he strokes my quivering back. “I bet Conor would have saved her,” I say in a tearful voice.

“Bullshit,” Matteo grunts. “He’d have taken a bullet to the head for sure. Don’t ever fucking compare yourself to him!”

I shake my head. “He’d have had his gun. He could have defended himself. I had, what? Two shoes?”

“You managed to stab one of them.”

“It didn’t do Molly any good.”

“Did you ever find out why they targeted her?” he asks.

“Her father broke up a sex-trafficking ring they were running out of the Grand Canal Dock in Dublin. So they got revenge by taking his daughter.”

“What happened to her?”

I shrug. “She was never found. It keeps me up most nights, wondering what happened to her, where she went, if she’s still alive.” I sniff hard. “But as hard as everyone tried, we couldn’t find her. It’s like the earth swallowed her up.”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers. “But that was a long time ago. You were only eighteen. You didn’t know how to—”

“But I should have!” I screech. “I tried so hard to do what was expected of me! To prove myself to my father! Ever since my mother died, I’ve done everything possible to have him put his faith in me as his successor. And when we were in Dublin, I’d found out he was going to choose Conor over me. It just made things that much worse that I’d let Molly get taken. After that, I figured my chances at leading the family were nil.”

“But that’s not how things turned out,” Matteo says. “You and Conor are on the same level. You have the same amount of power.”

“Yeah, well, after Molly was taken, things took a back burner and the decision ultimately was for both of us to support Dad. But ever since then, Conor has battled me, looking for a shot to take me out.” I let out a dry laugh. “I guess he finally figured out how. All he needed to do was kill a cartel

lieutenant and boom! His competition gets married off, and the thorn in his side is removed.”

“Listen, for as much of a thorn as I think you are,” he says with a smile. “I don’t think Conor believed that killing Santos would rid you from his life. I think Conor is just an egotistical asshole with something to prove. He’s too stupid to do something that strategic. You give him more credit than he deserves.”

“I know it’s why my father never promoted me over him,” I muse. “He saw what I let happen.”

“Years ago,” Matteo reminds me. “You’ve come a long way since then.”

“And now he’s trying to get me out of his hair by arranging me to you.”

“I think we’ve proven more than a few times in the past couple of days that marrying me might not be as bad as you’d thought.” He grins, dropping his lips on my forehead.

“Yeah, well, I still have a past. And it’s still going to keep me from getting the future I want.”

“You have to trust me, Heaven,” Matteo says, placing his hands on my shoulders and looking deep into my eyes. “I’m going to protect you, just as I was instructed to do. And I’ll make sure you get everything you deserve.”

My shoulders slump, and I let out a sigh. “Sometimes when I think back on my life and what’s happened over the past few years, I wonder if I already have.”

“I know the past week and a half hasn’t been easy,” he says. “But things will work out. We just need to carry out the rest of the plan. You have to protect your family.”

“That was the only reason I agreed to this in the first place.”

Matteo’s hands run down the sides of my arms. “I know,” he murmurs.

“But I…” I swallow hard, clasping one of his hands. “I feel different now. This whole thing has become more than just obligation and orders.”

“For me, too,” he whispers, his breath hot against my cheek. “You’re not just payment of a debt, Heaven. I want you to know that.”

“It doesn’t mean I’m giving up my dreams or goals,” I say as he gently lays me down on the mattress.

“No.” He shakes his head, angling himself over me, a look of intensity shadowing his features. He opens my legs with his knee, the head of his cock grazing my pussy. With a throbbing pulse, I lick the palm of my hand and grasp the thick shaft, long strokes massaging his length.

“But it does mean I’m falling in love with you,” I whisper, the fingers on my free hand grazing the side of his face.

“I’m falling in love with you, too, Heaven,” he murmurs, a smile lifting his lips. It’s a vision that actually makes my heart flutter in my chest. It’s not often that he smiles...I mean, really smiles, like he means it. I’ve seen hints of it here and there, but nothing like this. “And I’ll take care of everything... of you. Always.”

I nod, tears stinging my eyes. They had been sad ones, tormented ones. Now, they are hopeful for the future.

Our future.

The one in which I was ordered to participate.

And it’s now the one I freely accept.

Matteo lets out a moan as I drag my hand up and down his length. “God, you’re so fucking good at that.”

I smile up at him, rubbing him harder, my fingers alternating between his cock and his balls. I knead them as I lift my hips, his swollen head meeting my slick opening. “Make love to me, Matteo,” I whisper.

A tiny yelp escapes my lips as he presses into me, his massive cock stretching me wide. It burns in such a good way, igniting the flames of desire that pool in my core. Last night, he gave me what I needed. The pain of his hand smacking my ass, over and over with increasing intensity, distracted me from the emotional anguish that has plagued me for the better part of the last

month. It came to a head yesterday with that altercation with Conor and the carnal lust that stirred deep in my gut was unleashed, along with all of the agony that accompanied it...the ever-present belief that I'd never be enough, that I'd never get what I want and deserve, that I'm weak.

Matteo knew just how to make those beliefs dissipate, even if only for a little while.

I have a feeling he has ways of making them disappear for a longer time... deviant therapy tactics that can make me forget for longer.

And maybe even heal me in the process.

I'll bet that secret room of his downstairs can be very therapeutic for me. He's never told me it's there, but I've taken a few peeks and I'm thinking he might need to take me on a tour very soon.

He thrusts into me with long, hard strokes...plunging so deep, it makes me cry out with need. Each push makes me clench my legs tighter around him, keeping him burrowed inside of my wet heat. But he knows what I want, and he drags his hard cock out of my pussy, grazing my clit, and then my spot, with each push back in. The sensations coursing through me paralyze my body. I don't want to move, breathe, or even blink because he feels so good. My body writhes under him as his cock glides against my spot, slowly and methodically. I tremble against him, lancing the flesh on his back with my fingernails. Tingles shoot out from my core to the ends of my fingers, curling my toes as screams of pleasure bubble up in my chest and erupt out of my mouth. I bury my face in his shoulder, my pussy clenching tight around him as I drive my hips against his. My eyes squeeze shut, my teeth are clenched tight, and bright white light flashes across my eyes in the midst of the darkness blanketing the room.

The orgasm shocks my system, sizzling every nerve ending from the top of my head to the tops of my toes. It rages through me, ravaging my whole body, mind, and soul until I succumb to the bliss flooding my insides.

And my God, I feel more alive than I ever thought possible.

Because of a man whom I was ordered to marry.

A man whom I hated because of all he took from me.

A man I was convinced I'd hate forever.

Matteo drops next to me on the bed with a contented sigh, laying his head right next to mine. He drapes a muscular arm over me. "Ahnuhbooh," he murmurs, his face buried in the plush pillow.

I drop a kiss onto his shoulder. "I love you, too," I whisper, letting my eyes float closed.

And suddenly, I can breathe again.

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Chapter Sixteen

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MATTEO

I'm getting married today.

And I'm actually happy about it.

Who in the fuck would have thought *that* would have ever happened?

A smile tugs at my lips as I recline against the leather seat in the back of Roman's Bugatti. He's driving, Dante is in the passenger seat, and Sergio is on my right in the backseat. My brothers flew in last night from various locations — Sergio from Las Vegas, and as usual, because of his secret assassin lifestyle, Dante kept us guessing about where he'd been before flying into JFK International Airport.

My brothers had every intention of keeping me occupied on my last night as a bachelor, although distracting them with a pop-up sex party in the West Village was a much better option, in my opinion. It kept my lap free from naked dancers and gave them the time of their lives.

Ever since I took Heaven to the club a week ago, we'd spent pretty much every waking hour together — in the gym, out at restaurants, shopping, wandering around her old digs to make sure all businesses were again running smoothly. There was only one two-hour period when she broke away from me, and that was to try on her mother's wedding dress with her Aunt Maura.

Declan was in meetings all day around the city, so I didn't get a chance to corner him about Conor. And to be honest, I don't think I need to waste my

time. Soon enough, Conor will be handled and out of our hair. Heaven didn't go to her father about that standoff, so as far as Declan knows, all is right in the Mulligan empire.

Until it's not.

And that time is coming.

It's the one thing that drags my lips down from their upward climb.

I have work to do and it needs to be done quickly...before someone decides to handle it for me.

I pull at my bowtie, that nagging little thought fast becoming tight as a noose around my neck.

"Nervous, bro?" Sergio quips, chugging from a bottle of Jack Daniel's while we're stopped at a light.

I lift an eyebrow. "So classy. No glasses?"

Sergio shrugs. "This whole thing is kind of lacking in class, yeah? I mean, you're marrying into a mick family at this tiny little church, and then we're eating at some Irish restaurant afterward where we'll probably be drowning in corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes, and swimming in warm beer. We're in Manhattan, for fuck's sake! Why not the fucking Waldorf Astoria? Or The Plaza? It's not like you can't afford it. What the hell, Matty?"

I shrug. "Heaven wanted something small. Why does everything need to be larger than life for you, Serge?"

"Because why the fuck not?" He chuckles and takes another gulp. "When you're rich, you just do that kind of impractical shit because you can and because people expect it." He points the bottle at Roman. "I mean, look at Romo. He's got this sick car. He doesn't need it. He barely ever drives it, but he has it. Why? Because he can!"

"I don't see what the big deal is," Dante grunts, grabbing the bottle from Sergio. "If they wanted to keep it small, who the fuck are you to challenge them? And also, warm beer is Britain not Ireland, you dumbass." He glares at Sergio and Sergio rolls his eyes.

“You always get like this after a job, you know that?” Sergio says. “Why can’t you be a happy assassin?”

“Maybe I’d be happy if you were the target.” Dante takes a long gulp of the liquor and hands it to me. I grasp the neck and down a long sip.

“Damn, Dante. That was cold, you fuck.” Sergio snickers. “Be careful or that dildo I stole from Matty’s party last night is going right up your ass later!”

I listen to my brothers banter until Roman pulls up to the front of the church. He looks at me in the rearview mirror. “Looks like a nice church. I mean, God don’t discriminate, yeah?”

“I sure as hell hope not,” I grumble. We pass around the bottle a few more times until it’s empty.

“When is Pop getting here?” Dante asks, rubbing the back of his neck. I know he’s not exactly anxious to see my father. They have a pretty rocky relationship since Dante isn’t the kind of order taker that my father wishes he was, and there’s always some battle brewing between them.

Seems like there will be a lot of those in the coming weeks.

“He’s going to call me when he arrives,” I say. I miss my mother terribly but right now, I’m glad she’s not here to see this...what I’ve done and what I’m about to do.

“You ready?” Sergio says, nudging me. “For that ball and chain to be wrapped tight around your ankle? I sure as hell hope this plan is worth it, Matty. You’ve got a lot riding on these ‘I dos.’”

“I know,” I mumble, hairs on the nape of my neck standing at attention.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Roman asks with a quirk of his brow.

I look from one brother to the next. For as long as I can remember, I assumed control over our family as the oldest is expected to do in our world. I learned my lesson the hard way and made sure to never let my judgment falter again. I like to think I’m still in control of it, even though seeds of doubt about this scheme have rooted and begun to sprout.

But now is not the time to come clean to my brothers about my feelings for Heaven and how I feel about the plan I so carefully concocted...how I'm panicked that when the shit hits the fan as it will most definitely will, it's going to drive the woman I love away from me forever.

Because there is no way to avoid that.

Dante slaps me on the shoulder and I manage a smile. "It's all good, guys. Come on, it's about time."

We all gather on the sidewalk, ready to go into the church when I furrow my brow. My phone...

"Romo, lemme have your keys. I think my phone slipped out of my pocket. I'll call Pop and then meet you inside." I grin at my brothers as Roman tosses me the keys. "Don't wreak too much havoc in there, okay? They're going to be my in-laws."

I watch them jog up the stairs and disappear inside of the church. Part of me just wanted to keep my family out of this sham, but it's good having them all here. I never like to say I need anyone, but right now?

I do.

I reach into the backseat for the phone and dial my father's number.

"Hey, Pop," I say when he answers. "You okay?"

"Yes, yes," he says in his thick Italian accent. "I will be there in a few minutes."

"Okay, good. I'll be out here waiting."

I hang up and look toward the tall spire swirling out of the top of the light gray stone building. I never thought I'd be standing here outside of a church, waiting to get married. A chill slips down my spine as I recall the last time I was in church.

It wasn't a wedding, though. It was a funeral.

Joey's funeral.

My throat tightens.

Joey was my younger cousin.

I let out a deep sigh as I lean back against Roman's car.

Heaven isn't the only one who has nightmares about her past.

It's because of Joey that I'm here right now, why I can never settle, why I am always pushing, planning, and controlling every last detail of my family's organization. It's because of him that I lost myself to begin with, something who tears me up inside to this day, knowledge I will take to my grave.

Admitting it would be weakness.

And weakness just doesn't fit in with my strategy.

A long time ago, my head wasn't screwed on straight. My father and I didn't see eye to eye, and I was on a power trip gone awry. I wanted his attention and I got it, but it was the wrong kind of attention, and it had a godawful consequence.

He kept Joey under my wing. I think he figured it would calm me down, to be accountable for my cousin who needed a role model since his dad has been killed in a drive-by perpetuated by a rival family back in Italy. But I was too busy making a reputation for myself to be bothered.

He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he had called me for help.

I was neck-deep in an underground poker game with the dredge of the Earth, and with twenty grand in the hole, I had not a single shred patience for playing babysitter.

I stayed in my game.

He got in the middle of a gunfight.

I lost my fucking car.

He lost his fucking life.

I was stupid, arrogant, and toxic, if I'm being honest. My goal was to create a reputation for myself, a calling card, if you will. It was the only way to get my father to put his trust in me.

In the end, it had the exact opposite effect.

I've been trying to make up for it ever since by hovering over my brothers, making sure that they stick to our plans and not stray because I know what happens when you wander too far away from them.

I've built that reputation.

I've earned the trust.

And now...my throat tightens...I'm at risk for violating it yet again.

I should have complete control over this situation but I don't.

I'm not the one calling the shots anymore.

But I need to figure out how to grab that damn bullhorn because like Sergio said, there's a lot at stake.

The stress knot lodged at the base of my neck is so tight and it's growing larger by the second.

I have to figure this out. I need to come up with a way where I don't lose everything...especially the woman I've grown to love.

I just don't know if that's possible anymore.

"Matteo," a gravelly voice mumbles from behind me.

I spin around to see Jorge Dominguez...again dressed in an expensive suit. This time, he's wearing a blood-red tie. I'll bet that's not a coincidence.

Fucker.

"I came to wish you congratulations," he says with a smile, his yellowed teeth flashing. He looks around. "Your bride is not here?"

"Not yet," I rasp.

"Let's hope, for your sake, that she doesn't have, eh, cold feet, yes?" He lets out a dry chuckle.

"You shouldn't be here," I say in a low voice. "It's too risky. They can pull up at any second—"

“Just like the other night at the club, yes? When Heaven went to freshen up and I approached you?” He steps closer. “She could have come out and seen you talking to me, which would have been very bad for both of us. But she didn’t, because I am careful, Matteo. Careful, but not stupid.”

I shake my head. “No, you aren’t.”

“And because I am not stupid, I also know that you are having doubts about this arrangement. My trust in you is wavering.” He narrows his eyes. “What are you going to do about that?”

“Look, I told you to give me a little time. Nothing can happen until we’re married—”

“Yes, I understand English, Matteo. I heard what you said. I am saying I don’t like it. You are backing away from the plan, making moves that only...” He grins. “A man in love would make. That is what concerns me, why I feel that you are jeopardizing the plan. Your loyalties seem to have shifted.” He leans in close, pointing a finger at me. “Remember our agreement. Do not test me or you will find out very quickly that Conor will not be the only prize I claim from our arrangement. In fact, now is as good a time as any to tell you that I plan to take a bride, as well, although not in the same way you will,” he hisses, a smile on his face.

“What the fuck are you talking about? This only has to do with Conor,” I growl. “Heaven wasn’t ever supposed to be part of—”

“Oh, yes. I guess I forgot to mention that part, didn’t I? But it is only fair, yes? A daughter for a daughter,” he says, turning away from me and heading to his car. His driver pulls open the back door, and Dominguez slides into the backseat just as a white Mercedes turns down West 42nd Street. His car barrels past, my gut twisting as I make eye contact with the driver of the Mercedes. Pop will have to find his own way inside. I give the driver a quick nod to signal him to let Heaven out of the car, and then I hurry into the church before I have a chance to see her in her wedding dress.

Because I don’t need any more fucking bad luck.

Chapter Seventeen

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HEAVEN

Butterflies.

Lots and lots of butterflies.

They took flight as soon as I woke up this morning and have yet to stop swarming.

A tiny smile tugs at my lips.

A couple of weeks ago, I'd have laughed at anyone who told me that this arranged marriage wouldn't turn out to be a total and complete sham. Yet, here I am, in my mother's wedding dress, clutching the hand of my aunt, actually excited to see my future husband standing at the altar.

Waiting for me.

Waiting to start a future fraught with unknowns but somehow, that doesn't scare me as much as it did weeks ago. He's shown me a different side of him, one that he doesn't display to the world. I truly believe he cares about me and my family and will do anything it takes to protect us. This all started with a debt, but it's morphed into something else entirely.

He has a lot of layers, ones I am excited to peel back as we begin on this crazy journey. I trust him, believe in him, and know I'm making the right choice by marrying him.

In the beginning, I was caught between a rock and a hard place. I couldn't walk away from my father's order knowing that my resistance would put my

family in jeopardy.

Now I can't walk away because I'm in love with him.

My pulse throbs against my neck as the driver pulls open my father's door. Dad slides out of the backseat and holds out a hand to me. I stare at it, then at him, finally grasping it and allowing him to help me out of the car. I gather the long white train in the crook of my arm and face him. His eyes look sad and drawn, and he brings a hand to the back of his neck.

"Heaven," he says in a heavy voice. "I'm so sorry the way things turned out. I'm sorry that you have to go through with this, but I am so grateful to you for saving our family."

I squeeze the side of his arm. God, I've thought about this moment for the past two weeks. Would my father even apologize for changing the course of my life? Would he feel any remorse at all for his decision to marry me off for his own preservation?

And last night I finally decided that I would forgive him.

I agreed to do this as part of my family obligations since family has always been the most important part of my life.

I resented the fact that the burden to protect fell on me because I'm a woman.

If given the chance to lead, I could have proven myself a protector based on smarts, skill, and strategy, not gender.

And I fully intend to get that chance.

So I smile at my father and grasp his hands. "I understand that this is what you think it best, and I only want what's best for everyone."

His pale eyes tear up and he nods. "I don't want to lose you over this."

"You won't," I say. "And with Matteo by my side, we will make sure the Mulligan empire flourishes."

"I know you will," he says in a choked voice, his eyes dropping to the ground.

My brows knit. Why did he just look away from me in that second? “Dad, what—?”

“Heaven, come on! We’re a little beyond fashionably late here,” Aunt Maura calls out.

Dad flashes a quick smile and takes my hand, leading me toward the church before I can ask the question that just made my stomach knot.

I let Dad lead me into the church vestibule where all of my brothers are gathered. Since we went small, they pretty much make up the whole bridal party. Matteo’s brother Roman is his best man, and Aunt Maura is my matron of honor.

Small. Just the way I wanted it.

Patrick lets out a low whistle as he walks over, pulling me in for a tight bear hug. “You look gorgeous, Heaven. That guinea bastard is a lucky guy.”

Liam, Niall, and Quinn circle me, heckling me. Niall holds out a flask of whiskey and I grab it, taking a quick chug, watching Conor out of the corner of my eye. He stands a few feet away from everyone, his arms folded and his face twisted into his signature scowl.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I mutter to Patrick.

“You are his sister,” he says with a chuckle. “I know he’s a dick, but not so much that he’d miss your sham wedding.”

I bite back a smile. For as tight as Patrick and I are, I haven’t let him in on too many of the details of late.

Like how I fell for the enemy.

Or how Conor tried to kill me.

We’re going to need a bottle of whiskey and a few hours to cover all the highlights, so I just nod. I’m not going to give that shit show air time today, of all days. “I guess so.” My hand instinctively grazes my bandaged wound. It’s covered by the sleeve of my dress, so nobody will ask questions, but the harsh sting still remains...a reminder of who and what my dear brother is to me and the rest of the family.

