

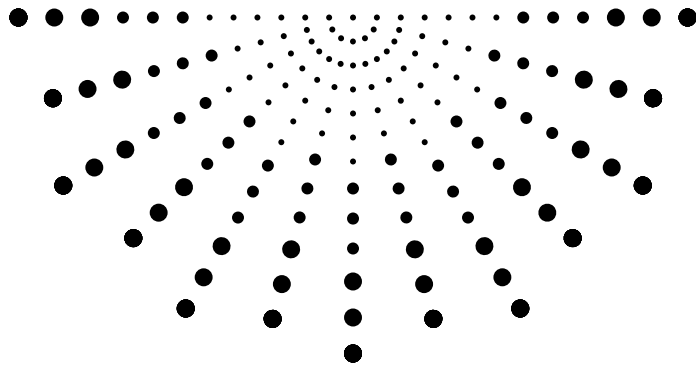


MESSINA
CRIME
FAMILY
BOOK ONE

Sinful
VOWS

LILIAN HARRIS

SINFUL VOWS
MESSINA CRIME FAMILY
BOOK ONE



LILIAN HARRIS

CONTENTS

[Content Warning](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

One Month Ago

[Chapter 2](#)

Present Day

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

Three Days Later

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also By Lilian Harris](#)

[About the Author](#)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidences are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

© 2023 by Lilian Harris. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the express written permission of the publisher.

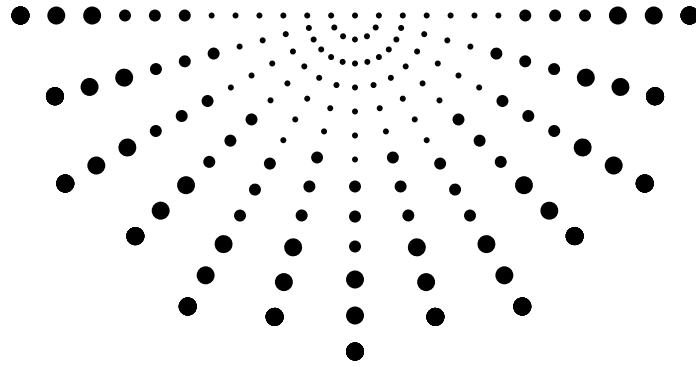
Editing/Interior Formatting: [CPR Editing](#)

Proofreader: [Judy's Proofreading](#)

Cover Design: [Cormar Covers](#)

 [Created with Vellum](#)

CONTENT WARNING



This book contains some depictions of human trafficking and violence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

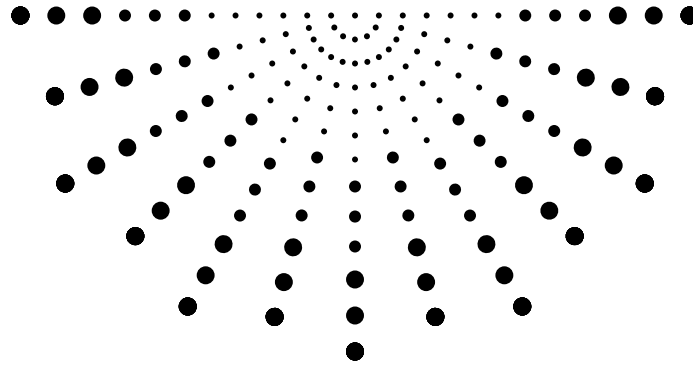
Sinful Vows is my tenth book. Ten whole books. Wow. I can't even believe it. I started as a little girl chasing dreams, to a woman who thought it'll never happen. I became a lawyer, a mother, then I became an author, and it's thanks to each one of you that I still am. I hope to continue giving you stories you can drool and swoon over. Thank you for being here.

To my kids, I love you guys and how you support me. To my oldest, Harrison, who's only nine, but tells all his friends his mom is an author. I'm lucky to be your mama. Kinda hard answering their questions though LOL. Warn me next time...

To my daughter, Liliana, who's six. Your spunk and maturity helps shape the kids I write in my books. Sophia was inspired by you. Not sure which one of you rolls her eyes better though.

And to my youngest, Finnegan. You're only two and you have no idea what's going on yet, but that's okay because you're cute.

CHAPTER ONE



ELSIE ONE MONTH AGO

Some say the devil has no soul. But I think it's humanity that doesn't.

We do the sickest things to one another and find the dirtiest or most clever excuses. But in reality, we're savages. All of us. Some more than others.

"Take it off," Keith grits, a hand within his scruffy white beard.

I raise my chin up, clenching my teeth so hard it aches through my jaw. I won't do it. They may think they own my skin, but they don't own my heart. My mind. Those are mine, and I won't let them inside either.

Let them hurt me. Fucking kill me. I don't care. Death is an escape I will welcome. But somehow, I'm still here.

"Elsie, please," Kayla whimpers, her body bare for the slimebag who works for Faro Bianchi, the one who stripped us of the dignity we once had.

We were taken together, along with our friend Jade. My God, every time I think of her, my heart physically hurts. I have no idea where she is.

It was supposed to be just a road trip, us three enjoying time together after finishing high school, wanting to have some fun before college – and then med school – took all our time.

We had plans to become doctors one day. My mom's a plastic surgeon. But me? I wanted to fix hearts. I wanted to see what made them stop. What made them bleed. What made them work again. I wanted to fix them, to make

people live again – really live – and maybe when they came back, some of their humanity would too.

But, of course, I never became a heart surgeon. Neither of us got to become anything. Kayla’s dreams of one day helping people with cancer as an oncologist went up in flames right along with mine.

And Jade? She always wanted to work with kids. Well, except when she wasn’t dreaming of playing in international concert halls. She could play a piano like Picasso could paint. But Jade was selfless. Her mother was a single mom raising two kids, and Jade wanted to have a job that would guarantee her a salary high enough that she could help her mother.

So much for that.

The Bianchis run the Palermo crime family, and we’ve been theirs for nine and a half years. Brutal, torturous years. There are days where I’ve come to the point of wanting to slit my own throat. It’d be less painful than everything they’ve done to us. They’re sick. All the Bianchis are, but Faro, who’s the boss, and his brother Agnelo are the most ruthless of the four brothers.

They sell our bodies for money. Kids too. Those monsters traffic women and children like cattle. They own a members-only sex club, and the only way for a customer to get there is by calling a number on the back of a gold card and having someone pick them up. They’re then brought blindfolded to the location. And no one knows where it is. Not us. Not the men. No one.

Kayla and I have been taken there plenty. Some of the girls work there permanently, while others, like us, are only brought in when we’re needed. And none of us ever want to be needed.

We’re forced into rooms with men who take every bit of us – our skin, the flesh underneath – until we’re begging for it to end. We don’t have control. No way to escape. We have nothing. When we’re not working there, sometimes we’re chauffeured to fancy hotels.

And we know better than to talk to anyone there. The last girl who tried to get help was murdered. They showed us pictures of her body, head severed completely off. I threw up that day. It’s been two years, and I still can’t wipe the image of her eyes out of my head. They were brown.

“Bitch, you go deaf or something?”

Kayla gasps, her arms around her bare breasts, the thick eyeliner and mascara now running down her cheeks in a thick river. She never wore makeup before we were taken. She hated it. Now it’s the least of her worries.

He takes a single step forward, a hand whipping hard across my cheek, and my head twists roughly. But instead of crying or making a sound, I laugh – really laugh – and his anger...it's beautiful.

“Is that all you've got?” My mouth curls at the corner, my long black hair flitting across the small of my back, almost touching my ass.

A leery grin slips to his wrinkled face before his palm lunges for my neck, tightening until I can no longer breathe, his strength forcing me off my feet inside the house where we're kept with six other women. Where we're watched day and night, mainly by two men: Giuseppe and Vito. They don't care what's done to us. They actually do worse.

No one cares. Not here. We're indispensable. Treated as well as the rats that run across the grass in the late hours.

The house is in the worst neighborhood. Cops don't even come here, because what's the point? You'll see drugs being sold on the corners. Probably by some gang who sells women too. Not here, though. Not on these blocks. This is Mafia territory, and the others know it.

My lungs burn as he squeezes, baring his teeth.

“You little whores don't know how good you have it. But I'm gonna show you how much worse it can be.”

Kayla sobs, unable to catch her breath. “P-p-please le-let her g-go.”

But he ignores her. “Do you know what I can do to you without actually killing you?”

Because he knows he can't, not unless it's been sanctioned by the boss.

I fight the fear. I fight the onslaught of panic climbing like an inferno through my chest. I glare at him, fighting the only way I can. Inside, I scream so loud the glass that keeps me prisoner shatters to tiny pieces all around me. But on the outside, I have the armor up. I'm ready for battle. The war never ends. It never will. Not until that very last sword pierces my heart, granting me peace.

Death is the only way out. The devil won't let me go any other way.

Keith drops me onto the floor and I heave, my chest rising and rising, the air hard to swallow.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Repeat.

The inside of my throat burns. The rotting of nausea swirls in my stomach, and I push through that too. I like fighting. It makes me feel strong,

even while it's all an illusion.

Kayla crawls to me, her body shielding me. But he picks her up by one thin arm and throws her to the side. She hits the wooden floor with a heavy thud.

A low groan of rage thunders out of me, and as I try to kick him for hurting my friend – my sweet, never-hurt-a-soul friend – he throws a punch into my stomach. Then another, and another, until I cough. Until the kick comes next.

I don't know how many more times he hits me. I lose count. My head spins, lights flickering in and out of my eyes. Kayla screams for help, but it's muddled like I'm underwater, barely hearing a thing.

“Sto...bleeding.”

“Yo, off...merchandise...”

“Fuck you!”

Voices. Too many now. I can see Vito and Giuseppe, images of them walking up flashing in and out. Someone whimpers. I think it's me.

“Shhh,” Kayla says with a snivel, her hand stroking my head.

I can feel it. I'm not dead. Too bad.

But how can I leave her? How can I be so selfish? She can't survive on her own. But maybe it's better if she dies too.

We only have each other while the other girls keep to themselves. Everyone is afraid to talk to one another, afraid they'll kill us for it.

And they would. If we talk to each other about anything that happens with the men, they kill us. There used to be twelve girls in the house. The others weren't so lucky.

“Oh, Elsie,” Kayla cries. “I'm so sorry.”

I try to tell her she has nothing to be sorry for. I did it to myself. I knew exactly what would happen. But it's who she's always been. She's one of those people who apologizes when someone else bumps into her. She doesn't deserve this.

I barely recognize the girl she used to be. This woman before me is too broken, and I hate seeing her break even more with each passing year. Will we be here until we're too old to use and abuse?

No, I won't let that happen. I'll end it on my own terms.

Jade was more like I was, and if I know anything about her, I know she's out there fighting too. Yet, not knowing what happened to her – if she's even still alive – it keeps me up at night. Is she better off than us? Worse?

Maybe it'd be better if she were with us. That way we could at least be together. But I can't even ask these assholes where she is. I know Faro knows. He knows everything. But he'd kill me before he gives me the satisfaction of telling me something I want to know.

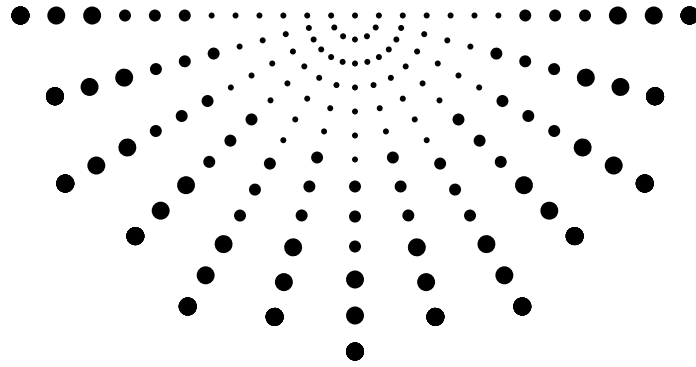
Kayla stays with me for seconds...minutes...I don't know. But the next thing I hear is her screams, and when I look up, Keith has her in his clutches, Giuseppe and Vito no longer there.

He kneels, his foul breath rubbing up my nose. "I'm gonna fuck her so hard, you're gonna see her bruises for weeks. You can thank yourself for that, whore."

Then he's yanking her by her brown hair, her knees hitting the floor as she screams my name until she disappears.

And her screams? I continue to hear them long after they're gone. And I wish it was me instead.

CHAPTER TWO



ELSIE PRESENT DAY

The air has changed, the chill wafting through it, autumn leaves scattered across the ground, orange, yellow. Dying, yet still, they're beautiful.

"What do you think they're going to do with us today?" Kayla asks, huddled against me shoulder to shoulder on the other side of the first floor as we stare out the window.

Vito and Giuseppe are stationed at the door on the opposite side. Faro has them guarding day and night. They sleep here with us, so even as we close our eyes, we aren't safe.

I think about running away probably every single day. But where could I go where they wouldn't find me? After the beating, it took me a week to recover, then I was back to working.

The only good thing about getting hurt that day is that Keith doesn't come around anymore. Hopefully he's dead. Maybe Faro offed him for messing with his plaything. We make him good money, and he doesn't like the men messing with his source of income. His men are just as disposable as us.

"I don't know." I throw my arm around her back and pull her tighter against me. "Wherever we go, we'll survive it. We always do."

"But what's the point of surviving? We're not living, Elsie." She speaks the words I've been keeping to myself. "Have you ever thought about..." Her face drops, eyes poking holes into the floor.

“Don’t,” I say in a low tone. “I don’t want you to even think it.”

But I’m a hypocrite, aren’t I? I was just thinking of dying myself. But to hear her say it out loud, to imagine her gone...

“Can you make me a promise?” She looks to me now, dark brows tightening, moisture building in her hazel eyes.

“Depends on the promise.” I don’t look at her anymore. Because I know what she’s going to ask.

“Come on, Elsie. Please. Just say you promise,” she strains.

I can hear the tremble of her voice, and it causes my heart to race. Seconds drift by, and in them, I’m breaking, because how can I promise that? But in the end, how can I not?

“Okay. Whatever it is, I promise.”

“Well, now you’re being ridiculous,” she sighs on a flicker of a laugh, just a smidge of the fun, carefree Kayla I once knew.

My God, the dreams we had. The world ours. Now, we’re faced with making promises of the end instead of the beginning we once dreamed about.

“Fine.” I force a smile, peering over. “What am I promising?”

“That if I come to the point where I beg you to kill me, you’ll do it.”

With a stuttered inhale, I squeeze my eyes shut. It’s one thing knowing what she’ll say and another thing actually hearing it.

“Kayla...” I suck in a deep, exhausted breath. My heart...it physically hurts.

“I’ll do it for you, Elsie. If you want it. I’ll do it for you. We can’t go on this way anymore,” she whispers. “I can’t take another day of it.”

She snuffles, and I force my tears back.

“They take and take,” she silently cries. “We have nothing left to give them. I’d rather my parents find my body than wonder what really happened.”

My chest pounds with an aching so raw, I’m barely able to hold on to my emotions. I don’t want to think about my parents. The pain they must’ve been living through all this time, wondering every day who has me. Wondering if I’m hurt. Dead. It’s what I’m going through, not knowing what happened to Jade.

“Okay.” I let out a shaky sigh, staring out at the pale grass right out our window.

It looks like it hasn’t drunk anything in a while – that yellow-tinged death that grass gets. They mow it, though. Have to keep up with some kind of

appearance. Just in case, I guess.

“Okay?”

The questioning way she asks that has me turning to her.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll kill you, Kayla. If you’ve ever had enough. If they’ve crushed you to the point that you can’t go on another moment, I’ll be there. I’ll take away the pain.”

Her lower lip trembles, eyes shimmering with her anguish, before we’re both facing the window once again. The sun is shining brightly across our faces, yet the weather has that fall chill to it, like it can’t decide if it prefers the cold or the warmth.

“What the hell are you two doin’?” Jordan appears behind us, a hand on her hip, her jet-black hair in a high ponytail, those ashen eyes assessing us.

“Just looking,” Kayla answers lowly, eyes flicking to her.

“Is that against some house law?” I snicker, facing Jordan and popping a brow.

“Don’t be a bitch, Elsie. I’m just lookin’ out.” She clacks closer in her five-inch nude stilettos. She must be entertaining soon. “If they catch you where you’re not supposed to be, they’re gonna fuck up your ass like last time.”

“Thanks for the concern, but I’m sure they know where we are by now from the cameras.”

If those two idiots are even looking at them. Vito and Giuseppe are too busy playing video games on their phones all day to really focus on the cameras they can watch through their cells.

My attention reverts back to the window, looking at that pale blue house across the street, where the addicts gather at night.

Jordan can fool the other girls, but I know she was the one who once told Vito I thought he had a small dick. He pulled down his pants and shoved his nasty thing down my throat just to prove how wrong I was. Then he did to me what Keith did to Kayla.

There’s no other way they found out. I whispered it to her. She tries too hard to be everyone’s friend and pretends to care to your face. I don’t buy it. Her personality is as fake as her boobs, and there’s only one of those things I can’t stand.

“Okay. Whatever.” She clicks her tongue, the sound of her loud heels almost as annoying as her dry, scratchy voice – like nails scraping on a chalkboard. Makes my skin crawl.

“I can’t stand her,” I whisper into Kayla’s ear once Jordan is out of sight.

“Same.” She giggles, and I love the sound.

I miss laughing just to laugh. At the stupid things. At something funny someone says over lunch. It’s the dumb stuff I miss. The small things one doesn’t realize matter until they’re torn away from you.

I miss music and singing. The morning rays of sun hitting my face on the lounge by the pool at my house. I miss coffee and the fresh chocolate chip waffles Dad used to make.

We get old pancakes from a box here. Some of the boxes have been expired for months, but we still eat them, or we starve. Nine straight years of the same disgusting pancakes. If I never eat another one, I’ll be thrilled. I used to love them once upon a time. Now I can’t even recall what that felt like.

We barely eat as it is. Pre-made salads in a bag for lunch and dinner. No dressing. Sometimes we get tomatoes or cucumbers. Or they buy a whole chicken, and we take turns making it. They got us a turkey once. Apparently it was Thanksgiving.

Holidays. That’s another thing I miss. My family gathered at the table, food overflowing. My grandma and her famous mac and cheese. I actually remember the recipe. Too bad I’ll never get the chance to make it. I miss the laughter too.

It always comes back to that. Laughter. I don’t even realize the tears have lost their will and tremble down my cheeks, leaving a path of hidden pain and dark secrets.

“I know.” Kayla’s deep breath falls over my shoulder as she leans her head against it.

Because she does know. I pull her to me, tightly holding her close once again.

A friend. At least I have one in this cruel world. The other girls don’t even have that.

Silently, we watch the leaves fall for a few minutes more until a dark blue SUV pulls up, stopping right outside our window.

Kayla and I jerk our heads back. No one comes here except the Bianchis or Chad, and that’s not their car.

“Who the hell is that?” Kayla whispers with fear slinking up her tone, and the panic crawls up my spine like a deadly hand.

The driver’s side door swings open and out comes a man, tall like an

Adonis, his body built for war, his face carved with sin and lurking danger. A thick scar slices across his right cheek, eyes so dark, it's as though they carry hell within them.

His hair is longer at the top, hanging over one side of his forehead in a swoop, black strands hitting his thick eyebrow. He marches away a few steps before he pauses, his black wool coat hitting his knees as he fixes the collar, a silver ring on each of his middle fingers.

A large hand runs through his strands, forcing them back as he reaches into the pocket of his black pants. When he doesn't find what he's looking for, he opens the back door, and I see a cell phone in his grip now.

His eyes snap up, and they instantly catch mine. My stomach roils, like I've been caught doing something bad, but I don't cower from his gaze. His entire face is sculpted with sharp edges, the kind of man one would describe as deadly attractive, yet fearsome too, an aura of command around him.

He keeps staring, holding me there as though daring me to disobey. I'm unable to move, and I'm not sure why. And I don't like this feeling.

His stubbled jaw clenches, the hollows beneath his angled cheeks appearing deeper the harder his penetrating gaze sinks into mine. The sheer power hovering around him should scare me, but it doesn't.

"Oh my God. Why is he looking at you like that?" Kayla whispers. "We should go."

But I can't seem to move an inch.

Who the hell are you?

His brows dip inward for a mere twist in time before he tears his attention away from me, turning his wandering eye toward the door leading into the house. And as he does, I catch sight of that thick, pronounced scar across his cheek yet again.

As though knowing I'm staring and wondering how a man that looks like a walking threat ever got hurt that way, he catches me with a glare, chest expanding roughly. He sharply slams the car door, stomping away toward the house as though I've offended him.

As he disappears out of sight, with my eyes on his SUV, a dangerous idea takes root. Maybe the universe is finally throwing us a bone. This may be our only chance. We have to take it. If we don't, we could regret it for the rest of our lives.

I grab Kayla's hand.

"We can run," I murmur into her ear as I lean over. "We can get in the

back of his SUV and hide on the floor. It's big enough. Even if he finds us, I'm sure he'll just toss us somewhere."

Probably.

But I don't tell her that.

When I pull back, her eyes bug out.

Elsie, no, she mouths.

"Are you insane?" She looks around as the words fall just below a whisper. "He would find out and send us back and they would hurt us worse than ever."

"Listen to me," I say, staring at her with conviction, hoping she sees the certainty on my face. "It's either this or we die here. We *have* to try. The window is big enough to get out from."

My body breaks out in a shiver.

"This is our one shot." I squeeze her hand in mine. "Please, Kayla! I won't go without you."

She shakes her head, her eyes swimming with tears that line the rims of her lower lashes. "I...I can't."

"Where the hell is Faro? He told me he was gonna be here," the stranger's voice fires with an undertone of disdain. "We have business to discuss."

"Not here, man," Vito casually tells him. "I know nothin' about nothin'."

"We have to go now! Kayla, please!" I beg, my heart pounding in my throat, the adrenaline causing my entire body to buzz.

"You have to go without me." Her bottom lip is swallowed up into her mouth. "You're our only chance. You have to be the one to save us. Get us all help," she pants, her chest vibrating with every breath. "You know I'm not brave enough."

Her gaze swims with regret.

"You have to do this alone," she says in a tearful voice, wiping the back of her hand under her eyes.

"I'm gonna wait here until he returns." The man sounds angrier by the second, and my pulse jumps every single time I hear his voice booming.

"Whatever, man," Vito says carelessly on a snicker. "But you can't stay at the house, so not sure what to tell you."

"Why not?" The question comes out hard, stamped with a tinge of irritation.

Giuseppe chuckles. "It ain't that kind of house."

There are a few seconds of complete silence, and I'm almost afraid he's

leaving, taking my chance of escape with him. I can't wait another moment.

"Call Faro and you tell him I'm waiting."

"Sure, yeah, whatev—"

"Fuuuuck!" Vito roars with a groan.

Then comes a loud bang, like something knocked into a wall.

"St-stop, man. I'm b-b-bleeding!"