A total self-serving asshole who is more focused on dipping his wick in diseased pussy than on what's most important.

And even though I know all of that, I am going to ignore all of the voices telling me to steer clear of my toxic brother.

I don't want to walk down that aisle harboring resentment.

I'll kick his ass tomorrow, but today? Nothing will ruin my happiness.

It's my wedding day, for fuck's sake, and it's here in large part because of him.

Joke's on you, Conor!

I watch my father bend his head close to Conor's ear, murmuring something that makes my brother's eyes take on a murderous glaze. He pulls away from Dad, muttering something in a low growl that I can't quite make out. I'm damn curious to know what the hell has his boxers in a twist.

I know it isn't the fact that I ratted him out for his almost-lethal tantrum the other day, since I listened to Matteo and kept my mouth shut. I don't want to get anything by default. I want my father to realize how much good I can actually do, and promote me because I deserve it, not because Conor is a fucking psychopath.

But still, I smile, because he looks hella pissed, and that makes me even happier.

And to be honest, I'm glad he's giving my father shit over whatever they're arguing about. Maybe Dad will finally start to see what his empire will look like with Conor at the helm.

And how different it can be with me in the top seat.

Me, the one who doesn't embezzle from the family.

Me, who hasn't tried to cut the jugular of any siblings.

Me, the one who will have the power of the Sicilian mafia on her side as of an hour from now.

In fact...

I walk over to them, forcing a bright smile as I reach for my father. “Dad, it’s time.”

He looks at me, a guilty expression on his face. He quickly clears his throat. “Oh, certainly, *a leanbh*. Yes, let’s go.”

He turns away from Conor, and before I follow him, I flash my smile at my brother for a split second. He narrows his eyes in response.

“You look like the cat who just swallowed the canary,” he grumbles, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

“Maybe that’s because I just did,” I say in a voice that matches the false sweetness of my smile. “At least, that’s what it looks like to me.”

“I hope you’re ready for the aftermath,” he says. “Because that canary is gonna run right through you like a goddamn freight train.”

“Is that what you think?” I say in a low voice, lifting an eyebrow.

“It’s what I know,” he snips. I recoil, the stench of stale beer on his breath strong enough to make my stomach roll “This whole thing...all of it...it’s bullshit. You’re taking the pipe because you’ve got a pussy. That’s it. Dad doesn’t give a shit about the Italians. Villani was hired to marry you, to get you out of his hair. And that’s the truth, Heaven.” He pushes away from the wall and stumbles toward the group of my brothers who are in position to walk down the aisle.

My heart hammers as I take my place next to my father. I tell myself to calm down, that Conor is only lashing out because he’s a fucking viper who knows his ass is backed against a wall. He knows what he stands to lose by me taking over, so he’s trying to get inside of my head.

I take a few steadying breaths, telling myself to calm down.

He knows that this is all about him fucking up...*I* know it’s about him fucking up! He’s just trying to incite me.

I smooth my veil down, my breath hitching.

But then why is Dad acting so weird? What was he going to say to me outside of the church?

I nibble at my cuticle, shifting in my heels. Aunt Maura smacks my hand away from my mouth. “Your nails look beautiful. Let’s keep them that way.”

I manage a smile. “Okay.”

The sounds of the organ music echo in the space as she settles on the opposite side of my father. She pulls my veil over my face and steps back, smiling from ear to ear. “Heaven, your life can be anything you want it to be. Always remember that you aren’t defined by whom you marry. You’re defined by who you are and what you decide to do with your gifts. And there are plenty of gifts, *a stór*.” She kisses me lightly on the cheek, her eyes teary and her smile quivering.

“I love you,” I mouth to her.

“I love you, too,” she mouths back. Patrick holds out his arm for her and they move forward toward the entrance of the church.

With a throbbing pulse, I glance at my father, who keeps his gaze forward the whole time. It’s like he doesn’t want to catch my eye out of fear for what I may ask.

Though the question is on my lips, I don’t ask it, partly because I really don’t want to hear the answer. If what Conor said was true, then Dad has been lying to me this whole time.

I don’t want to know that the one man who is required to love me more than anything would do something that horrible to me.

I don’t want my love and respect for him to shatter like a pane of splintered glass.

And I can’t bear to hear any more lies.

The start of *The Wedding March* signals us to move to the doorway leading into the church. The sounds reverberate between the stone walls of the small church. Dad clutches my arm tight as we walk toward the altar.

I peer through the tulle hanging over my eyes, trying to make out Matteo’s face. I see him standing at the end of the aisle with Roman and his other brothers to his right. They only flew in last night, so I haven’t officially met

them yet. My eyes travel over their faces, unable to really see much because of the netting obscuring my view.

But it's really Matteo I want to see.

I want to look into his eyes and feel the same comfort and security I did after I woke up in a fit of crying the other night. I never needed those things before and I don't really believe I do now.

It's just nice to know it's there.

And that this most unlikely of unions may actually bring me more peace than anyone else ever has.

When Dad and I reach the end of the aisle, he turns to me and lifts the veil. My pulse rockets, and I can't stop the smile from stretching across my face. My gaze immediately searches for Matteo, and a tiny pang makes my grin waver the slightest bit.

I've only seen his real smile a couple of times. It's bright, white, and so wide that it makes his eyes crinkle at the corners.

I'm much more familiar with the forced one. I've seen that plenty since we got 'engaged'. It's tight, forced, and not in any way etched in happiness.

Today, I wanted to see the former.

Instead, the latter is what greets me.

A sudden chill slithers down my spine. I'd have chalked it up to the open back of my dress and the fact that we're standing in a cold stone church in the winter time, but my twisted gut warns me otherwise.

Suddenly, Dad's odd behavior and Conor's sinister words make me think that there is much more to my wedding day than I know.

Dad shakes Matteo's hand and ushers me toward him.

He doesn't tell me I look beautiful.

He doesn't whisper that he loves me.

He just stares at Father O'Malley, going through the motions, not showing a damn shred of affection for his bride.

Just as anyone would expect from a man who was paid to marry said bride.

I have no choice but to go through with this.

My course has been set, and as much as I hate the destination, I love the people it will protect.

Well, most of them.

I swallow hard as I repeat the vows that Father O'Malley speaks. Matteo's hands feel cold in mine, limp, not at all the strong ones I felt the last time he touched me.

What in the hell happened?

And why, as usual, am I the last one to know?

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Chapter Eighteen

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MATTEO

“**I** now pronounce you man and wife.”

A smattering of applause from our very limited audience temporarily halts the inner battle waging in my mind.

The one where my past indiscretions always try to overtake my future.

Wrong place, wrong time.

Yet again.

Dominguez made it damn clear outside that it will always be the wrong place and the wrong time for me and anyone I care about.

I thought I'd gotten my life under control, thought I'd established the right alliances and found the right allies after stepping into this role for my family.

But I didn't. Again, I made choices, the wrong ones, and now everyone in this church — Heaven, my brothers, my father — is at risk to pay the consequences of my actions.

Or non-actions, as the case may be.

Dominguez and I had an agreement, and I didn't deliver.

Now he is going to take everything from me.

How can I look Heaven in the eye and marry her, knowing her life is about to be shattered because of me?

How everything I promised is bullshit?

How can I pretend for another fucking second that I'm not about to ruin her life?

The receiving line flashes past in a blur, and all I can think about is getting her into our own private car, the one Gio will be driving, and away from anything that can hurt her. When we're finally clear of our families and guests, I grab her hand and pull her toward the car. Gio nods at me and opens the door. I help her gather her dress into the car and then climb in after her.

She stabs the partition separating us from Gio and turns to me, her blue eyes spitting fire. "What the fuck is wrong?" she hisses. "You looked like you wanted to be anywhere other than where you were. Are you completely full of shit, Matteo? Was this always just about money to you?"

I furrow my brow. "What are you talking about? What money?"

"The money my father paid you to marry me because he has no intention of promoting me to become head of the family?" she shrieks.

I give my head a hard shake. "Your father didn't pay me to marry you for that. You know why we're here!"

"Well, that's not what Conor told me. And you heard him the other day! How am I supposed to trust you when there are so many fucking stories being circulated? I don't know who or what to believe anymore!"

"Heaven," I say, grabbing her hands before she smacks me with one of them. Or both, actually. She sure 'talks' like an Italian girl already with all the hand waving. "This has everything to do with Conor, and nothing to do with your role."

"Liar!" she shouts.

"I am not lying. I love you, Heaven." I choke on the words, because for as much as I do love her, I *have* been lying to her...just not the lies she seems to believe.

"My father was acting strange today before we went into the church, then Conor told me all of that crap about my dad wanting me out of his hair..."

her voice trails off, her cheeks pink with anger. “I don’t think I could take it if you’re holding back, too.”

“I’m not,” I croak. “But there is an issue with Dominguez. He knows for sure it was Conor who killed Santos Rojas.”

Heaven gasps. “Are you sure?”

I nod, rubbing the back of my neck. “That’s why I’ve been distant. He approached me outside of the church. I’m just trying to figure out how to hold him off. We’re married now and that should be enough to tell him your family is off-limits, but...” I swallow hard. “He’s made insinuations that he isn’t afraid to take us on.”

A big, fat, steaming pile of bullshit.

And the first lies I’ve told my brand-new wife.

The problem is, the lies are about to swallow us all whole.

“We have to tell my father,” she says, an angry edge to her voice. “If Conor’s complete lack of concern for our family is about to erupt into a war, he needs to know! We have to take action!”

“Easy, killer,” I say. “I will handle this, okay? It’s why your father hired me in the first place.”

“Yes, but what about everyone else? How can we not tell them the risks? I mean, that crazy asshole can be stalking us right now!”

“And that’s why you have to trust me,” I murmur, trailing my fingers down her injured arm. She jumps when they graze her wound. “I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s just a reminder...you know, of everything. What he did, what he got away with. I hate him,” she seethes. “Is it horrible to admit that I just want Dominguez to ice him?” Heaven manages a small smile. “I mean, we’re not in church anymore.”

“I don’t think it’s horrible at all,” I say, grasping her hands and bringing them to my lips. “And for as sadistic as you are, you’re also gorgeous. You look stunning, babe. I’m sorry for not saying it sooner.”

Her lips curl upward and she slides closer to me on the seat. “Just please promise me that this will end, Matteo. That the people who deserve to pay, do.”

I nod. “They will.”

And that’s the truth.

But it’s the *how* that remains to be seen.

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Chapter Nineteen

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HEAVEN

We pull up to The White Dove a few minutes later. It's one of my family's more upscale restaurants. I always loved cooking here with my mother when she was alive. We made up new recipes all the time — always fancy, always exotic.

I gaze up at the discreet sign once I'm standing on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. I remember when we put it up, so many years ago. We had no idea at that time if this restaurant would take off since it's basically the worst investment you can make.

But with my mother's magic touch, the restaurant exploded in popularity, and to this day, it's near impossible to get a reservation. Patrons book weeks out for a table, and with the first-class chefs we have running the kitchen, it's no surprise.

Still...none of them are my mom.

And none will ever be.

Matteo joins me and drapes an arm around my shoulder. "What are you thinking about?"

I look up at him. "My past," I say. "And my future."

"Our future, I hope," he quips.

"Time will tell." I smirk, linking my arm with his. I gather my skirt with my other hand so it doesn't drag on the pavement. "You know, having our

wedding dinner here makes me feel like my mother is with us. So many of the recipes we still serve are hers. It's nice to know she's kind of hosting the party for us."

Matteo gives me a squeeze. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be right now."

"Me, too," I say. "Although, I can't say I'm not excited to go home with you later."

"That's when you'll get your real wedding present."

I open my eyes wide, a mock look of shock on my face. "Wait, so *you're* not the real gift? I get more?"

"Oh yeah," he murmurs, nuzzling my ear. "Lots more."

"I can't wait." And with that, we walk into our reception. I force all Conor-inspired rage to the far corners of my mind, instead focusing on what I actually can control.

We walk into the restaurant, which has been closed off to the public. I love the vibe in here. It's so chic and sophisticated with creamy white walls and décor with carefully curated pops of bold color that add life and exuberance to the space. It is so much like my mother. She was always so calming and even-tempered despite the Irish blood.

But every once in a while, she had a point to make and she made sure everyone heard it. Those were the only times I'd see hints of her powerful alter ego.

The rest of the time, she was cool as a cucumber. The fact that she was married to a mob boss might have had something to do with that.

I didn't get the calm gene, unfortunately — for me *and* Matteo.

We walk into the main dining room, greeted by tiny white lights wrapped in tulle and draped across the ceiling. The crystal chandeliers are dimmed, casting a soft glow over the space. The finest bone china and most delicate crystal graces the tabletops, along with small, tight bunches of white calla lilies. Each bunch is wrapped around one single red lily.

Tranquil...with coiling passion at the root.

Yep, it's almost as if my mother guided the hand of the florist.

I smile, breathing in the fresh floral scent.

She's not here, but I can feel her.

Both of them.

Mom, Molly...

For years, I suffered the losses of two of the women in the world who mattered most to me.

I buried myself in my work, trying to compensate for everything I'd done wrong and prove out everything I could do right.

Today I am more certain than ever that I will succeed in my goals.

I can fix us.

I have the power and the love of a man who makes me feel like I can take on the world, even when I'm secretly afraid I can't.

"Matty!" A loud voice bellows from the front entrance, and I spin around with a grin on my face as Matteo's brothers barrel into the restaurant.

Roman gathers me in a bear hug, stepping aside so that an older man I take to be my new father-in-law kisses me on both cheeks before giving me a tight hug. He pulls away, a smile on his aged face. "*Bellissima*, I am Matteo's father, Paolo," he says, squeezing my hands tight. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," I say. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you." I look up at his other brothers. "*All of you.*"

"Matty, Romo sure was right when he said you were marrying up," the tallest of the guys says with a movie-actor smile.

"Oh, did you, *Matty*?" I mimic with a grin, nudging Matteo. I hold out my hand to his brother. "Heaven."

"Fuck yeah, you are," he says, waving away my hand and pulling me in for a hug. "We're family now. And this family doesn't do handshakes. Got that, sis?"

“Sure do...uh, who are you, again?” I say with a chuckle.

He grins wider. “Sergio. The only name you really need to remember.”

Matteo rolls his eyes and introduces me to the other brother, Dante. After more hugs and well wishes, we’re surrounded by our families, holding flutes full of champagne.

“Always thought it’d be a cold day in hell that Matty got hitched,” Dante drops his voice and whispers with a wink. “Pretty ironic that he ended up in Heaven.”

I nearly spit out my champagne. My cheeks flame red as my new brothers-in-law hoot and catcall. Jesus, I’ve got my hands full with these Italians.

It isn’t long before my brothers edge in on the action.

Looks like we’re all one big happy gangster family now.

My father finally looks relaxed, although his ruddy complexion tells me it’s courtesy of a lot of whiskey. He and Matteo’s father are chatting politely, which is always a good sign. After all, we’re united now. All for one, and one for all.

Aunt Maura fusses over my hair, makeup, and dress. “You look like a princess.”

“Thanks, Aunt Maura,” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “And thank you for everything. For all of these years. When Mom died, I was so lost. Thank you for helping me to find myself.”

She gives me a squeeze. “What kind of world would this be without our own little slice of Heaven?” she says, making a play on my name.

“Well, it’d probably be a quieter one,” Patrick chimes in from behind me. He and Quinn and Niall bring over shots of whiskey and hand them around. “Now that we’re done with the chick booze, let’s get to the hard stuff!”

“I resent that,” I say, gulping down the fiery, amber-colored liquid.

“Just like a champ,” Matteo snips, sucking down his own shot.

The shots keep coming, but Patrick pulls me away from the group, his expression curious and maybe a little incredulous.

“Heaven, is it me or do you actually like your husband?” he asks, a smirk on his face. “Because the way you guys are acting makes me think that tonight won’t be the first time...” he clears his throat. “Matteo is in Heaven.”

I give his arm a whack, chortling loudly. “Patty, it’s kind of crazy to me, too.” I look back at Matteo, smiling at him as I watch him get harassed by his brothers. “It just, I don’t know, happened. So fast, too. I’m still kind of in shock myself.”

“You took one for the team, that’s for damn sure. I just never expected you’d fall for the ginzo.”

“Me either,” I muse. “But it’s the best of both worlds, right? Everyone is safe, and things worked out for me and Matteo.” A nagging feeling in my gut reminds me that all is definitely not well and that Dominguez is still a threat. But I also know Matteo will do everything he can to make good on his arrangement with Dad. He has a network, and if Dominguez wants to battle, Matteo can just call in the troops.

I take a deep breath.

Yes, everything will be fine.

And once Dominguez is out of the way, there won’t be any other roadblocks littering my path.

I’ll take care of Conor myself when the time comes.

“I’m really happy for you, sis. I mean, you married down, but you know. He’s got money, so...” Patrick shrugs, his blue eyes glittering with mischief. “There’s that. Plus, Italian guys are supposed to be, ah, kind of a big deal in the bedroom, yeah? So don’t feel too bad about things.”

I giggle. A big deal in the bedroom? That’s a gross understatement if I ever heard one. But I don’t need to discuss the size of my husband’s member with my baby brother. That’s just way too much information to dish. “I feel quite...satisfied. In all regards. And we can just leave it at that, okay?”

Patrick makes a few gagging sounds and clutches his throat, pretending to stumble backward.

“You’re the one who brought it up!” I shriek with laughter.

“Brought what up?” Matteo says, grabbing me from behind and spinning me around to plant a kiss on my lips.

“Oh, um, our honeymoon plans.”

“Shit. The honeymoon.” Matteo flashes a guilty smile. “In all honesty, I didn’t know if we’d get anywhere alive considering where things started between us.”

“A fair assumption.” I wink at him.

“But maybe now’s a good time to talk about what we can do,” he murmurs, pulling me close to his broad chest.

“Okay, I don’t really need to hear about what you are going to do to my sister, so this is probably my cue to exit,” Patrick quips, darting around Matteo after clapping him on the back. “Welcome to the family, bro. Best of luck to ya!”

The evening...the dinner to celebrate our sham-turned-heartfelt union... passes by in a flash of laughter, dancing, and chatter.

It’s perfect.

And everything I never thought I’d want in a million years.

At some point during the night, I gaze around the dining room, noticing that one grimacing face is missing from the party.

Conor.

I guess I’d been too focused on floating in my blissfully married bubble to notice earlier that he wasn’t around.

Can’t say that it bothers me much, either. Seeing him just makes my stomach roll. I can’t believe I questioned Matteo because of some bullshit Conor spewed in his drunken and probably drugged-up stupor at the church.

A tiny part of me hopes he chokes on his own vomit when he passes out.

Wait, no!

I can't think that. It's my wedding day.

I refuse to wish death on my brother today.

I smile at my husband.

I'll leave that for tomorrow.

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Chapter Twenty

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MATTEO

“I know it’s not as glamorous as the wedding night you probably envisioned for yourself, but it’s the place I can keep you safest,” I say to Heaven as we walk up the stairs leading into my townhouse. “I promise once I take care of this whole Dominguez mess, I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“Anywhere?” she asks, a seductive smile tugging at her lush lips.

“Anywhere,” I murmur, scooping my arm under her legs and hoisting her up before we cross the threshold together as husband and wife.

“Wow, so romantic,” she says as I place her high-heeled feet on the polished wood floor in the foyer.

I shrug, closing all of the locks and setting the alarm. “I can be traditional.”

She gazes up at me, trailing a finger down the side of my tuxedo jacket. “I like the other things you can be, too.”

I pull out hairpins one by one, her long, wavy red hair cascading slowly over her shoulders. “That hairdo looked painful. Does that feel better?”

She places her hands on my hips, swaying into me. “So much better.”

“So, honeymoon,” I say again. “You deserve one. Any ideas about where you want to go?” That is, after I figure out how to disable a powerful drug lord whose hit list I now top because I told him to stand down for a minute.

I'm gonna need a vacation after pulling off that kind of miracle...the one where I don't get myself killed in the process. Otherwise, my beautiful bride will be a widow before she gets to take said vacation.

She drops her head back, a dreamy look in her eyes. "I'd really love to go to Bonaire."

"Never heard of it," I say. "Where is it?"

"It's an island in the Caribbean Netherlands off the coast of Venezuela. Big for scuba diving."

"Oh, you dive?" I smirk. "I didn't think you had any hobbies besides cooking and maiming."

"I'm certified, but I've never done a real trip before. Molly and I..." She pauses, her forehead pinched. "Molly and I got certified together. It was a few months before she was taken. We'd always promised each other that we'd go to Bonaire together to see the ostracods. That's why we got certified in the first place. We'd seen pictures of these tiny crustaceans that light up the ocean every month, a few nights after a full moon. I can't even imagine what they look like in person. They cast this crazy bioluminescent glow over the water and when you're underwater among them, it looks like you're floating in space amidst the stars." A small smile tugs at her lips. "I'd love to experience that with you, if you're open to it."

"Well, I don't love the idea of being stuck miles deep down in the ocean, I'm not a strong swimmer, and I have a pretty serious fear of suffocation," I say with a smirk. "But, sure, I'll get certified and become a scuba diver. We can go see the ostracods. If it's gonna make you happy, I'll suck it up."

"It's only about thirty feet deep. And trust me to do plenty of the sucking to return the favor," she says in a coy voice. Her eyes widen. "Oh, I forgot the best part! They glow because they're mating! Isn't that so amazing? Like lightning bugs but under the water! And how perfect for a honeymoon?"

She clasps her hands together and I can't help but laugh despite the fact that there is probably a Mexican army staking out my townhouse right now with Christ only knows what kind of firepower.

“It would be perfect,” I murmur. “But since we can’t exactly fly to Bonaire tonight, we need to come up with a Plan B. Any ideas?” I gaze down at her, dragging my finger down the side of her face. Her porcelain skin is so soft and smooth, her crystal blue eyes glittering with pent-up desire in the overhead light.

“I want you to take me to your room,” she whispers.

“Okay.” I bend down to pick her up and walk her toward the main staircase, but she shakes her head.

“No, not that room. The other room.” She points toward a door, a closed door down the hallway. My cock jumps. She’s obviously been making herself comfortable in her new home, seeing all of the amenities it has to offer. I pass the stairs and follow the hallway to the closed door. With one hand, I twist the knob and push it open, carrying her inside. Her white dress is a stark contrast to the deep blood red color of the walls surrounding us. I wanted to drape the room in a fiery, passionate color to match the tone of the carnal acts to be committed within these walls. The beaded white train of her wedding gown gathers around her feet, the shimmer of the crystals sewn into the fabric catching in the light. She glitters and glows as she sashays over to me, lacing her fingers with mine and winding my arm around her waist as she settles her back against me. I watch her scour every corner of the room until her eyes settle on the Texas king bed in the center of the space. The large mirror hanging on the ceiling over it doesn’t escape her attention, either.

“Kinky fucker,” she murmurs.

The comforter is thick red satin, a shade that exactly matches the walls. Heaven pulls me over to the bed, fingering the restraints, wrist and ankle cuffs. She narrows her eyes at me.

“You use these often?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Not at all, actually. I’ve been waiting for the right woman to break them in.”

“I think I’m up for the challenge,” she says, twisting around and slowly unzipping the back of her dress. I slide the beaded straps off of her thin shoulders and then the rest of the dress over her hips so that it pools around

her feet, a giant puddle of white beads and sparkling stones. She gathers her hair off of her shoulders as I take in her lithe body clad only in a bright blue lace thong. “You like?” she asks. “It’s my something blue.”

“I like very fucking much,” I growl, pulling her close and burying my lips in the smooth column of her neck. I breathe her in, the scent of vanilla, wedding cake, and whiskey filling me with warmth and comfort.

A fucking odd combination, but it’s Heaven.

She fumbles with the buttons on my shirt, giving up pretty quickly and finally just pulling it open. Buttons fly into the air and she giggles, pushing it off my shoulders. “I’m so impatient,” she murmurs, nodding at the walls of kink to her left and right. “And I am damn anxious to have you use some of that on me.”

My cock strains against my pants, which, regrettably, are still on. Just the thought of me lashing her with one of my floggers has my dick dripping.

“We have a lot of options here.” Her provocative tone makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Much like my cock. “Now, Matteo. What exactly are you going to do to me?” she asks, her legs falling open invitingly.

I crawl on top of her, my face hovering against hers. “You’re the one who brought me here. What do you want happen?”

“I want you to make me feel, Matteo. I want to feel everything. I want to feel pain. I want to feel love. I want to feel excitement and arousal. I want to feel it all, for the first time, together with you.” A seductive smile creeps across her face. “Make love to me, Matteo. Give me all you have. Show me what our forever will feel like.”

I loop my fingers into the waistband of her panties and I slide them down over her thighs, pulling them off one ankle at a time before letting the soft lace flutter to the floor. I gather her into my arms, her back arching delicately. I run the palm of my hand down the creamy white skin of her abdomen and over her hips. Hovering over her, I slide my tongue over her prickled flesh, navigating a path up to her heaving breasts, kneading them with my hands and flicking her taut, pink buds with my tongue and teeth.

Heaven lets out a squeal, her legs tightening around me as I feast on her. She tastes so sweet, yet sinful at the same time, like our decadent chocolate wedding cake.

I graze my lips with hers, tugging at her lower lip with my teeth as I swallow her moans. Our tongues coil together, heat flooding my insides as she infuses my whole being in a way I'd never before allowed anyone to do.

She commands my heart, but I still command her body.

When I pull away, my breaths short and sharp, she wiggles underneath me, angling her body to draw me back toward her. I smile. "Soon," I whisper.

Then with one quick motion, I flip her onto her stomach. I quickly cuff her wrists and ankles to the restraints and sit on my knees, gazing at her lying flat on the mattress. She's completely restrained, completely at my mercy. And that seems to be exactly what she wants and what she needs right now. It's what she begged me to do...to show her what our future looks like, to make her feel, and to give her all of me.

I'm all too happy to comply because it's the same thing I need.

I know how conflicted she was today, how confused she was to hear of the unfortunate circumstances.

And I only added salt to the wound by lying to her about Dominguez.

When she finds out the truth, what I want for our future won't matter because by then, she'll be gone. Maybe not in body, but in heart and spirit.

God, that would be so much fucking worse.

Staring at everything you want for your life, knowing it wants nothing to do with you.

But I bury all of that for now. My objectives right now are two-fold — keep her safe and make sure she feels the most intense pleasure that she's ever conceived of in that beautiful and twisted mind of hers.

Those are my goals.

I look at the wall of sin, eyeing the toys.

Falling short on either of them isn't an option.

I walk over to my display of floggers, selecting one that has soft black leather strands attached to the end. Her perfect ass is puckered and pointing straight into the air.

Oh, holy fuck, I want more than anything to sink my teeth into that plump flesh and then bury my dick inside of it. But first I need to make her beg for it.

For me.

I drag the leather strands down her spine and she shivers, bracing herself for what comes next.

Namely, her, if I do my job right.

Heaven moans into the mattress as I slap the leather tassels against her ass, once, twice, three times.

She yelps. "I need more!" She writhes against the mattress. "I need to feel your hands on me and your cock inside of me."

"Ask me the right way," I murmur against her hair. "Tell me what I want to hear."

"Please, Matteo! Please fuck me!"

With a thumping heart, I toss the flogger to the side of the bed, digging my fingertips into the globes of her ass. I fall to my knees in front of her, sliding my tongue in between her cheeks. She moans into the comforter as I work my tongue around her tight rim of muscle. I slide my fingers into her pussy, her lips clenching around me like the best kind of vise...one I want clamped around me for a fucking lifetime because it feels so incredible. Her walls clench my digits tight as I drive them deeper and deeper inside of her.

She squeals and grinds against my fingers, bucking her ass into my greedy mouth. I drag them out, licking off her juices before I bring my palm against her ass. It makes a satisfying smack, leaving a bright pink mark on her skin.

I've just branded her. My wife. The woman whom I'm convinced more and more was meant for me, regardless of business or money. Her pussy was

made for my cock, her ass made for my hand.

She fists the comforter, her body quivering and trembling. As I slide my fingers back inside of her soaked pussy, her desire flows over my fingers, filling my mouth.

I drink it in, the sweet nectar slipping down my throat. I savor every drop before I hiss at her, "I haven't given you permission to come."

But she's in too much of a state to even respond, not even to squeak out a plea for release. I recoil, smacking her ass again and again until she lets out a small cry. "I need to see you," she rasps. "Please let me watch you come. I want to stare into your eyes when you give yourself to me."

Oh, Christ. My cock throbs between my legs, and it won't be long before it erupts like a fucking active volcano. I uncuff her, turning her over. She gazes up at me, her chest heaving. Her eyes glitter with unbridled passion as she raises herself up from the mattress. Her hands attack my pants with vigor, pushing them to the floor. "This is taking way too long," she murmurs.

"I don't normally tolerate backtalk in this room," I say with a smirk.

"You're going to have to get used to it," she retorts in a snarky tone, one that makes my cock rival a steel beam. She grasps my thick shaft, stroking it with her soft hands and taking my balls into her mouth.

I gasp, knowing my staying power is in serious jeopardy the longer any parts of my dick reside in her mouth. I give her a gentle shove backward onto the mattress, my legs straddling her body. But my girl is relentless. She leans up, swiping her tongue over the swollen head. She teases the slit, making my core tense and tighten before she once again takes me into her mouth, stroking me long and hard with that devious tongue of hers. This time, I let her. The deep ache in my core paralyzes me, desperately in need of relief.

When she stops, a smile stretches across her face and she drags a finger across her glistening lips. "Now," she says, gazing at me from under thick, dark lashes. "Give me my wedding present."

I grin down at her. "But it's not wrapped."

She laughs out a soft giggle. "Good."

I lower myself on top of her, plunging into her slick opening. Both of us gasp in unison as my cock throbs inside of her, stretching her wide. I crush my lips against hers, devouring her like she's my last meal on Earth. My tongue pokes between her lips, delving into her hot, wet mouth.

Her legs lock around my ankles, beckoning me, drawing me in deep. She thrusts her hips against me, each one pulling my dick deeper and deeper into her erotic abyss. I wrapped one arm around her waist, digging my fingertips into the small of her back, urging her body upward. Perspiration pebbles our skin as our bodies rock against each other, slick with sweat, flushed with lust.

I roll onto my back, pulling her on top of me so I can feel that sweet pussy clench me like only she can. I want Heaven in control this time. I want to give that to her. I want to trust myself to give that to someone else. She's the only one who will ever get all of me.

My chest muscles tense each time her nipples drag against them. She trembles with each drive of her hips, sinking all the way down my length so that my entire dick is buried deep within her.

Our limbs are entwined, our bodies attacking each other with an unparalleled fervor, our souls joined in a way I never imagined possible. I figured we'd eventually fuck. I never figured we'd make love. And I sure as hell didn't anticipate it happening so quickly.

Two weeks ago, we became engaged for business purposes, and now we're connected in all other senses of the word.

She rides me hard and then slows her movements, her pussy clamping around my cock slowly, methodically, and maddeningly. Each clench of her lips makes my cock pulsate harder. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close enough so that my lips crash against hers. I slide my index finger in between the globes as I massage them, kneading the flesh and smacking it to hear that beautiful sound her mouth makes when she's about to come.

And I know she is. I can feel it...*her*.

I slip my finger into her tight hole, slowly stretching her. Her pussy clenches me even tighter and her soft mewls morph into full-fledged wails. I drive my cock harder, plundering her core as I plunge my finger deeper. She throws

her head back, tremors quaking her body as the orgasm tears through her.

I squeeze my eyes shut as my groin tightens and my cock explodes inside of her, my hot cum filling her, giving her everything I have.

Just like she wanted.

She's the first one I've surrendered to, and she will be the last.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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MATTEO

I crack open my eyes the next morning, blinking fast to wake them up. Whatever snippets of rest I may have gotten were splintered by nightmares.

Joey's body, splayed on the pavement after the shootout, bloody and peppered with bullets.

Dominguez in his shark skin suit, warning me that death is coming and that there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Heaven in her wedding gown, bloodstains blooming over the fabric like flowers of the most morbid type.

You'd think that after the carnal wedding night activities carried out in my own private sex den, my mind would have been too fried to do much else than succumb to sleep. My body had been zapped of all energy, but the turmoil in my head couldn't be quelled.

Heaven passed out as soon as her head hit the pillow, but too many toxic thoughts haunted me, keeping my eyes, ears, and body alert as the hours crept past. I listened to her even breathing, marveling at how peaceful she is in a comatose state.

I wish I could experience that kind of peace.

But I gave up all hopes of that a long time ago.

I made decisions and executed plans, none of which will bring me any degree of tranquility.

My sole priority was to protect my family's interests, business and otherwise. Heaven was never supposed to be included in that objective. She was always the pawn in this dangerous game. But things changed. I lost focus and fell in love, effectively incinerating any plans I'd put in place. Now, my job is two-fold — protect the family *and* my wife, at all costs.

And because my priorities changed, so did the fate of my whole world.

I'm not only destructive to everything I love, but a fucking liar to boot.

When Heaven confronted me yesterday, tormented by the thought that her father was trying to push her out, I didn't comfort her. Instead, I fed her a load of bullshit about Dominguez approaching me at the church to justify my own behavior, which was un-fucking-justifiable.

I didn't tell my wife I loved her when she grasped my hand at the altar.

I didn't tell her how I couldn't take in a proper breath once I saw her walk down the aisle because she was *that* magnificent of a vision.

I didn't tell her how fucking lucky I am to have her in my life.

Instead, I pretended to be preoccupied with Dominguez's threats about taking Conor's life.

I think about how happy she was last night at our wedding reception, smiling and laughing with her family. Things between her and her father even seemed amicable, despite recent events. She was relaxed. She was excited. And she seemed hopeful.

I feel like I've just torn that hope right out of her grasp, and there's nothing I can do to salvage it.

I stealthily slide out of the bed, leaving her undisturbed. She lies next to me on her stomach, arms clutching the pillow, her bright red hair fanning her face. She looks so calm and relaxed, the exact opposite of what I feel right now.

I pull on a pair of gym shorts and a sweatshirt before heading downstairs to the kitchen. I rake a hand through my hair, padding across the floor tiles. I brew a fresh pot of espresso and pour two cups, taking one outside to Gio. He can probably use it right about now since he's been stuck in the car all night long. Besides, I need to know if he's seen anything suspicious lurking around. He texted me a few times during the night to let me know things were quiet, but now that the sun is up, it's a brand-new day for hell to break loose.

I slip on my Nikes and jog over to the spot where the Escalade is parked. All windows, including the windshield, are tinted...illegal but necessary...so I can't make him out. I walk around to the driver's side and a sharp gasp escapes my lips.

The driver's side window has a small hole in it...a hole made by the bullet that exploded into Gio's left temple. It didn't shatter the whole window pane, which is probably why the police hadn't been called. You could look fast and not even notice it.

Only someone who came close to inspect the hole would see Gio's bloody head slumped over the steering wheel.

"Fuck," I mutter. I grab the keys in my pocket, click to silence the car alarm, and pull open the door, pushing Gio to the passenger side. I jump into the car, turn on the ignition, and do a three-sixty into the private parking garage next to my town house. It's set far enough back that it isn't visible to the public and I pull the Escalade inside, shutting and locking the door.

I jump out of the truck and dart back into my house. I sure as hell wasn't going to hang around outside waiting for the same sniper to turn his rifle on me.

The blood is fresh.

The hit happened recently.

That means the next one will be imminent.

I rush back into the house, locking everything up once again. I take the steps two at a time, peering into the bedroom to make sure Heaven is there.

And alive.

She lets out a little moan and burrows deeper into the pillow and comforter. I let out a breath and close the door before firing off a text to Roman using my burner phone.

You need to get here as soon as possible. Bring Sergio, have Dante stay with Papa at the hotel. Be fucking careful!

He responds almost immediately.

Be there in ten minutes.

I pace around my office, trying to figure out my next steps. I knew this would happen. I knew this hit was coming. Dominguez promised me yesterday that it was inevitable.

Motherfucker!

In what lifetime did I really think that partnering with a scumbag drug lord would benefit my family and our organization?

The terms of my agreement with Dominguez were simple.

He didn't just want revenge.

He wanted everything.

And I reneged on the deal. I could give up Conor and Declan without a second thought.

But I couldn't give up Heaven.

He wanted them all...the heads of the Mulligan empire, as retribution. But not just for Santo's death.

Conor killed Dominguez's daughter in that standoff.

None of the Mulligans knew that, though.

Dominguez came to me with a plan to crush the Mulligans, punishing them for what Conor did to him and his family.

I was to marry Heaven so I could access half of the family's assets. Then I was supposed to deliver Conor and Declan to Dominguez so he could dispose of them, leaving Heaven as the sole heiress.

And as of yesterday afternoon, he intends for me to step aside so that he can kill her, leaving me with everything.

It would have been a mutually beneficial agreement...except I fell in love with my own prey.

Now he's out for blood, and mine is mixed in with that of my new in-laws.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rings. I rush to grab it, unlocking the doors and unsetting the alarm to let my brothers into the house. I hold a hand to my lips, ushering them into the office and closing the door tightly behind us.

"What the hell happened?" Sergio asks.

"Gio was hit this morning," I say in a grave tone. "I went outside to take him an espresso and to see how things went overnight. I found him slumped over the steering wheel, his brains blown out of his goddamn ear. I pulled the truck into the garage just to get him out of sight. But this is just the beginning. Dominguez knows how to get to me. He knows how to get to Heaven."

Roman holds up his hand. "Wait, what are you talking about? What does Heaven have to do with any of this?"

I take a deep breath, pushing back my hair. "There's something I didn't tell you yesterday. Dominguez approached me outside of the church after you had all gone inside. He knows I've been avoiding him and telling him to stand down when I was supposed to be handing over the Mulligan empire on a silver fucking platter. He doesn't like the way that the plans have shifted. And he's decided to take it upon himself to execute them."

"No pun intended," Sergio grumbles. "What else?"

I rub the back of my neck. "This whole thing started because Conor Mulligan killed a lieutenant in Dominguez's crew, as well as Dominguez's daughter. The Mulligans don't know that, though. Declan Mulligan hired me to protect his family and to keep Conor alive because he's the one who is intended to

take over the family. But yesterday outside of the church, Dominguez told me Heaven is one of his targets. He was always planning to kill her, too, leaving me with the entire Mulligan empire.”

“You know, I asked you weeks ago if you had this shit under control and you told me you did, that you were in complete control of it all,” Roman grunts. “Dominguez is gonna come back, fucking locked and loaded. What the hell are we gonna do to stop him now that you’ve had a change of heart, Matty?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I growl. “We have to battle Dominguez.”

“Fuck that!” Sergio says. “Give him what he wants, Matty! Why the hell should you sacrifice *everything* for this dumbass plan?”

“Because I love her!” I seethe. “And I won’t give her up. I can’t!”

“Then deliver Conor and Declan. Come up with an arrangement for the rest!” Sergio yells.

“It’s too late,” I say. “Unless we stop him, Dominguez will take them all out. It’s beyond money at this point. He won’t trust me again to deliver what he wants. He’s going to take it!”

“You’d better hope you can stop him,” Sergio says darkly. “Because Dominguez won’t just stop with the Mulligans. He will take that revenge to the next level and unleash it all over us.”

“He won’t,” I say. “He knows our allies and understands what kind of hell he’d bring on his own organization if he fucks with the Villani family. That was how I caught Mulligan’s attention in the first place. I convinced him I have the network to keep Dominguez away from his interests as long as Heaven wears my ring.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sergio mutters. “I mean, I know you’re supposed to be the one in charge, Matty. But did you think that maybe this fucking plan could possibly blow up on the rest of us, too? They went after Gio. What if they go after Pop next?”

I narrow my eyes at Sergio. “I did this to set us up, goddammit!”

Sergio scoffs. “And how’s that worked out, now that you're on Dominguez's hit list? Dominguez, the guy who was your partner up until he popped one of your guys?”