Something else slams, and we both jump, my arms skittering with a fresh coat of goose bumps. Vito pitifully moans.

"S-s-stop! Please, I'm s-s-sorry," he cries.

"Shit," Giuseppe gasps. "You broke his fucking nose!"

"Next time..." The stranger's tone lowers with a deep-chested growl. "I'll kill you for speaking to me like that."

"Yo, man, no disrespect." Giuseppe sounds scared, and it makes me damn happy to taste his fear.

They're always comfortable making us fear them. Torturing us. Treating us like whores. But whoever this man is...well, he has them fearing *him* now.

"Yo, man'? Is that how your mother taught you to speak? Hmm?"

A chill glides up my arms from the callousness of his voice. And the next thing we hear is Giuseppe's scream ripping through the house, sounding worse than Vito's.

"My fucking teeth!"

"The name is Michael Marino. You learn it the next time you address me."

Oh my God...

My stomach drops, rolling like the waves of the ocean I miss. I know that name. I've heard the rumors. This man...he's just as dangerous as them, maybe even more. I've heard about the Messina crime family from when the Bianchis talked about them, not knowing I was listening.

They say Michael is really the one in charge, and soon he'll take over for his father. They say they're all extremely wealthy. Untouchable. The wealthiest family in the city.

They say no one can get close to him, and no one wants to. He kills without mercy, and he does it well. But right now, he's my one chance of escaping. A woman like me doesn't have many other options, and Michael Marino is my only hope.

Men aren't to be trusted, not in our life. But if he can lead me out of this hell, if I can go and find help like Kayla said, then it's worth it. Maybe I'll

find the opportunity to roll out of the car while he's on the road. By the time he realizes what happened, I'll be running while hoping like hell he doesn't decide to catch me.

"I'll be back for you." I grab Kayla's other hand. "I'll find help and I'll get you out. You hear me?"

A burn registers behind my eyes, building like a storm, clouding over me. I grab her and hold her close.

"I can't leave you," I softly cry as she does too.

"You have to." She pushes away to look at me before opening the window as quietly as possible.

There's no one here. The girls are all upstairs. The men are occupied. They never look at the cameras. They assume we're too scared to try anything.

"I love you, Kayla."

"I..." She chokes on the rest of the words, her chin quivering. "I love you too. I won't tell them anything. No matter what they do to me." She quickly swipes the tears away.

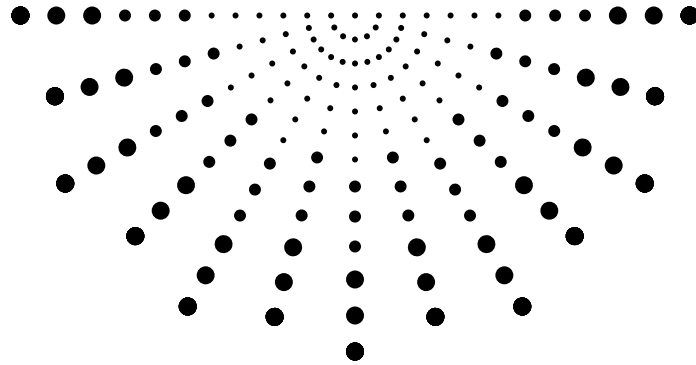
"I'm sorry." I rub under my eyes, hating this.

I can't seem to make myself move. She needs me, and I need her. We have no one else, and now we won't have each other.

"Go!" she whispers.

I nod with a tremor, swallowing against the pain stabbing at my chest, and with a final look at my friend, I slip out the window, not knowing if I'll ever see her again.

CHAPTER THREE



ELSIE

Nausea swirls in my gut as I quietly jog for the SUV, my sneakers keeping my footfalls silent even as my pulse pounds so heavily in my throat, I almost pass out.

When I finally reach the other side of the car, I open the door as silently as I can and slip inside, huddling as low to the floor as possible.

The echoes of my heartbeats rumble through my ears like a pair of heavy drums. Seconds and minutes drift by, and my anxiety only intensifies until I hear him coming closer. Until the car door opens and every single hair on my body rises to attention.

Please don't look back here. Just drive.

The car finally starts to move, and that sigh of relief stays trapped in my lungs just in case he can hear it.

Kayla.

Tears slam into my eyes even as I try not to cry. I can't believe I left her. What kind of friend does that? What if I never get her help? What if they beat her or kill her before I can return with the cops?

Michael makes a sharp turn, honking on the horn with a curse under his breath. The sound of a cell springs to life, and he immediately answers.

“Hey, princess. How was school today?”

Suddenly, the harshness from earlier melts away from his voice. In his place is someone softer, and I instantly want to know that man.

He's a father? I never heard that when I'd eavesdrop.

"It was sooo good!" The sound of a cheery little girl springs to life. "Tawny brought slime to school, and we got to play with it at recess."

He laughs, like a real kind of laugh. Like the laughter I miss. And my heart swells. This guy obviously loves this child.

"I'm glad you had a good day, baby." His voice softens, and I'm left wondering how a man who glared so cruelly at me can sound so sweet. "Daddy missed you."

"How about you, Daddy? Did you have a good day?" Her tone drips with honey.

"It's about to get better since I'm going to see you in a few minutes."

She squeals. "Are we still making pizza together for dinner?"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"Yes..." She quiets, the bitterness seeping through.

"What is it, Sophia?"

"Um..." She pauses. "You don't always keep your promises, Daddy."

I bite into my inner cheek. That tinge of sadness is hard to miss and harder not to feel. And if that pause is any indication, he's feeling it too right now.

"I'm sorry, princess. You're right." His exhale is harsh. "I'm going to do better. Work less."

"That's okay. I'm just kidding. I know you work very hard to pay for our house and all my toys."

"Nothing is more important than you. Daddy loves you... You're getting too big too fast."

"Grandpa says I'll be getting married before you know it."

"Tell him you're not getting married for another twenty years."

The laughter of an older man comes through the line, and she bursts into a fit of giggles.

"Okay, Daddy, I'll see you soon. Gonna go play now."

"You finish your homework?" he hurriedly asks.

"Duh. Homework before playing," she regurgitates as though she's done it a million times.

I can almost see her rolling her eyes, and I try to stifle my own laugh.

Who are you really, Michael Marino?

"I will be checking it."

"Okay, bye. Love you, Daddy."

The call drops, and I realize I haven't been paying any damn attention to getting the hell out of here. From the sounds of it, we're on a highway or a road with way too many cars. I don't want to get squashed on the street like a damn pigeon. Maybe I can get out once we get to his house. I'll slip out of the driveway while he's busy with his daughter. That sounds like a much safer plan.

For a few minutes, all I hear is the roar of traffic and his honking. The man is impatient as hell. Finally, the SUV slows, and with a click from inside the vehicle, the car rolls into darkness.

What the hell? Where are we?

His door opens and he climbs out, his footsteps thundering just as a beep sounds off and his door shuts. I'm immobilized for another few minutes, maybe more, my body tensing, a chill running down my spine.

What if he knows I'm here and he's testing me? If I come out and he's there, what the hell do I do? Can I beg for his compassion to save the girls? He seems to care for his daughter. Maybe that'll carry over to us.

More time floats by until my legs prickle like they're asleep. I need out of here. I'll face his wrath if it comes to it. No way will I sit here and waste precious time. Kayla needs me.

A palm on the door, I push it open, gripping the handle in my unsteady grasp. When he doesn't jump out at me, it gives me courage to open it fully.

Still staying low, I gradually step out, finding myself in a massive garage, my feet hitting the concrete below. Four cars are spread out across the space: an orange and blue sports car on one side of me, and two SUVs on the other. There's even a damn circular sofa.

The rumors weren't wrong. He's loaded. I tiptoe toward the garage door, trying to gently lift it up, but it's locked.

Fuck! Fuck!

There are two other doors here – leading into the house, I presume. Scrambling toward one of them, I gently press my ear to it, hearing no voices. My heart beats so quickly, I swear it'll stop at any moment.

This was a mistake. What have I done?

If this man finds me in his home, he'll kill me. He doesn't seem like the type of person who takes kindly to strangers breaking in.

My heart practically climbs out of my throat as I place my hand on the cold brass handle and turn it all the way, not sure what to expect behind it. I don't even know what door he went through. What if he's inside?

I gulp down the fear, but it's still there, draping me in dread, skin prickling from the mingled panic and chill in the air. I'm only in a black tank top and yoga pants, the usual attire they provide us – unless we're entertaining, then it's tiny dresses and high heels. Luckily, I'm not wearing that right now. The hairs on my arm strain at my skin as I drag the door open. I hold my breath in my lungs, expecting him to jump out, but I don't hear a sound.

The room's dim, just enough light to see where the hell I am. As quietly as possible, I drag the door to a close, scurrying past the narrow hallway and into a spacious room. I wander toward the glossy black bar, set against the wall on one side with bottles of liquor lined up on all three shelves and six black swivel stools waiting for someone to fill them. There are even sofas here. The entire place is immaculate.

But the one thing that catches my attention is the massive fridge to my left and what looks to be a meat freezer set in the corner. It's seemingly out of place, like it's been left there and forgotten about.

The wood creaks beneath my feet, my gasping breaths loud, and I'm terrified someone will hear them. My eyes fall to every inch of the room, trying to find a place to hide.

This was a stupid idea. He's bound to find me. But there's no other choice. I can't get out of the garage, and I certainly can't run into the house when he's home. Maybe I can dash out of the front door once he leaves and his daughter is in school. I should hear his car drive off from here.

This will be fine. I'll be okay.

But I do a really crappy job at convincing myself.

My mouth's dry and my stomach is growling, the hunger swelling. The last thing I ate was a plate of spinach, and breakfast included one tiny pancake. I couldn't even eat the whole thing. One side was moldy.

My gaze jumps to the fridge again, like a single bottle of water in a desert. And even as I try to mask the terror, I rush for it, quickly pulling it open. My eyes enlarge, scanning the contents within: sandwiches, water bottles, fruit, you name it. There's everything I could possibly need here. I'm sure he has food in the kitchen. Would he notice if I took a little here and there? From the looks of this place alone, he probably won't. I'm sure the inside of his home is stocked with enough food to feed an army.

My hand snaps a water bottle, taking it with me. I'll start with that and one of the containers of blueberries. Before I close the fridge, I grab a

sandwich too, not caring what's in it. I'd eat anything right now. I'll hide under the bar top and take the food there with me. There's nowhere else to go.

Maybe he doesn't even come here. I'm sure there are plenty of rooms in his fancy home he could be in.

I take what I need, rushing behind the bar, settling on the floor, and placing the sandwich and blueberries down. But before I can even open the bottle, the door squeaks, and a rush of a breath escapes through my lungs.

I press a gentle hand over my mouth, fingers trembling as footfalls thump across the floor, nearing me. I force my eyes shut, keeping the water steady in my grip. If I so much as move or make a sound, he'll discover me here.

I will my lungs to work.

Just breathe, but don't make a sound.

In.

Out.

The shallow sounds of my inhaleds and the sound of my raging pulse are loud in the silence of the room. I hope he doesn't hear them.

Please, just leave.

I can't die. Kayla needs me.

But the footsteps crunch closer until they stop. And as my body trembles and my foot bounces with a tremor, the bottle falls out of my hand and rolls out.

No! Fuck! I practically let out a silent cry.

"Hello?" A tiny voice of a little girl comes through, and my pulse hammers. "Is someone here?"

Oh my God.

My heartbeats pound like fists, and I ball my hands, fear crawling up my body.

If she finds me, she's going to tell her father.

"I know you're there," she continues, the floor creaking beneath her feet. "You can come out. I won't hurt you."

She continues closer until I see her bare foot coming from my right and she's standing right in front of me, our eyes connecting, her gaze widening.

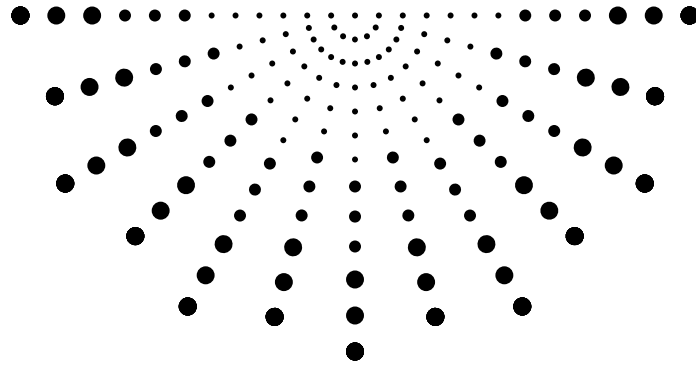
"Sophia!" Michael hollers. "What did I tell you about coming in here?"

My eyes bulge; hers stick to mine as I frantically shake my head.

This is it. This is how I die. I'll never get to Kayla now.

I'm sorry.

CHAPTER FOUR



MICHAEL

There's something dirty about killing one's own brother, especially when it's a brother you were once close with. Who'd die for you. Kill for you. But after what happened last year, and everything else in between, things have changed. For all of us.

Raphael is thirty-eight and two years older than me, and it would have been his rightful place to take over for my father as the head of the Messina family, but he didn't want to. Neither did my father, and he wasn't shy about telling Raph that.

Those two never got along. They hate each other. So I knew, even before everything went to shit and Raph left, that one day the keys to the kingdom would be mine. Raph still worked alongside Gio and I until he left, and I swore that one day, when I took over, he'd be my number two. He deserved it more than anyone. He worked hard, but my father never saw it. Never cared.

"I won't do it. Not yet." I lean against the sofa in my home office.

My father sits across from me behind my desk. He may be the boss, but I'm second in command, and I don't make decisions to suit anyone else.

He shakes his head and throws his hands in the air, staring up at the ceiling with a disapproving glower. Too bad for him, I couldn't give two fucks about his disapproval.

His eyes snap to mine. "Then you're a bigger fool than I thought. How do you expect to take over for me when you can't even kill someone for going

against the family?”

I fist a frustrated hand through my hair. “He isn’t just *someone*. He’s your son and *our* brother.”

Giovanni, my other brother – six years younger and my father’s consigliere – stands off to the side. His back’s against the door, arms over his chest as he observes wordlessly. He doesn’t want this either. But we all knew it was coming to this, didn’t we?

“He may be my son, but he’s ruining our business. And he almost put us at war with the Irish.” My father’s nostrils flare. “He’s proven he’s not on our side. I’m done. My hands are washed of him.”

He focuses hard on me, face tightening in the way it does when he gets angry.

“He’s an absolute embarrassment,” he continues. “And over a woman? I didn’t raise a pussy.” He shakes his head with revulsion. “He’s punishing us for what happened. He still blames us. Don’t you see that? He’ll never stop!”

He slams a fist against the desk, the pen holder tipping over, a single one scattering to the floor.

“Those men who came after you a week ago? Who the hell do you think sent them? You almost died!” He pounds another fist, his voice rising. “If you’re too weak to act, then I’ll handle it myself.”

“I’m not weak, and I’m not dead,” I practically growl, rising off my seat and nearing him, palms against the edge of the desk, my eyes set with a tight glare. “I will *not* kill my own brother without hearing from his mouth that he caused all of this.”

He throws his head back with a derisive laugh. “Are you listening to this, Gio?”

“Pop, he’s got a point. You don’t know for sure it’s him. It could be the Quinns wanting payback for what happened. We’ve gotta sit down with Patrick and find out what’s what before we assume Raph is fucking us over.”

“Not you too. Jesus fucking Christ! Did I raise men or a bunch of girls? The Irish have nothing to do with this.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate women these days, Pop,” Gio chuckles.

But his attempt at getting a laugh out of our father is fruitless. The man sees nothing beyond the opportunities we’ve lost on two occasions.

A few days ago, someone called up the feds to tip them off about the weapons we were buying from the Dominicans. It was a bad fucking day. Lots of dead bodies on both sides, and I almost ended up being one of them.

Then yesterday, someone burned down the property we were going to buy for a new bar. The fire captain we know said there was no doubt it was intentional.

Someone is fucking with us, and it'll be a bad day for them when I finally enact my revenge.

Growing our legitimate empire has taken a lot of work, and no one will mess with what I'm trying to accomplish. I want my daughter to be proud of me and our name one day. This is for her as much as it is for us.

We own six restaurants and four bars right now, plus some hotels overseas, but we'll be opening a lot more. I want the name Michael Marino to mean power. Legitimacy. There's always more to accomplish, and it helps when you have the right individuals in your pocket.

Drugs, people...that's not our thing. Gambling. That's where most of the dirty money first came from, especially online. The family runs a few illegal underground casinos too, and that still brings in a lot of cash and a lot of trouble, especially when people can't pay back what they owe. And if they can't pay, they do it with their life. It's how it is.

"How do you know the Irish weren't behind the hit on me?" I ask, straightening as I uncuff my shirt, pulling up the sleeves to my elbows.

The day plays in my head. That could've been it. Sophia would be an orphan. The bullet came out of nowhere while I was in the parking lot of one of our bars after hours. But it didn't get me. I got lucky. But the son of a bitch ended up dead, tossed in the ocean where the sharks will have at him. We couldn't identify him. He wasn't connected to any syndicate we knew of.

"I had a call with Patrick right after," my father goes on. "And he personally assured me they weren't behind it."

"You believed him? Now you're friends all of a sudden?" I laugh humorlessly, returning to my spot.

My father has never liked the Irish. Despises them. There's history there he doesn't talk about.

"Friends, no. But I know how to keep my enemies close. And yes, I can tell when the son of a bitch lies." He rubs his chin with two fingers. "If he said it wasn't them, then it wasn't them."

He curses under his breath.

"I didn't raise an idiot, Michael. Have you learned *nothing* from me? No mercy for the enemy, and that's who your brother is now."

That's my father's favorite line. *No mercy for the enemy*. We've lived and

breathed it like a code of honor. Our enemies always fall.

And if my brother is behind any of this, he'll die for it. No one goes against the family and lives to tell about it.

"If he's doing all of this, I'll put the bullet in him myself," I grit. "But I won't harm him until I know it was him. We have lots of enemies. Any one of them could've done this."

"Sure, we do. But only one we can confirm still hates us." He sighs. "He's not coming back to us, boys. It's been a year since he threw his life to shit." He looks at both of us. "If we don't do it, someone else will. The Irish, for starters."

Raph isn't easy to kill. He's living off the grid in a well-guarded house, surrounded by more trees and even more foot soldiers. We can't just show up. His men are loyal to him, guarding the place twenty-four seven. If we come for him, we have to be prepared. We all know this.

My father pulls in a long inhale, shutting his eyes for a moment before he punctures me with another cold stare.

"Ever since it happened, he's not well, Michael. You know it; you just don't want to admit it. I know you love him." His brows tug. "I do too."

He pumps his fist against his chest.

"But he's lost to us. He's like a dying animal. It's a mercy to end his life." He slowly shakes his head. "He's living like a recluse in that house, hiding out in those woods and doing what he can to ruin us. Soon enough no one will have respect for the name I worked hard for."

He blows an exasperated breath, his gray mustache rising.

"By the time you take over, our name will mean nothing, and the men will not respect you."

A long stretch of silence falls over the room while I think about a life without Raph in it. He's right to blame us. It's every bit our fault.

But the Irish denied it. We have no proof otherwise, and starting a war with no proof is not how I run business. That's when people stop respecting you, and fear and respect have to go hand in hand, or else the name my father fights so hard for will be known for cowardice. And I'm not a fucking coward.

"You'd better figure this out soon," my father says. "I won't wait until he ruins us so bad, we can't climb out of it."

"That won't happen." My tone is clipped.

"We'll see." He jerks a shoulder, staring hard at me and leaning back into

the swivel chair.

Silence grabs the room as he focuses on the ceiling for a few seconds until he opens his mouth again.

“You find a wife yet?”

And for once, I’m glad we’ve changed topics, though this one irritates me just as much.

“Since Chiara is not an option, you have to decide, and soon.”

The muscle in my eyelid twitches. “Never wanted Chiara to begin with.”

Gio barks out a chuckle, and I flip my eyes up to him with a deathly glare.

Amusement plays in his eyes as he forces himself to shut up.

“You’d better find a wife quickly,” my father scoffs. “Or I’ll find one for you, and the last two times I tried, you rejected them. Your old man wants to retire already.”

It’s all he’s thought about in these last couple of months. Wanting to go buy a house somewhere abroad with Mom. Says he’s getting too old for this life and deserves to relax.

“I’m giving you two weeks,” he says. “That’s it.”

“What?” My voice rises in volume. “There’s no way I can find someone in two weeks.”

“Well...” He rises to his feet, fixing his black suit jacket and pulling it down. “You’d better, or you’ll marry the last one I chose.” He breathes in a deep sigh. “You need to show our people you’re a man, and a man has a family. You don’t have to love her.”

A leery grin creeps over his mouth.

“You can still do whatever you want with whoever you want. I did with your mother.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” My body stiffens like every other time he talks about Mom that way.

That’s not what I want from a marriage. Not that I want one at all. Not anymore. Not in the world I’m in. I once thought I could have it all, find a wife good enough to be a mother to my Sophia, but that all changed a year ago. There’s no place for a woman here. It’s either this life or a family. I can’t have both. Life has proven that. It’s enough that I have Sophia to protect, to constantly worry about.

But I have to do this. It’s the only way...

“Gross, Pop.” Gio grimaces.

“I’m just saying.” He chuckles. “That Valentina was a pretty thing. You saw her ass, right? I’d marry her just for that ass.”

“You’re fucking sixty-five.” I shake my head. “She’s twenty. Why are you looking at her ass?”

He shrugs, marching toward the door. “I may be old, but my eyes and my dick work just fine.”

“Okay, yeah, we’re not doing this.” Gio rubs his temple as he steps aside, giving our father room.

“Get it done, Michael.” He points at me. “Two weeks. That’s it.”

“I’ll get it done.”

Fuck me.

“Good.” He opens the door with a triumphant grin. “Now excuse me, I’ve got some business calls to make before I go and buy your mother some new jewelry.”

“What’d you do now, Pop?” Gio looks to him for an answer.

But instead, our father walks out the door.

“Think he had another affair?” Gio asks once we hear him leave.

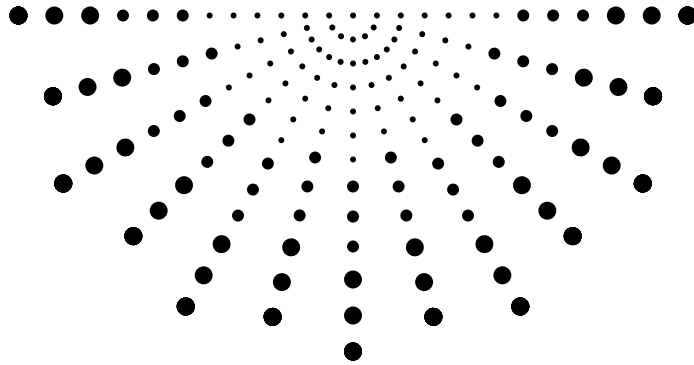
“It’s our father.” I glare. “Of course he did. It’s what he does.” My head shakes with vitriol and disgust. “I don’t know how the hell she’s put up with it for this long.”