I lean forward, my head in my hands. “I have to take care of Heaven. I have to make sure that she's protected. He will come for her, for all of them. That’s the immediate threat.”

“Or maybe that's what he wants you to believe,” Sergio says with a sharp tone to his voice. “I love how you're so protective of your new wife. But what the fuck about the rest of us and our interests? How do we rate? Because it sure seems that your priorities are a little fucked up, bro.”

“Relax, Serge,” Roman says. “We’ll figure this out. But I’m with Matty. We need to make sure we hold off Dominguez and the rest of his army.”

Sergio’s eyes pop open wide. “Fuck Mulligan! Let Dominguez torch fucking Hell’s Kitchen! I'd rather them be the sacrificial lambs than us!”

I press my fingertips to my temples, the control seeping from my body with each passing second. “I need to find Declan. If Dominguez is going to go after him and Conor, that's our only shot to stop him once and for all. And he will go after them. The question is — will he go after them or will he go after Heaven first?”

“Maybe next time you come up with a ‘brilliant’ plan, you run it past us before executing it,” Sergio says.

“Don’t fucking challenge me, Sergio! Christ only knows you’ve done more than enough in the past to rain hellfire on our name!” I storm over to him, pushing into his personal space and forcing him to recoil. “This was supposed to be a simple job. Infiltrate the Mulligan family and collect the spoils of war. Period.”

“Yeah, great plan,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “But you kind of shit the bed when you fell in love with your wife.”

I swing my hand out, swiping at a nearby table lamp with a guttural roar. “Fuck!” The glass shatters on the floor as my heart rate spikes. “Look, all Heaven wanted to do was take over as head of the family when her father retired. That's it. She's smart. She's a savvy businesswoman. She's ruthless as

hell. She deserves it. Conor is in his position because he's got a cock. That's it. That's why his father is trying so hard to protect him. He didn't earn that position. He's a fucking thief and a liar, and he'll run that family right into the ground the first chance he gets. I'm the only one who can stop that from happening." I swallow hard. "I have to make things right. All of them. For all of our sakes."

"Okay, so now what, *boss?*" Roman says. "What's the fucking plan?"

The office door opens, slamming against the wall with such force that the frames on the wall shudder and crash to the floor. Heaven stalks into the room, her eyes shooting blue flames and her hand outstretched. Her fingers are closed tight around a Beretta.

My Beretta.

One of the ones locked in my...*our*...bedroom safe.

Shit...

I unlocked it before she woke up, just in case I needed to grab one.

"Yeah, *Matty,*" she hisses through clenched teeth. "What *is* the fucking plan?"

I eye the barrel of the gun as it stares me down. "Heaven," I say, slowly stepping toward her.

"You lied to me!" she shouts, her face bright red as her screams reverberate between the walls. "You looked me in the eye *on our wedding day* and lied to me!"

"I was only trying to protect you—" I start to say but she cuts me off.

"Protect me? By conspiring with my family's enemy? By giving us up to that lecherous scumbag?" Her voice shakes with anger, her nostrils flaring. She inches closer. "You betrayed me, Matteo. You betrayed all of us!"

Her piercing screeches are high-pitched enough to shatter the windows of my office and she is bordering on hysterical, which isn't good for me or my brothers. My wife is ruthless and lethal without a gun in her hand.

“Look, you think you know what you heard but—”

“But what?” she yells. “Were you working with Dominguez?”

“Yes.”

“And did you marry me to fulfill your part of the bargain, to get access to my family’s businesses?”

“Yes.” Fuck, ask me a question I can say no to!

“And did you tell me yesterday that you were going to take care of Dominguez to keep us all safe?”

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. “Yes,” I groan. “Heaven, please, listen to me. You and your family aren’t the only ones at risk right now. Dominguez put me on his hit list because I backed off from the plan. It’s true. I worked with him to take down your family. But just remember that Conor is the one who brought this shit on you in the first place! He fucked around and brought hell to your front door!”

“And what about me?” she says, her voice dropping. “You were really going to let him kill me? After...everything?” Her arm muscles flex and she shakes her head, dropping her icy gaze for a split second before pointing the gun at a mirror hanging to my left and firing. I duck, holding my arms in front of me, my brothers letting out a yelp and jumping away from us. The glass shatters, the frame smashing onto the wood floor. Shards of glass scatter at our feet, and a pang in my heart tells me it’s damn close to suffering the same end.

“You were never part of the plan,” I say. “Not until yesterday. And when he told me that, I knew I needed to take care of him, to protect you. That’s the job I signed up for.”

“Fuck you and your job!” she shrieks. “I trusted you! “I told you things I’ve never told anyone...things about my family, about Molly...” Her spine stiffens. “I fucking loved you, Matteo! I fell in love with a goddamn liar! Well, let me just tell you this.” She drops her gun-clenched hand and grabs my shirt in her fist with the free one, pulling me close so she can hiss her next words right into my face. I’m too shocked to move or protest. “I don’t need your fucking protection! If Dominguez wants me, he can come for me himself, and I will protect my damn self!” Her whole body tightens, a vein

pulsing in her forehead as her face grows redder. “Just stay away from me, Matteo. Consider us annulled, dick.”

Then she points the gun at the art hanging on the walls of the foyer and opens fire.

Thank fuck for the silencer.

Once the floor is covered in slivers of glass and metal, she does an about-face and stalks into the kitchen. Seconds later, I hear the alarm sound as the garage door opens and the engine of my Lamborghini roars to life. She peels out of the driveway, and if she noticed Gio’s lifeless body, she sure as shit doesn’t give any indication of it with so much as a scream.

And then she’s gone.

“Goddamn,” Roman mutters, letting out a low whistle. “Mrs. Villani is a fucking fire-breathing dragon from hell!”

“Appropriate, considering where she’s from,” Sergio quips.

I let my eyes skim the aftermath of Heaven’s rage until reality hits me like a cement block to the gut.

My wife is *gone*.

I rub the back of my neck, shifting in my sneakers. My stomach churns with the knowledge that Dominguez is lurking, just waiting for a chance to snuff out the fire that is Heaven Mulligan.

Heaven Mulligan *Villani*.

With a rocketing pulse, I turn around to my brothers. “Let’s go. We’ve got to find her.”

“Where do you think she went?” Sergio asks.

Roman and I exchange a quick glance. “Molly’s,” we both say in unison.

She’s looking for Declan and Conor.

Unfortunately for her, so is Dominguez.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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HEAVEN

Blood rushes between my ears as I stomp on the gas pedal, speeding uptown. I swerve around cars as I zoom up the West Side Highway, not giving a flying fuck if there are any cops in my way.

Let them follow me.

Let them try to fucking stop me!

Street lights become flashes of red, orange, and green, blurred by the angry tears stinging my eyes. I've never felt so humiliated, so rejected, so pathetic!

How could I not have seen something like this coming?

Matteo Villani is a fucking gangster! A slimy bastard who charges boatloads for sordid sexual escapades and conspires with scumbag drug lords to steal what's not his!

And I fell in love with him!

"Argh!" I scream, slamming my fists on the dashboard as I screech to a halt at a red light.

I'd have normally run through it, but something told me to stop.

Good thing, because the car waiting to make a left turn didn't hesitate to gun his engine as soon as the light turned.

I'd have been pretty badly mangled.

Although, my fate will much bleaker than that if Dominguez has anything to say about it.

My skin prickles with the inconvenient memory of Matteo's hands on me, his voice softly vibrating against my ear, his body sliding against mine in a most deliciously erotic way.

“No!” I shriek, pressing my foot on the gas, the truck lurching forward. “I am not thinking about that! I hate that sonofabitch! He married me to set me up for fucking death!” With a swift adrenaline rush, I fist my hair with one hand. “I was so fucking stupid to believe he actually cared about me!”

My fingers twitch as I swing the steering wheel onto 42nd Street in the direction of Molly's. I want my father to hear firsthand what he did to us by ‘hiring’ that guinea bastard. “Always so high and mighty about making the right moves for the family,” I mutter. “Well, guess what, Dad? You just killed us all!”

I don't bother to park in the lot. I leave Matteo's truck on the street, double-parked.

I hope someone smashes their car into it. I hope they fucking decimate it, the same thing he did to my heart, that motherfucker!

I jump out of the truck and yank open the door. It's still early, so no patrons have ventured inside the restaurant yet.

“Dad!” I bellow, not even bothering to look for him. “Conor!”

My voice echoes in the empty space and the kitchen door swings open. Aunt Maura rushes out, a panicked look on her face. She puts her hands on my shoulders. “Heaven, what's wrong? Where is Matteo?”

My pulse throbs, razor-sharp breaths slicing at my lungs. “Where...is...my... father?”

Her blue eyes widen. “He's in his office. But what is this all about? Why aren't you with—?”

The hidden doorway that leads to the corridor at the back of the restaurant opens and my father walks out, an alarmed look on his worn face. Conor

struts out after him, leaning against the bar wearing his signature scowl.

“Heaven?” Dad says, sliding a hand over his head. “What are you doing here?”

I stomp toward him, my legs and arms tingling with a pins and needles sensation. I catch a glimpse of Conor’s glare, and I don’t stop at my father. I keep going, barreling straight to my brother. I ball my left hand into a tight fist and launch it at his jaw, my huge diamond engagement ring cracking against his face.

“You fucking bastard!” I scream at him as he doubles over with a loud groan.

“Heaven, what the fuck?” he groans, clutching his now-bloody lip. It must have caught one of the prongs.

Good!

If I had a fucking knife, I’d have sliced the whole damn lip off!

“You attacked Dominguez,” I hiss through clenched teeth, my whole body shaking. “You opened the door for him to crush us all!”

“Heaven,” Dad says, grabbing my arm. “What the hell is happening here?”

“Well,” I say, with a big, fake-ass smile plastered across my face. “Let me enlighten you all. My new husband had a little meeting with his brothers this morning, and I overheard the whole fucking thing!” I grab Conor’s shirt, pulling him up so I can shove him backward against the bar.

It feels good.

It’d probably feel better to shoot him, though.

Too bad I left the Beretta in the truck.

“What meeting?” Dad demands.

I swivel around, clenching and unclenching my fists as I walk toward him, digging my heels into the floor with each step. “Did you even do any research on this guy before you agreed to sell me off to him?”

“What are you talking about? He was hired to protect us!”

“He didn’t protect anything other than his own interests!” I shriek. “He was working with Dominguez! He set you up, Dad! He set us all up!” I jerk my finger back at Conor. “Because of that fucknut!”

“Heaven, love,” Aunt Maura says, glancing at my father. “You’re not making any sense right now.”

I look at my aunt, stepping toward her. “You don’t know what happened,” I say, my voice dropping. “This whole arranged marriage was to save our family because Conor killed the daughter of a drug lord!” I swivel around to look at him, his cheeks flushing a deep red. “But you knew that, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer, just grunts.

“That’s what I thought.” My lips curl into a sneer. “Did you also know that Dominguez planned to kill me, too? So your plan didn’t really work out too well for you, Dad, since Matteo was ready to deliver us all to him on a fucking silver platter!” I grasp my father’s arm, staring at him so he doesn’t miss a single word. “He only wanted to marry me to get his olive oily hands on our money! Once Conor was dead, I’d get it all. And after Dominguez killed *me*...” My throat is so tight, I can barely squeeze out the next words. “He’d have everything. Everything!” I yell, grabbing two pilsner glasses from the bar and hurling them against the large-plated glass mirror behind it. My chest heaves, the sound of shattering glass not nearly enough to bring me any bit of relief. So I grab a bottle of Jameson and fling it across the wall, the amber-colored liquid splashing all over the tables and floors next to it.

I take a few deep breaths to settle my rapidly spiking heart rate, to no avail.

I glare at my father, then at Conor. “You did this to us,” I seethe. “Both of you. And you can’t stop it!” I kick over a chair at the nearest table, damn tempted to sink a fork into my brother’s eye. “How does it feel, Dad? To know you were completely duped? To know that you put trust in the wrong people? And that everything you worked so hard for is about to be yanked away?” I slam my fist down onto the tabletop, my voice slicing through the air like a machete. “Because that’s exactly how I fucking feel right now! Except, you know what? I did absolutely nothing to cause this shit show. I didn’t try to go behind anyone’s back for my own purposes, I didn’t try to screw anyone over out of fear that they’d take anything away from me, and I

sure as fuck didn't try to kill my brother, even though he deserves it!" I scream this part right into Conor's face, shoving him backward so that he tumbles into a chair with a loud grunt.

I spin around, my vision tinged with red as I stare down my father. Aunt Maura's jaw is hanging wide open and I don't think she has any fucking clue how to handle me at this moment.

Good.

Let them realize how unpredictable I can be.

"I gave my life away for all of you," I seethe at my father. "I wasn't given a choice. You played me. You lied to me. But worst of all? You discredited me. Humiliated me. I've given everything for this family and you just took, took, took." I let out a dry chuckle. "And I am just plain insane. I just kept coming back for more, anything you'd give to me, thinking that it was the job that would finally convince you that I'm the right person to run this organization. An insane person continues to do the same thing over and over, hoping for a different result, hoping that you'd finally tell me what I wanted to hear. But you never did. And it took me this long to finally learn." I shrug. "Better late than never, I guess. Although it remains to be seen how long I'll actually be able to enjoy this hard-earned clarity, since I'm at the top of the hit list of a notorious drug lord!"

"Heaven," he says, being very ballsy in my opinion and putting a hand on my shoulder. I tense up, narrowing my eyes at him. "I did what I thought was best for the family and for our organization! Marrying Matteo was to protect us all—"

"No!" I scream, a sob rising in my throat. "Marrying Matteo was to keep me in check because you just didn't trust me! You haven't since..." I swallow hard, my pulse throbbing along with my temples. "Since Molly was taken. You blamed me." I wave my arm around. "You all did!"

"Heaven, that's nonsense," Aunt Maura says, taking a few cautious steps toward me. "Everyone knew you'd done what you could to stop them from taking her!"

My eyes pool with angry tears, but I'll be damned if I let them slide down my flaming cheeks. They think I'm weak. I'm not about to prove it to them! "No, not everyone." I look at my father. "You didn't. I saw it in your eyes then and I can see it again now."

Dad shakes his head. "You only see what you want to see, Heaven. You always have. You've just been so racked with guilt over it that you've never been able to let yourself off the hook."

"It was my fault," I say. "And I've been trying to make it up ever since."

"You're the only one who needs this redemption." Dad's forehead pinches.

"Fuck that!" Conor yells, still clutching himself. "If you had the makings of a boss, you'd have saved her!"

"Conor!" Dad yells. "Enough!"

I shake my head, my shoulders slumping. "No. He's right. I know it. And that's why I've been trying to make up for it for the past eight years. But let's get one thing straight, Conor," I hiss. "I may have fucked up that night, but I'm not the one who opened fire on our entire family! And while you drown in that reality...*your* fucking reality...*I'm* going to figure out how to dodge the barrage of bullets that will be fired back at us. Me, Conor. I'm going to be the one to save our family!"

I glare at them once more, wanting to make sure they feel the fire in my gaze before I turn my back and stalk toward the door and shove it open. I press my hands to my temples once I'm standing outside on the quiet sidewalk, but the throbbing will not cease.

I have a cartel war to fight, a deceitful sack of shit for a husband, and a pounding headache desperately in need of some Advil.

Goosebumps shoot up my arms and down my legs as I take a shuddering breath.

Time is not on my side.

And evidently, neither is karma.

I lean my hand against the brick face next to the door, every last nerve twitching.

I have to take a step.

I need to make a decision.

Now.

The bell over the entrance to the pub jingles just as squealing tires screech to a halt in front of the restaurant.

“Heaven!” Aunt Maura calls out. But a loud crash makes me jump, and I jerk around in time to see a metal trash can fly into the air and land on a nearby car.

Doors open, footsteps pound over the pavement.

The car alarm blares as a set of faces flash in front of me.

Dark, menacing faces.

And they’re fast approaching.

Another car from a different direction hops the curb, and I jump backward, slamming against the wall with a loud yelp.

I’m surrounded on both sides by tables and chairs, stuck in the middle of the fenced-in dining area.

Trapped.

Exactly the way they planned it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

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MATTEO

I lean on the horn of Roman's car as I zoom down 42nd Street, alerting anyone in my way to get the fuck out of it.

"How do you know that she went to the pub?" Roman asks, pulling out his gun.

"Because I just know," I grumble. "She went to find Declan, and I'll bet that's where he is right now."

I press the gas pedal to the floor, barreling through a light. "Fuck!" I yell, pointing to the front entrance of Molly's. "Dominguez obviously had the same idea!" I veer right, jumping the curb just as gunfire explodes into the air, peppering the sides of the car as we careen past. The car crashes into an overturned trash can, just beyond the restaurant. My brothers and I leap out of the car, greeted by an eruption of bullets. I run around the front of the car toward Heaven, Dominguez's guys now using Roman's car as their shield. Bullets ricochet off the smoldering metal as I dart toward my wife where she's hovering under a table with her aunt.

As I run, the sunlight fades and the moon glows in the sky, and suddenly I'm transported back in time.

I'm no longer staring at Heaven's stricken face.

It's my cousin Joey's lifeless one.

His skin is pale, his eyes vacant.

All because I didn't get there in time to stop the horrors from consuming him on that fateful night.

I waited too long.

I watched it all happen.

I had the power to stop it.

But I didn't.

I lost him.

I lost myself.

I can't lose anyone else.

My legs ache, my muscles tensing with each step. Conor comes running out of the pub with a gun in his outstretched hand.

Pop!

Crack!

Bang!

I keep running until I am close enough to dive toward Heaven and Aunt Maura and push them out of the line of fire that is coming closer and closer.

Panic assaults my body and mind as my body lunges for them, my sole priority being protection.

"Heaven! Get down!" I yell.

I hear my words pierce the air just as a sudden and harsh impact makes me jerk forward. The force was like that of a baseball bat crashing against my back. And just as suddenly, searing pain erupts in the center of my back, tearing through my insides like a jagged flaming poker. I crumble to the ground on top of Heaven, unable to move.

"I'm so sorry," I gasp, gritting my teeth as the bullet slices through me. "I should have stopped it when I had the chance. I'd never hurt you. I...love...you..."

“Matteo, oh my God!” Heaven shrieks, tears rolling down her cheeks. She clutches me tight, pulling me against her as shots continue to explode behind me. “Somebody call 911! He’s been hit!” She cups my face, her blue eyes blurring into rippling pools in front of me.

In the depths of my mind, I hear muffled sounds above me — screaming, crying, and yelling, although I can’t piece together what’s happening to me. I’m still alive — gasping, riddled with pain, and somewhat aware. But all of those sensations all fade quickly as streams of light behind my eyes blanket the threat of impending darkness.

That’s when everything starts to slip away.

But before it does, one final thought stutters forth, blooming in my tormented mind.

I did stop it.

I saved her.

Numbness then snakes through my extremities, stifling the anguish as a strange yet comforting calmness settles into my soul.

And then, just like it’s been swallowed up by a black hole, my whole world goes silent.

Chapter Twenty-Four

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HEAVEN

I didn't tell him I loved him.
I didn't tell him I loved him.

“Heaven!” Conor screams. “Dad’s been hit!”

The gunfire finally stops and one of the cartel soldiers makes a run for his car, tearing away from the curb before anyone can pop off a cap in the rear windshield or a tire. My shoulders quake as I clutch Matteo, whose face is growing more and more pale.

Sirens ring out, blaring like clanging cymbals between my ears as they approach.

“I’m going after him!” Conor yells, pulling open the door of his car and peeling down the street in hot pursuit of the escape shooter.

“Aunt Maura!” I yell. “How bad was he hit?”

“He’s awake!” she shouts back. “Thank God!”

I nod, holding Matteo closer to my chest. My tears fall silently, slipping from my chin onto his blood-stained t-shirt.

There’s such a fine line between love and hate.

Only a few minutes ago, I wasn’t sure where I stood...if I could ever cross back over.

An icy hand squeezes my heart, the same raw sensation that assaults my fingers, interlaced with his frigid and stiff ones.

At this point, I don't know if it will even matter.

I swipe at my eyes, Roman and Sergio bent over Matteo trying to check for some sign of life.

“His pulse is weak,” Sergio mutters. “Matty, don't you fucking die on us!”

Roman sweeps a hand through his hair, jumping up as the ambulance stops in the middle of the street.

EMTs jump out of the ambulances, one set running to my father and one set darting over to where Matteo lies.

They check his vitals, tight-lipped and muttering quietly to one another. My heart dips lower and lower in my chest as I jump into the back of his ambulance. Aunt Maura climbs into the back of the ambulance with Dad, and Roman and Sergio follow closely behind as we veer through the city streets to NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital.

I cuddle against Matteo, cradling his hand in mine as my lips move in rapid and silent prayer.

I'm so angry at him and my father and Conor, so fed up with the deceit, but so absolutely wrecked at the turn of events...and devastated at myself for cowering — unable to save anyone.

Again.

I bring his hand to my lips, squeezing it tight.

I love him.

So much.

But my God, I'm furious at him.

He betrayed me and my family.

He lied.

And then he married me, promising to love and cherish me forever.

Until his dying day.

He crushed me, shredding my heart and soul in the process.

A chill slips down my back and I clutch my midsection, fear and anger knotting my gut.

For years, I berated myself for not being able to stop a tragedy from occurring. I allowed my guilt to consume me. It fueled the flames of my inner turmoil and feasted on my confidence. For years, I attempted to claw a path out of the black hole my life had become, but the shadows always hovered overhead, threatening to eclipse any bit of light that could possibly shine through.

But Matteo's presence unexpectedly forced those clouds apart. He illuminated the darkness, sparking hopes for a promising future. He filled the holes in my heart and soul, showing me what my life could be if I opened up to the possibilities.

That's what I cling to now as the ambulance careens around the driveway in front of the Emergency Room.

The possibilities.

There are so many.

As long as he is by my side.

I pace the waiting room, chewing on my nails. Where the hell is the doctor? How much longer do we have to wait for a status?

I rub my hands down my arms, glancing into the corner where Roman is huddled against the wall with his phone to his ear. I know he's calling the rest of his family.

Sergio stands over by a window, a vacant stare in his eyes. I walk toward him, not wanting to speak a word. But somehow being with Matteo's brother

makes me feel closer to him. It seems silly but comforting at the same time.

“Did he tell you about Joey?” Sergio asks in a tired voice.

“Yes,” I say.

“He was so desperate to get to you today, Heaven. He’d have never let anything happen to you. And he was ready to go after Dominguez to make sure you stayed safe.”

I nod, my voice too choked to speak.

Sergio looks at me. “I know we don’t know each other at all, but my brother is a good man. He’s had his share of fuck-ups and he’s made some bad judgment calls, like all of us, but he’s the most loyal guy I know. And he ran hard for that bullet, taking it so you didn’t.”

“I know,” I whisper. “He saved my life.”

“Yeah,” Sergio mumbles. “He loved you. I know things happened fast with you two and shit didn’t go exactly according to the script of a fairy tale, but he’d have given anything to keep you safe. Including his life.”

I swallow the sob that bubbles in my chest. “This can’t be the end,” I whisper. Sergio opens his arms and pulls me close.

“Matty is a stubborn old fuck. And he’s vicious. He’ll fight hard, Heaven, because he knows what he has.”

“So will I,” I whisper. “So will I.”

We stand together as time creeps by, the silence deafening.

“Mrs. Villani?”

I jump at the intruding voice, spinning around to see one of the nurses standing behind us, her brows furrowed. She shakes his head and my heart clenches. “W-what is it?” I manage to choke out. “Is he...will he...?”

“The doctor planned to come and speak to you, but your husband coded while we were examining him and they rushed him into emergency surgery.” She shakes her head. “There wasn’t time to waste. I’m sorry I don’t have more of an update for you right now.”

There's no sense in asking the question on the tip of my tongue.

The grave look in her gaze speaks volumes.

A gaggle of tears catches in my throat, and Sergio's arm tightens around my shoulders as the nurse scurries back through the large red doors. Aunt Maura passes her on the way out, rushing over to me.

"Your dad is being patched up now. They'll probably keep him for another hour or two just for observation." She bites down on her lower lip. "How is Matteo?" she asks, twisting her hands.

But I can't even speak. I just shake my head as tears dribble from my eyes. She wraps her arms around me, stroking my back like she used to do when I was young.

Back then, it was comforting.

Now all it does is make me feel like more and more control is slipping away from me.

I may not be able to save my husband, but I may be able to redeem myself.

Conor bursts into the emergency room, running right over to me.

I push away from Aunt Maura, my jaw twitching as he dangles the car keys in front of me. "I got the shooter," he hisses. "He's in the trunk. And I have a location for Dominguez."

Adrenaline floods my veins and I reach out to dig my fingers into Conor's wrists. "We're going. *Now.*"

He nods, a murderous glare in his eyes. "He's fucking finished."

I look up at Sergio. "Call me the second you hear anything."

"Fuck that, I'm coming with you," he says. "I want a crack at this bastard, too."

I look at Aunt Maura. "Tell Roman and Dad, and call me the second you hear anything."

She grabs me, pulling me in for a tight hug. “Be careful,” she whispers against my hair. “And be smart. He’ll be expecting you.”

I pull away. “Not this time. He won’t see this coming at all.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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HEAVEN

Half an hour later because of fucking Manhattan traffic, we're barreling down Malcom X Blvd in the direction of Central Park North.

"This guy had better not be screwing with us," I growl, opening Conor's glove compartment and fishing around for a weapon. My fingers close around a Kershaw automatic knife and I pull it out, holding it up in front of my face. One click of the button and the stainless steel blade pops out, the sharp tip glimmering in the sunlight streaming through the windshield.

"You need a gun," Conor says.

"Why?" I ask. "You guys are going to cover me while I find Dominguez, therefore you need the guns."

"And what the hell do you expect to do when you find Dominguez?" he demands.

"I'm going to kill him," I reply in a calm voice.

"The fuck you are!" Connor yells. "This is my beef, not yours! I'm gonna finish him!"

"It became my 'beef' when he sent his men to kill me." I turn and glare at Conor. "It became my fight when he almost took my husband's life! And now Matteo might die, so yeah, my beef takes fucking priority here."

"You don't get to pick your kills, Heaven. That's not how this works!"

I force a nasty smile as Conor slams his foot on the brake at a red light, a few blocks from our destination. I grab his chin and turn it toward me. “It works this way now because I’m calling the shots. Your fifteen seconds are up, Conor, and you’ve fucked up plenty in that short amount of time. So you just step off and let me handle Dominguez. That, or you might find my knife buried in your goddamn thigh before you even have a chance to get out of this car!”

Sergio lets out a low whistle from the backseat. “My sister-in-law is a badass bitch,” he mutters. “I’m good with the plan, Heaven. Just so we’re clear.”

“Smart guy,” I grunt darkly.

“So this guy Dominguez, how sure can we be that he’s gonna be at this address?” Sergio asks. “I mean, are we gonna walk into a trap? The guy had time to make some calls before Conor snatched him and tossed him in the trunk.”

“That’s just a chance we’re gonna have to take.” Conor hooks a right turn into the park entrance. “But from what he told me before he pissed his pants and I fired a blank at his temple, Dominguez will be too busy with his new shipment of pussy to worry about us. Today, his priority is fucking virgins. Tomorrow, he’ll be back on us.”

“Oh, he’ll be on his back for sure. But it’ll be because he’s dead,” I say through clenched teeth.

Conor drives through the park, which is surprisingly pretty desolate at this time of morning. I gaze out the window, scouring the landscape for any signs of life. I see ominous figures moving through the trees, out of plain sight but just waiting to sniff out and then snuff out any newcomers in fancy cars. This area is known to be one of the most deadly areas of Harlem, so taking out the head of a drug cartel is actually lower risk than obviously wandering through this seemingly scenic area.

“What’s the situation?” I ask as we get closer to the destination. It’s located in the Ravine, a heavily forested area in the park. Conor explains the setup as he winds around the roads in the park. According to the guy stuffed in the trunk, there’s a nondescript building hidden in the depths of the foliage where Dominguez’s crew transports boatloads of young women every month where

some will be sold into slavery, and some will work for Dominguez himself. They're lured into the clutches of the cartel from various places in Latin America, brainwashed into thinking that a new and better life awaits them in New York City, only to find out that they're about to be sold into lives of prostitution and drug addiction.

I swallow hard, anger festering like an infection deep in my gut.

Just like Molly.

If she even survived.

Girls who put up too much of a fight are 'handled' by their captors.

The money isn't worth the headaches as far as they're concerned.

Too many times, I've heard nightmare stories of these poor girls being shot up with so many drugs that they end up overdosing before they can be sold to the highest bidder.

And their lives come to a tragic halt.

I blink fast, a sharp pain shooting down my neck because my jaw is clenched so damn tight. Molly suffered the same end as far as any of us know. What they do to these girls, what's become of so many others in the past...the mere thought makes my heart physically ache.

My ears roar with the imagined sounds of torture, torment, and realization when these girls figure out what their lives had been reduced to, that they will never see their friends and families again, that the futures they planned for themselves will never come to fruition.

So help me, I need to silence those sounds.

This isn't just about my vengeance, about my need for retaliation.

This is about speaking for those who can't any longer.

Dominguez should have killed me when he had the chance.

Because now I'm coming for him and escape won't an option.

It'll be a pipe dream.

We take a final turn and stop about fifty feet from the building.

Conor turns off the car and looks at us. “It’s broad fucking daylight in this shithole section of the city. I think this is a bad idea.”

“Don’t think, Conor. Save the last few brain cells for once we get inside,” I snap.

“You know, you’re pretty fucking mouthy for someone who’s being hunted by a drug lord,” Conor growls. “You need me, so show some fucking respect.”

I narrow my eyes, seething my next words. “Respect? You put me here, Conor. You put us all on the defensive when you took on the cartel. So now you’re going to make things right. I don’t have to respect you. I just have to work with you.” I turn to look at Sergio. “You’re armed?”

“Always,” he says.

“I’m going for Dominguez,” I say.

“You’re not gonna get far with a knife,” Conor scoffs.

“Watch me,” I hiss. “Now here’s how this is going to work. You two will take me to the entrance, pretending that you’re part of the delivery. You tell them you have more in the car. As soon as they let you pass, it’s showtime.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Conor asks. “They won’t buy it!”

“It’s actually not a bad idea,” Sergio says.

I smirk at him. “Suck up.”

Sergio snickers. “I admire the self-sacrifice. It’s hot.”

“It’s also necessary.” I glare at Conor. “It’s the only way inside. We need to get in before we can find Dominguez. Now come around and pull me out of the car in case anyone is watching.”

Conor presses his lips together, but for once, does what I ask. He opens the car door, bending down to scoop me out of the front seat. I allow my body to go limp against his, my eyes floating closed. He walks toward the building, and pent-up fury gurgles in my veins as my feet drag along the patchy grass.

He stops at what I can make out through my cracked eyelids is a door.

My heart thumps and hammers. This plan is sketchy at best. I may have sounded super confident, but the reality is we have no idea what we're going to find inside.

If we even get inside.

I just hope that we acted fast enough to prevent any news from getting to Dominguez.

An ache in my chest reminds me of everything I have on the line because of that asshole.

It's up to me to make it all right.

I hear the heavy metal door creak open and my breath hitches.

"We're here with a delivery," Conor grunts. "Got more in the car. Fresh virgin pussy, straight from Dublin."

Oh my God, I want to hurl right now.

A thick Mexican accent mutters a response. "Take her inside. How many others?"

"Two," Sergio pipes in.

He makes a clicking sound with his teeth as he tilts my chin backward. I let my head fall as his fingers travel down the front of my shirt.

I'm so close to pulling out my knife and slicing off those damn sausages, but it turns out I don't have to after all.

"Bring her inside. And get the others," he grunts to Sergio, who gives a quick nod, backing away. I let my head fall over Conor's shoulder as he pulls me through the door. I open my eyes the slightest bit to take in the scene but it's quiet, save for the other guy just inside.

Security, I guess. I'll bet there are pockets of guards set up all over this building.

Bend the fuck over and kiss your asses goodbye, punks.

We're coming...

I push away from Conor, spinning around and jamming my blade into the side of the guy who just let me pass over the threshold. Conor plugs two bullets into the chest of the other guy who was too stunned and stupid to act first.

Thank God for silencers.

Sergio appears next to me, holding the barrel of his gun to the guy's temple as he winces and weeps like a bitch.

I could have gutted him, but I want to find his boss and I don't really feel like knocking on every door throughout this place.

"Shut the fuck up," Sergio mutters and I twist the knife as a guttural yell bubbles in his chest.

"Hold it together," I whisper to the guy. "Swallow the screams. The only words I want to hear from your disgusting mouth are the ones that tell me where to find your boss."

"I...d-don't...k-know," the guy sputters, spittle flying into the air.

I recoil and dig the knife in deeper. "Bullshit. Tell me now or I will slice your goddamn throat!"

His eyes water, his chest heaving as Sergio curses in Italian.

"Kill him," he mutters. "We can't waste any more time."

I pull the blade from his side, and just as I'm about to impale his heart, he begs for mercy. "Please, stop! He's in the playroom, all the way at the back of the building. It's where he evaluates all the girls and picks out his own."

My stomach churns, bile rising in the back of my throat.

Just like Molly.

Just like Molly.

A sudden pounding between my temples makes me grasp the wall. I press my hand against it to steady myself, gritting my teeth because I cannot let him

get to me.

I refuse!

I couldn't save her.

The enemy stole her life away from us.

But I will be goddamned if I let that happen again.

I will not lose anyone else.

I will fight.

I will defend.

And I will fucking win!

These assholes will not crush another human life ever again.

And Dominguez will pay the very hefty price for all of the lives he's already compromised.

"Who would be in there with him?" I hiss, the tip of the knife hovering over his carotid artery.

"Just one other guy. The handler. The one who takes care of Dominguez's girls."

A nasty smile tugs at my lips. "Thank you for being so cooperative," I say.

"Please just let me go," he begs. "Please ju—"

I slice at his jugular and he clutches his throat as he crumbles to the floor.

Fifteen seconds can feel like a lifetime in a situation like this.

I drop to my knees, making sure he can see my lips move.

"This is me letting you go," I say with a little wave. "Bye-bye now."

"You sure you're not Russian? You remind me a lot of my good friend Katarina. She's a brutal bitch, too," Sergio says.

“I’m not Russian,” I say flatly. “I’m just fucking pissed off.” I square my shoulders, ignoring the knot in my stomach, the one that not so gently reminds me that we haven’t heard a word from Roman about Matteo’s condition. I know if I let myself dwell on that for a second too long, dizziness will assault my mind and panic will paralyze my plan. I can’t think about what might be. I can only focus on what I can stop.

“Playroom, here we come,” I mutter.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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MATTEO

The deep glow of late afternoon sunlight illuminates the bright white stoneface of the church. The large structure is surrounded on all sides by lush greenery, the scent of the air so fresh and clean. I take a deep breath, letting it fill my lungs as I squint up at the sky.

My gut clenches for some unknown reason, but I instinctively know it's time.

The 'what' remains to be seen.

I slowly walk up the steps of the church, wondering if what I am looking for... what I know I need to find...will lay beyond the heavy mahogany doors. My palm grips the brass handle, pulling it open. I expect to see the inside of an ornate church, but instead, the doors open to an expansive meadow that is surrounded by a large lake. I step through the doorway and into the grassy knoll, my feet sinking into the soft earth as I trek toward a group of people congregated by the water's edge. They are standing in circular formation, whispering in hushed tones. I pick up my pace, my walk morphing into a run, a sense of impending dread crashing over me as I get closer and closer to what they surround.

I open my mouth to call out to them — any of them — but nobody can hear me.

They never once look back at me, and I realize it's because my lips move but no sounds emerge. My throat tightens as the voices in my head get louder.

I'm the only one who can hear me.

Finally, the crowd separates, creating a small space for me to peek through. I creep toward the opening, finally catching a glimpse of bright white.

A flowy material billows in the light breeze, and a peal of laughter breaks the stillness in the air, washing away the fear that gripped me only seconds earlier.

I release the breath I'd been holding.

It's my Heaven.

I no longer have to search.

She's right there in front of me.

But the panic doesn't dissipate entirely.

It still lingers like an ominous shadow eclipsing the happiness that everyone else seems to share in this moment, including Heaven herself.

Why can't I feel that same happiness?

Why am I waiting for darkness to emerge...to swallow us whole?

Deep red curls cascade down her creamy back, covered by a thin layer of tulle. She spins around, a tight bunch of pink calla lilies clutched in her hand. Her ruby lips stretch wide across her face when she sees me, the rhinestone tiara on her head glittering like a crown.

How apropos, since she's my queen.

She holds out her hand to me and I reach for it, interlacing my fingers with hers. I smile, pushing my way through the crowd toward her, except the ground is no longer solid. It's thick, wet quicksand, pulling me into the abyss with each step I take toward her.

My pulse spikes, the tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickling as her smile fades. Her lips part and a scream erupts into the air. I push through the quagmire, my legs sinking deeper and deeper the more that I fight the seemingly inevitable.

The crowd fills in around me, watching as I struggle, staring blankly as I yell for their help.

I can't save Heaven if I can't save myself.

She runs toward me, the bottom of her gown disappearing into the murk. It swirls around her ankles and I yell for her to back away. I try to lunge for her, to push her out of this deadly snare, but the more effort I expend, the faster I sink. The quicksand rises around my chest, constricting my lungs.

The people surrounding us disappear one by one until we are the only two left in the meadow.

My chest heaves as I draw in labored breaths.

She's all by herself. I have to protect her!

But escape seems impossible.

My fate is set.

Heaven's eyes flood with tears as she calls to me, trying desperately to pull me from the quicksand. But the more she pulls, the harder it drags me under.

A loud explosion erupts around us. I can't twist my body in the direction of the chilling sound. I can only watch Heaven clutch at her chest, blood-red stains spreading over the starch white fabric of her wedding gown as her body bucks and jerks.

Assailants flank her on all sides, but they're invisible. I can't see them, I can't shout to her, but worst of all, I can't absorb the deadly blows.

That was my only job.

I failed.

Again.

She falls to her knees as I scream her name, a final tear slipping from her eye before she collapses backward into the tall grass.

Every shriek, every wail, every bellow drags me further into the depths of my own personal hell, the one where I am forced to live a life without Heaven Mulligan.

But instead of darkness, bright white lights flash behind my eyes, sickles of sharp pain slicing at my insides. Heaven's crumpled form ripples like a stone skimming across the slick surface of a lake, fading away as tormented thoughts pop between my ears like bullets, the sounds growing louder with each passing second.

I lost my control. I didn't stop the horrors from consuming her, the ones coming from all directions.

And now she's gone forever...because I couldn't save her.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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HEAVEN

“**Y**ou can’t just barge in there, Heaven,” Conor mutters as we hover inside of the doorway to an empty room.

“I think I just proved that I can and I will do just that,” I retort, my lips curling into a sneer. “Cover me or don’t. Either way, I’ll gut the bastard before I leave this place.”

Sergio holds out his fist and I bump it with mine. “I’ve got your back, Natasha Romanoff.” He winks at me. “Same red hair and everything. I’m telling ya. *Russian.*”

I manage a smile through my rage.

Sergio jumps and grabs his vibrating cell phone. I can see Roman’s name flash across the screen and he stabs to accept the call. “Romo?” he whispers into the phone. “Romo!”

He holds it to his ear, eyebrows furrowing for a few seconds before he rolls his eyes and ends the call. “I fucking lost him. Service in here sucks. Let’s hurry this up and get back to the hospital, yeah?”

“Let’s use the same game as we did to get in here,” I say, looking at Sergio. “Drag me down the hallway and if anyone asks, you’re taking me to the boss.”

“And if they challenge it?” Conor snips.

“Then you plug them,” I say, letting my body fall against Sergio. He grabs me with a low *whoof!* before I go down like a sack of cement. “Let’s go before anyone finds those two dead clowns and comes for us.”

We start down the hallway. It’s quiet up front. I guess most of the activity is happening behind closed doors. And there are a lot of them. Because I’m trying to act comatose, I can’t see much clearly other than the dark gray walls surrounding us. The place is a shit hole. It must be a distribution site. Once the girls are listed wherever online for buyers...I guess on the Dark Web... they must be transported to the auction sites. I can’t imagine anyone with money coming here to claim their purchases.