“Not like she can divorce him.”

“I don’t want that,” I tell him.

Gio plants himself on the opposite side of the sofa and looks hard at me. “What do you want, then?”

CHAPTER FIVE



MICHAEL

What do you want?

The question echoes in my head.

Shit. I can answer that in many ways. But I'll keep it simple.

"I want to take over and save our brother. I don't need a real wife for that, just someone who can play the role." I rub my palms together. "Until I no longer need her."

"And where the hell are you going to find a woman like that in such a short time?"

"I have no clue." My elbows fall to the top of my knees, face buried in my palms, hair falling over the tips of my fingers.

There are some days where this is all too much. Worrying about my brother, taking over for my father, and taking care of my daughter, the only person in my life who truly matters. She needs me. If something happens to me, she's got no one.

"He's got a point about Valentina," Gio points out.

"Then you marry her," I snap.

"Damn. Okay, don't shoot me. Shit. I'm just saying. Who else do you have?" His brows knit in thought. "Cassie's cute."

"Who's that?" I ask, not knowing that name.

"That chick from Saint's bar."

"Ahh..." I chuckle lightly. "She has big tits like you like them."

“They’re damn nice.” He winks, and my face turns hard.

“You fucked her?” The words spill harshly.

“Of course I fucked her.” His shoulder lifts a fraction. “Years ago.”

“What did I tell you about that?” I clasp his forearm. “You didn’t learn shit from the incident with Fiona, did you?”

“It worked out.” He pushes me off.

“He almost killed you.”

“Now that I see how badly he wants Raph dead, I believe he would’ve if I hadn’t fixed my mess.” He snickers.

We both know our father is a hard-headed man who doesn’t stand disrespect. And a bartender at one of our bars getting knocked up when Gio was eighteen was not what my father wanted. It’s a good thing Fiona’s baby was someone else’s.

“What are we gonna do about Raph?” Gio asks, looking unsure.

The Marino boys were once a united front, unstoppable. But life...it changed all that.

“We’re going to stall as much as we can and hope nothing else happens in the meantime. But if it does, we must end it once and for all.”

Staring ahead, I think about Raph and how good it once was. It was only a year ago when we were all in this very house, having dinner, and the next day, everything changed.

“Sophia, your hair is just so beautiful,” Bianca gushes, twirling a piece of my daughter’s wavy chestnut-colored strands around her finger. “Every year, you get prettier and prettier. Your poor father.”

She laughs unauthentically, giving me a glance, while I nod with a tight smile.

“She’s just perfect.” Mom leans her head to the side, brows knitting, a hand at her chest, adoration growing on her face.

“Thank you. Thank you.” Sophia curtsies with a bright grin, then twirls in her entirely too poofy dress she insisted on wearing.

Both of my brothers laugh. They love that kid as much as I do. She’s the only light in the darkness that is our world.

Being her father changed me as a man. Before her, I had no idea what it meant to love another person, not like I love her. But when I found her, when I saved her...in that moment, she became mine. It doesn't matter where she came from, whose blood courses through her veins. Because she's my daughter. A Marino. And she will die a Marino.

Raph sits beside Bianca, his wife, while Gio's across from Nicolette, Bianca's twenty-year-old sister, nearly five years younger than Bianca. Nicolette's pale green eyes stare right at Raph, but he's always been too oblivious to notice.

But that's Raph. He's devoted. He'd never be interested in anyone while he's married, especially his own sister-in-law. He's as loyal as they come. I don't think he's even talked about fucking another woman, not even as an afterthought. He's nothing like our father.

Raph is the real deal. Better than all of us. He puts everything into his marriage, even with some of the problems they seem to be having lately. I can see the tension between them, a lot more than usual.

If I ever settle down, I won't be like our father either. But I haven't found anyone who'd be good enough to be Sophia's mother. My daughter deserves that, someone who can love her like they share the same blood.

But it takes a lot to marry someone like me, to accept the danger that comes with being Mrs. Marino. Some of them are too eager for a chance with me, seeking the thrill of this life, but I'm not after a woman like that. I want someone real. Someone smart. One who recognizes the dangers and accepts them because she wants me, wants us. Nothing less than that will ever be enough. Maybe one day, there'll be a Bianca for me. Not today, though.

She comes from a solid family. Both of her parents are Sicilian. Her father owns a bunch of liquor stores, which is where we get all our supply for the restaurants and bars, and for way below the market price. It's the least her father can do, my father says. Elio would never refuse us. He knows better.

"When are you two having a baby and giving your mother and I another grandchild?"

Here we go: my father starting with Raph again. It happens at every damn family dinner. If it's not this, it's something else.

"Oh, Giancarlo." Mom slaps him playfully on the chest. "Leave the kids alone."

"Come on, I'm serious." My father snickers. "Almost three years married

and no kids? What are you waiting for? Neither of you are getting any younger.”

He stares straight at Bianca, and her eyes dart to her lap uncomfortably.

“She’s twenty-five, and I’m thirty-seven.” Raph’s jaw flexes as he leans forward with a harsh breath, fixing our father with a glare. “We’re not as old as you.”

“You wish you were made like me.” My father pounds his chest once with a fist, his features curtained with rage. “I’d have knocked up my wife more than once by now.”

Nicolette widens a stare, scratching the side of her neck with long fingernails.

“We’re leaving.” Raph starts to rise.

“What are you so sensitive for, huh? What the hell did I say that’s so bad?” my father mocks with tense laughter.

The air is thickening with heavy unease, my brother’s eyes still on him.

“I mean, your...you know...” my father says, glancing at Sophia, who’s sitting on my mother’s lap and looking back and forth between him and Raph. “It still works, right?”

And we all know he means his dick.

Raph’s entire face tenses. I can practically feel that fury filling his blood with poisonous thoughts.

This is how it’s always been with them. My father has had an axe to grind with Raph for as long as I can remember. Even when we were kids, he was never good enough. Strong enough. Sinister enough.

Me? I never had that issue. We all knew I was the favorite, and I hated that. Gio? Our father just tolerated him.

“Dad...” Gio says. “Enough.”

“Yeah, come on. We should probably be going,” Mom says with a tense smile, playing with Sophia’s hair. “This little girl needs her sleep. Isn’t that right?”

“I’m not tired.” Sophia scrunches her face.

“See? She’s not tired,” my father says, flipping a hand in the air. “All I’m trying to do is make sure we have a solid new generation. Strong Marino genes. No pussies.”

He says that while looking straight at Raph.

Bianca fingers her shoulder-length black hair, while Nicolette’s brows knit as she stares at Raph.

“Yeah, because you should know about being a pussy.” Raph’s voice rises. “Isn’t that right, Dad?”

“You hear this one?” Dad chuckles, but it never reaches his eyes.

He jumps to his feet, and then my brother jumps to his, gritting his teeth.

“Oh my God,” Sophia murmurs.

My mother’s arms slip around her; my baby’s eyes are full of fear with tears filling them.

And that’s when I’ve finally had enough. I get up, standing between them, a palm against each of their chests.

“This is not happening in my house,” I tell them both. I won’t allow a fight near my daughter. “You’re all leaving now. You and Mom first, Dad. Go.”

“Alright.” His chuckle is deep as he waves me off. “I’m going. I’m going.” He turns to Sophia. “Grandpa has to get his beauty sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay, princess?”

“Okay, Grandpa. Love you.” She throws her arms around him in a quick hug, then holds my mom in a tight embrace before placing a palm against her cheek. “Love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, my favorite girl.” Mom kisses her on the forehead, then grabs her bag and starts for the door after our father.

That’s what she’s done most of her life. Follow him around. And their shitty marriage made me realize a long time ago that I don’t want a wife who follows me, but one who walks beside me. I want a damn queen.

Once they’re out the door, Raph exhales sharply, rubbing his palms over his face, groaning in frustration.

That’s when Sophia walks over to him and places her hand on the top of his head. “Are you okay, Uncle Raph? He wasn’t very nice to you, was he?”

He looks up at her, thick brows bending, his mouth quirking. “You’re my favorite. Did I ever tell you that?”

“I am?” She flutters her lashes with a tip of a smile.

She’s only five. What the hell am I gonna do when she’s fifteen?

I’m gonna knock out every short-dicked fuck who thinks he can touch my girl. That’s what I’m gonna do.

Shit, I’m not ready for this. Not by myself. Raising a girl is hard enough. Raising a soon-to-be woman? I can’t handle it without someone who knows more about this than I do. Mom will help, but it’s not the same.

“You’ll always be my favorite, Sophie bug,” he says, just as she yawns.

Raph gets up, grabbing her in his arms and lifting her in the air, her laughter and squealing erasing all the negativity my father is an expert at pulling out.

“Want me to put her to bed?” he asks me, placing her on his shoulders.

“Hey!” Sophia giggles with protest. “I said I wasn’t tired!”

“Tough, kiddo,” I tell her. “You’ve got school tomorrow, and it’s already past eight.”

“Bor-iiing.” She rolls her eyes.

I lift a single brow. “You’d better unroll those eyes. Right now.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” She flashes me a sweet smile, giving me her doe eyes.

I’m in trouble with this one.

“You got your daddy wrapped, don’t you?” Bianca laughs, looking up at her. “You’re so good with her, Raph.”

And the way she says that, the way her features tighten, a hand slipping around her stomach for a mere second...it’s like she wants a child too.

I never asked my brother about that. It’s none of my business, and sure as hell isn’t my father’s business either.

As Raph takes Sophia upstairs and disappears out of sight, Bianca shuffles uncomfortably on her feet.

“I don’t know why your father treats him that way. He’s always trying to shake him, you know?”

“Yeah.”

What the hell else can I say? I’m not about to talk shit about my father to anyone, not even her, no matter how right she is.

She must sense my discomfort. I can tell from her uneasy expression.

“Well, thank you for having us for dinner.”

“You’re family. You’re always welcome. Nicolette too.” I give the younger sister a brief glance as she picks at her red nails, completely avoiding me, her eyes wandering ahead like her mind is elsewhere.

“Nicolette, where are your manners?” Bianca scolds with a clipped twinge in her tone.

“I’m sorry, what?” Her gaze darts to her sister.

Bianca flips a hand in the air, face turning with a grimace. “Michael said we’re welcome here anytime, and you’re too busy with your head in the clouds.”

She narrows a glare, and Nicolette gives her one even harder.

“Well, my head wouldn’t have to be in the clouds if one of us didn’t—”

“You need to stop,” Bianca snaps, her voice slicing with a fresh coat of anger, not something I’ve ever seen in her.

“You’re the one who needs to stop.” Nicolette pauses, the two sisters practically clawing one another with their glares. “Whatever.” She rises to her feet. “I’ll get myself home.”

“Stop being a child!”

But Nicolette waves a hand. “Thanks, Michael. Bye, everyone.”

“I can drive you,” Gio throws in.

But she’s already at the front door, and then we hear it bang as it shuts.

“I’m sorry about her.” Bianca sighs. “She’s young and difficult. A deadly combo.”

Her eyes roll and she huffs out, fingering a strand of hair that has fallen over her eyelashes.

“It’s fine,” I say. “Not a problem. We know how it is.”

Whatever sisterly bullshit is happening between them, I want no part of it. I have to be up early tomorrow for a business meeting with a real estate group in hopes of finding additional locations to expand our brand.

“You ready to go?” Raph says now, climbing down the stairs.

“Yes.” She smiles faintly at him. “Thank you again, Michael.”

Her hand goes to my forearm as she lightly squeezes. Once they all say their goodbyes, I lead them to the door, and I’m finally alone.

Damn, my family is exhausting.

I need my brother back. Need to help him get over the demons of his past. Sophia misses him like crazy. It’s time.

“Alright, I’ve gotta go,” Gio tells me, jumping to his feet.

“Yeah, I need to go and see that Sophia actually did her homework. That kid lies better than you.”

“No one lies as good as me.” He smirks.

I walk him out with a shake of my head, a casual grin on my face as I lock the door behind him.

When we were kids, he’d lie to my parents all the time. But back then, he wasn’t as skilled at it as he is now. His ass would get beaten for the shit he

told my father.

But now as a man, his cleverness, his ability to keep that poker face during our business deals, has served us well.

“Sophia, where are you?” I call, walking into the den and not finding her there, where she’s usually lying on the shaggy white rug, watching TV on her belly.

As soon as I got home earlier, she jumped into my arms, holding on to me until it was time for me to have that meeting with my father and brother. Managing everything, it’s damn hard. I want to spend every hour with her when she’s home, but it’s not always possible. Maybe a wife wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Even a pretend wife is better than none at all.

Stepping into the kitchen, I don’t see her there either.

“Sophia!” I call from the head of the stairs, waiting to hear those little feet stomp out of her room.

But there’s only silence.

My irritation grows.

“Sophia! Daddy’s not playing hide-and-seek right now. You have to come out and show me your homework, and then we can make pizza together.”

I stare up, still not seeing or hearing a damn thing. Dragging in a sharp breath, I take out my cell and turn on the security cams, rewinding enough to find her running into the bar room.

“God damn it,” I mutter, my feet already moving.

She knows she’s not allowed there. It’s off-limits. I should probably start locking it. But it’s way more convenient to leave it open for the times when I’m dragging a body into it.

But she’s getting older and more curious. I can’t have her asking questions. It’s soundproofed, and I do lock it when I’m inside. But what if she sneaks there and accidentally discovers her father’s hand on the trigger, with a dead body on the other side of it?

I don’t even want to imagine her opening the meat freezer. The only kind of meat we store there is the human kind. Before parts of our enemies get dropped into the ocean, they’re sometimes kept here.

She wouldn’t understand what I must do for the sake of the family, for the sake of respect. She may never understand. One day, she may hate me for it, and I’m not ready for that day.

As soon as I’m in the garage, I open the door to the cellar, marching

down the hall, and that's when I see her rushing for me.

"Sophia! What did I tell you about coming in here?"

I find her shell-shocked gaze staring at me.

"I—I—I'm sorry," she stammers, looking behind her, then back at me.

Kneeling down, I place both palms over my daughter's shoulders, an overpowering sense of love hitting me in the chest. "I'm not mad, princess. But this is Daddy's room, and it's dangerous. There is too much glass here." I cup her cheek, leaning over to kiss her on her forehead. "What if you got hurt and I didn't know where you were?"

Her lower lip trembles, soft brown eyes swimming with tears. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to be bad." She wanders a gaze to her feet.

"You're not bad, princess." I tip her face up back to mine. "Just a little shit sometimes." My mouth widens into a smile.

She lets out a small laugh, and I hold her face in my palms, kissing her forehead again. Her eyes go to where a water bottle lies on the ground to my right.

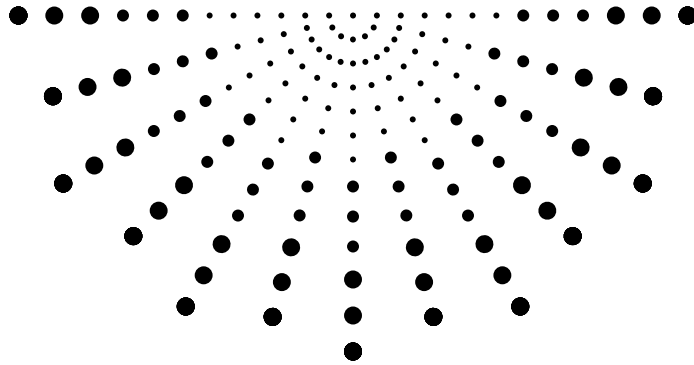
"You got thirsty?"

"Um...yeah." She hops to the bottle and picks it up while I straighten. "Yeah, uh, this is mine. I got *super* thirsty and just sat on the floor waiting for you to be done with Grandpa and Uncle Gio." She grabs my hand and tugs me toward the exit, acting crazy suspicious. "I'm hungry. Can we go cook now?"

"Okay," I tell her.

But my eyes? They wander toward the bar for a few long seconds before we make it out the door and shut it behind us.

CHAPTER SIX



ELSIE

The large clock on the wall to my right reads six in the morning, and I've been up for hours. I could barely sleep for a solid thirty minutes, weaving in and out of consciousness all night, worried I would be discovered.

The second I heard him walk in yesterday, calling his daughter's name, I thought I was certainly dead, but that little girl with her brown hair and full brown eyes didn't give me up. I don't know why. Maybe because she saw my tear-stricken gaze. Maybe she felt sorry for some random woman hiding in her home.

But whatever the reason for her kindness, I was spared, and the next time, I might not get this lucky. I have to try and get out of the house, no matter the risk. Because staying here is a bigger one.

My fingers slip into the carton of blueberries I stole earlier, along with a turkey and cheese sandwich I've already devoured. Two empty bottles of water lie before my feet, my ever-growing collection.

I'm not greedy. I only take as much as I need to stifle that stabbing hunger.

Leaning back against the wall, I think about Kayla and what she's probably going through, and pain meets my eyes. They'll blame her and punish her because of me while I'm sitting here not doing a damn thing to help her.

My eyelids grow heavy, and I doze in and out. Maybe I can catch a quick

ten-minute nap without being spotted. I settle further into my little corner, but as I do, the door creaks and heavy footsteps drudge forward.

And in an instant, I'm fully awake, like someone doused me with ice water. I hold a breath in my chest, afraid to move, to make any sudden noises.

"Make sure you're here in an hour." Michael's cold, deep voice punctures me like a knife. "Do not be late."

The way he says that, no one would think to go against him. He's terrifying, and I don't want to be the one to know that side of him.

There are a few seconds of silence until I realize he must've hung up. He stomps across the floor, and my entire body comes alive, a shivering sensation running down both arms.

What the hell is he doing here?

The fridge door opens, and the sound of a plastic bag fills the air.

Crap, he's going to know someone took the food.

He rummages in there for a minute before the fridge bangs shut, but instead of leaving, he eats away the distance between us, and the clank of a bottle lets me know he's only a few inches away.

My pulse slams in my neck, the adrenaline causing my insides to shudder, my stomach in tight knots. If he even so much as looks over the bar, he'll see me. My arms huddle around my upturned knees, pressed to my chest.

Glass clanks over me, and when he starts shifting further and further away and the door clicks shut, I breathe out the biggest exhale, and the vile need to vomit hits me hard. I grab a bottle of water beside me and take small sips.

Whoever he's meeting in one hour, I sure as hell hope it isn't here in this room. But just in case, I have to find a way out before that hour is up and he finds me.

Quickly coming out, I slowly tread for the door until I reach it. My hand hits the knob, and I twist even as my skin breaks with an icy chill. But as I pull the door with all my might, nothing happens.

"Wha...no." I shake my head on a low cry. "It can't be...no!"

But no matter how long I keep trying, it's pointless. The door is locked. Panic like I've never known hits me, my hand trembling as it jumps to my mouth.

All I can do is stare at the door, tears now rolling silently down my cheeks. I have to go. I can't be here.

I'd beg for his forgiveness. For him to let me go. To help me save my

friend. He has to help. But knowing his level of cruelty from the rumors I've heard, I know he won't.

I slap a hand under my eyes, not wanting the tears. They won't help anyone.

After staring at the door for who knows how long, I return to my hiding spot and cry. The tears may not help a soul, but they're all I have. So I let it out, right here in my enemy's home, not caring at all if he hears me. Not anymore.

"Shut the hell up!" a man I don't recognize shouts.

I startle, eyelids flashing open, my heartbeats rattling inside.

Shit. How long have I been sleeping?

"Save those tears, Smitty," the same person continues. "It's going to get a lot worse for you."

"Pleeease," he openly sobs, fear trickling in his voice. "I didn't take nothing from you."

"That's a lie." Michael speaks this time, and I can practically hear the wicked amusement in his voice.

What sounds like a chair grinds across the floor, then the man's screaming, over and over until my ears bleed, until my flesh breaks with goose bumps.

I can only imagine what they're doing, and from the sounds of what I think are punches and things breaking, it's nothing good. My body practically retracts into itself, and I shiver as I hide my head into my raised knees.

He's going to do this to me when he finds me. I tremble, my body in full-blown panic. He's going to torture me, break me like every man before him.

I should've died. I should've opened his car door and jumped out to my death.

"You stole from me, Smitty." His tone is sharp, like a parent scolding a child. "Now, if you admit it, I'll be easier on you."

He says it so matter-of-factly, like it's a prize he's offering this man.

"P-p-please...I—I didn't do it. Too-took nothin'." He continues to weep, every second the cries pierce out, only getting louder.

“Come on, Smitty. I don’t like liars.” His shoes thump loudly. “I’ll make you hurt worse just for that.”

“P-please, Michael. I—I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” he grates, and this time the rage in his voice has my eyes widening.

What could this man have taken?

Then it hits me. The food? Could it be that? Is that why Michael was looking in the fridge today? Did he realize stuff was taken and is blaming this guy?

Michael mocks him with a tsk. “Things have disappeared, Smitty, and you were the one with access.”

His footsteps slink closer to where I am, and my entire body trembles, my teeth clenching and rattling within my mouth.

“You disappoint me.”

“But I didn’t t-t-take it. Maybe it was s-s-someone else.”

“Tie him up,” Michael says, and Smitty snivels as sounds of another chair come through.

“Pliers,” Michael demands, like he’s asking to pass the potatoes.

I suck in an audible breath, my stomach churning, pulse speeding, beating loudly in my ears.

What’s he going to do with those?

“One last chance. I’m not a patient man.”

But Smitty just keeps wailing.

The rhythm of my heartbeats drums inside me until my chest grows heavy with every tattered breath.

Michael sighs, as though with boredom. “Suit yourself. This will be painful, and you’ll wanna die. But…” Another chair drags across the floor. “If you admit it now and don’t waste my time, I’ll kill you faster. One shot into your brain, and you won’t even know what hit you.”

The man sobs. “I di—ahhh!”

The words die in his throat, replaced by a scream so brutal, I’ll hear it for as long as I live.

My palms cover my ears, tears running down my face, imagining what’s being done to him, all because of me. I can’t let Michael hurt someone who doesn’t deserve it. But if I reveal myself, I’ll be on the receiving end of this.

Oh, God. I cry silently, eyes falling closed, tears continuing to spill.

I don’t know how much time passes, but the screaming gets louder, as

though the man is on the brink of death.

I can't listen to this anymore. Allowing another person to pay the price for what I did isn't how my parents raised me. It's not the type of person I want to be. I'm better than this. I've never let fear cause me to cower before, and I won't start now.

"Should I begin with your other hand?" Michael roars. "Or will you finally admit you stole from my family before I chop both your hands off?"

The man screams louder, like he's being butchered alive, but Michael only laughs. A sadistic kind of laugh, like this is a sick game.

"Okay, then. I'll just keep go—"

"Stop!" I yell out, jumping to my feet, weakness pounding at my knees.

Instantly, a gun is pointed to my face, but not Michael's. The one belonging to the other man beside him, who looks younger, but much like he's related. Their dark, almost black eyes are identical.

"Who the fuck are you?" his lookalike questions, brows tugging in confusion.

I will my feet to move, little by little, my hands raised in the air, my heartbeats exploding in my rib cage. "I..."

My throat goes dry, my chest flying up and down as I glance at the both of them, hoping not to die.

"The girl from the window." Michael's lips faintly curve. "Nice to finally meet you. I was starting to wonder when you'd decide to join us."

I gasp, lowering my arms, eyes rounding.

He knew? Son of a...

"You know her?" the man who still directs his weapon at me remarks, turning to Michael with a tilt of his head.

But Michael...those mesmerizing eyes, they remain fixated to mine, gaze falling to my trembling lips before they crawl back up to my eyes.

"Sort of." He chuckles dryly.

He knew. This whole damn time, he knew I was here. He fucking knew even when he came here earlier, didn't he?

"You were messing with me when you came down here, weren't you?" I stamp out with an irate exhale, glaring at his smug face.

My gaze narrows. Even with the fear skating up my arms, there's anger there too. Did he think it was funny to scare me? Is this some sick game to him? To torture people?

He takes a single step forward. "I know everything that happens in my

home.”

He slinks closer, and without a second thought, I match his step, a snarl now fastened to my features.

“So why didn’t you kill me?” I hiss, my chest rising and falling with fierce breaths.

His chuckle is cold and callous as he raises his gun and points it right to my heart. “I’m pretty tempted right now.”

“Do it, then.” My gaze fills with wrath, chin tilting higher, teeth gritted.

Whoever this man is, no matter how sweet he was to his daughter, there’s a monster at my feet. A cruel one.

Those eyes darken like a storm brewing on the horizon as we stare each other down, neither one of us giving in. He can shoot me. There’s no one to stop him. But he doesn’t. Maybe this is another game he’s playing.

Behind him, the man on the chair looks to be dead, blood and bruises covering what’s left of his face, pieces of wood sticking to the open wounds on his cheek. His nails on one hand are all gone, along with one of his fingers, with blood dripping out. Too much blood.

I don’t shy away from it. I’m used to it by now.

Michael casually takes in my body with a single rove of his gaze, starting at my mouth, raking downward until he’s captured every inch of my flesh.

My nipples instantly grow taut at the intrusion, breathing turning wild. I wrap my arms around my body, suddenly feeling bare, even with the clothes still on me.

“Are you checking out your meal before you eat it?” I toss out with a lift of a brow and a curl of my lips.

“Oh, shit,” the other man laughs. “We’ve got ourselves a feisty one.”

Michael’s mouth spreads into a taunting grin. “I bet you’re scared to find out.”

I sneer. “I’ve met far scarier men than you.”

Something flickers in his gaze. It’s momentary, but I swear he felt sorry for me.

But I’ve definitely imagined such a thing, because he’s just like them. Nothing about him is good.

He continues to stare, like he’s not sure what to do with me, cocking his broad chin, a single thick brow rising. “I should thank you.”

When I don’t ask what for, while my eyes cut into him, a cunning smirk emerges on his face.

“For letting me know I need better security.”

“You need a lot of better things.”

I can't seem to stop my mouth from moving, or from getting under his skin, which I know I'm doing if the muscle in his firm jaw twitching is any indication.

“Like what?” he casually drawls, taking another predatory step toward me, the words slipping out slowly, like a threat.

But I stand my ground. I won't show him fear.

“Like a better personality.” I let out a small snicker. “You seem a little angry.” I tilt my face toward him. “Are those wrinkles on your forehead?”

My finger points to the area, and the angry scar at his cheek jerks.

The other guy breaks in a chuckle, trying to hold it in, but failing terribly.

“You think you're funny?” Michael asks.

But before I can utter a word, he's on me in one fluid motion, his body pressing into mine, his hand wrapping around my throat so tight I can barely breathe.

“Because I don't think you're funny at all.” His pistol is still gripped in his other hand, and he presses it into the underside of my jaw, pushing his face into mine.

I try to pull in a breath, but he delves his fingers deeper, those eyes full of rage.

I'm in hell, and this is its keeper.

My lungs constrict and breathing becomes barely possible, especially when he stares at me this way – like in a mere second, my life will end, and Kayla will be alone. I try hard to keep up the front that I'm not afraid, that he won't scare me, but I fail. Because my friend needs me, and my bravery could cost her everything.

“Please, let me go,” I beg, barely getting the words out, and I hate the sound.

Begging a man for anything makes me cringe, but sometimes we must do the dirty things just to survive – or, in my case, help others to.

“Ple-please.” I feel the moisture build in my eyes and I no longer care that he sees the weakness I'm desperately trying to hide.

I attempt to force air into my lungs even as my chest burns. “I'm s-sorry.”

My inhales and exhales rival for space. My heart aches; my body, too. I can't do this anymore. He won't let me go. I just know it. He'll toy with me until I'm nothing but flesh and bone. A plaything, like for all the others. I'll

be his for as long as he wants, and there will be no one to save me.

I won't live this way anymore. I'd rather die. I drift my eyes to a close, tears leaking past the edges.

"Just do it," I whisper as I slowly open my eyes and take in the last man who'll ever hurt me.

I feel like a coward giving up, not being strong enough to save her, but I won't be able to. Not with him.

"End it. I can't take another second of this life. Just kill me. Kayla will understand." My lips tremble as I stare fiercely into the eyes of a monster. "She was right. Death is the only way."

My vision grows hazy from the tears blanketing it, and for a single passing moment as I look into the eyes of the man who has my life in his hands, I definitely see it. His face softens, just a fraction, just a sliver of humanity appearing like a light in the darkness, calling to me.

His gaze penetrates through the mist in my eyes. Hard. Deep. Wave after wave of this look in his eyes that I can't understand or make sense of. It's like he's attempting to pick me apart at the seams, to discover who I truly am. But he won't find anything underneath. That girl is gone, and the woman I am... there's nothing left of her for a man to find.

His brows pull tight as his chest widens with a long inhale. Is there sympathy in those eyes? For me?

No, a man like him doesn't sympathize. He takes. He hurts. He doesn't forgive. He doesn't understand. He kills. And I'm grateful to be next in line.

When he doesn't shoot me, when his grasp around my throat loosens a fraction, my breathing ravages, the anger surging.

I place both hands on his weapon. "What the *hell* are you waiting for?!" Rage curls through my senses. "Do it already. Fucking *kill* me!"

His even, collected breaths, those eyes holding me still, refusing to let go...it only irritates me. I place my thumb on the trigger, and the way he gazes at me, it's as though he doesn't want me to pull it at all.

But just when I thought I saw humanity within those dark eyes, he pushes off of me completely, not giving me a second thought. Marching back to the man on the chair, and with his eyes to mine, he points the weapon at Smitty, and—

Pop.

A bullet pierces his temple.

One second of time, and it's over.

“No!” I scream, rushing toward Michael.

That could’ve been me. Should’ve been me.

“Why?! I took the food! Me! *I* stole from you. Kill me!” My voice goes shrill, my breathing labored as I no longer stare at Michael but at the man he just murdered. “How could you do that? He didn’t even take anything from you!”

I turn to him, and amusement flanks his gaze, the sides of his eyes crinkling.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Don’t worry that pretty head of yours.” His words are soft, like he’s lulling me to sleep. A single hand reaches my face while I stand there trembling, tears pouring down.

His bloody knuckle strokes down my wet cheek, and my skin tingles all over, alive for the first time, even while I fear him. I warm at his touch, like he’s the flame heating up the very depth of my soul. But he isn’t warmth – he’s fire, and I’ll burn under his blaze.

“He did steal from me,” he casually explains, like killing someone is nothing. “And it wasn’t the food you’ve been eating from my fridge. This had nothing to do with you.”

My eyes grow. “Did you plan this? Did you want me to think—”

“That I was killing him for what you did?” His hand gradually falls away. “Of course.”

“You sick son of a b—”

He tosses his head to the side, shaking a single finger side to side. “I’d be very careful before you finish that sentence. You may be pretty, but I wouldn’t hesitate to break a pretty thing like you.”

“Fuck yo—”

Before I can even finish, he’s on me again, his palm engulfing my throat, like he very much enjoys it there. His mouth falls dangerously near mine, his lips perched close, our breaths mingling.

“If you *ever* say anything about my mother, I’ll find yours and slit her goddamn throat. Are we clear?”

I nod frantically, my heart threatening to rip right out of my rib cage. Wherever I’ve ended up, it sure as hell is worse than where I came from.

“What do you want from me?” I implore.

He doesn’t say a word, his exhales rough over my lips.

“Get this cleaned up. Then leave us,” he tells the other man, dropping his

hand and drawing further away.

I manage to breathe again, forgetting that I was barely doing it at all.

The other guy gets Smitty off the chair, throwing him over the plastic draped on the floor and rolling him in it before throwing him into a body bag.

It's not my first time seeing a bag like that. Lots of girls have been tossed in them, never to be seen again. My eyes stay glued past Michael, watching Smitty get dragged out the door.

"I'll send someone to clean the room later. Text me," the guy says before shutting the door.

Then we're alone. Michael continues to stare arrogantly at me, unnerving every part of me, while I focus on the wall ahead, not wanting to face him.

I can feel his hot gaze scorching up my skin, melting into my flesh. I swallow past the roll of anxiety building within. With a huff, I fling my gaze back to him, and instantly regret it.

Why does he look at me like I'm a riddle he's attempting to solve?

"I'm sorry, okay?" I tell him. "I'm sorry I broke in. Just...just let me go."

Silently, with his brows pinching, he drifts his knuckles down my face, causing my throat to close, a knot of something building in my gut.

Affection – this need to feel a connection with another person. That's another thing I miss, and I hate that he's the one who gives it to me. A man who'd toss me away like I mean nothing.

I don't even remember how it feels to like a guy. It's been too long. The last person I allowed to kiss me was this boy I dated senior year in high school, the one who took my virginity. That was my one true sexual experience. And the thought only makes me sad.

I try not to think about everything I've missed in my life. Boyfriends and heartbreaks and the finding of love when you least expect it. Buying my first place, a job, kids...I want them.

Better not to think about things I'll never have. I stuff the thoughts far away where I don't have to look at them anymore. All they do is hurt me – the reminders of what could've been.

"Weren't you just begging me to die?" he asks, eyes pinning me in place, his hand sinking lower until the large span of his palm is back around my throat.

But it's gentle this time, his thumb feathering against my thundering pulse like all he wants to do is to touch me. Tingles spread across my skin, prickling over every inch the more I feel his strong hands on me, the more he

looks at me that way.

I fight it. Whatever this is, I don't want to feel it. His touch is like all the rest.

Painful. Greedy. Unrestrained.

But somewhere inside me, I like this too. I crave it on some deeper level I can't yet make sense of. It's as though my body is coming alive for the very first time.

"I can't die," I whisper, blinking past the emotions slamming into the center of my chest.

I have people to save first.

His mouth slants nearer, barely anything separating us. And when he falls a breath away, his lips almost brushing mine, I let out a pant.

"Should've thought of that before you broke into my car and entered my home uninvited," he breathes, and in the tendrils of his tone, I sense the danger lurking.

He pulls in a sharp inhale, that mouth hovering, and my lids grow heavy, needing another taste of whatever that was. Like a hit of a drug, like poison that I should run from. But instead, I slant my face tighter to his, our mouths whispering over one another's. Almost a kiss.

This is wrong. So wrong.

My panting grows louder in the silence of the room, my nipples chafing against my shirt, pressing into his chest. And it sickens me that I could even be attracted to him, but maybe it's the fear, his strength, the way he overpowers me...I don't know, and I won't be here long enough to find out. If he doesn't let me go, I'll find my own way out or die trying. He won't be able to stop me.

I once dreamed of reuniting with my parents, seeing the looks on their faces when they finally found me. I won't stop trying for them. For Kayla. I'll fight my way out of this prison, just like I fought my way out of the last one.

"What's your name?" he asks, pitching his face back. "And don't lie to me."

His thumb strokes my lips, and my breaths quiver.

"Elsie," I admit. "I have no reason to lie."

"Well, Elsie, do I seem like the type of man who'd let you get away for trespassing without being punished for it?"

I shake my head, because I know him already. At least everything I need

to know. He's not a decent man. There's nothing human about him. He hurts people, and he will hurt me.

“Good girl. Because you're right.”

He leans his mouth to the corner of my lips, and the harshness of his breaths slips past me in a soft caress. A contradiction – just like he appears to be, because the man he was with his daughter is someone else.

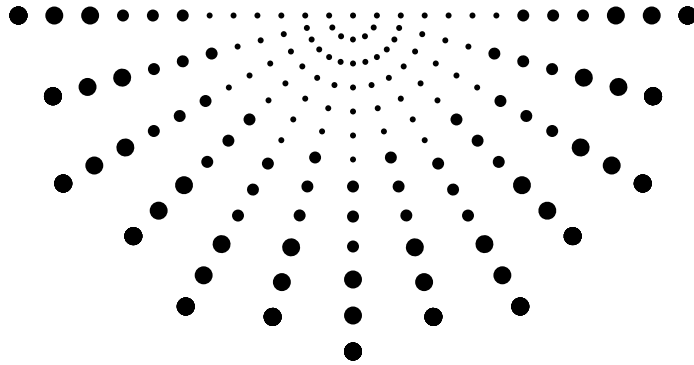
“Is there anything I can do or say to convince you otherwise?” But I know the answer before it even comes.

His lips snake up, curling like a serpent ready for attack. “Not a damn thing.”

I know if he wanted to, he could kill me, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Because I'm his now.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MICHAEL

I feel sorry for the woman before me. Sorry for what she endured at the hands of the Bianchis. And in her eyes, I see the pain as though it's here among us. But it's not enough to save her. Not from me. Because no one crosses the family, even someone as beautiful as her.

And she's right. I did know she was here in my home, and I wanted to see how far she'd take it. When I brought Smitty here, who skimmed money from us, I was hoping she'd think it had everything to do with the food she'd been stealing, but it didn't. I was merely testing her, wanting to see what kind of person she was: the one to look out for herself or for others.

And she passed. That's the only reason she's still alive. I'd have no use for her otherwise. Elsie is the perfect choice to pretend to be my wife. To live alongside my daughter. She has no choice, unless she wants to end up like Smitty here – or end up in prison, where I'll make sure she stays for a long time.

If she suspects the Palermos have people in their pocket...well, she hasn't met the Messinas yet. We know people in every avenue. Judges, cops, even senators. And each of them would do anything for us. Like keep a pretty little thing like her in prison for as long as possible, throwing every charge they can at her.

The Mafia owns this city, and we're at the head of that table. There are five families that rule here: us, the Palermos, the Rosolinos, as well as the

Cambria and Grazia families. The bosses of each family have also formed an alliance, known as the Azienda. It was established before my time and has been in existence for years. It's where we hash out differences, prevent an all-out war between families, and where new alliances are created.

Our family and the Palermo family have always been at odds, and if it wasn't for the alliance, I'd have killed the Bianchis already. They have nothing on us. They may think they're on top, but only one family has a name that every person in this city knows well. Fears enough to do whatever we ask. We could squash them like a bug, but it'd turn into a full-blown war.

But a treaty was signed with them, which prevents me from killing every one of them. They promised to stay out of our business, and we stay out of theirs.

We may turn our eyes away from what the Bianchis are doing, but I'd never send a woman to them. It's taken everything in me not to put an end to the human trafficking, the club. But I can't risk a war, and Sophia can't become a casualty of it. If I start one and break that treaty, all bets are off. Protecting my daughter is all that matters to me.

"If you're not gonna kill me..." Elsie's features harden, practically clawing at me with her striking gaze. "What the hell are you gonna do with me?"

Those big, twinkling brown eyes hold me captive with a fire burning through them, even while I can practically taste her fear like it's marking her soul.

I like that in a woman, someone who's tough even while she's bathed in fear. And I like knowing she's afraid of me. She should be. No one breaks into the place where my daughter sleeps without answering for it. I don't care that she was one of the Bianchis' girls or how beautiful she may be – and she is that. Goddamn, she is.

It's taking every amount of restraint not to punish her the way I truly want to. Pinned against the wall. Helpless. At my mercy. Her body mine to take, to make it do *anything* I want. But I can't do that. Not with a woman who's been through what she has.

But that doesn't stop my mind from taking a joyride filled with dirty thoughts: hands in her long waves, my fingers inside her cunt. I bet it's pretty. Like the rest of her.

Her large breasts heave with each one of her heavy inhales.

She likes me. She may not want to, but I can sense it in her breaths, those

eyes growing aroused.

“Well...there’s a lot I can do to you.” My lips fall to the curve of her jaw, wanting my teeth to sink into that soft skin, to hear her cry out my name.

Michael, fuck me. Make me come.

It’s as though I can’t restrain myself. It’s like I’m unable to stop touching this woman. It’s not something I’m used to, and not something I want to get used to.

“Like what?” she whispers, her voice cracking like stone, like she’s trying not to show me how much she’s enjoying our proximity.

“Like call the cops and have you arrested. Or...”

“Or what?” she breathes.

I lift the pistol still clutched in my palm, tipping her face up with the muzzle and pressing it to the underside of her chin. “Or we can just end this right now, just like you begged.”

Her brows snap, eyes watering over, and something in me almost feels it, that hurting inside her. Almost. Not enough to stop me from shooting her if I had to.

“No.” She vigorously shakes her head, swallowing roughly. “Don't call the cops. Please.”

That one word twists into the hurt she carries, weaving through the pain carved in her features as deep as the scar on my face. And that part of me that doesn’t want to feel a goddamn ounce of sympathy for her...it damn near shatters.

“You're more afraid of them than you are of a bullet?” My curiosity gets the better of me.

“Yes.” She nods, eyes going downcast before she focuses on me.

I place my finger in my waistband, eyes searching hers. Without realizing what I’m doing, my hand reaches her face, fingertips against her temple, softly moving away pieces of her hair that have fallen around her eyes. Those beautiful eyes.

“What are you running from?” My voice grows tender.

I’m not a tender man. Never been that way, especially not with a woman. I get what I need from them and never look back. It’s how it’s been. First, it was because none of them were ever good enough for my daughter. But when Raph left, after it all happened, I knew I’d never find the family I once thought I could have. Sophia is my family, and that’s enough.

“That's none of your business.” She glares now, pushing my hand off her.

But I already know the kind of life she's escaping from. I just want to hear her tell me. If I were to call the cops, she and I both know one of the dirty ones still loyal to the Bianchis would tell them they found their missing girl.

I wouldn't let that happen. I'd pay them way more money than the Bianchis could afford.

But she doesn't know that.

"Now..." She pops a brow. "Are you gonna kill me or what? Might as well do it before your daughter finds me again."

My fingers instantly tighten around her delicate throat, and I love the way her mouth parts and her cheeks flush.

"Don't you ever speak about my daughter. If you're trying to die, you're about to succeed."

Her smile is cold. Ruthless. And I fucking love it.

"You talk a lot of shit for a man who hasn't killed me yet."

I groan as I near my lips to hers, fucking groan like a madman because those words...goddamn, they set me off. That smart mouth of hers is getting me rock hard. I haven't felt so well matched with a woman before.

They try too hard to please me. That doesn't do a thing for me. But this? This, I like. That attitude of hers has me so hungry for a taste. But I'd never take it like I take everything else. It's something she'd have to be willing to give.

"I only kill when I have to. And I don't have to kill you, little dove. Not if you agree to a proposition."

"I'm not your *dove*." Anger pinches her features, like she's stabbing me in the heart with just a look.

A wry smile stretches over my face. "Oh...but you are." The knuckles of my other hand trace across her lips. "Delicate. Soft. One snap to your neck, and you'd be dead."

Her pulse quickens against my touch. I can feel it thundering.

She lets out a gasping breath, swallowing harshly. I can feel the swell against my palm. But then, instantly, that fear evaporates and strength returns to her eyes.

"So, are you going to actually tell me what your proposition is, or do I have to wait until your mouth decides to work?" The sass in her tone has a smirk creeping over my mouth.

Fuck. The things I want to do to that curvy body. I'd have her bent over,

with that ass spread and my tongue inside it.

“You have quite the attitude for a woman pinned to the wall.”

She snickers. “Let’s just say I no longer give a fuck what you do to me.”

I break with a slow, dragged-out chuckle, tightening my palm around her throat. Her mouth trembles, brows tightening.

“If you agree to my terms, it’ll spare your life and allow you to leave unharmed.”

Her head cants with a scoff. “I bet there’s a catch, though.”

I move back a fraction, my fingers slipping off her neck. Her throat looked a lot better with my hand around it.

“There’s always a catch, little dove.” I can’t help the satisfied grin on my face when her eye muscle twitches at that nickname. “My father’s the boss of our little enterprise, and for me to take over, I need to get married—”

“Oh, *hell* no!” She shakes her head. “Just give me the bullet.”

“Okay.” I shrug a single shoulder, reaching into my waistband. “Anyone you want me to call after I spray my walls with your blood?”

“Screw you,” she hisses.

“Keep talking with that mouth, and the only one who’s going to get screwed is you.”

That gasp and the sudden flush of her cheeks has me smirking, my cock heavy and throbbing.

“Shall I continue, then?”

She rolls her eyes in disgust, glancing at the ceiling momentarily. “Fine.”

The word may as well have been a curse, and I can’t help but laugh again. When the hell have I laughed this much except with Sophia?

“You’ll have to stay married to me for a year, attend all—”

“A year!” Her eyes grow wide. “Are you insane? You truly must be.” Her features twist with revulsion.

I find it all very amusing. “Like I was saying, you must also attend all the functions, be present for everything that would be required of me to attend. For all intents and purposes, and to everyone else, we are married. Our deal will only be known to the both of us.”

It has to be a year for my father's men to believe that I’m married, that I can keep my own house in control. I need the time.

“This is crazy,” she gasps. “I can’t do this!”

“Well, you don’t have too many options, it seems.”

She pitches me with a pointed glare, chest jumping with heavy breathing.

Her body remains pinned to the wall as though my hand and body are still keeping her there. And I would very much like to.

“The wedding would be soon,” I continue, ignoring this violent need surging up my body. “No later than a month or less. Then after a year, I divorce you, and you get to live your merry fucking life.”

She remains silent for long seconds, eyes darting all around until they land on me. “Do I get any money? I mean, anyone who has to be forced to stay married to you for three hundred and sixty-five days deserves something.”

I chuckle, just barely, before my face turns hard. I near her until her chest rises, until my lips flirt with a taste of hers, those intoxicating breaths coating my mouth.

“You want money?” My tone’s marked with callousness. “For breaking into my house? For avoiding jail time?” I reach a hand for the delicate contours of her face, fingertips drawing down the side of it. “No, little dove. There will be no money.”

Her lips part, those breaths long and scattered.