Not unless they had a death wish for themselves.

But that’s good for us.

Less expensive security to battle.

As we move toward the playroom, other girls are being shuttled into different rooms. They look clean and somewhat put together for what must be their photo shoots.

My stomach clenches as tear-stained faces pass us by.

Killing Dominguez is the only way to help them.

It’s the only way to right all of the wrongs he’s committed.

A guy with thick dark hair and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth approaches us, and he drags his hands over my ass and up my thigh. I try desperately not to tense up but God, I want to cut him.

I can feel Sergio’s arm tighten around me, and I silently beg him to relax.

If he gives us away now—

“Take your fucking hands off of her!” Conor hisses, sticking his gun into the guy’s side. “She’s for the boss!”

The guy’s eyes widen and I hold my breath until he backs away, hands over his head. “Sure thing, *ese*. He’s in the back.”

“We know,” Conor seethes. “Move the fuck out of our way.”

I let out the breath. “Don’t do that again,” I whisper to Conor. “You could have given us away.”

“But I didn’t,” he says. “Because maybe I’m not the complete fuck-up you thought.”

“Let’s slap a TBD on that one, yes?” I mumble.

The doorway is in front of us. All I have to do is reach out and grab the handle—

“Diaz and Alvarez have been hit!” A loud voice bellows, and my hand freezes on the knob. “Lock this place down now!”

Doors on both sides open, dark-skinned men emerging with guns in their hands, rushing past as we loiter outside of the playroom.

“Guys, this is it,” I hiss. “We move now or else we lose him.”

Screams erupt into the air, and the girls who aren’t too incapacitated to move escape the rooms where they were being held. They scurry around, not sure where to run, but desperate enough to figure out a path. I take a deep breath and push open the door, only to find that it’s locked.

“Fuck!” I whisper-shout. “We need to get in there!”

Sergio kicks a leg out and the door crashes open. We dart inside and slam it closed again, turning to take in the den of sex and sin that greets us. My eyes water from the thick clouds of marijuana smoke that hang in the air as I walk around. It’s a sectioned-off space with several different ‘rooms’ and lots of moaning.

“Stay here,” I say in a low voice. “Keep an eye out. I’m going for Dominguez.”

With a racing heart, I peer into each curtained-off area until I find him in a dimly lit room, spread-eagle on a leather sofa.

I know it’s Dominguez as soon as I see his portly body, greased-back hair, and thick mustache. He’s got a blunt hanging out of his mouth, a stream of smoke billowing into the air above him.

He's naked from the waist down, a young girl who looks to be about sixteen on her knees in front of him, sucking his dick. I can see the tears glistening on her cheeks and my gut clenches. I take a few steps toward him, waiting for a guard to jump out at any second.

But he's alone from what I can tell.

Weird.

The guy is worth billions. He'd really leave himself that vulnerable?

I clutch the knife in my hand as I creep toward him. His eyes are drooped closed as he face-fucks the girl, and my vision takes on a deep red haze as my thoughts trip back to the hospital where my husband lies on a gurney in critical condition.

Because of this pig of a man.

My blood bubbles to the point of eruption as I inch closer, so close, the noxious scent of his cologne making me retch. I reach out, closing my hand around his neck. His eyes flutter open, red and bloodshot. His mustache quirks upward as he smiles at me.

"Did you really think you'd be able to turn the tables on me, Heaven? You thought you could beat me at my own game, didn't you? Your husband couldn't stop me, and neither can you."

"You tried hard, Dominguez. But you failed," I seethe.

"Your whole family failed!" he thunders. "When your brother took the life of my daughter, you all failed! But you will pay, Heaven. Your family, the Villanis. What happens today doesn't matter. There is still a debt to be paid, and you will all suffer just as my family has!"

I squeeze my hand harder and he grips my wrist with more force than I'd think he could muster since he's probably higher than the fucking heavens right now. "No," I say, my voice shaking. "This is over, right now! You're finished!" I scream, my voice piercing the air. The girl who'd been sucking him off scrambles away, seeking refuge in a corner of the room. "Take your debts and shove them up your fat ass, *ese!*"

Gunshots explode behind me, the impact so close, it rattles my brain. A loud crashing sound makes me shudder as I clutch Dominguez's thick neck. I shriek, panic crushing me as I yelp my brother's name.

"Heaven! Get out now!"

It's not Conor's voice but Sergio's. My skin prickles, fury consuming me as the realization strikes. Someone's gotten into the room. Someone has hurt Conor.

But I won't leave. Not yet.

No matter what.

"We need to leave! He's been—"

Sergio's voice comes to a stuttering halt, and more bullets pop into the air.

I let out a roar, kicking my foot against Dominguez's chest, sending the couch flying back against the floor. A strong hand grips my hair, flinging me against the plaster wall. I slam into it, my temple throbbing from the collision. I blink a couple of times, trying to clear my vision. I can make out a snickering Dominguez as he staggers to his feet, not even bothering to pull up his pants. The hand that flung me into the wall is back to grab me again.

I spin around, dragging the tip of my knife down the front of his abdomen, paralyzing his ability to retaliate. I slash the top of his wrist for good measure, rendering his hand completely useless.

His weapon clatters to the floor since I've just cut off his ability to fire it. I kick it far enough away where I can bend and grab it, turning toward my assailant and firing two shots to his chest.

He falls to the ground like a bag of cement, and I turn toward Dominguez who finally looks like he knows how fucked he is right now.

"You thought he was the right guy to protect you? Maybe you shouldn't have been so fucking doped up when you made the choice to have him guard you and your peanut-sized cock!" I sway toward him, my head still splitting from the harsh blow to my temple. "So what was I saying before?" I rasp, raising the gun and pointing it to his forehead. I pause for a breath, my shoulders

quaking. “Oh, right. You’re finished.”

I fire off as many shots as the gun has, watching the bullets make his body jerk left, right, and sideways as they plunder his insides.

The girl on the floor screams, clutching the sides of her head as I empty the clip, dropping the gun once he falls to the ground like the sack of shit he is.

My chest heaves as I run on my wobbly legs toward my brother and Sergio.

Conor writhes on the floor, Sergio kneeling right next to him. There’s a bloodstain spreading over his shirt, and his face is paler than usual. But he’s alive. Awake. And I feel a strange sensation flood my insides.

Relief.

Interesting considering that only yesterday, I’d wished him dead at least ten times.

Three more of Dominguez’s crew lay around them. Sergio looks up at me, his ice-blue eyes narrowed. “Your brother didn’t get the badass gene that you did. All of this work?” He points to himself. “Me.”

“Fuck off, Sergio,” Conor mumbles. “I took this bullet for you.”

“Tell whatever story you want, buddy,” Sergio says with an eye roll in my direction. “But if it wasn’t for me, you’d be guzzling beer and scarfing potatoes in hell. You took the bullet ’cause you couldn’t get out of its fucking way.”

Conor continues to mutter some semi-intelligible things and I step over the bodies, peering out the door that’s been halfway blown to bits. It’s complete and utter chaos outside of this room, and judging from the distant and blaring sirens, we don’t have much time to get away from here. Sergio and I hoist Conor up and drag him out of the room, sticking close to the walls.

Dominguez’s crew scatters like cockroaches, and the captive girls flee in droves.

Nobody pays much attention to us as we drag my brother to the car and ease him into the backseat. The transports disband as the sirens get closer and the girls run from the building in hordes. I shake my head watching them tear

through the park.

All of those women...

They'd have all but vanished from existence once they were transported to the auction sites, sold away into slavery or God only knows what else. A shiver runs through me and I put my hand on Sergio's arm.

"We need to get out of here. You drive, I'll take your phone."

He tosses it to me, slamming his foot on the gas. The car jerks backward and he throws it into drive, peeling around the bend and kicking up a cloud of dirt in our wake.

With shaking fingers, I go to his recent calls, see Roman's name, and click the call button. I toy with my engagement ring, using my thumb to slide it around my finger. It rings once...twice...three times.

But nobody picks up.

My pulse rockets and I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

There can be a million reasons why.

The ringer might be off.

The phone may have slipped out of Roman's pocket and he doesn't realize it's gone.

He might not have service in the hospital.

He might be talking to the doctor.

Fear clutches me like an icy cold hand to the throat, squeezing hard and constricting my breath.

"What happened? Voicemail?"

"Yeah," I choke.

Sergio's jaw tightens as he heads back downtown toward the hospital. "Don't get crazy," he says. "You don't know why he's not answering."

I nod, blinking fast to keep the tears in check. Jesus Christ, I'm the lead car in the hot mess express right now. My husband, my unbeknownst enemy, is lying on a hospital bed right now fighting for his life, and while I have so much to say to him...so many things to yell at him...I have no idea if I'll even get the chance.

I also don't know if I'll ever be able to look him in the eye again and tell him that despite everything, I'm evidently a glutton for punishment and I love him.

I wring my hands, staring at the phone in my lap, silently willing it to ring.

It doesn't.

Half an hour later, we're back at the hospital. I get out and motion for an orderly to help me lug Conor inside while Sergio parks the car. I rub my hands down my arms, chewing the inside of my mouth as I follow close behind them. Each step is more tentative than the last, as if my body knows what my mind refuses to comprehend.

My eyes dart left and right once we walk inside, and I stop short when I see Matteo's other brothers and father huddled in a corner. Roman sees me first and looks up, his gaze heavy, his forehead pinched. I blow out a few short breaths to keep control of myself before heading toward them.

"You didn't answer your phone," I say in a choked voice.

Roman furrows his brow and looks down at it. "Service is shit," he mutters.

I nod. "Have you heard anything?"

Dante shakes his head, pushing back his longish, dark hair. "No," he grunts.

"No news is good news," Sergio says, coming up behind us.

"No news is no news," Roman barks, getting up from the chair and walking away from the group. His brothers go after him as he stomps toward the nurses' station.

I completely agree. I always thought that was a stupid saying, as if it can sugarcoat the inevitable because the news is just a little bit delayed.

I meet the tired and drawn eyes of Paolo, who is hunched over in the chair across from me, his head in his hands.

My father-in-law.

I can see the pain etched into his features, the knowledge that his oldest son and right hand is lying helpless in a hospital right now as he is slowly plummeting into an abyss of grief.

“He’s a good man,” he says to me in a thick Italian accent. “He was doing right by his family.”

“And wrong by mine,” I say in a low voice. “By *me*.”

Paolo nods. “Yes. And I could tell yesterday how conflicted he was about his decision to partner with Dominguez. He was not himself at all. He was torn between wanting to control his future and wanting something else.” He nods at me. “The love of his wife.”

“He was about to sell me out along with the rest of my family,” I whisper, my lips quivering.

“That was the original plan, yes,” Paolo muses. “But over the past weeks, something changed. Yesterday wasn’t about business. I can tell you that my son isn’t the type to fall hard and fast for any woman. But you changed that. It was written all over his face, and when Dominguez lashed out, threatening your life, I knew Matteo would do everything to stop him and to keep you safe, even if it meant the cartel would declare open season on my family as well.”

“And you supported that? You weren’t angry that he abandoned his obligations to the family by going up against Dominguez?”

Paolo shrugs his shoulders. “When Matteo was younger, he wasn’t as, ah, structured in his ways as he is today. He suffered a lot of loss and it taught him a lot. I watched him become the man he is today, a strong, disciplined, and strategic thinker. I trust him and his decisions. We may not always agree on the ‘how’, but we agree on the ‘what’. Family and loyalty are most important. If you have those things, you can battle any enemy.” Paolo takes my hand in his. “And he needs an equally strong woman by his side.”

“He saved my life,” I say, my voice trembling “After I’d overheard the whole plot this morning. He came after me...to protect me.”

“Because he loves you,” Paolo says. “I know you’re confused and you feel that he betrayed you, but he wants to make it right. Give him the chance to do what he vowed to do.”

I let out a deep sigh, my shoulders sagging.

If only I get that chance.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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MATTEO

“**M**atteo, can you hear me?”

A male voice pulls me out of the thick web of fog consuming my conscious mind and I shift in its direction. I clench my teeth, what feels like a searing flame incinerating the left side of my body.

“The medication is going to kick in soon,” he continues. “I’m Dr. Savia. Do you remember what happened to you, Matteo?”

I blink fast, the harsh fluorescent lights making me squint. “There was a shooting...”

Dr. Savia nods. “From what I hear, you saved a woman’s life by diving in front of her.”

“My wife,” I rasp. “Is she okay?”

“As far as I know, only you and a Declan Mulligan were brought in.”

“Declan,” I mutter. “What about him? Do you know anything?”

“Minor wound. He’s been patched up and will be discharged soon.” Dr. Savia shakes his head. “I don’t know the circumstances of why you were in the middle of a shootout, but you were damn lucky to have gotten to this Level 1 trauma center when you did. If you hadn’t,” he says with a shake of his head. “It’s very likely we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. You were hit with a high-caliber bullet, which should have killed you. But like I said, you’re a lucky man. It didn’t tear up your insides, but it punctured a

lung and nicked an artery, two injuries that would have been deadly if we didn't get you into surgery immediately upon arrival." He quirks an eyebrow. "Like I said. Lucky."

"Yeah," I say.

"The cops are here waiting to talk to you," Dr. Savia continues. "They'll want details of the shooting, but I have a feeling you already know how these procedurals work." He grins. "I told them you were still in recovery, so that buys you some time."

"Thanks," I rasp. Christ, it hurts to take in a breath. "When did you say the medication would kick in?"

He grins, backing out of the room. "Soon. Any last requests?"

"Yeah, can you find my wife?"

"I'll go and check the waiting room. I'm sure you want to make sure she's okay."

"And to make sure we're still married," I grumble, letting my head fall toward the window. The blinds are drawn but slivers of light peek in.

Looks like a beautiful day for new beginnings.

To me, anyway.

I seriously doubt Heaven will feel the same way.

She's brutal, unforgiving, and ruthless, qualities I loved even though I'd always known they'd be directed at me.

So now I'm looking at two potential and lethal enemies — my soon-to-be ex-wife *and* Dominguez.

Jesus, did this plan ever backfire on me.

I'm the guy who's supposed to maintain control, not the one who invites in chaos.

Now the latter is what controls me and my future.

The tips of my fingers and toes tingle, and I flex and unflex them to rid myself of the sensation. But instead of stopping it, it travels up my legs and down my arms.

I clench my teeth as the unsettling sensation creeps through my insides.

A knock on the door jolts me. I jerk my head toward the door, wincing as the pain in my side intensifies at the sudden movement.

Heaven's head pops inside and my breath hitches as she approaches the bed, twisting her engagement ring.

At least she's still wearing it.

"How are you feeling?" she murmurs, slowly inching toward me.

"Like someone lanced me with a hot poker," I say. "But the doc says I should feel lucky."

She nods. "Do you?"

"Not if I'm about to lose the one thing I tried to protect." I hear the words come out of my mouth and feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience. Maybe that gunshot wound did more damage than the doctor realizes. How I can feel this way so soon...at all...is beyond my comprehension.

Love.

Fuck me.

But if honesty is the price I have to pay, it's a check I'm all too willing to write.

"I hated you a few hours ago," she says, her eyebrows knitting together.

"What about now? Do you still hate me?"

"Well, I had a little time to work out my anger issues," she says, the corners of her lips curling upward.

"Oh yeah? How'd you do that?" I ask, lacing her fingers with mine, which are growing numb by the second.

“I stormed the Dominguez compound and iced the bastard,” she says with a self-satisfied smile on her face.

My eyes widen. “You went into his fucking neighborhood? Are you crazy?”

She nods, her blue eyes glittering. “I wasn’t alone. Sergio and Conor came with me.”

The numbness travels up my torso and down my arms, making my fingers go limp in hers.

“You could have been killed,” I mumble, my tongue suddenly feeling thick and dry like a wad of cotton was stuffed into it.

“But I wasn’t,” she says, swaying closer to the bed.

“What about Serge and Conor?” My vision goes hazy and the sharp lights now look like clouds hovering over Heaven’s head.

“Conor got himself shot,” she says with an eye roll. “But Sergio and I got him out of there. We saved a lot of girls today, Matteo,” she says, her eyes shiny with tears. “I wish I’d have been able to do the same for Molly, but at least I helped someone. A lot of someones who now will have the chance to live.”

“You’re an amazing woman,” I whisper, fatigue crashing over me like an all-consuming wave. “I love you.”

“Thank you for saving my life,” she says, leaning down to graze the side of my face.

“So, are we getting a divorce?” I croak. “Or are you just gonna save yourself the effort and kill me, too?”

She cocks her head to the side. “You make me sound so vicious.”

“You are the most nefarious woman I know,” I mumble, expelling a deep sigh as my body settles against the mattress. “And I can’t live without you.”

Heaven nods, grazing my lips with hers. “Well, you know what they say. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

“Trust me, I’m gonna keep myself buried inside of you.” My voice fades, my eyelids heavy.

“I love you, Matteo.” Her soft words caress my troubled soul, the last sounds I hear before I tumble into the blissful darkness that beckons me.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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HEAVEN

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TWO DAYS LATER

I pull open the door to Molly's after pausing for a split second outside. My eyes fall to the same spot where I'd cradled Matteo, waiting for the EMTs to hustle him into the back of that ambulance.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

Aunt Maura rushes up to me, enveloping me in a tight hug. "Heaven, *a leanbh*, how is Matteo?"

I smile. "He's doing great. The doctors think he'll be released in the next couple of days. They're just keeping an eye on him to make sure that he heals up enough to make the trip home."

Home.

Our home, the one we've only just started to build.

She smooths my hair away from my face. "You look happy. So very happy."

I can't help the smile that spreads across my lips. "I am. Who'd have guessed that, huh?"

Aunt Maura shrugs. "When it's right, it's right."

"Yeah, but how often do you hear when it's arranged *and* right?" I giggle.

"You got lucky, I suppose."

I did. Damn lucky.

We all did, in so many ways.

And in large part, because of me.

Matteo unleashed the threat, and I crushed it.

Talk about girl power. It's practically oozing from my pores, something I don't plan to let anyone forget for a very long time.

Case in point, the meeting I was summoned to at my father's office.

He asked me and Conor to join him here for lunch, and as soon as I stepped into the pub, I immediately flew into defensive mode.

I really have to stop that.

There's no reason for it, especially since I pretty much single-handedly saved our family.

But since I'm still sans dick, I guess old habits die hard.

"Dad in the back?" I ask.

Aunt Maura nods with a smile. "He's waiting for ya. And I'll pack up some lunch for you to take to the hospital when you're finished here."

"Thanks," I whisper with a wink that tells her I appear to be a lot more confident than I feel right now.

But like Sergio said, I'm a badass bitch. I shouldn't have to prove a damn thing to anyone.

So I square my shoulders, straighten my spine, and push open the door that leads to my father's office. I take a deep breath as I knock, swallowing hard when I hear my father's voice asking me to enter.

I twist the knob and walk into the room, settling into a chair opposite my brother. Conor's hand rests against his side, the area where he got shot, and my father's arm is in a sling.

I'm the only one unwounded.

I enjoy that little victory as I wait for my father to speak.

"Heaven, Conor," he says, looking between us. "I think you both know why you're here."

Conor lets out a huff, turning his head away.

I clasp my hands together, sitting up straighter.

“Heaven, I made you a target for Dominguez. I made all of us targets.” He sighs, settling back against his chair. “I betrayed your confidence and your trust, and for that I apologize.”

I give a quick nod.

“Conor,” Dad says, turning his attention to my brother. “You helped make the situation right with Dominguez. You accompanied Heaven and you—”

“Wait!” I say in an irritated voice, standing up from my chair. “Are you seriously telling me that this meeting is about lauding *Conor*? Conor, who caused this whole mess in the first place? Conor, who couldn’t even stay standing long enough to have my back when I killed Dominguez and one of his guards?” I rake a hand through my hair. “This is such bullshit! What the hell do I have to do to get your respect, Dad? To show you that a woman can rule just as well as, and in my case, a whole hell of a lot better, than a man?”