“When you’re gone, it’s with whatever you came with. And because I’m a good man, I’ll let you call your family or your boyfriend, and they can help you.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Those words make my fucking heart jump, and I shut it right off. “Doesn’t matter to me. I’m not here to fall in love with you.”

My lips graze hers, and her exhale jumps out. I’m playing with fire. That was too close.

“Great.” She practically bites my mouth off, even as the haze of her arousal marks every syllable. “Because I’ll never love you.”

“I don’t want your love.” I brush my thumb softly down her cheek. “I only want your obedience.”

“You won’t get that, either.”

With my other hand, I find her wrist, lifting it up above her head, slamming it against the wall, and keeping it there. “We’ll see about that.”

I run my nose down her neck.

“So full of yourself, Michael Marino.” Her words fade until my name is but a slight little moan, the bravery in her tone replaced with desire. She may deny it to herself, but I can practically smell it on her.

“Ah, so you know my name, then?” I pull away, enough to see those

soulful eyes begging to own me.

But she never will. No one can. I won't let them.

"Unfortunately." She bats her lashes with a taunting look.

"What have you heard?" I cup her jaw in a roughened palm.

"Enough to know you're not a good man."

"All true." I hit her with a cold smile. "So, what will it be, Elsie? Death, prison, or a year of being my sweet, obedient wife?"

She scrunches her nose, and I only chuckle.

This woman is my one shot at saving my brother. I need her, and I will take what I need to secure my father's position. It's the only way I can ensure that Raph stays alive. I never needed the power – I already have it – but my brother's life, if I can spare it, is worth this woman's freedom.

There's no one else I can find in two weeks, no one but her. Especially not someone who excites me as much as she does. If I have to get married for a year, it might as well be with someone who puts up a good fight and burns at my touch.

"I'm not sweet either."

There's a glint in her eyes, and I suppress a growl, wanting her helpless beneath me, feeling the vibrations of her moans as I enter her for the first time.

Gradually, I let my lips fall to her neck, inhaling her fresh scent as those little pants grow closer together. "I bet you taste real sweet, though."

She gasps, and fuck, I love the sound of it.

"Don't you have to drop to one knee or something?" she breathes.

"Will that get you to say yes the proper way?" I run my lips past the ravaging pulse beneath her neck, beating with life inside her.

"Not in your dreams, Marino." She sighs, throwing her head back, giving me more of what I crave.

My God, she makes me never want to stop being this close to her, feeling her whisper to life under my touch.

Rolling back, needing those eyes, I let my knuckles brush down the side of her face. She may entice me with her strength and that feisty attitude, but I have no interest in getting to know the woman underneath. I won't allow her to get close enough. I won't fall. She'll never get whatever's left of my heart. And there isn't much left at all. I have no plans to keep this woman and make her mine.

A man like me learns to accept the life he's been dealt. In my life, there's

only danger. It's how it is. Marriage will never be something I'm after. Not the real kind, not anymore. But that doesn't mean I can't pursue it for the mere purpose of getting what I want.

Marriage doesn't have to be final. They end. And this woman? She's going to help me get exactly what I want, and after that, I'll let her go.

Simple.

Easy.

Clean.

My father doesn't have to know a thing about my true intentions.

"So, we have a deal, then? Because I *will* need to hear you say it."

She stares at me with a tight glare. "Will I have to sign something?"

"Only to make the marriage legal. This agreement between us will be a verbal one."

She huffs, all dramatic, spearing me with a look that says she'd love to see me dead. I can't say I blame her.

"Fine. Deal." She sighs. "A year. That's it. Then you will let me go."

I drop my hand off her, pushing away completely, and every damn muscle in me wants back on her. My hand swipes through my hair, forcing it away from my forehead.

"That's what I said. And I don't like repeating myself."

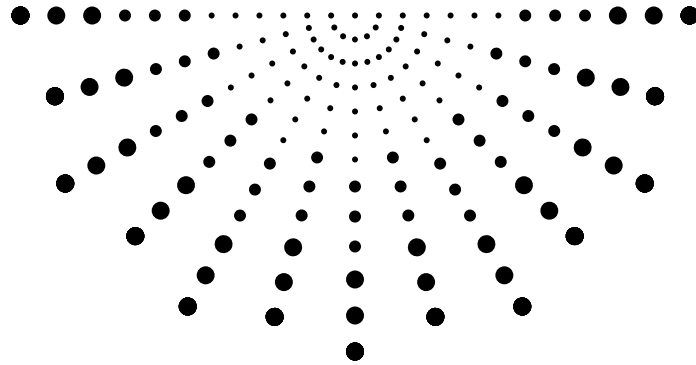
"Noted." She rolls her eyes.

"Don't do that." I take a step up to her, chest to chest. "Don't roll your eyes at me, Elsie."

"Or what?" She snickers. "Seems like you need me a lot more than I need you."

"You overestimate your value, little dove. You're only seeing the tip of what I'm truly capable of. Now, let's go. We have an engagement to announce."

CHAPTER EIGHT



ELSIE

His hand is on the small of my back as he leads me out of both the bar room and the garage, wanting to show me around the place that will be my home for a year.

His touch is firm, and if I weren't in this situation, I'd even find it safe, the way he touches me.

But there's nothing safe about him. I'm trapped in the arms of a monster and there's no way to escape. He wants me for a year, and the thought of being bound to him, living with him – a murderer, someone evil – it churns my stomach. Makes my skin crawl.

But he was right about one thing: I don't have other options. And it's better to have them than to end up dead or back where I came from. If this is the only way for me to save Kayla, then I will take it.

So I'll give the infamous Michael Marino what he wants. I'll play his game. But once he lets his guard down, I'll run. And this time, he won't find me.

"What will you tell your daughter? You know, considering she saw me hiding?" A small, sinister laugh bubbles out.

He pauses as we enter the house, snapping a hand around my wrist, yanking me flat against the bulk of his chest. "Don't worry about my daughter. She's only six. She'll believe just about anything."

His smoldering gaze skirts down to my mouth, and I swallow over the

ball of nerves there.

“You just worry about doing your job right.”

He drops my hand as though it’s suddenly made of ice, practically rushing past me, further into the house. But he pauses, his back to me, his shoulders leaping with heavy breathing. I proceed closer, my eyes scattering high to the cathedral ceiling with a sparkling chandelier hanging overhead. The mansion appears as though it spreads out endlessly, fancy-looking art on the walls and elaborate décor like tall shiny silver vases at the corner with fresh lilies.

I look at the wall to my left and see photos of his daughter, them together at the beach building sandcastles. He looks happy. Truly happy. Sophia’s on his lap, and his face is beautiful, that wide smile makes him appear almost kind.

But I know better.

I pause, continuing to glance around and spotting a large photo of them at a wedding, the couple smiling, Michael’s arm thrown over the man’s shoulder. There are other photos too: an older couple. Parents, maybe.

I pass a glance at another frame: Michael with two other guys, the one who pointed that gun at me and the other the groom from the wedding photo. He too has similar dark features to Michael, all three with those darkened eyes and black hair.

“Those are my brothers,” he explains. “You’ve met Giovanni already.”

“Yeah, he seemed really friendly.” I peek over at him. “Kinda like you.”

“Must run in the family.” His entire face flanks with amusement, and I quite like it when it does.

I return to the photos, allowing me a glimpse into his life. “And the other one?”

My attention wanders back to Michael once more, but this time, his jaw twitches and he stares ahead. And it makes me that much more curious.

Is he dead?

Shit, I shouldn’t have asked.

His palm returns to my lower back as he practically pushes me out of here and into a den. Cream leather sofas and pale gray walls greet me, along with a TV that covers almost the whole entire wall. I didn’t think they even made any televisions that huge.

“At least this place is big enough that I don’t actually have to see you every day,” I say, sauntering further into the space.

His eyes play with delight as he stops me, tipping my chin up with a finger. “Except at night, when you and I will sleep together.”

An icy chill skitters up my entire body as though I just took a bath in ice water.

He takes in my horrified expression with a cunning turn of his mouth. A hand slips around my hip, pulling me hard against him, and a breath rushes out of me.

“Did you think any wife of mine wouldn’t be sharing my bed?”

“Why would we have to?” The words fall just above a whisper. “I thought this would be...uh...” I swallow harshly. “Purely business. I scratch your back, you...you scratch mine.”

The vein trapped within the thickness of his neck twitches as the backs of his rough fingers skate softly down my cheek.

“Oh, little dove...” A thumb traces my lips as his eyes follow its path. “This mouth of yours is gonna get you into lots of trouble.”

“Get used to it,” I breathe.

The hand at my hip tightens, and those palms, those large hands...

I’ve never felt what I’m feeling, and I’m ashamed of it. Because between my thighs, something throbs to life. The whisper of an ache building in my core, like his fingers are there, flicking past the abuse, past the deprivation, to discover what I like, what I need.

I don’t even know what that is. I haven’t felt anything for any of the men who violated me. Not a single thing. I’d close my eyes and pray for it to be over, but now, with him.... I don’t know what’s happening. Maybe I’m just fucked up. Only capable of getting turned on by men who don’t care for me.

His sigh is harsh as he pins me with a flame of his own desire. My throat goes dry, my entire body spreading with sheer electric heat.

“This will most definitely be a business arrangement. There will be no love in this marriage.” His voice grows deep, gruff.

When that molten gaze slinks down to my parted lips, a slow trembling exhale rushes out of them. He continues to bathe me with his captivating aura, and I continue to feel it in parts of me I swore had died.

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” I ask. “Because I don’t need convincing, Michael. I’m not looking for anything but my freedom.”

“You’ll get it, as promised.” He pushes off me in a quick move, leaving me to wonder if I had imagined him there at all.

His back is to me, his fingers threading through his hair, the bulging bicep

beneath his suit jacket flexing.

He stays that way for several seconds before he faces me again. “Let’s keep moving. I’ll show you the rest of the place, and soon enough, you’ll meet my staff.”

I don’t care about any of that. While he starts to walk away, I stay there, wondering why we have to share a bed at all. Unless...

“What is this marriage going to look like? Do you expect—”

His lips twitch slightly. “To fuck you?”

I nod, those dirty words slamming into my core with a vengeance.

Would I like it if he did?

My chest rattles with heavy breathing as he cuts the gap between us. His hands stay off of me, but he’s close enough for his chest to press up against mine until it’s as though every single part of me is being felt up by him.

“Are you scared, little dove? Scared that I’ll touch you?” A single finger traces down the side of my torso. “All of you?” He grasps my chin between two fingers, his commanding gaze only pulling me in deeper. “Or are you scared that you might actually like it?”

Those words ignite inside me, my panting slamming out harshly.

A knowing sultry pull of a smile falls over his entire face. “I don’t have to love you to fuck you. Remember that.”

I raise my chin up even higher, meeting his fiery gaze with a glare. “Don’t think you’re even capable of love.”

He chuckles faintly. “You’d be right.”

“What if I say no?” My brows tighten and my core clenches because the worst thing about it is, I’m not even sure I would.

His nostrils enflame as he stares. Seconds drift by, and his eyes? They almost entrap me, my breaths flailing.

His hand leaves my chin, knuckles caressing under my jaw. In his gaze, I see him again: flecks of the tender man that appeared before, when we were alone in the bar room. And in these short little seconds, I almost wonder if I was wrong. If he’s capable of loving a woman. The more he looks at me, the more I wonder if he’s asking himself the very same thing.

“I may be a lot of things, Elsie, but I’m not the kind of man who’d take a woman against her will.”

His mouth leans closer, those lips fledging over mine.

“But you’ll say yes,” he whispers in a gravelly tone. “I promise you that.”

My breath hitches while a throbbing ache roars inside me, squeezing and

feeling and wanting. Him.

“You sound sure of yourself,” I breathe, unable to maintain the strength in my voice.

“As sure as I am that if I slipped a finger inside you, I’d find you wet.”

An unintentional gasp jumps out of me. I’m unable to respond, the words stuck in my throat.

And instead of a crass reply I’d expect from him, his lingering gaze intensifies, holding me captive in its unending storm. His thumb strokes my lower lip in the most tantalizing way. Being touched this way, every single time he does it...it’s unsettling.

The men use me – their hands weapons, not safety. But his touch feels different. Or maybe I want it to. Maybe my subconscious is desperate to cling to the hope that for once in my life, a man wants me enough not to hurt me.

But hope is a fantasy left for the women who believe in love. Because I don’t. Not anymore. That girl I was may have held on to hope that one day she’d find a man who’d scorch the earth for her, but I’m smarter now. Those men don’t exist.

The sharp edges of his features temper, and in a blink, he’s off of me, his hand against my lower back. “Let’s go upstairs so I can show you to our room.”

Our room. Oh, God.

A lot can happen in a room, especially when I’m trapped there with a man who makes me feel the way he does.

He leads me past the den and toward the double spiral staircase. I climb up, him behind me. Though I no longer feel his touch, I can sense him at my back, and my body breaks with a shudder from merely being this close to him.

It’s crazy, the way my body reacts to this man. It’s unexplainable, and I need to push it away because it isn’t real. It’s merely an illusion, my twisted-up mind making me crave something I shouldn’t and wouldn’t have ever desired before I was taken. Before they changed me into a woman who’d want a man like Michael Marino.

After everything I’ve been through, I deserve a normal life. Someone who can love me and accept me with all of my flaws, all the scars that have left marks too deep to ever eradicate.

But Michael isn’t that man. He’s not my forever. He never will be.

“Are you all right?” His palm buckles around my hip from behind, and I

only now realize that I've stopped moving, frozen mid-stair.

"Yeah, I...uh, I'm fine." Clearing my throat, I continue up, reaching the top.

Once he's beside me, he leads the way down a long corridor. "It's right through this door."

He gestures with a hand toward the last room on our right, and when he opens it, my eyes almost bug out. It's massive. Just like him.

I enter first, him marching in after me. My gaze floats toward the large black upholstered bed against one side of the wall, a fireplace across on the other, a white shaggy rug before it.

"Welcome home." His voice is a gritty concoction of sin and seduction.

His fingers feather around my hip, and my arms scatter with goose bumps.

I pull in a long breath.

"This isn't my home," I manage, clearing my throat, ridding it of all things Michael.

The pads of his fingers tighten, delving into my skin. "It is now, little dove. And it's a much better upgrade than that house they had you in."

I turn sharply with a scowl. "What do you know about that place?"

Seconds drift, his eyes only staring with a darkened lull, not revealing whether he knows what that place is a source of.

"Come, let me show you the rest of the room." It's obvious he wants to avoid the conversation we're bound to have eventually.

He marches past me, down the long stretch of the room. I can't even call it that. It's like its own city, bigger than the entire house I was trapped in. A guitar lies against the corner beside the bed, and I start to wonder if he plays. He must. Why else would he have it?

Does he sing too? Like me?

When I try to picture him playing, singing his heart out, it doesn't quite fit. He's so hard, well put together in those clothes. I can't imagine him strumming the guitar in a three-piece suit.

Speaking of suits... My eyes inadvertently catch the sight of his round ass, tightly wrapped within the confines of his gray trousers. A man's ass has no right to look that enticing.

He wears a suit like he was born in one, tailored to his every sinew, every taut muscle on his fit body. I bet that black dress shirt he has underneath is sculpted perfectly around him.

He pops a single brow as his face turns to me.

“Coming?” he asks, his hand on a doorknob, and I have no idea where he’s taking me or why I’m still staring at his ass.

His lips tip up just a little, and I realize he’s caught me. He pushes away the long strands of his hair from his face, and even his hair is beautiful. God-awfully beautiful.

I try to pretend he has no effect on me, willing my legs to move, unsure what he could be showing me. When I’m beside him, he fully parts the double doors and reveals a large walk-in closet.

There are loafers lined neatly on the floor in all colors. Shirts, pants, and more suits than I’ve ever seen hang in a row. Even more than my father owned, and he owned a lot.

I continue to take it all in, registering the warmth of his body behind me once again, a palm tightening against my hip, hair prickling across my flesh from the wake of his touch.

“I’ll make room for your things.” His sensual, deep tone sends me into overdrive, heat spreading across me.

It’s as though after all this time, after everything I’ve survived, he’s brought my body back to life. Like I can finally feel something for a man.

After the years of beatings, the rapes, the loss of dignity, I’ve come to accept that I’ll never know the tenderness of a man and the love and acceptance that comes with it. But here with him, in this illusion, it feels like I can have that. Like the dreams of a girl I once was – of finding someone who loves her – can finally come true.

“What things?” I snicker. “I have nothing.”

With a twist of a hand, he turns me to him, my body molding into his, my tight nipples scratching against my shirt as he pushes me up against him.

The back of his index finger nudges my chin up to meet his height, while his other arm twines around my hips. “You’ll have everything.”

His gaze bores into mine, so deep that I sink into his eyes, forgetting everything but this moment. This feeling.

“My wife will want for nothing,” he promises.

And that thumb, it brushes against my lips, setting me on fire.

His wife...

An ache builds behind my eyes because for a single fleeting moment, it feels real, like I’ve finally found it. A life I once only dreamed about. And for a moment, I dare to imagine it: a future, that we’re together, me with my arms

around him, him kissing me, that my heart was made for a man that isn't mine.

But only little girls dream of such things. A woman like me? She knows better than to dream. Dreams are for those who haven't been broken.

This is nothing more than a lie. I'm his captive. A woman he's using to get to the top. And I will help him get there.

"You'll have everything you could possibly need by tomorrow."

"Great," I grit. "Except my freedom."

When I try to pry his hand off me, he only tightens it, not looking away, fingers biting rougher.

"You'll have that too, eventually, as promised. Until then, little dove, you're mine."

"How lucky for me."

His mouth curls into a devilish smirk, and I wish I could take that gun of his and shove it down his throat.

"Tell me one thing." My stare narrows. "Did you know what they were doing to us?"

Was he somehow involved? Because if so, he can put a bullet in me right now. I will not help him.

When his jaw flexes and he refuses to answer, I shove at his chest hard with both hands. He lets me go, arms now crossed over his chest.

"You did, didn't you?" I gasp, shaking my head in disgust. "Did you participate? Oh my God."

I slap a hand over my mouth, backing up.

"This was a mistake. I—I'm leaving. Or kill me. I don't care," I tremble, turning on my heels, rushing for the door.

But I don't even make it two steps before he fastens his arm around my stomach from behind, muscles tight and flinching around me.

"You will go nowhere," he husks out, every word like a sword, piercing me with strength.

"You're no better than them!" I yell, clawing at his arm, trying to get his arm off me.

But he grabs my other hand with his and pins it behind my back.

My breathing ravages, my inhales faster than my exhales. "Let me go!"

My entire body shakes, not giving up the fight, groaning when I can't move an inch out of his grasp. He's damn strong, towering over my small frame.

“I’ll drop my arm. Just don’t fight me or I will restrain you again,” he breathes, and the words whisp against the pulse beating rapidly in my throat.

My chest expands, unable to stifle the rage inside me. I’m tired. So fucking tired. Counting to ten, my eyes drifting to a close, I attempt to calm down, my body sagging as I finally do.

He must sense it because his arms begin to fall away, but only for a second. His palm snaps around the back of my neck and he tugs me to him, and with his free hand, he holds my cheek, thumb strumming back and forth, waking all my senses.

“I wasn’t involved in that. None of my people were.”

In his eyes, I find the truth. But it’s not enough.

“So, you what? Just looked away?” Tears burn and bleed behind my eyes. “Pretended it wasn’t happening?” My lower lip quivers. “I hate you.”

His inhale is harsh as he continues to stare, his unflinching gaze full of regret. Seconds drift by without a word from him, not even a justification for not stopping what was happening to us. Because I bet he could’ve.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, clutching my face tighter, brows snapping.

Somewhere inside me, I realize that those words aren’t ones he’s used to uttering. I can feel their weight in my hands.

But words aren’t enough. They didn’t save me then, and they won’t save Kayla now.

“I don’t forgive you, Michael.” More tears tremble out of me.

His chest widens with a sharp inhale.

“Being my wife won’t be so bad for you,” he promises. “You’ll be safe. No one will hurt you here.”

“Except you.” The words swim out faintly, like the water before the hurricane comes. Like the wave of attraction tangled in the web of darkness.

“I won’t hurt you either. Unless you don’t behave.” That sinful mouth lifts a fraction.

“Never been good at behaving.” My eyes narrow into slits, the anger still brewing.

And as I try to turn around, needing out of this room and away from him and this chaotic mess of feelings, his palm clenches rougher around the back of my neck, pulling me close enough for his forehead to slant over mine.

“Oh, little dove...” His voice is a sharp, whispered threat, lips lowering, too close for a taste I can’t let him have. “You *will* behave.”

His fingers trace south, roughly cupping my ass, squeezing it.

My breathing quickens, and I can feel the swell of his cock – large, rigid. I shuffle on my feet, squeezing my thighs together to quell the need pulsing through my core, hating every bit of it for a man who knew what was done to me and never stopped it.

It'd be easier if I wasn't attracted to him. But instead, I'm stuck with a man who, in a mere day, has brought my body back to the living. Like he's flipped a switch, illuminating all of my deep desires.

I gasp at the intrusion as his fingers now massage my flesh, mouth falling to mine until his lips graze my mouth, chaotic exhales matching his rough inhales.

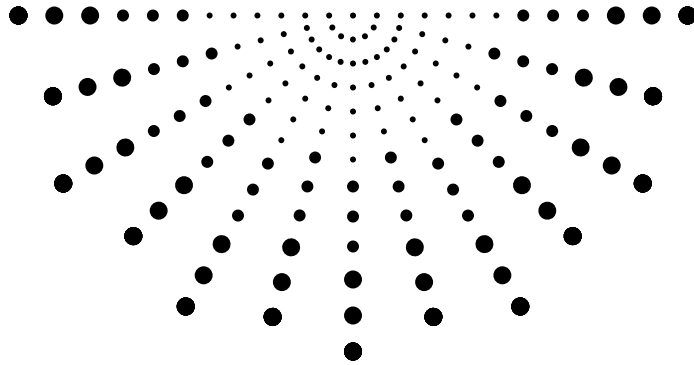
“It's a shame you're so beautiful.” His brows dip with emotion as he moves enough for me to see him.

“It's a shame you're such a bastard.”

My attempts to catch my breaths are futile. My heart is racing; I'm unable to slow it down no matter how hard I try.

I can't wait to get as far away from him as possible.

CHAPTER NINE



MICHAEL

Elsie will be free to go after she's paid her debt to me. And I don't feel sorry about what I'm asking of her.

She's part of a bigger plan than she realizes. A year is plenty of time for everything I need to do. I could potentially let her out of our agreement sooner, but she doesn't have to know that.

The longer my father stays on as the boss, the angrier he will get. And if that happens, he'll get his men to kill Raph, even if he's innocent.

I can't have that. Not yet. Not until the truth comes out, whatever that may be. And whoever has crossed the family will meet the end of my gun. I don't care who it is.