Conor twists to glare at me, cringing at the sudden shift. “I made a fucking mistake, Heaven. Get over it. Think bigger picture. Who the hell will take you more seriously than me? I’m the oldest son. It’s expected that I take over!”

“That’s just it, Conor,” Dad says with a shake of his head. “Getting over it is the big obstacle here. Your indiscretion with Dominguez isn’t your first, not by a longshot, and while we don’t need to rehash the very colorful past you’ve painted, you need to acknowledge that your sister turned a very deadly situation around for all of us.”

“I took a bullet so she could do her little dance with Dominguez! I let her take the revenge shot, for Christ’s sake!”

“You created the situation and a lot of other ones for the family!” I bellow. “But you know what? I’m tired of battling with you both over this. I didn’t come here to hear about how solid of a boss Conor will be, okay? Take a good look at me,” I seethe. “You can’t see one single scratch on me because they’re all on the inside! Years of battle scars, and I’m tired of fighting the war.” I look at my father. “You want Conor to take over as boss? Fine! But you will lose me. I did everything you asked of me. I have for years! And because I have a vagina—”

“Stop! Right now!” Dad thunders, pressing his good hand to his forehead. “And don’t pull out that word, for fuck’s sake.” He points his finger at me. “Conor backed you up the other day. He helped find Dominguez, and for that, I thank him. He tried to correct the wrongs, which is important for a leader. And although he made mistakes, he is still the oldest male in the family. That said, my decision has been made. Conor, you will succeed me. Heaven, you will support him the way he sees fit.”

Oh my God...he didn’t just speak those words!

Conor turns his gaze up toward me. It’s one of triumph, and if I had a gun in my hand, I really think I’d shoot that smirk off of his cocky bastard face.

I press my fingertips to my temples. “How could you promote him? After everything? After acknowledging the damage he did? After seeing how his choices ravaged us?”

Dad presses his lips together. “It’s the right move for us. People will take us seriously with a man holding the reins.”

“He’s a fucking sick and twisted bastard who tried to kill me!” I shriek.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Conor says with a yawn. “We had a fight. It got a little heated, but whatever.”

My jaw drops, and at this point, I really don’t think my eyes can widen a single bit more. “A little heated?” I scream. I grab the sleeve of my shirt, ready to pull it up, to show my father how very heated things got, but I stop when I see my father’s face.

He shows absolutely no remorse for what he just did to me by making that announcement.

His expression is stoic, uncaring, and hardened to the point where I seriously doubt I could ever penetrate it, no matter what I say.

“The decision has been made,” Dad says in a cold voice. “Heaven, you did your part for this family. You saved our future by marrying Villani, and for that we are grateful. I have a lot of ideas about how we will work to expand your position within the organization. You will be well compensated and will remain in control of the finances for all of our businesses...”

He keeps talking about this new fabulous role he's created for me and how important my job will become in support of Conor, but the blood rushing between my ears prevents me from hearing anything except my own toxic thoughts.

My gut twists, my knuckles white as I grip the chair. "Stop talking," I rasp.

Dad hesitates, his eyebrows knitting. "Heaven?"

I hold up a hand. "I don't want to hear any more. Not another single word from either of you."

"Do not disrespect me by interrupting, *iníon*," Dad says, a warning tone in his voice.

"Don't call me that," I hiss. "Because it indicates a relationship between us that no longer exists. I am not your daughter anymore. I am finished with this. With both of you. With the family." My pulse spikes, my heart thumping like a jackhammer against my ribs. "If you ask me, *this* is the biggest sham of all. I have given you everything, done your will even when I haven't agreed with the direction, and risked my life and my happiness for the good of the family." I step toward my father. "And don't ever talk to me about respect. For years, you've given me orders that I have followed without ever once challenging you, and in return, you shovel bullshit false hope, telling me that one day, you'll actually repay me with the respect *I* deserve. But you never have. You've just taken from me, never once given anything in return. And today, you've cut me down for the last time. You want to promote this fucking moron over me and expect that I'm going to support him and watch him lead this family so far down a rabbit hole that it will never see the light of day again? Because he's a *man*?" I shake my head, my fists clenched tight against my sides. "You're wrong, Dad. So very wrong. It's all so very fucking wrong!"

The stoic façade on my father's face slips a tiny bit as I stalk toward the office door. "Heaven, don't you dare touch that door knob. You will not walk away from this conversation!"

"As far as I'm concerned, the conversation is over," I seethe. "Because I am finished with it, with you, and with this life. Done." My jaw twitches, my teeth gritted. "*Forever*."

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EPILOGUE

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Matteo

“I’m so nervous and excited,” Heaven murmurs, placing her hand over mine on the stick shift of our rental car. I’m glad we chose a convertible. There’s nothing like driving along the coast and being consumed by the elements.

The balmy sea breeze whips through my hair as I follow the resort transport around a bend. Dusk has fallen and it’s almost time for the underwater mating show to begin.

And no, I’m not talking about me and Heaven.

This show is different and one which my wife has been researching endlessly since we made plans to vacation in Bonaire.

Just like she always wanted.

“The pictures and videos are incredible,” she breathes. “I just wish...” A sigh escapes her lips. “Well, you know.”

“I do,” I say, downshifting as the car in front of us takes a left turn. There’s a lot that she wishes. She wishes Molly was here to experience the very thing they’d sworn to do together. She wishes things with her family could have worked out differently. She wishes she could share this experience with all of them.

And unfortunately, I’m not a genie.

I can only make so much happen.

I surprised her with this trip because I know how rough the past couple of months have been for her and I wanted to give her something special, a new set of memories. She's spent a little bit of time with her Aunt Maura and with Patrick since the fallout but hasn't contacted any of her other brothers and certainly not her father.

They haven't reached out either, the fucking pricks.

Anger clutches my gut, the same way it does anytime I think of her family and how horribly they treated her. Conor, as far as I'm concerned, should be dead with that asshole Declan lying in a shallow grave next to his.

I've been tempted to turn that into a reality more times than once.

But as devastated as Heaven is about excommunicating herself from her family, I know she'd never want them to meet the end I'd very much like to deliver.

Although, if given the chance, she might just slit Conor's throat.

It's be therapeutic, if nothing else.

"We have a lot to look forward to, babe," I remind her. "Once we get back, we'll be headed out to Las Vegas to work with the other families of the syndicate and put plans in place to grow our influence. The Excelsior is thriving so it means a lot more opportunity for expansion in the gambling industry." The Excelsior is the new hotel and casino we've built with our Sicilian business partners, the Marcone family. Sergio has been running the operations since it opened. But Vegas represents more than just new business ventures for our family. Partnering with the Marcones also introduced us to the Severinov bratva, a Russian family who already owns a lot of the area we're looking to rule. Building this syndicate gives us endless possibilities for expansion. It also gives us muscle times three, which never hurts in our line of work. I know being in Manhattan is hard on Heaven right now, so while Roman handles our business in the city, Heaven and I will take a much-deserved break in Sin City.

I maneuver the Mercedes off of the pavement and onto the rockier terrain where our dive guide, Sem, has already parked. He took one look at the car and smirked when I said I wanted to drive it to the dive site.

Now I can see why.

I pull up next to him and press my foot on the brake. Heaven jumps out of the car and rushes over to the edge of the rocky cliff that overlooks the Caribbean Sea. There's a metal ladder that leads into the water here at Oil Slick Leap, and even though it's not quite pitch black, the semi-darkness is disconcerting enough.

Guys with guns and knives don't scare me, but novice scuba diving in the dark gives me pause.

Hence, the reason why I hired Sem.

I haven't survived this long because I've made dumbass decisions.

Sem gives us an overview of what'll happen once we get into the water. I got certified and Heaven got a refresher course after I surprised her with the trip, but this will be our first ever night dive. She strips out of her t-shirt and shorts, and my dick jumps when I see her in that skimpy metallic bikini I love so much. It barely covers her, and when I turn to glance at Sem, I can see he appreciates the view as much as I do.

I walk toward her, stripping down to my board shorts and effectively blocking the scuba striptease my wife is unknowingly performing for our dive guide. She pulls on her wetsuit quickly, clapping her hands as I slide my arms and legs into the snug material.

After a few more minutes of getting our equipment on and secured, we're ready for the underwater adventure that awaits us.

By the time we're ready to step into the sea, thousands of stars glitter in the otherwise black sky. We walk toward the end of the rocks overlooking the water, our flippers flapping against the dirt and gravel. Heaven looks at me as we stand at the edge. I can see the bright smile plastered across her face. "I love you so much," she murmurs. "Thank you for this."

I give her a quick kiss. "I love you, too. Enjoy it, babe."

I clamp my hand over my mask and regulator and all at once, we take a giant leap into the sea. I have an overwhelming urge to pee, which is normal. But then the feeling of weightlessness takes over and I take my first few breaths

tentatively since breathing underwater doesn't exactly come naturally to me.

I can feel Heaven's hand on my arm.

At least, I think it's her—

“Fuck,” I mutter, kicking my legs to stay afloat.

The depths of the sea light up all around us like someone flipped a switch and turned on a bioluminescent lamp. The ostracods glow all around us, tiny circles of blueish white lights in linear form.

It's mesmerizing, unlike anything I've ever seen or imagined in my life.

I drag one of my hands through the water, the sea illuminating in its wake. This dive requires total darkness because you can't see the bioluminescence with a flashlight. I know from Heaven's hours of research that I've just agitated the minute plankton under the waves.

A most brilliant mating display.

I catch Heaven's eye since the light given off by the ostracods gives me the slightest ability to see, and her gaze tells me everything I need to know right now.

Her eyes glow as brightly as the crustaceans surrounding us.

It's a vision I will never, ever forget.

Once we drag ourselves out of the water, we pull off our masks and regulators, then strip out of our wetsuits. This time, I position myself in front of Heaven before she has a chance to push down the fabric, just in case any bits of her bikini shifted away from parts they're supposed to cover.

I like Sem. I really don't want to hurt him.

I pop open the trunk of the convertible and toss Heaven a towel.

“Oh my God!” she sings out loud. “That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!”

Sem smiles, tossing his wetsuit into the back of the truck and turning on the ignition so we have some light. “I'm glad you enjoyed it. It's a very special

experience for newlyweds.”

Heaven grins at me. “Very special.”

I shake Sem’s hand, sliding two hundred-dollar bills into his hand, and thank him profusely. His eyes widen when he sees the money. I clap him on the back. “Thanks for taking care of us tonight.”

He grins and salutes me. “Anytime, Mr. Villani! Are you sure you don’t need me to come back and guide you back to the resort? It wouldn’t be a problem at all!”

I shake my head. “We’ll be fine, but thanks.”

Sem jumps into the truck and pulls out of the parking lot, kicking up gravel as he veers back onto the main road.

I turn toward Heaven, pulling her close and nuzzling her ear as she breathes into my neck. “Mm, you taste salty.”

“Be careful. If you lick me too much, you might bloat.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

She puts her arms around my neck. “So, this whole light show is kinda fitting, you know? Since it’s our honeymoon and it’s a mating display...it gives me some ideas,” Heaven tilts her head back, her blue eyes glittering.

My lips curl upward. “Oh yeah? Like?”

“Like maybe we should do like the ostracods,” she murmurs. “And make a baby.”

My dick thickens against the fabric of my shorts, pressing against her thigh. “I think that’s a really good idea,” I say in a husky voice. I step backward, grabbing two thick comforters from the trunk and spreading them out on the ground. The light from the trunk shines enough to give us a little bit of light as we sink down onto the comforter.

“I’m glad nobody else is around tonight. We got lucky.” Heaven leans into the plush center of the makeshift mattress, letting out a contented sigh. “It’s so cushy. Smart thing, packing two with all of these craggy rocks around us.”

“I’m a strategist,” I say with a grin, shoving my shorts to my ankles and kicking them off. I kneel down onto the comforters, straddling her. I untie each side of the bikini bottom covering her sweet pussy, and then reach behind her to release her lush breasts from the string bikini top.

I crush my lips against hers, plunging my tongue into her hot and hungry mouth. She fists my hair as our tongues circle one another, coiling heat radiating deep in my gut from the energy she breathes into my body.

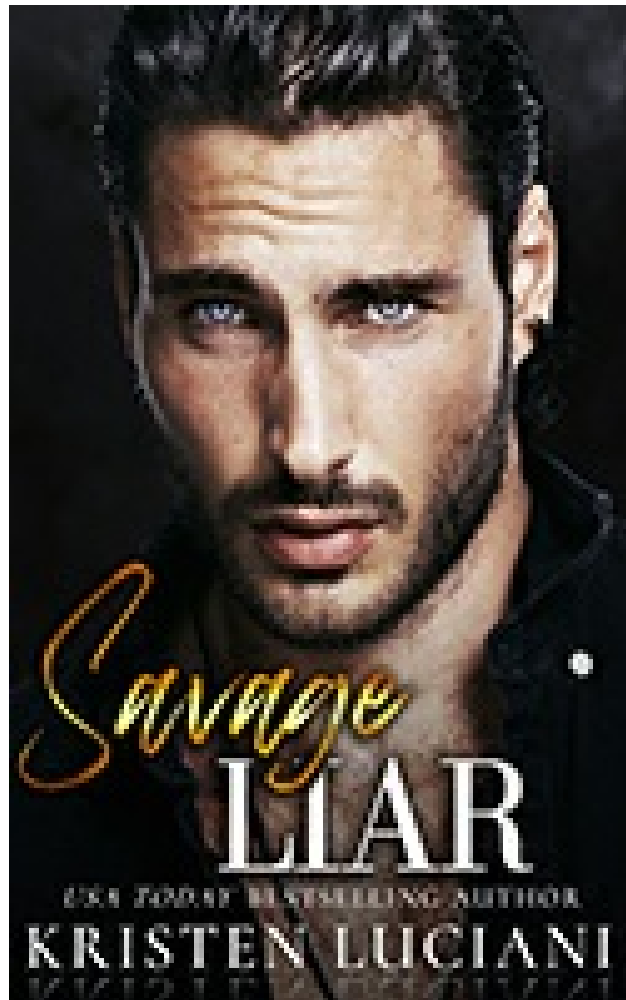
I slide a hand down the small of her back, gently forcing her hips upward. The head of my cock grazes her wet slit before pressing into her all-consuming heat. Her walls tighten as she gasps into my mouth, her desire blanketing me in warmth. I thrust into her pussy, her lips clenching around me. Our teeth crack as we devour each other like we’re our last meals on Earth. I swivel my hips, my cock throbbing inside of her. She pulls me deep, farther into her depths, as she whimpers into my mouth. Her body trembles, quivering against mine as a rush of juices flows over my cock. I wrap my arms tight around her as I drive my hips against her, a burst of light exploding behind my eyes as the orgasm tears through me and I empty myself inside of her, giving her everything I have.

My wife.

My life.

My forever.

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CHAPTER ONE: JAELYN - THREE YEARS EARLIER

“Not guilty.”

The words assault my ears and my heart, roaring over and over between my temples as the courtroom melee ensues. A collective, loud gasp follows the verdict, drowned out by a sea of shocked voices humming around me. Camera flashes snap left and right, temporarily blinding me as I jump up from the bench, craning my neck to see those two greasy bastards in their matching orange jumpsuits. They're the now-free men who shattered my world and now, thanks to the incompetence of the fucking asshole lawyer who was prosecuting my parents' case, get to walk away scot-free. I swallow down the scream bubbling in my chest, clenching my fists so tight, my fingernails might draw blood. Red floods my vision, my chest heaving as sharp breaths slice at my lungs.

My older brother Nate grabs my hand, standing up next to me and pulling me into his chest as tears sting my eyes. Every part of my body quivers and chatters, not from the cold but from the anger and regret that now clouds my life.

He tilts my chin up, staring into my eyes. His jaw twitches but his expression is impassive, as usual. It's very rare for him to freely give away his feelings, but the jaw twitch is his big tell. I know he's just as devastated as I am right now. He's just much better at hiding his emotions. Nobody but me ever knows what he's thinking.

Or plotting, for that matter.

But me?

I give it all away — my face, my body language, my voice. They tell all. There are never any questions about how I feel. I obviously suck at poker, and I let my emotions rage like wildfire.

Nate and I are the exact opposite in that regard.

But today I can see him falter. His carefully crafted exterior has a few hairline cracks that are rapidly spreading, threatening to expose what festers deep within his fortress.

Just for once, I'd like to see it crumble around him, exposing what I know is behind those walls.

Just for once, I want to see him shed his thick skin and grieve with me.

And by grieve, I, of course, mean kill.

Nate holds me tight against him as we sidestep spectators who are still marveling over the fact that the prosecutor couldn't get a conviction, and how one of the key pieces of evidence mysteriously went missing before the verdict was delivered.

Yeah, I wonder the same thing.

But when you go to battle with one of the biggest drug cartels in the world, be prepared to play the game according to their rules.

Everybody eventually bends.

Except my father, which is why we're standing here while all hope for justice dissipates into the air.

A knot in my stomach twists and tightens, my pulse throbbing against my neck as I catch a glimpse of the bailiff unlocking the handcuffs on the two men who destroyed my world. Brothers. Desi and Derek Bowman. Two mules for the Becerra Cartel out of Mexico. But they don't only run drugs. They also gun down anyone who doesn't share the same loyalty to the cartel that they do...basically, anyone who gets in their way of making a shit ton of money. I narrow my eyes at them. They're laughing, giving each other high fives and clapping their shady ass lawyer, Marlon Thomas, on the back.

He's the seediest of the seedy and expensive as hell. His only client is the Becerra Cartel and they keep him plenty busy from what I hear and read. If it wasn't for the deep pockets of the cartel and their partnership with the rival motorcycle club that the Bowman idiots belong to, they'd be behind bars before another second had the chance to slip on by.

I grip the top of the bench with both hands, stopping without warning, my heart beating out of control. White spots blast in front of my eyes and I sink back down onto the seat, my knees quaking. Nate sits next to me, cupping my chin in his large hand. “Jae, are you okay?”

I can hear his voice, but it’s muffled, like it’s coming through a thick fog. My knuckles turn white from the tight grip I have on the bench and blood rushes between my temples, the pounding intensifying as the Bowman brothers get closer and closer to the double doors of the courtroom.

Closer to freedom.

They get a second chance.

Unlike my parents.

Guilt hangs over my head like a dark, ominous cloud, hovering low like a menacing threat.

It should have been me.

Nate knows it too, although he’d never say the words.

The President of the Rebel Vipers motorcycle club can’t afford to let others know what he’s thinking.

Ever.

He says a few more things, but the only thing I hear are clanging cymbals echoing between my temples. Rod and Benny, Nate’s closest friends and his Vice-President and Sergeant at Arms, are on my other side, murmuring words I can’t make out because my ears are too occupied with other sounds... bloodcurdling screams, cries for help, and vows for revenge.

Revenge...against all of them!

I try to gulp down a deep breath, the spots now long flashes streaking across my vision. Flashes of white tinged with orange.

And yellow...the color of their teeth when their triumphant smiles pummel my heart from mere feet away as their lawyer leads them out of the courtroom.

The farther away they get, the faster my heart gallops, to the point where the white spots morph into darkness.

And the pits of my own personal hell swallow me whole.

My eyes flutter open and I bring one of my hands to the side of my head. “Ow,” I moan, gingerly grazing my fingertips over a large and very painful lump. I wince as the sharp sting blasts through my skull. My stomach lurches as Nate speeds through a light. The sun sets over the horizon and I feel like I’ve lost hours.

Days.

Maybe a whole lifetime.

That’s how long ago it feels since the fate of the Bowman brothers was decided, not by the letter of the law, but by the cartel.

“You wiped out in the courtroom, remember?” Benny volunteers. “Smacked your head on the top of the bench.”

“How many times?” I grumble, expelling a shallow breath. “Feels like someone slammed my head into a door about ten times.”

“With your big mouth, I’m actually surprised that hasn’t happened to you yet,” Rod quips from the front seat and I flip him off, settling against the leather. Muted white noise hums inside of my head, and fuzzy memories pop into my mind like bullets.

Seeing the Bowman brothers strut past our bench as free men.

Collapsing into the cold, hard floor of the courtroom.

Shock morphing into the most intense agony my soul has ever endured.