But my father is a lot more callous, doing things before he thinks them through. Once I take over, most of the men will be loyal to me. That's how it works. The tables will turn, and I will have the power. And those who decide to take my father's side and go against me will die for it.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I wait for her to come out of the bathroom, staring at my watch. I have to get Sophia from school in ten minutes and explain to her why the woman she saw hiding in our house is now my fiancée. The kid isn't stupid, no matter what I told Elsie. I hope they get along. It'll be a lot more difficult if they don't.

I need this wedding to happen quickly, and my mother will be more than happy to plan the entire thing. There will be no escaping the magnitude of

this event. But the faster this wedding takes place, the better it is for me. The fact that I don't have to be stuck in a marriage I have no interest in is the best part. My parents will eventually get over the divorce. They won't find out until it's done.

Divorce isn't common in my circles. People stay married, even while they hate each other's guts. That will never be me. I don't conform. I make my own rules.

"Let's go, Elsie."

My knee bounces. I don't want to be late. I hate disappointing my daughter. I've already done that too many times, between missing school due to work and not always being available to pick her up. I don't want to keep doing it. She deserves more than I can give her. I could lie and say it doesn't bother me, but it does.

A minute later, Elsie comes out, the same clothes on, but at least she's had a chance to shower. Her hair is still damp, a towel in her hand, soaking up the drips of water as she closes the door.

"How sweet. The new fiancée gets to meet the daughter." She slants her head with a mocking expression, the rage directed at me. "You going to lie to her too, huh? Anything to get what you want."

I suck in a hard breath, pinning her with a tight glare as I take to my feet. "Don't test me. My palm is itching to meet that pretty ass of yours."

Her eyes widen a fraction.

"Go ahead," she practically hisses, her chin rising in defiance.

My chest heaves with a single long inhale, and then my feet are moving forward as she backs against the door, that fuckable mouth parted like it's asking for my cock.

Her breathing grows heavier, and I swear this fight in her is her way at foreplay. I could almost taste her arousal on my tongue.

Slowly, I start to slash away the distance between us. Her breasts rise every time she pulls in a gasp, watching me as I get nearer, cheeks turning slightly pink. Her palms hit the wall, long fingernails straining against it.

When I'm right in front, those large brown eyes draw me in, and I almost let myself imagine it: what true happiness is like. The kind of life we could build for Sophia. My baby girl could finally have a mother, someone who loves her just as much as I do.

But no. That won't ever happen. One thought of what took place with Raph and Bianca, and it all vanishes. Every dream. Every fantasy. I'd die

before I'd let that happen to me.

I edge a hand toward the curves of her face, knuckles brushing down the side of it.

“Why do you test me, Elsie?” My voice strains, my hard-on throbbing, wanting inside her, the devil tempting me with something I can't have.

“Because I can.” A brow rises, and goddamn, she's a temptress, weaving her poison through me, curling it around my flesh and piercing it like a thorny vine.

My other hand grazes her hip before I whip out my palm and slap her ass.

She yelps, her hands leaping to my biceps. “You asshole! Did you just spank me?”

My upper lip curls, and as I get ready to do it again, that fight in her is back. And I crave it like tempted fruit, calling for me, enticing me with a single bite.

I spin her body around, my chest flat against her back. Grabbing both of her wrists, I raise them above her head, holding them hostage against the wall, and with my free palm, I spank her harder.

“I did. What are you going to do about it, little dove?”

She cries out low when I do it again – and then again – the sound slicing through the silence, except for her slight little moans.

“You will behave, or I will keep punishing you.”

Her head turns, those heavy-lidded eyes full of lustful rage.

“The next time you decide to open that smart mouth...” I slap her harder, louder, our gazes a tangled heap of wanton desire. “I won't hesitate to throw you over my knee and make you feel my palm on your bare ass.”

Her cry turns to a sultry moan, and I knead her flesh, rubbing away the pain. She pushes her hips into me, right into my cock, allowing herself to feel just how hard I am for her.

Her body trembles from the heaviness of her breathing, those eyes still on me, cheeks flushed.

My hand remains on her ass, unable to stop touching her. This body, it's like a sculpture: curved hips, heavy tits that I want in my palms. What sounds would she make when my hands rough through her hair as I make her come around my cock?

I bend into her, my nose rubbing that spot right behind her ear, just a whisper of a touch, but enough to make her feel it. “You're even more beautiful turned on for your husband.”

“Fiancé.” She lets out a gasping breath.

I groan on a faint laugh, tightening my hold around her wrists. “Husband soon enough.”

Her panting grows more rapid, and for a moment, her hands jolt from within my grasp, like they want to touch me back. I won’t admit it out loud, not to anyone, but I’d do anything to feel it.

“Shit. Sophia,” I mutter, quickly letting her go, looking at my watch.

Five minutes late already.

“Damn it.” I shake my head while she tries to catch her unsteady breathing, both hands still pinned to the wall as though I’m still there, holding them.

I take one in my grip, kissing the top of it as I practically peel her off the wall. “Come on. We have to go.”

She nods, still shaky as she slips into her sneakers. I lead her out of the room and down the stairs, not letting go of her hand, even as we get inside the car and drive off.

ELSIE

I can’t believe that man spanked me. And I can’t believe I actually liked it. A lot.

I should be disgusted. Humiliated. Especially after knowing he knew what went on in that house. Yet I don’t feel that way, because with him, it felt right.

But how could it when all the other times I’ve been touched that way, it felt dirty? *I* felt dirty. But with him, I felt free.

There’s clearly something wrong with my head. Even with the control he held over me up against that wall, I didn’t feel oppressed or scared, even while knowing at any moment, he could kill me.

But he hasn’t yet, and I can use that to my advantage. I can still save Kayla...if only I had a way to get out of here.

A year is a long time. He’s going to drop his guard eventually, and I’ll be there waiting for when that moment comes.

He isn't a good man. I shouldn't want him. It's wrong. It's sick. I shouldn't like the way he wields his power over my body until I melt for him, until I beg for something none of those men gave to me: sex on my terms.

Am I even capable of that? Would I fear it? Fear him?

I stare out the window in the back seat, refusing to sit beside him in the front, not wanting to be anywhere near him. It seems every time we're close, things turn out of control. I can't have that. I need to think with a clear head so I can figure out how to help Kayla.

When we left, I spotted two armed guards at the front of the house. Big, bulky, the kind that could stomp on you and not even know it. There were more around the tall iron gate. The entire estate is surrounded by it. It's like a prison.

There were people working on the grounds too. Any one of them would tell him if I tried anything.

The car halts to a stop, the drive only a few minutes until we're at a school.

"Don't try anything." He rotates to me, his charcoal brow rising a fraction, as though in warning. "I'll be just a minute."

I fix him with a glare, not saying a damn thing.

"We're doing that now?" He chuckles once, opening the door to his SUV and getting out.

When the doors click to a close, I know that I've lost my one good chance to get away. I try the doors anyway, every single damn one, but they're all locked.

"Fuck!" I groan, grasping at my hair and pulling in frustration.

This is hopeless. He's always going to make sure he's two steps ahead every time. How can I get away from a man like that? It's not as though I could ask him to help Kayla. He's on their side, not ours.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't see Michael and Sophia strolling toward the car until they're close enough to hear.

"I'm sorry, Sophia. Something came up and I ran late." His voice softens, and from here I can't see the little girl.

"It's okay, Daddy. I know you're busy."

He sighs, knowing it wasn't okay at all, and I feel guilty for causing him to be late.

Together, they go around toward the driver's side, and as they do, I find two women directly in front, whispering to one another, staring him up and

down. His jacket is now gone, the black shirt exposes a hint of his chest, a couple of buttons popped open, a simple silver chain around his wide neck. But I think their eyes are glued to his ass. Can't say I blame them, either. As though on instinct, he runs his hand through his tuggable hair and I swear they swoon.

I guess it could be worse. I could've been forced to marry the likes of Agnelo.

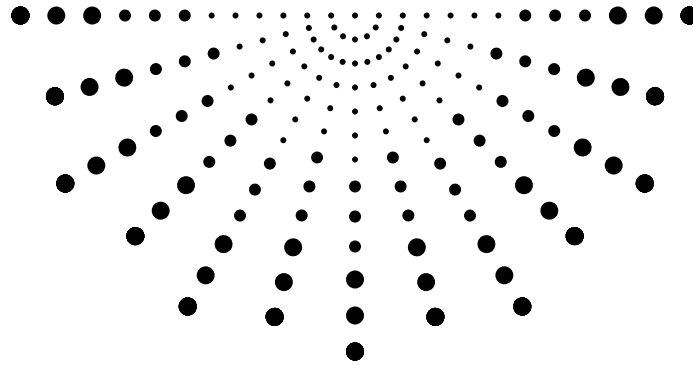
That man is sadistic. He enjoyed torturing us, beating us until we did everything he wanted. We had no choices. We were merely property. Our bodies theirs to buy and sell. Cattle. Commodities. Not human at all. Not to them.

I don't yet know if being with Michael will be any better. But as I sit in this car, the victims are all out there. Still being sold, hurt. I can't save them all, but I can start with Kayla and the others at the house. I can find someone from the government to help, someone the Bianchis haven't paid or scared off. There has to be someone out there with a conscience.

Michael opens the back door and helps Sophia into her car seat, placing her backpack on the floor below her feet.

But once she sees me there, her eyes bug out. "Ahhh! What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER TEN



ELSIE

My pulse thrashes in my throat as Michael’s eyes take me in. My gaze zigzags between the two of them.

“Umm, hi. Again,” I tell her nervously while he straps her in the car seat.

“I know you saw her the day you were sneaking around, Sophia,” Michael firmly informs her.

She pulls her mouth back in a grimace. “Okay, *fiiiine*.” She rolls her eyes, but it’s a lot cuter when she does it. “I didn’t tell you because you would’ve told her to leave, and she looked really sad, Daddy.”

There’s kindness in her eyes as she peeps back at me, and I wonder where she gets it from.

“Don’t ever lie to me again.” He places a hand over her shoulder. “It’s important we are always truthful with each other, baby. You understand?”

“Okay.” She nods, peering down at her lap with a pout. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He cups her face with both hands.

She looks up at him with a beaming smile, and when he grins back, it melts away every harsh line on his face. My heart...it practically jumps at the sight. Emotions swell within me, raw, aching to bleed onto the floor. Seeing them together makes me miss my family.

My parents and I were close. I’m their only child. I often wonder if Dad’s still working in finance and if Mom is still a plastic surgeon. Do they think about me, even after all these years? Are they still looking for me?

The questions haunt me. I think they always will. But a year isn't too long in the grand scheme of things. I could find them again.

"So, Daddy..." Sophia hits him with a sassy look. "Who is she, and why is she in your car?"

He clears his throat. And I swear the man looks more uncomfortable now than he ever did killing a man.

"This is Elsie. She's a friend of mine." His cold, lethal stare pins me to my seat, the corner of his mouth flickering. "A very good friend."

"Uh...Daddy?" She snaps her head back. "You don't have any friends. Except me."

He holds back a laugh. "Well, now I have another."

"Uh-huh." She narrows her brown eyes, from him to me, then back to him.

She slowly eyes me again. "If you're Daddy's friend, why were you hiding in his special room?"

She inclines her chin, looking inquisitively at me, like she's a detective.

I run my fingers over my lips, trying to come up with a plausible answer to this entirely good question. "Your daddy and I were playing hide-and-seek, and I really didn't want him to catch me."

"That's silly." She giggles. "So, did you catch her, Daddy?"

She gazes softly up at him, but his eyes...they're on mine.

"Of course I did, princess." His lips twitch. "I always do."

My stomach somersaults. Because the way he's looking at me, his gaze hungrily roving down my body, it's as though he's not sure whether he wants to kiss me or take out that gun and use it.

He continues to stare intently, seconds trickling by, a whisper of a ghostly touch slinking past my body, like he's here beside me, those large masculine hands on me.

His wide fingers brush his hair back, and the spell is broken. "Okay, enough questions. Let's go home."

He shuts her door and opens his, getting inside and drifting the car back onto the road.

"Daddy, put on that song I like. *Pleeease.*"

"Okay, princess."

He presses a few buttons and Sophia immediately begins singing her little heart out. I look to her with a soft smile because I know that song. I know it well. It was a favorite of mine a long time ago.

Taylor Swift's "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" plays loudly from the stereo.

And before I know it, I sing too, whispering the words, remembering as the girls and I would play that song over and over, never getting sick of it.

"Oh, my God, turn it up. I love this song!" I tell Jade from the back of her SUV.

But Kayla does it instead from the passenger side.

"Me too," she says, bobbing her head to the beat, her dark golden-brown hair swaying against her shoulders.

"Another week until our road trip," Jade throws in. "Can you guys believe it? We'll be by ourselves on the open road. I can't wait!"

"My mom is already freaking." Kayla half-turns so she can look at me. "She told me she doesn't want me to go. She's worried something could happen to us."

I wave a hand. "We'll be fine. We have each other."

"That's right." Jade's eyes meet mine from the rearview mirror, her blue gaze shimmering with excitement. "We're going to be just fine."

But we weren't fine at all. In one week's time, we'd be taken from the side of the road by three men who worked for the Bianchis.

They found us at the diner as we drove through a town, and they tampered with Jade's car. After we left, the vehicle stalled on an empty stretch of road, and that was when they ambushed us.

At first, they pretended to help. Until one of them bashed Kayla on the head and shot me in my calf. I can't forget the look of horror on Jade's face as they dragged me away, my skin burning from the friction of the rocky gravel beneath me.

I continue to sing, my eyes closed, the memories of the past assaulting me

in waves of sadness. I forget where I am, the music practically bathing me, tingles running down my arms.

Music. That's another thing I've missed.

Tears burn within my eyes, and I fight not to cry. It's a simple thing: the melody, the words, the way both come together to form something beautiful. But when you've been without it for so long and hear it again, especially a song you know, a song that gave you the last truly happy day you had, it's something special entirely. My God, it literally aches through my soul. My voice grows, and I can hear nothing else, that song still in my head even after all these years.

But out of nowhere, the music stops, and when my eyes pop open, there's a set of narrowed eyes staring back at me through the mirror. His eyes. And I realize we're back at the house, in the garage.

"You sing pretty." She grins, undoing the straps and jumping out.

"Thank you," I whisper, seeing him get out at the same time as us.

"You should sing with Daddy." Her face brightens as she wanders her attention to both of us, sandwiching herself between us. "He sings nice too."

I dare to look left, finding his intense gaze searing into me.

Sophia grabs both our hands, and together, we walk side by side, like we're somehow this one big happy family.

But we're not, and this little girl has no idea. And that's not fair at all.

"Are you staying for dinner?" she asks, excitement overflowing from the twinkle in her eyes.

I blink.

What do I tell her?

"Um..."

"She's actually going to be staying with us for a while," Michael answers.

She hits us both with a curious glance, darting from him to me. "Why? Is she your girlfriend or something?"

"Maybe?" His lips tremble with a smile.

"Oh my God!" Her mouth flies open, and she squeals, practically bouncing with excitement. "Wait until I tell Jackie."

"Why would your friend care?" He tilts his face curiously.

"Well, yesterday, she told me her mom said you'll never get married because you're unavailable." She pauses, batting her long lashes at him.

"What does that even mean?"

"Never mind that." He shakes his head slowly. "Why is your friend's

mom talking to her about me?”

“She was talking to Susie’s mom, and Susie and Jackie overheard.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I tighten my lips, choking on a laugh from his uncomfortable expression.

His fingers lift to his face, and he runs them across the scar on his cheek, and I’m back to wondering how he got it. He catches me ogling from the corner of his eye and immediately drops his hand, his jaw hardening.

I instantly feel sorry I was staring. It doesn’t bother me, the scar of his. I haven’t even thought about it. I mean, not that it matters what I think. We aren’t a couple. He’s nothing more than an inconvenience. My thoughts shouldn’t matter to him anyway, but I suddenly feel like they do. That the scar somehow bothers him, and that people looking at it bothers him too.

My heart squeezes, and I find myself feeling sorry for him, which is a stupid thought given who he is and what he’s making me do. But I can’t help this growing need to touch that mark on his face, to run my fingers down the bumps and swells. To show him I don’t find it repulsive, but beautiful.

“So, how did you and Daddy meet? Are you getting married?”

Her eyes shimmer as they stare up, and I can’t help but smile wide. She’s just so sweet.

“Oh my God! Wait until I tell Uncle Gio!” Her excitement grows. “He bet me five dollars you’d never get a girlfriend. Like *ever*.”

“Five?” Michael jerks back. “You should’ve bet him one hundred. Always aim big.”

“Oh, Daddy,” she giggles. “I’m a kid. I don’t need one hundred dollars.”

We both look at one another, smiling, and there’s this feeling of joy somewhere inside me, like this is real, like this is mine. But it isn’t. It’s his. I’m only visiting.

“Do Grandpa and Grandma know? Ooh, if you get married, can I be the flower girl? And can you get one of those carriages like Cinderella had?” She goes on and on, her widened gaze darting between us.

“Sure,” he promises. “When we get married, we’ll get a carriage, and you can ride with us.”

“Yay!” She drops my hand and hugs her father’s thighs with all her might, her lashes fluttering as she presses her eyes closed.

As I watch them, I can’t help the smile on my face. And when he lowers his eyes to me, my heart suddenly stills, the smile melting away, replaced with the rapid beating of my pulse. That intense look...I don’t know how to

explain it. It's as though he's telling me things I never asked him, like he sees me somehow. It's stupid and it makes no sense, but it's what he does every time he gazes at me this way.

Long seconds drift, and all we do is stare, caught in the moment of unspeakable feelings.

"Come on, Daddy," Sophia says. "I'm hungry."

In a blink, he flings his eyes away, turning the doorknob and letting a dashing Sophia inside.

"Take your shoes off first, then wash your hands!" he yells, his shoulders rocking with a small laugh.

"She's really excited about this," I note as he locks the door.

"It appears so." He slips out of his chocolate loafers and places them in the foyer closet, while I do the same with my sneakers.

"What are you going to tell her after the year is up?"

He stands in front of me now, looking down at me, his rough breathing lifting up his bulky chest every time he inhales.

"I'll figure it out. You don't need to worry about that." His voice grows low and husky. "Why do you even care?"

The back of his hand slinks up to the underside of my jaw, just barely touching, but enough to feel it as though he's touching me everywhere.

I swallow. "I...uh...I just feel bad hurting her, that's all. Unlike you, she actually seems sweet."

He snickers, his hand refusing to fall away, those eyes gripping the very soul of me. "She is that, and she definitely didn't take after me."

I pause, afraid to ask the question I want the answer to. But I do it anyway because if I don't, I'll wonder.

"Who, then?" My tone lowers, not wanting Sophia to hear my line of questioning. "Where's her mother?"

"Dead," he answers so casually, it's like he's telling me what's for dinner.

There's no emotion there. I can't even see a twitch on his face. Whoever she was, she clearly didn't matter to him at all. The warmth of his gaze continues to fasten to mine.

"That's sad," I say, my attention lowering to the floor.

His hand drops to his side, and his entire face hardens.

"She has *me*. She doesn't need anyone else." The anger in his words slashes over my skin like a heavy whip.

"You seem great with her, and I don't doubt how good of a father you

are.” I peek back up at him, finding pain behind his eyes. Pain he’s good at hiding with a layer of anger.

“But what, Elsie?” He barks low, roughly gripping the back of my neck and bringing his face nearer, his jaw flexing as he stares at me with the eyes of a broken man.

“Nothing,” I breathe, because I can sense his anguish and I don’t want to cause him any more.

With a long inhale, he slants his forehead to mine.

“Say it,” he whispers gruffly, fingers delving deeper into my nape. “Tell me I’m not enough.”

Sorrow weaves into my chest, because the man in front of me...he’s really hurting, and I know all about that. He may act tough, but inside he’s crumbling. And suddenly, all I want in this moment is to wrap my arms around him and tell him that he’s more than enough for that little girl.

“You are enough,” I say. “To her, you’re always enough.”

I feel the moisture build in my eyes. His breathing grows ragged, drifting warmly over my lips. We stay that way, holding one another, bound in this confusion, two people who should’ve never met – complete opposites – yet here we are. And I feel for the man who feels nothing for me.

His rough exhales flounder against my lips, his mouth drifting closer, almost touching mine, and I nearly beg for him to do it. To kiss me raw. To end this explicit torture. And I wonder...what would it feel like to kiss a man like that?

“Daddy? You coming to make dinner with me?”

“Shit,” he mutters softly, swiftly ripping his head away, but his hand remains around the back of my neck, those eyes still aligned with mine. “Yes, baby. I’m coming. Wash your hands.”

“I already did.”

“Wash them again,” he stresses, his voice growing.

He’s unable to pull his gaze away, and I can’t seem to rip away our connection either. My heart beats so fast, it may explode.

“But, Daddy...” she whines.

His breathing turns heavier, not directed at her, but at me. I swear, it feels like he wants to grab me and fuck me right up against the wall.

And I’d let him. Right now. Right here. I would.

“Again, Sophia. Wash them again.”

My lips shudder; I can practically feel him devour them.

Sophia grumbles, and her feet stomp away until we no longer hear them. It's then I snap my gaze from him and escape from his grasp, and he lets me go. A second more and I'd run into his arms and beg for that kiss. Beg and plead to taste him, to find out what a kiss should truly be like.

It's been so long since I've craved it. The boys in my past...well, I bet he kisses better than they ever did. It makes no sense why I'd fantasize about something like that with him, someone who could hurt me.

But he hasn't yet, has he?

As my feet begin to move further away, his hand seizes my wrist, not hard enough to hurt me, but powerful enough to cause me to almost stop breathing. His commanding grip makes me want more of it.

He spins me around and pulls me against him. Hooded eyes fall to every inch of my face, rough knuckles softening with a swipe across my jaw.

"I'm sorry." The cadence of his voice causes my pulse to race faster and faster until I fear it'll climb out my throat. "Did I hurt you? Before?"

"Wha..."

Confusion settles, and just as quickly, I realize he means when he grabbed the back of my neck.

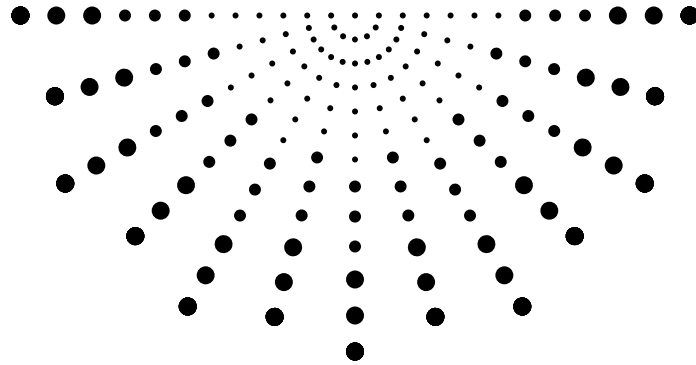
"No." I shake my head, brows gathering. "I've been through way worse, Michael. Your touch...it doesn't hurt me."