Torrents of tears and hysterics that followed.

“I gave you a Valium so you could calm down,” Nate mutters from the driver’s seat. “And you blacked out. I didn’t expect you to sleep for this

long.”

The guys didn't take their motorcycles to the courthouse today. Nate wanted to be close to me, to keep an eye out...just in case. The cartel ordered a hit on my parents to send a message, but who knows if they forgot a post script? Nate figured we'd all be safer this way.

Together.

The rest of the club wanted to come, but Nate only allowed Benny and Rod to join us for the verdict. I stare at the back of my brother's head, his dark hair slicked back, his spine stiff as an iron rod. He clutches the steering wheel tight, his jaw even tighter. He didn't look as shocked as I felt when the verdict was delivered, and even now, it seems like he's on autopilot. A man on a mission...that mission is what scares me. Nate doesn't go off the deep end. He's level-headed, controlled, and calculating. He doesn't do crazy.

That's my department.

But right now, I can see his teeth are clenched, and if he was clutching someone's neck the same way he's gripping that steering wheel, their eyes would pop out of their skulls. Something is up with him and if I didn't know better, I'd think he was prepared for this.

It's almost as if he—

No. That's a crazy thought. He couldn't have known, right? Not after he convinced me over and over that justice would be served.

By whom, he didn't specify. I just assumed it'd be by the state. Maybe I should have probed him harder. But the reality is, I guess I clung so tight to what he said because I wanted to believe that they'd get what was coming to them, that they'd end up in gen pop with a bunch of derelicts just like them who'd slash their throats because their club has started more wars and shed more blood in south Florida than any other gangs and mafia families put together.

Needless to say, hate for their club runs deep.

But not as deep as their pockets because they run a plethora of drugs through their pipelines across the country. They don't like competition, and neither

does the cartel.

And dirty money runs the fucking world, so...

Not guilty.

I squint, shifting in the backseat. “Where are we? And how long have I been out?”

“Headed toward the clubhouse,” Nate says. “You’ve been asleep for seven hours.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. I guess grief really does take a toll on you. My brain just decided to give in to the blissful haze of nothingness. I wish I’d been able to stay for a little while longer.

“I think this is a bad idea,” Rod grumbles under his breath.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, did I?” Nate snaps, hanging a sharp left. I grip the ‘oh, shit’ bar and hang on for my life as he zooms down the secluded dirt road that leads to the clubhouse.

“I really don’t feel like going inside, Nate,” I say. “I don’t want to talk to anyone. I know they all mean well, but—”

“We’re not going inside,” he snips. “I’m dropping off Rod and Benny, who haven’t seen us since we left the courthouse,” he says in a warning tone, tossing a glance at Rod over his shoulder. Without warning, he skids to a stop half a mile back from the clubhouse. “Get out here,” he orders the guys. “Your bikes are in the woods where we left ’em. Ride up to the clubhouse and stick to the plan.”

I furrow my brow. “What plan? Nate, what the hell are you—?”

He turns to me, silencing me with a look that clearly says ‘this isn’t the time to run that big mouth.’

I get the message and snap my lips shut.

Rod and Benny exchange a look and Benny grabs me, hugging me tight. He’s always been a good friend. God only knows, he’s bailed me out of plenty of screw-ups in the past couple of years.

“Be good,” he murmurs.

Tears spring to my eyes. It sounds suspiciously like a goodbye.

Oh no, not another one of those...

I don't know how much more I can take today!

I breathe in his familiar scent of worn leather, beer, and weed, squeezing him and burying my face in his cut until I feel Nate gently push me away from him. I blink back the tears, managing a quivering smile at Rod. “Bye,” I mouth, knowing that if I try to speak, I will erupt into another round of hysterics. And judging by the serious expression on Nate's face, I know I don't have that luxury.

The guys scramble out of the car and disappear into the thick green foliage as Nate swings the car around and heads back down the dirt road.

“Nate,” I say. “Tell me what's going on right now.”

“Jae,” he says, his voice thick. “What happens tonight marks the end of our life here. We leave and never look back, do you understand?”

My heart thuds hard in my chest, tiny hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention despite the balmy breeze flowing in through the car window. “Leave your club?” I say, my voice cracking. “You're the President! How can you just—?”

“I'm doing this for you, for us, and for the club.” He slams his hand on the steering wheel. “Jae, the reason why Mom and Dad are dead is because of me, because I fucked up. I made moves that went against the cartel and against the Steel Reapers MC. I thought I was doing something good for the club, but it backfired. This is all on me,” he hisses. “And the only way to make things right is to make sure that when we finally get our justice, they know exactly who served it.”

“And then what? The cartel finds some other schmucks to come and off *you*?” My voice rises in panic. “How is that a good plan?”

Nate pulls over on the side of the dark road and turns to look at me in the backseat. “I knew this would happen the day the trial started. That evidence

didn't just magically disappear, Jae. The cartel was never gonna lose this battle. Ever. And no, I can't singlehandedly take down a cartel, but I can sure as hell cut off their hands and their dicks. Send my own message."

"Then what?" I whisper.

"Then we disappear and start over somewhere far away from here. I leave the club behind, and they're protected because they had no involvement at all in what's about to happen."

"You'd give up the club? Just like that? You've been with these guys for years. They're your family."

He nods, his shoulders slumping a little bit. "They are. But so are you, and so were Mom and Dad. I can't help Mom and Dad anymore, but I can help you and the club." He lets out a sigh. "It's the only way. Rod will take over as President, and Benny will move up. They're the only two who know we're leaving, but I didn't give them details about why, and I didn't tell them where we're going. Better that nobody knows. I'm acting alone on this to keep heat off of everyone else. We'll be okay. I've cleared out all of the bank and investment accounts. We leave tonight."

I let his words settle into my conscious. Leave Miami and everything we've ever known behind? Forever? I mean, the club was almost as much my place as his. All of the people we'd known forever were part of it. It's our extended family, the only family we have left. And now we're supposed to just walk away? Into the unknown? "So you really did know," I muse.

"I had to be prepared," he says gruffly. "I couldn't wait until the verdict was delivered and then scramble to get our shit in order. I knew we need to act fast and to hit hard."

"How can you be sure they won't find us?" My voice trembles as the gravity of our situation settles on my head and heart like a lead brick.

"Look, the only thing you need to know is that I will always protect you, Jae. I made mistakes before, big ones. But I won't make them again. This is our only chance, the only way we survive what's going to happen next."

"And exactly what is that, Nate?" I ask, an icy coldness snaking through my insides. "What happens next?"

His eyes darken, lips stretched into a tight line. “We kill them all.”

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CHAPTER TWO: SERGIO - PRESENT DAY

“Capacity is down by about twenty percent as of right now.” Enrico, my top security guy, hands me a slip of paper with a bunch of numbers on it.

“Shit,” I mutter, wishing like hell I hadn’t been stuck in the entertainment sector of Operation: Make Vegas Our Bitch. My family recently partnered with a few others in an attempt to take over the gambling industry here in the States, and we’re starting here in Nevada. But with all of the competition popping up all around our nightclubs, it’s like trying to breathe life into a fucking corpse. Competition lurks in the shadows, just waiting for me to revive shit so they can snuff it out again.

I volunteered to come out here to Vegas, but it was a way for me to make my own name, away from Sicily and my past. It’s not like I’m the boss. That title is reserved for my oldest brother Matteo. I’m not the youngest, either, like Roman, who always gets the cush jobs because he’s the baby. And thank fuck I’m not my other brother Dante, who manages to set fire to everything in his path because he’s such a ticking time bomb, always running into battle, usually without armor because he never thinks first.

But me? I get no special treatment. No favors. No latitude.

I’m just expected to deliver, no excuses, only results.

Nightlife in Vegas is hard to control, even for a group of families with deep pockets. We’re competing with major drug cartels and motorcycle clubs out here, and they all have tons of cash to throw at their businesses. They also run side jobs through their clubs, running all kinds of shit through them — drugs, guns, contraband, women.

Nothing is off limits out here.

Hence the name Sin City.

And nobody seems to obey boundaries.

We've tried to keep things civil, but they see us as a threat to their livelihoods. I get that. Our mass invasion has the competition on edge, and they'd love nothing more than to exterminate us.

They're doing a damn good job of it, too, which is why I'm stuck in this role.

I'm supposed to be the savior, the guy with the master plan.

If I'm successful, I get a seat at the table.

If my idea tanks, I'll be running security right alongside Enrico.

A voice. It's all I want.

Well, that and a future that isn't dictated to me. I want to call my own damn shots for once. I figured I'd get my chance when I got out here. Running the Excelsior Hotel and Casino for the past year, the hottest new property on the Strip, has been great, but we're already solid on the hotel and restaurant businesses. And I'm not running the place alone. The Marcone family, also out of Sicily, has skin in the game.

I want something of my own.

And nightlife is the only area where we're slowly being choked to death.

Luckily, I have a plan that will loosen that noose.

I take a deep breath, staring out at the sea of faces gyrating on the dance floor here at Verve, my current nightmare. The numbers have been dropping steadily for the past month and there's only one way to stop the bleeding.

And that's to cut someone's jugular.

Metaphorically, of course.

Because the only way I can save my livelihood is to kill someone else's.

Unless he tries to screw with me.

Then, all metaphors go out the window.

"You really think your plan is gonna work?" Enrico asks.

I pull my eyes away from the dance floor and lift an eyebrow at him. “Nobody turns me down, Enrico. I always make offers that are impossible to refuse. This time next week, we’ll be on our way to owning this city. Shit, we’ll have more pull than the goddamn mayor.”

A smile tugs at my lips. I haven’t been out here long, but my footprint will be deep if I can make this deal.

And like I said, I always deliver.

Enrico claps me on the back and goes back to his position at the front of the club. I take a long gulp of the chilled scotch in my glass and swirl around the ice cubes, scouting the thin stream of patrons trickling in. My lips press together into a tight line because I know where the crowds are anxiously waiting on a mile-long line right now.

Fucking Nate Torres and his string of sex dens.

Soon, you’ll be mine. All of you.

I take another sip, draining the glass, and as I lower it, my gaze connects with a group of women who just entered the club. Blonde, huge tits, short, tight dresses that barely cover their asses. They’re giggling, clearly intoxicated as evidenced by the way they can barely walk a straight line in their ridiculously high heels.

I barely blink an eye as they pass because for Vegas, girls like that are a dime a dozen. Hot but old. Tired. As in, no challenge.

Stifling a yawn, I push away from my secluded spot against the wall and prepare for another lap around the place. I shake my head as I walk. This place should be so damn crowded that I have to shove past people. I don’t even come close to grazing someone’s shoulders, for fuck’s sake.

The place is dying, just like the other clubs we own.

I let out a frustrated sigh, sweeping a hand through my hair as I lift the near-empty glass to my lips to suck down the last drops.

Just focus on the deal, Serge. And the future you’re about to make for your—

Crash!

My body lurches forward, the glass flying out of my hand and shattering on the floor.

No danger to anyone since there's a big open space in front of me.

Cue the sarcasm.

I twist around, just in time to be knocked against a nearby wall by a massive guy who's pawing at me to keep his footing. I shove him away from me, straightening my jacket. "What the fuck is your problem, friend?" I growl at the guy, grabbing him by the shirt collar and flipping him around so that he's the one against the wall.

His eyes are glassy and he snickers, the stench of stale beer on his breath. "Fuck off, dude. Don't be such a tight-ass."

I slam him hard against the wall. "What did you just say to me?" I hiss.

"Look, it was-sn't me, okay?" he slurs. "It was her, that bitch behind you. S-she pushed me into you."

"Because you grabbed my ass!" an angry voice from behind me bellows. "Do I look like an animal at a fucking petting zoo?"

He leers at her over my shoulder as I bite back a smirk. "These girls-s. They run around barely dressed and expect guys-s to keep their hands to themselves-s, like they aren't begging for it."

I hear the girl gasp, and she pushes her way between us and gets right in his face. "Look, dick, if I wanted to walk around naked, I have the fucking right to without being fingered by your diseased digits!"

"Well, technically, you can't walk around naked because it's against the law," I say, just feeding the fire a little bit more. Not like she needs it. She's five foot nothing, so I have at least a foot on her. But what she lacks in size she definitely makes up for in attitude. I glance down at her back since that's pretty much all I can see with her squeezed between us. Long, dark hair cascades down her spine, and as she shakes the guy pinned against the wall, I catch a hint of citrus wafting up to my nostrils.

Seems ironic that such a sweet scent is emanating off of a body this primed for slaughter.

She flips around, not letting go of her assailant, and my breath hitches.

Fuck.

Almond-shaped green eyes narrow to slits, practically disappearing under her thick eyelashes as her lips twist into a scowl. Demonic is probably the word I'd use for that expression, but damn, it gets me hot.

So hot that I want to take her to my office and bend her over the couch while I fuck that rage out of her. Judging by the way her nostrils flare, I can sense there's a lot of it, and I'm definitely up to the task.

"This is Vegas," she seethes. "If I want to pole dance nude in the middle of the Strip while snorting cocaine and guzzling vodka, I'm pretty sure the cops would leave me alone." Her lips curl upward. "Hell, they'd probably try to join my party."

"I can't imagine any living, breathing man who wouldn't." I smirk and she returns the smile, letting go of the guy and shoving him away. She flips her head around toward him. "Keep your fucking hands to yourself!" she snaps before turning back to me with a seductive smile that has my cock twitching because this girl is hot as fuck and nursing a raging inferno inside of that tight body.

I run my eyes over her curves, highlighted by the tight black fabric hugging them. She sticks her hands on her hips and tilts her head to the side. "See anything you like?"

"I like it all." I snicker. "Not that I'm gonna touch it because I've seen what you do to the dumb asses who dare."

"Some guys just forget that they need an invitation to the party. They don't understand that crashing it can be dangerous."

"So what were you gonna do to that guy if I hadn't gotten in the way?"

She lowers her gaze, staring up at me from under those long lashes. Then she slides closer to me, doing an exaggerated head tilt. Her eyes blaze, a rush of

heat smoldering in my gut as the seconds pass. Finally, she parts her deep red lips. “I was going to sterilize him,” she murmurs.

And fuck me, those words are the sexiest I’ve ever heard.

Meaning be damned.

“Would have been bad for business,” I say. “I can’t have a gorgeous, out-of-control woman storming the place, assaulting my customers. You’d scare everyone away.” I rest one hand against the wall, blocking her in on one side.

“Oh, so you’re afraid of me?” she asks in a teasing voice. “Am I really that much of a monster?”

“I’m not afraid of anything. I’d let you assault me anytime you’d like.” I grin. “And I’ll bet that the monster inside would definitely enjoy the experience.”

“You sound pretty confident about that.”

“What can I say? I know my talents.”

“I’ll bet plenty of women know them, too.” She folds her arms over her chest, and I can’t help but steal a glimpse of her tits. They’re peeking out of the neckline of her dress, begging to come out and play.

An image of her riding my cock with those tits bouncing flashes in front of me, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut for a second to keep my cock from busting through my pants.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

“Very wrong,” I say. That’s a gross understatement if I ever heard one.

“You know what else would be wrong?” she asks in a breathy voice.

Uhh, if you dropped to your knees right now and sucked my cock?

That would be wrong on so many levels.

But I’d be a willing participant in a hot second.

“What?”

“For you to keep staring at my boobs like you’re trying to will them out of my dress.” She quirks an eyebrow. “You’re almost as bad as the other guy. At least he had the balls to grab one.” With a quick wink, she slides away from the wall and struts toward the bar to re-join her group.

I turn my head, and thanks to my club being near-empty, I can see her hips swing gently with each step. She moves slowly, methodically, as if she knows—

With a quick flip of her head, she gives me a self-satisfied smile over her shoulder.

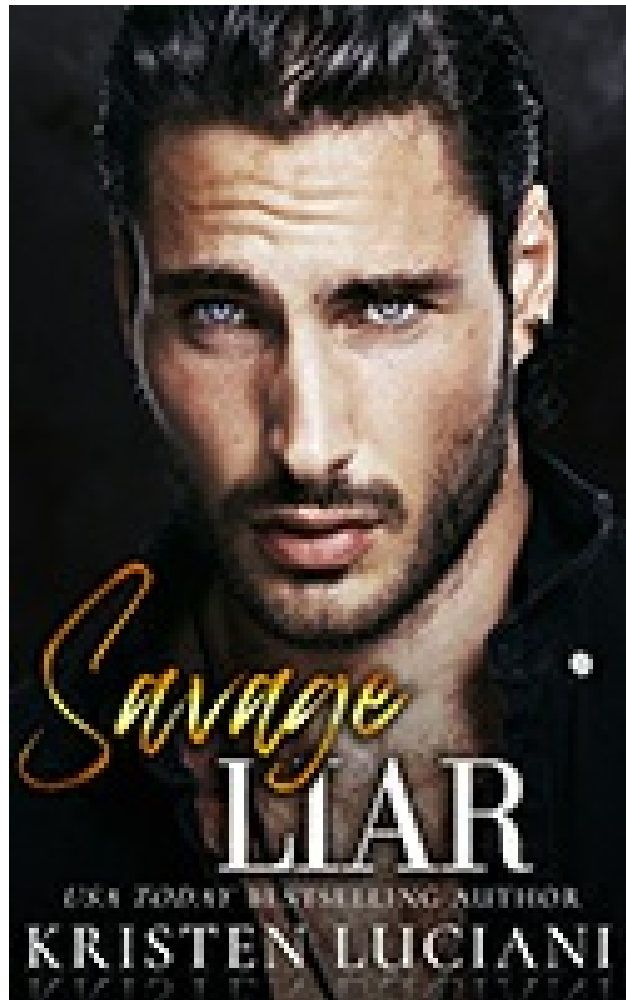
Yep.

That I’m watching.

And I am.

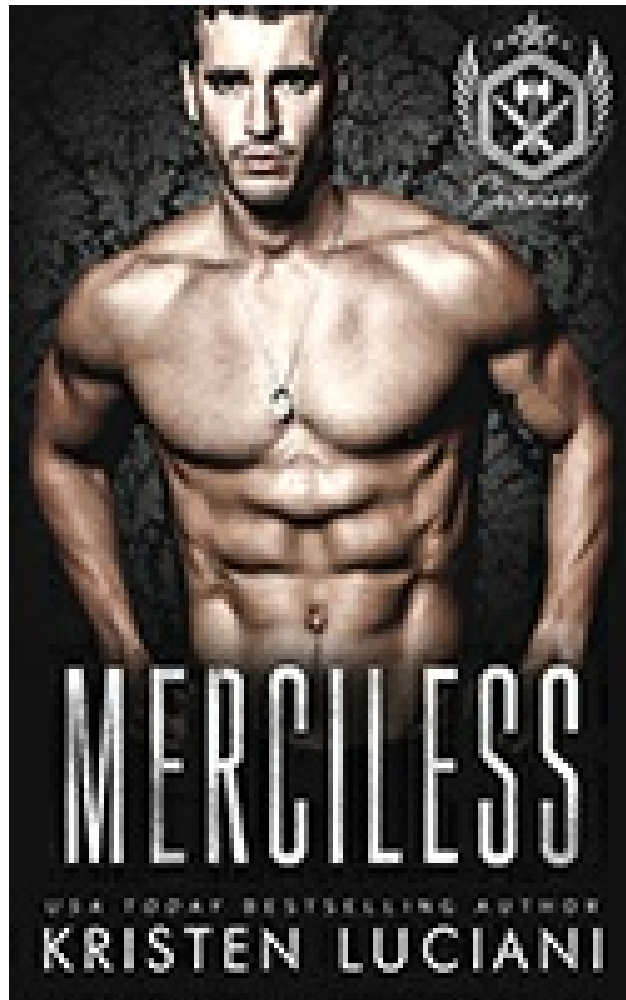
She’s definitely got my attention.

Now I’m really curious to see what she’s gonna do with it.



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Kristen Luciani is a *USA Today* bestselling romance author and coach with a penchant for stilettos, kickboxing, and grapefruit martinis. As a deep-rooted romantic who loves steamy, sexy, and suspense-filled stories, she tried her hand at creating a world of enchantment, sensuality, and intrigue, finally uncovering her true passion. Pun intended...

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