"Fuck," he mutters, eyes shuttering to a close as he takes in one sharp inhale, the vein in his neck bulging.

"I'm ready, Daddy." Sophia bounces back inside, and with another long look into my eyes, he finally lets me go.

I've never wanted someone to hold me this badly before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



MICHAEL

Hearing the misery in her voice when she told me she'd been hurt before...it did something to me. I wanted to find every one of them and burn their bodies while they still had air to breathe. I knew the kind of life she was living there, but to hear it, it's different.

Makes me wish I could get rid of the Bianchis myself. Nice and quiet. But things like this always have a way of coming out. I can't risk my baby girl's life, and she's counting on me to stay alive too.

I despise the Bianchis. All of them. It's the reason I never agreed to marry Chiara, Faro's only daughter. I didn't want to tie myself to that family for the rest of my life.

Chiara's innocent, though. She has no idea the kind of family she's been born into. What they've been doing at the sex club they've been running for years while everyone looks away – celebrities, politicians, cops, judges. They frequent that shithole too, so of course they'd want themselves protected. One wrong move, and Faro would expose them. But our men know not to step foot in that club, or they'll die for it.

The Bianchis hurt innocents – women, children, they don't care. That's not what we're about. We don't sell people. We have a line we don't cross, and that's where it is.

“What are you guys making for dinner?” Elsie asks.

I try my hardest to avoid her eyes, burying my hands in a cabinet to pull

out a bowl. It's like they haunt me every time I catch them. I don't know if it's because I feel sorry for her or because I'm attracted to her – or both. I've never been this unsure about anything in my life.

I shouldn't have touched her like I did earlier. Like I cared. But fuck, I do care. Care about what she's been through, wanting to know everything so I can somehow make it right.

A woman like Elsie should be worshipped. Body, heart, both taken care of. Yet I'm hurting her. When she's long gone, she'll find a man who deserves her, who won't hurt her anymore. I'll never be him.

“Baked ziti!” Sophia announces, taking the bowl from me while I go to the fridge, glancing at Elsie as she stands off to the side, fingers playing with the hem of her black tank top.

I hate that she's still wearing those damn clothes. None of my stuff would even fit her. And I can't ask my mother. Not until they know about her, which will be within a day or two.

I've already made the call to someone I know at Saks Fifth Avenue, who's going to set her up with a complete wardrobe. Everything is planned to be sent over by tomorrow morning. Hopefully, they don't send over lingerie, because if she wears any...

I sigh heavily, balling a hand into a fist. There's only a limited amount of restraint I'm capable of.

I close the fridge a little too hard, going to the stove. With the olive oil in my hand, I uncap it, sprinkling some on the already heated pan.

“Do you like baked ziti?” Sophia asks, peeking up at Elsie with excitement while I walk over to the counter where they stand together.

I start on the sauce, undoing the cuffs of my shirt and pulling up the sleeves to my elbows. I can sense her tracking my movements as I grate the fresh tomatoes. My mother would kill me if I used the canned stuff.

“It's been a while since I've had it,” Elsie remarks.

And when I peer over, I find her smiling, but it's the goddamn sad kind of smile. The kind that rips through your soul, and this woman is an expert at doing that to me already.

My hand grates harder, almost cutting my damn finger. My heart pounds from the mere thought of what Faro and his people did to her. What she must've missed out on.

How long has she been theirs? How many fucking years have they been doing this to her?

I march back to the stove, slicing some garlic on the cutting board before tossing it into the sizzling pan, along with some shallots and grinds of pepper.

“Daddy's the best cook ever,” Sophia continues. “Right, Daddy?”

I force a smile as I glance over my shoulder at my daughter even while my mind is still on the woman I plan to marry. It's a good thing she probably thinks of me like I'm no better than the Bianchis. It'll make keeping myself from falling for her that much easier.

“Can we play some music, Daddy?” Sophia asks. “Like always?”

“Sure, princess. Let me get my cell out.”

“Daddy and me always play music when we make stuff together,” she explains. “Do you wanna pick a song, Elsie?”

“Uhhh...” She swallows, tugging her brows, biting her lower lip as her eyes land to mine. She appears as though she's about to burst into tears.

But why?

“How about we leave Elsie alone? Okay, princess?”

“No.” Elsie shakes her head. “I...I want to. Pick a song, if that's okay. I don't even know if they still have it. It's...uh...” Her eyes swell with tears, brimming around her lower lashes. “It's been a long time since I've heard it.”

I foolishly realize that wherever she'd been, there was no music there at all.

I drop everything, going to her until I'm right in front, grabbing her hand in mine. “Tell me the name of the song, and I will find it for you.”

Her chin trembles a little as she clings her eyes to mine, and I can tell how badly she's trying to keep herself from falling apart. My hand slides to her face, a finger forcing all that beautiful black hair away from her brows. And I'm doing it again, touching her like she matters. Her mouth parts, a breath stilling in her lungs as she inhales.

“‘I Won't Give Up,’” she says. “By Jason Mraz.”

My hand falls to my pocket, and without separating from her gaze, I fire up the music app and speak the name of the song. As I press play, the melody slips into the air and her soft smile grows.

“Thank you.”

She sighs. And I almost want to kiss her. Too close to doing it.

“I'd ask you for a dance...” I trace my knuckles across the underside of her jaw. “But I'm about to burn our dinner...” My lips quirk up. “And the last thing I want is for my future wife to think I'm a bad cook.”

Her laugh is small, but what it does to my heart is damn right huge. She's

unraveling me. Slowly turning the key and undoing the lock that holds the future I once wanted.

“Uh, Daddy?” Sophia whispers. “Are you going to kiss her? With tongue?”

I yank my head back, glancing down at my daughter staring up at me, while Elsie tries hard not to snicker.

“How the hell do you know about that?”

She shrugs all innocently.

“Let me guess.” I shake my head. “Jackie.”

She nods, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “Bingo.”

ELSIE

After the most delicious dinner I had tasted in a long time, we cleaned up together, the music still playing as we did, changing to songs I had yet to discover. I liked hearing what’s popular today. Made me feel like I was finally part of the world I’d been torn away from.

The day has turned into night, and Sophia was tucked into bed a few minutes ago.

Together, we tread to his bedroom, the one we must share together, and my stomach tenses as we continue inside.

“I’ll find you something to sleep in.” His voice is hard, and it’s like he hides behind it, this tough exterior.

But I much prefer the man who held my hand and played the song for me while he stared into my eyes. And I wonder which one he prefers to be: the man he shows the world or the one hidden beneath.

“Thanks,” I say as he brushes past me toward the dresser drawers, digging inside and fetching a black t-shirt.

He holds it up in both hands. “This should be long enough.”

His eyes wander down my body, and I instantly grow warm and sensitive all over. I’m only five-three. It’ll definitely be long enough to cover right past my knees.

“You’re free to use the shower whenever you want, and anything else in

this room.” He brings the shirt to me, barely looking my way.

I take it from him, our fingers grazing, and I prickle where his touch has just been.

His jaw tenses as he glances down at me for only a single moment before strutting away, giving me his back. Wordlessly, I take the shirt with me to the bathroom, and when I shut the door behind me, my back hits the door, the shirt clutched in my fist.

I shutter my eyes, breathing in and out. It all hits me in this moment. The fact that I’ve escaped one hell and entered another. And yes, maybe he isn’t as bad...so far. But he’s still a bad man. A criminal. Someone who’s keeping me hostage. I’m nothing but his captive.

I’d do anything to go back in time and stop myself and my friends from getting in that car. What would our life be like if we’d never gone on that road trip?

But life doesn’t give us second chances. We take one road, and all we can do is hope that the next turn we make will be better than the last.

I hang the shirt on the hook, taking off my clothes and placing them on the floor. I’d burn them if I could. They remind me of that place. Of the hell I went through.

I strut further inside, heading for the shower. Sliding open the glass door, I turn the knob, bringing the water roaring to life before I slip under it. I once again try to wash away the filth, the grime of my life, but no matter how much I scrub, I can’t seem to get their hands off my body. I can almost feel them. The grunts, the slaps, the tears filling my eyes.

I scrub and scrub until my skin turns red. Emotions dig into my eyes, and I fight them away, taking a few moments to collect myself.

Shutting off the water, I snatch a towel and dry off before grabbing the shirt and slipping it over my head. It definitely hits past my knees. Considering I have no panties underneath, that’s a good thing.

How am I supposed to sleep beside him like this? At least the bed is large enough.

Drawing up some courage, I open the door to face him. But as I do, the sight of his bare back hits me, and I release an internal gasp. His tanned skin is on full display. Hard, well-defined muscles ripple as he readies to pull a shirt over his body.

I don’t want to feel this way. The tightening in my core, the rattling of my breathing. I don’t want any of it, but he makes me feel it anyway.

He turns sharply as he slides the white t-shirt over his body, a pair of loose-fitted gray sweats riding low on his hips. His abs are traceable even through the cotton.

My God, the man looks good all casual and domestic, just as much as he looks good wearing a suit.

He doesn't miss my gawking, giving me a tight smirk. And when I dare to look into his eyes, really look at them, I'm suddenly caught in them, unable to look anywhere else but at him. His gaze overcasts with a stormy haze as he slowly slides those eyes down to my legs, as though I'm a meal he'd enjoy taking a bite of. My heart pounds in my chest, breaths caught in my lungs.

"The shirt fits you well," he finally says, the words slipping out with a strain.

I run my hands down my sides, unable to handle another second of the way he inspects me. My skin warms, as though his big, strong hands are on me, on the naked flesh beneath the clothes. My nipples harden, and I practically rush for the bed, not wanting him to see me that way, to know how he makes me feel.

"Mm-hmm." I attempt to keep the confidence in every step.

Discreetly, I lower to one side of the bed while sliding under the softest comforter I have ever felt. The white fluff is like a cloud.

He huffs out a quick breath, sliding in beside me, turning off the lamp on the nightstand, and transforming my world into darkness. But I know the dark quite well.

"Goodnight, little dove," he whispers, and I can hear the heavy roll of his breaths, while I match them.

How can I sleep this way, knowing his big, strong arms are right beside me?

I shuffle to my side, pressing my inner thighs together, trying to drown my desire for him. But it's useless. My craving is too intense.

I will my eyes to close, concentrating on the comfort of this bed, appreciating that I actually have a bed to sleep in. In that house, us girls all slept on dirty mattresses. The coils within them would practically pierce into your back. But that was not close to the horrors we endured. There was always something worse happening to us. Something new we couldn't escape.

“Eenie, meenie, miney, mo. Which one of you should go?”

He stands before our naked bodies as we huddle with a cry. Some are already dead on the floor, their heads with a bullet between their eyes.

Chad is one of the ones who takes out the trash – us being the trash. He’s one of their cleaners. Or killers would be a better word. When he steps foot into the house, I go into a state of panic, because I know – we all do – some of us will die today.

It’s not enough to kill us, but they scrape away every ounce of our dignity on the way out. They make us strip, show them everything, while we beg to stay alive.

Just one more day. Isn’t it funny to beg for life when you’ve thought about dying so many other times?

“So, Bree, I’ll ask again. Where is the tip money you stole from the boss?”

“P-p-please.” She shudders, blonde hair now tangled at her shoulders, her entire body shivering, her cheek bleeding from the cut he gave her with his knife. “I didn’t take any money. I w-would never.”

“Wrong answer.”

Pop.

Anna falls instead, her body dropping to the floor with a thud as the others scream and wail. Bree sobs, her quivering arms around her breasts.

“Please, I didn’t. I wouldn’t!” she cries, her once bright blue eyes now dull.

Kayla wails beside me, one hand covering her mouth, the other whatever she can of her body.

“Tony says you did. He saw you take it from the club. We just don’t know where you hid it.”

“I don’t know w-what he’s talking about. I don’t steal. I—I gave it all to Tony the s-same day.”

Tony marches up to her, grabbing her jaw roughly and spitting in her face. “You calling me a fucking liar, whore?”

His hand whips out and he slaps her so hard she falls to her knees.

“Get the fuck on your feet, you ugly bitch.” He snatches her arm and

yanks her up. “Just kill her, Chad. We’re wasting good bodies here because of her.”

“I don’t take orders from you.” He fits Tony with a sinister glare, green eyes filled with vitriol.

Tony raises his hands in the air, shutting up. Chad may be young, a few years younger than my twenty-five, but he’s as dangerous as the Bianchis. He has no conscience. He kills like it means nothing. He practically smiles as he watches the blood seep through the bodies on the floor. And Tony is nothing but the driver who takes us to and from the club. He’s one of many.

“Come on, Bree. You’re going to die anyway.” Chad chuckles wryly. “Why don’t you save the rest of the girls and tell me where the money is?”

But all she does is wail, because she didn’t take it. I would bet every dime I don’t have on that. Bree is the sweetest girl. Scared shitless of them. If anyone stole anything, my money would be on Jordan. But I wouldn’t want this for her either. Not for any of them. If only someone would find us and save us. I try to catch my breath, my tears flowing like a rainstorm down my cheeks.

Tony paces in front of Vito and Giuseppe, who quietly observe. They don’t care. We aren’t human beings to them. We’re toys for their amusement. Mere objects to throw away when we’re broken.

I observe Tony while everyone else keeps their eyes on Chad, and something eerie hits me.

What if he took it? What if he’s blaming her to keep himself from being killed?

My mouth starts to move, but no words come out. Because if I’m wrong, I will die right on the spot. Seconds trickle by, and he levels his weapon on another girl.

“She—”

With one word, Chad turns his attention to me, brows popping up.

“What did you just say?” He approaches, the pistol in his hand tracing from the juncture of my thighs up to my throat. “Speak. Now.”

“She didn’t...sh-she couldn’t have taken the money.” I shudder. “She wouldn’t do that. I—”

My eyes go to Tony, right behind Chad.

“Don’t fucking look at him.” Chad tilts my face toward him with the muzzle of his gun. “Look at me and finish that sentence.”

“He took the money. Tony. I would bet anything on it.”

“You fucking bit—” Tony roars.

Chad holds out a hand, and Tony instantly shuts up, a snarl on his face as he glares my way. I focus on Chad instead.

“Check his entire car. His house. If I’m wrong, kill me. But I’m not wrong.” There’s renewed confidence in my voice, even as Kayla whispers for me to stop.

“Oh, if you’re wrong about this, I will absolutely kill you. Don’t worry about that. But if she’s not wrong…” He reverts to Tony, pointing the weapon at his chest. “You will die. And it will be painful. The boss will want your head for this. Literally.” He grins.

“Yo, man, I wouldn’t do that shit. I ain’t stupid.”

“We’ll see.” He waves at Vito and Giuseppe, and they go out the door to Tony’s car.

Long stretches of time slip past as the girls continue to cry, seeing the three others on the floor. I stare at my feet instead, the pink polish my only focus.

We have a woman come once a week to do our nails. They make sure we look good for the customers who pay top dollar for us. We’re not just any whores. We’re the best they’ll ever get, or at least that’s the image the Bianchis deliver. But if the men took a look at how we live, they’d discover there’s nothing high-end about this.

Vito and Giuseppe come back inside, their expressions unreadable.

“Anything?”

At first they don’t say a word, and I realize this is it. Fear slams into my gut, like that feeling you get when you drop down a roller coaster, like all the blood from your body rushes out.

I feel Kayla’s hand slip into mine, and she holds it so tight, I think it’ll break. She knows it too. This is the last time I’ll see her. Tears swell behind my eyes, and I let them fall.

But suddenly, Giuseppe’s hand slips into his pocket, and out comes a black envelope with a gold emblem. That’s where all the tips from the sex club are placed into. It’s a rule. The men place the money inside and seal it before they’re done.

Chad chuckles, grabbing it from Giuseppe as Tony’s eyes bulge like they’re about to fall out.

“That’s not mine.” He shakes his head, choking on the words. “I—ahhh!”

A bullet pierces the flesh of his upper thigh, and he falls to the ground screaming.

Chad walks up to me casually. "You were lucky this time."

He winks, then slips his gun into the holster at his waistband.

"Pick him up," he orders Vito and Giuseppe, who do as commanded.

Together, they drag Tony out the door, while we're left with the bodies of those no longer with us.

"Elsie," a deep voice rumbles through my drowsiness.

His voice. Michael. The man I'm about to marry.

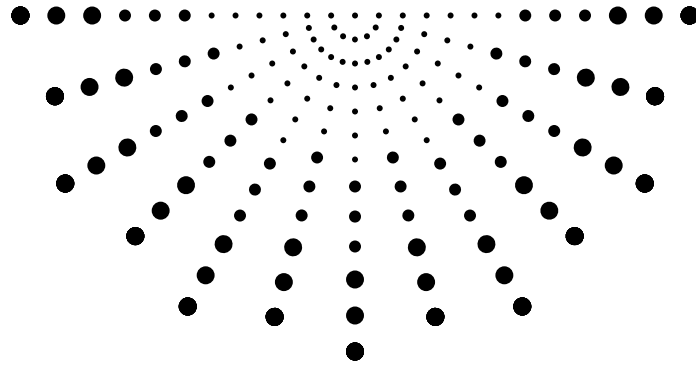
I hear a groan, and it sounds like me, but I can't be sure. I'm too tired to make sense of anything.

"Shh. It's okay. I've got you, little dove. You're safe now."

His words slip around me just as tenderly as his strong arms do, holding me tight. I can feel them, his warmth at my back.

With a heavy sigh, I let myself fall back asleep, claimed by the exhaustion still flitting through me.

CHAPTER TWELVE



ELSIE

I groan as I pull the covers over my head, the rays of sunlight dripping through the gray curtains. A yawn hits me, then another, and if I could sleep for an eternity, I would. But I can't stay in the comfort of this bed forever.

Slipping a hand toward Michael's side, I find it warm, yet empty.

Did he really hold me last night? Was I having one of my nightmares?

I have them sometimes. I remember waking myself up from the noise I'd make, tossing and turning. Other times, Kayla would wake me. It'd be embarrassing if he heard me. But I guess it's bound to happen sooner rather than later.

There's a small knock on the door, and I lift myself to a sitting position.

"Come in," I say and the doors fly open.

"You're up! Yay!" Sophia runs over to the bed, jumping on top of it. "You have to come with me now! Daddy got you clothes!"

"Is that so?" I grin because her joy is infectious like that.

"Yep! The store people just brought them. It's a lot." She widens both palms in the air, gesturing the size. "Daddy's friend is going to bring it all up here while we have breakfast."

"Who made breakfast?" I ask curiously, wondering if Michael cooked again.

She folds her arms, lifting her brows like I just asked the dumbest question known to man.

“Our cook. I can’t make anything by myself.” She giggles. “Her name is Pearl and she’s really nice.”

She scoots in close, dropping her head over my shoulder, and my arm instantly surrounds her.

“Well, not as good as Daddy of course.”

“Of course.” I laugh as she peeks over and gives me a beaming grin.

“And don’t tell Pearl I said that.” Her voice quiets, eyes widening. “I don’t want to make her feel bad.”

“I promise.”

My gaze narrows as I nod, and she returns my expression. I try not to laugh, pressing my lips together, because she looks entirely too serious.

“And there’s also Mabel,” Sophia adds. “She cleans for us with four other ladies and babysits me sometimes. But I still have to clean my own room because that’s what responsible people do, Daddy says.”

“Well, your daddy is definitely right.”

“There’s also Rodney, and he drives me around when Daddy can’t.” And when she says that last part, her tone surrounds with heartbreak.

“Is your dad not around a lot?”

She shrugs, bowing her head. I tug her to me, knowing how it feels. I was that kid with a mom and dad who worked long hours, sometimes having to miss things at school. It hurt a lot, but as an adult, I know they did their best.

“Well, I know he loves you very much.” I stroke her arm. “I’m sure he wishes he didn’t have to work so hard. I know my parents did.”

“I know.” Her eyes find mine. “That’s what he says.”

“So what did Pearl make for us?” I quickly change the subject, hating the melancholy wafting through her.

“Can’t tell ya!” She instantly perks up. “Come on, let’s go so you can see!”

I start off the bed with a laugh. “Let me grab a robe from the bathroom first.”

“Well, come on! Hurry!” She climbs off and heads for the door, bouncing out of it.

I head for the bathroom, take one of the robes I saw there the last time, and put it on, tying it around my waist.

As I rush for the door, I find something on the nightstand: a piece of paper, and what looks like a flip phone on top of it. Picking up the note, I read through the words.

This phone is for you. It's been programmed to only call one number: mine. Unless you want to call the cops and end up in prison or back with the Bianchis. My men are always watching. Remember that. Call me if you girls need anything. I'll see you for dinner. I hope you like the clothes.

Michael

I immediately flip open the phone and try to remember how to use one of these. It's been too long, but I figure it out pretty quickly. Making sure he wasn't lying, I try to dial my home number, but the call doesn't go through. "Fuck!" I mutter, firing off a text to him.

Elsie

The last person I'd ever want to call is you. Shove this phone up your tight you-know-what.

Michael

I see you miss me already.

Elsie

Yeah, like a cavity.

Michael

Didn't seem that way last night with you tucked against me, purring like my little kitty cat. Maybe that's what I should call you from now on.

Oh, crap. So that did happen. Wonderful.

Minutes trickle by while I stare at his text, embarrassment warming my cheeks. Then another text arrives.

Michael

I held you all night until I had to go to work. You were having a nightmare. Are you okay this morning?

My stomach tightens, and my heart flips.

Elsie

Be careful, Mr. Marino. For a second there, I actually thought you cared.

Michael

Ahh, there's that smart mouth of yours.

Elsie

Don't worry, I'll have plenty for you when you get back.

Michael

I'm counting on it. I'll have something for you too when I get home.

Elsie

Oh yeah? You gonna spank me again?

Michael

You keep talking like that and I just might.

My core aches, and it's a good thing he can't hear me groan.

Michael

I'll have some papers for you to sign to make our marriage official.

Elsie

What? Already?! You said a month.

Michael

I said a month or less. This is less. You will sign them, Elsie, and we will have that wedding. I think you've forgotten that you're mine for a year, and in that time, you will do exactly what I demand.

My teeth clench as I tighten the phone in my palm. That self-righteous asshole. Who does he think he is? I want to curse him to the ends of the earth, my fingertips ready to fire out an ugly response. But instead, I ignore him. I won't give him the satisfaction. A minute later, another text comes through.

Michael

Tell Sophia I love her. Take care of her for me.

Elsie

Of course I will.

I may hate him, but I'm not heartless. I'm sure he doesn't like leaving her with me.

He's so damn infuriating. I wish he would've just killed me. But I know fighting him won't do me any good. Maybe if I do what he wants and don't

give him a hard time, he'll at the very least consider saving Kayla.

But as I think about it some more, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. He knew about what was happening and did nothing. Why would he magically change his mind now? And if Faro finds out Michael has me, he won't just let him have me, and Michael doesn't seem like the type to cower to anyone. Or what if Faro kills Kayla as payback?

No, I have to do things myself. I have to get on Michael's good side and try my luck at finding some way out of here. I just hope Kayla won't be dead by then.

Flipping the phone shut, I hurry down the stairs and into the foyer, finding three pieces of luggage waiting for me.

"Ma'am," a tall man I've never met before greets me with a curt nod. "May I bring these upstairs for you?"

"Please. That would be great."

"No problem." He grabs one in one hand and two in the other, lifting them up the stairs like they weigh but a feather.

As he leaves, I register voices coming from my left and I follow the sounds of Sophia's laughter.

"You're going to spill it all over the floor," a woman chides, but her voice is kind.

She mixes something on the counter as I approach, her chestnut-colored hair tightly wrapped in a neat bun, the sides sprinkled with a bit of gray.

When they hear me, they instantly look my way and smile.

"Hi! You must be Elsie." She drops the spoon and comes over to me, sticking out a hand. "I'm Pearl. I do the cooking here when Michael isn't around."

"Nice to meet you." I take her hand in mine, shaking it before letting go. "I hear you're a really great cook."

I glance at Sophia on the black swivel stool, giving her a wink, and she giggles.

"I try," she says, returning to the counter.

Sophia spins on the stool, grinning up at me, while simultaneously popping a piece of pancake in her mouth.

"Well, have a seat." Pearl gestures toward the empty chair next to Sophia. "What would you like? Bacon, eggs, pancakes?"

I settle down, running a hand over Sophia's soft strands.

"Maybe all of it?" she suggests, raising a brow, her mouth lifting up at the

corner and the sides of her eyes crinkling.

“All of it would be just perfect.”

Though if I never see another pancake again, that would be great.

If she only knew how much I’ve missed a home-cooked meal. My mom would make breakfast when she was home, and Dad did on the days she couldn’t. They had a good system going, and it worked for us.

She places a heaping plate in front of me, pouring a cup of coffee too, and handing me a carafe of milk and a container of sugar. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

“This is amazing,” I whisper, adding some milk and a packet of sugar, trying it before deciding to add another.

I haven’t had coffee since I was kidnapped. I forgot what it tastes like. And at the first sip, I realize I haven’t forgotten it at all. A smile fastens to my face as I continue to drink in silence, while Pearl cleans and Sophia hums beside me, stuffing a chunk of a blueberry pancake in her mouth.

“What are you girls up to today?” Pearl asks from the sink, scrubbing a pot.

“We could have a fashion show!” Sophia throws in. “Ooh, maybe I can do your makeup and we can surprise Daddy when he comes home!”

She’s so excited, I don’t have it in me to disappoint her, nor do I want to. Life is so fleeting, it’s important to grasp the things that give us joy and let others have it too.

“Sure, that sounds like fun.” I grin, and she’s all giddy.

“I’m really good at doing makeup.” Her face grows serious. “I did Pearl’s makeup one time.”

“Oh, she did. She is especially good with the blush.” She nods thoughtfully, tightening her lips and trying not to laugh. “I’ll need pictures.”

“I have a camera!” Sophia appears all too excited to provide them. “I’m going to take lots.”

We continue to eat while I do my best to avoid the pancake, cutting into it and pretending so Pearl won’t be offended.

Once we’re done, Pearl packs up to head out, putting the lunch she made in the fridge for us. “I’ll see you girls tomorrow.”

She comes to give me a hug this time, then Sophia throws her arms around the woman’s stomach, gripping her midsection with all her might.

This girl loves big. It’s easy to see that.

“I love you, Sophia,” Pearl says fondly, wrapping an arm around her back

before heading out the door.

I lock it, even with the men guarding from the outside. One can never be too careful.

“Come on, let’s go see what kind of stuff you got!” Sophia dashes toward the staircase, and I follow.

As soon as I enter the bedroom, she climbs up on the bed while I start unzipping the first piece of luggage that’s waiting for me on the floor.

Inside, I find all kinds of pants and more shirts than I know what to do with. I start on the other, carefully opening it.

“I hope there are dresses in there!” Sophia creeps toward the edge of the bed and waits with excitement bubbling out of her.

“What do you think is in there?” I glance up, donning a smile, and she taps her temple thoughtfully.

“Underwear and socks.” Her giggles flare across the room, and it gives me butterflies.

There is something about a child’s laugh. It’s like the cure to all the sadness in the world. If only they could bottle it up.

As I start to open it, I see that there are in fact dresses, all kinds of them.

She jumps off the bed and plops beside me. “Ooh! Try this one on!”

Her hands dig out a green one, the color of the sea, flaring at the waist.

And I do. I try on as many as she wants, hearing her laughter and wanting more of it. We spend hours laughing *together*, getting to know one another. And every day, we’ll only get closer.

But I realize that one day I’ll have to leave her and break her heart, and that only breaks mine.

MICHAEL

As I ready to leave the office, my assistant, Ashley, hands me a cup of coffee to go.

“Is there anything else you need today, sir?” She flips her shoulder-length blonde hair back.

“No, that’s all. Thanks. Have a good evening.”

She nods, picking up her tablet from the corner of my desk, and leaves the office.

Gathering my keys and phone from the desk, I prepare to head out too, ready to be home with my girl. I'd spend all my free time with her if I could, but I'm the one in charge of our company, and I need to ensure it's being run smoothly.

As soon as we opened the upscale bars and restaurants, I started a corporation. It makes us appear legitimate in the eyes of everyone else, especially the law. We may have some of them in our pocket, but there's always a new fed sniffing, hoping to be the one to finally bring down the infamous Messina crime family.

That won't happen, not with me at the reins. They won't find anything. We're good at what we do. The dirty money is well hidden. They'd never trace any of it back to us. All they're doing is wasting their time.

I step out of the office, slipping into the elevator. I hadn't heard from Elsie since her texts, nor did I see anything alarming on the cameras I have installed all over the estate. It took everything in me not to go back home as soon as I left for the day. I'm not used to leaving Sophia alone with a stranger. It's either family or Mabel who watches her when I'm not there, but if Elsie is to be my wife, I have to start trusting her with my daughter. But shit, that's hard to do.

Earlier, I watched them on the laptop at work as they splashed around in the pool, laughing together like they've known each other for years. I was damn jealous that my daughter was having more fun with a stranger than her father.

As soon as they came out, Sophia lay on Elsie's shoulder on the lounge and Elsie stroked her hair like she was already her mother. Like she cared about my little girl.

I shut it off immediately after that, my chest heavy at the sight of them together. My daughter will never have that. And Elsie may not have wanted to say it, but I'm not enough. I never will be.

Stepping out of the elevator, I enter the garage and get into my Tesla Roadster, the car I drive when I know I don't have to get Sophia from school.

The drive home is quick. Once I get off the highway and make it the few short blocks to our house, I park right in the garage. And as soon as I enter the house, I hear Sophia giggle.

"Just wait until Daddy sees—"

“Sees what?” I ask with a tilt of a brow, dropping my keys on the counter. I find Elsie on a chair, and I can’t quite see her face because my daughter is in front of her with a makeup brush in hand.

“Daddy!” Sophia yelps, running into my arms.

That’s when I see Elsie, and her face...well, I know immediately that’s my daughter’s handiwork. I fight a laugh because the amount of makeup on her face is ridiculous, but she’s happy. She’s damn right grinning as she shrugs.

“Look how pretty she looks, Daddy!” Sophia pulls my hand until I’m standing right in front of the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

My gaze roams every inch of her.

“She is that,” I mutter, almost under my breath. “You did a great job on her cheeks, princess. They’re so...uh...pink.”

Like I bet another part of her is. Images filter through my mind of her tangled around my body, my cock buried inside her, my name on her lips...

“Thank you, Daddy. Want me to do yours now?”

“Uh, maybe next time.” I scowl internally at the thought.

“Oh, come on, Daddy.” Elsie rises off the chair, her body almost touching mine, her tone seductive as hell.

Her hair flows past her shoulders as her hand slinks out, her fingertips gently grazing around the side of my neck, and I instantly harden. Not just my cock, but every goddamn muscle in my body.

She bores her eyes into mine. “Let the girl have a little fun.”

My jaw tenses and my hand snaps to her nape. I yank her to me until my mouth lines up against her ear. “You’re trouble, you know that?”

I hear her sharp inhale, and it warms every cold inch of my heart.

“So, Daddy, can I?” Sophia pulls on my suit jacket.

Reluctantly, I retreat back from this woman – this tempting woman who’s like a magnet, pulling me in until I forget everything I swore I’d never have.

“It smells good in here. Did you guys make something?” I planned on cooking as soon as I got home, but it looks like I may not have to.

“Yep.” Sophia answers. “We made dinner. We just finished. After I do your makeup, we can eat.”

I chuckle. I was hoping the food would distract her from the makeup, but I should’ve known better.

I look back at Elsie, whose fingers now brush past the spot below her ear, the same place my mouth had been. I like knowing she’s still thinking about

it. About me.

The new clothes I got her already seem to fit quite well. A little too well.
Fuck.

Thoughts of my hand sliding past the flowy pink fabric of the dress, skirting up her thigh, brushing over her panties, inching inside them to discover everything she likes...they make my damn cock stiffen. Her breasts look even bigger, held hostage in the confines of that tight little thing, begging for my hands to shred it to pieces.

“Thank you for cooking,” I tell her.

“I helped.” Sophia rolls her eyes as I peer at her.

“The thank-you was to both of you.” I scoop her up in my arms as she giggles, throwing her over my shoulder. “What did I tell you about rolling those eyes, young lady? Hmm?”

I tickle her, and she laughs faster.

Elsie watches us with a smile. “We made Tuscan chicken. Sophia was a huge help.”

“See, Daddy?” she laughs. “I was a *huuuuge* help.”

“Uh-huh.” I tickle her some more, and her laughter is the only thing that keeps me alive.

“We may have to cook together one day soon,” I tell Elsie. “You know, to see who’s better?” My lips tilt up.

She scoffs as a single brow lifts up. “Oh, Michael, I’ll smoke you.”

I chuckle freely, like the entire world isn’t on my shoulders, like this life with this woman is real.

With a deep sigh, I drop Sophia on her feet. “Okay, princess, make Daddy pretty.”

She inspects my face, taking her job seriously. “Have a seat, sir. I’ll be right with you.”

Elsie laughs, standing off to the side as I settle on the chair she had been in.

“So, Daddy? What color should we put on your eyes?”

“Black.”

She shakes her head, her nose scrunching. “I think pink is more your color.”

“Of course it is.” I shake my head, my mouth quirking up.

Then she gets to work.

And the whole entire time, my eyes are on Elsie, and her eyes...they

drown in mine.

“This is really good,” I tell Elsie.

Her mouth tightens as she peers into her plate.

“Where did you learn how to cook?”

“My grandma.” She gives me a quick glance, then returns to staring down. “She was the best cook. My parents were often too busy, so she and I would cook and bake together.” She smiles fondly, absently staring at her food.

“Do you still cook together? Like Daddy and me?” Elsie looks up at Sophia then, and in that moment, her eyes dim with darkness.

“Not anymore.” She shakes her head, her features laced with grief. “Maybe one day we can again.”

That’s when she looks at me for long, excruciating seconds.

I get it. I’m the bad guy in her story, and she’s not wrong.

“I have a little surprise for you,” I say, hoping to change the subject.

Not that this one will make her any happier.

“Oh, yeah? And what could that be?”

Sophia giggles next to me because she already knows, and she couldn’t be more excited. It’s obvious how much she adores Elsie already. It makes me the biggest piece of shit on the planet for lying to her the way I am. But it’s to save her uncle. And with time, she’ll get over the loss of Elsie.

Maybe they can keep in touch. Elsie doesn’t have to be my wife for them to still talk. I don’t have to fit into the equation.

And fuck, that idea stabs me right in the heart.

I reach into my pocket, retrieving a box with a ring inside it. If I am to have her sign the papers later tonight, a ring is a necessity, especially with my parents coming over tomorrow to meet her. They have to know it’s real.

I place the box on the table, and Elsie’s eyes widen.

“Is that...”

“It’s a ring,” Sophia whispers, peeking at her.

“I—I can see that.” Her eyes enlarge.

She doesn’t want this, and seeing the box, knowing what’s inside...it

must make it real to her. She'll have to get used to it. Everyone in our circle will know soon enough. Every influential person will be invited to our wedding.

Once that happens, even the Bianchis will be aware of who she is now.

Mine.

Once she has my last name, they can't touch her, according to the rules set forth by the Azienda. Wives and kids are off-limits, unless an established treaty is broken. And I'll kill them if they dare to take her from me. If they want a war, they will have it.

"Daddy..." Sophia urges, squinting at me with an expression that says, *what are you waiting for?*

I know what she wants me to do, but the woman before me? She's not going to care if I do it or not.

But it means something to my daughter, so I pick up the box and come to stand before Elsie. And in one smooth motion, I drag her chair out to the side and bend on one knee.

Staring right into her bewildered eyes, I reveal the sparkling eight-carat solitary diamond, and with my free hand, I take her left one in mine.

"It may not be what you wanted," I tell her. "But it's where we are. Will you marry me, little dove? Will you be my wife?"

Her lips part, breaths escaping, her gaze jumping from me, then to the ring. She stares at it like it's a collar meant to shackle her, and I guess in a way it is.

Seconds trickle by, and I wait for her to give me the only answer she's allowed to give. And finally, she does.

"Yes, Michael. I will marry you. Unfortunately." She whispers that last part.

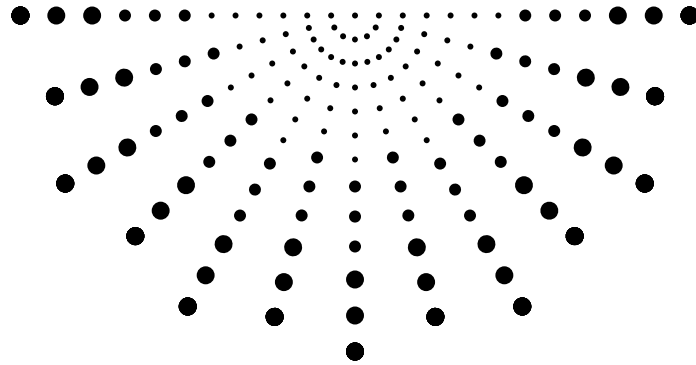
I hide the chuckle rumbling deep in my chest. It's unfortunate for the both of us.

"Yay!" Sophia yelps, clapping.

I drop Elsie's hand and take out the ring, gradually slipping it onto her finger while she stares down at her newly decorated hand, wishing she could be far away from me.

I wish she could too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



ELSIE

“They’re here!” Sophia runs for the door the following evening, his family on the other side of it.

I smooth out my white pencil dress before running my fingers through my hair, my pulse drumming.

“You can go open it,” Michael tells her from beside me while I almost trip on the way to the door.

My whole body prickles with awareness. He unnerves me by being this close, and I’m already nervous enough to meet his family.

My heartbeats thump chaotically in my chest. I don’t know why I’m this nervous. I have no reason to impress them. In fact, their opinions mean very little because Michael needs this, and he doesn’t seem like the type of man who will care what they think of me. That gets my heartbeats quieting just a little, but not enough that when the door opens and three very well-put-together people walk in, I don’t want to run up the stairs and hide. What if they know where I came from and what’s been done to me?

But no, they couldn’t. Not unless Michael has told them, and he has no reason to.

“Sophia!” his father says, lifting her off her feet, his eyes going to me and then to Michael. “This must be Elsie. I’m Giancarlo. Nice to meet you.”

His smile is endearing, but the way he looks at me...I bring my arms over myself, feeling the need to hide.

“Nice to meet you too.” I nod in greeting, plastering on a fake smile. Michael’s mother sweeps past her husband, coming over to my side.

“I’m Fernanda. You’re even more beautiful than Michael said.” Her eyes shimmer with a grin.

His face is stoic as I happen a glance, not an ounce of a reaction.

“Thank you,” I tell her as she pats my hand, walking further into the house.

The twelve-seat dining table is set with the food Pearl cooked, all the dishes covered up and remaining heated before we set to eat.

“So, this is going to be my new sister-in-law,” says the man I’ve met, the one who held the gun to my chest.

When his father and Sophia walk into the house, he leans in.

“Nice to see you again.” Lifting my hand, he kisses the top of it, his lips dancing with a smirk.

“Thanks for keeping your gun away from my face this time,” I sass back, watching Michael from the corner of my eye as he waits off to the side, staring daggers at us.

I can practically feel his eyes searing my skin. His jaw flexes, arms crossed over his white shirt, baring a hint of his bulging chest, the buttons appearing as though they’re about to pop. His arms fall, hands balling into tight fists, the rings straining against his fingers. And images of what he could do to me with those large, masculine hands barrage into my mind like a movie I want to star in over and over until I’m wrung dry.

“That was before I knew you were going to be family,” Gio goes on in a low tone.

I had completely forgotten he was even here.

“And what a family it is,” I scoff.

“We’re not all bad.” Amusement flanks his features. “Some worse than others.”

Then he struts away, and I’m left with Michael’s eyes zeroing in on me. He beckons me with a thick finger, but I stand exactly where I am, a single brow lifting in defiance. If he needs me, he can come to me.

It’s just me and him here; everyone else has now made themselves comfortable in the den.

When I don’t make any effort to join him, he stalks over to me, and I suddenly feel out of breath, tripping back a step. Hooded eyes trap me in place, closer and closer, until he’s right before me and the only place I have

left to go is backward.

My body hits the door just as both of his palms slam against it, confining me. I can feel the swell of his hard bulge against my stomach.

“Have you forgotten whose wife you are, little dove?” he practically growls.

My insides curl deliciously, loving the jealous twinge in his voice.

“What are you talking about?” I barely have the ability to speak, my body striking with a flame he set to it.

I burn everywhere. For him. For the connection I want to explore when I’m not thinking about who he is and what kind of life he’s leading. I just want him right now. To lose myself with a man simply because I want to.

“You were flirting with my brother.” The backs of his fingers slowly caress down my cheek.

I close my eyes, enjoying the sensation, my breaths alive with desire.

“I can flirt with whoever I want,” I whisper, my gaze meeting the darkness pooling in his eyes. “That was never part of our agreement.”

He draws in a long inhale, staring hard at me, a veil of unmatched possessiveness clouding over his face, like he’d fuck me right up against this wall just to show me how wrong I am. Who I truly belong to. My eyes hunger for his mouth on me, for his lips to dance over my skin with tantalizing prowess.

I gasp as his palm slides up to my throat, tightening his fingers around it. His lips bend to mine until they brush the corner of my mouth.

“Is that what you think?” he whispers harshly. “Well, let me make something clear.” He cinches his grasp. “You, little dove, are mine. In name...and in flesh.”

My chest rattles, and it’s like he wants to kiss me, but is fighting it. His exhaled force themselves out of his lungs, like he’s tangling on the cusp of losing control.

“No one will touch you,” he promises, running his nose down the side of my throat. “And if they try, they won’t live long enough to remember.”

Then he’s off me, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he stalks off, while I’m left with the memory of his body pressed up against me.

I tried to sit through dinner in one piece, but it was difficult with his palm permanently attached to my thigh. That was all I could think about while I ate, while his family talked.

Everyone's now gathered back in the den, drinks in hand. I try to take a sip of the white wine Michael had silently given me, but I can barely stomach it. Michael, though...he's had a couple of glasses of whiskey already.

"So, Michael," Giancarlo calls from across the sofa, seated on another with Sophia on his lap. "When is this wedding happening?"

"As soon as possible. I want it done fast, and so does Elsie." He clasps a strong palm over my upper thigh, the sides of our knees touching.

Can a person die from overstimulation? Because I swear I'm there. I need his hands off of me, yet I want them all at once.

"Right, baby?" he stresses.

"Right." My response is tight, a forced smile latched to my mouth, not giving him any indication that his hand on me is making it hard to breathe.

As though hearing my thoughts, his fingers delve deeper, sinking into me roughly, and my core pulses like it wants it that way.

"I can't wait," I add, before leaning over into his ear. "Baby? Really? Way to put on a show."

He chuckles, rubbing the pads of his fingers into my inner thigh. My pulse thrashes in my ears, and I place my hand on his, trying to remove it, but it's like a damn brick.

"You can get the wedding planned for us, right, Ma?"

Her eyes immediately travel to us. "Absolutely! It'll be the talk of the town. You just leave it up to me. How's a week?"

A week?!

My stomach fastens with knots. What if the Bianchis find out I'm here? What if they demand he return me? My hand trembles, the wine almost spilling, but Michael is there to save the fucking day, grabbing my wrist to steady me.

"Looks like my bride is a little tipsy already." He leans over to kiss my temple, taking the glass from me and placing it on the table beside him.

He has no idea that the way he just kissed me sent my heart exploding like fireworks.

Kiss me like that again, Michael. Please. I need to feel it.

Why do you make me feel this way? Like you're more than just my fake husband. Like you care.

God, I hate this. I don't belong here. With him. Pretending. I have to concentrate on getting out. On saving Kayla. On creating a whole new life for myself. One that doesn't include Michael Marino.

"I'll send Galina over tomorrow," his mother continues, oblivious to my internal struggles. "She'll make you whatever kind of dress you want." Her hand slides through her short, wavy auburn hair. "And if there's anything you want for this wedding, you just tell me, sweetheart. We can do whatever you'd like."

"A Cinderella carriage!" Sophia volunteers, now sandwiched between her grandparents, excitement bathing her wide eyes.

"We did promise her, baby." Michael peers at me, his heavy palm gliding up and down from my knee to the top of my thighs.

I grow achy, needing this night to be over.

"Fine by me." My voice breaks, and he smirks, knowing exactly what he's doing to me.

Asshole.

"Grandma will get you that carriage. Don't you worry." Her sigh is heavy as she glances onto her lap, quieting for a few long seconds, her mood completely shifting.

"What is it, Ma?" Gio asks.

"I just wish Raph could be here for this."

"Not this shit again!" Giancarlo shouts, throwing his hands in the air.

Sophia's eyes widen. I knew I hated that man as soon as he walked through the door.

"How many times have I told you that he's dead to us, Fernanda? Dead! He won't be coming to no fucking weddings."

Sophia slips off the couch and tiptoes to our side, sitting between us. As soon as she's there, I grab her hand and hold it in my lap. Michael catches it from the corner of his eye, and his jaw tics.

"Enough, Dad." Michael grows irate. "We're not doing this again."

"Tell your mother that." He lifts his chin at her in disgust.

"Excuse me." She gets to her feet, swiping under her eye, and Gio follows her.

"I hate it when he yells," Sophia whispers to me.

"I know you do," I tell her, not knowing what else to say.

A minute later, Fernanda and Gio come back in, and she reverts to that happy face she wears, but it's obvious she's hurting inside. We all hurt in our

own ways, some more than others. Makes me wonder what's really going on with his other brother. What would make a father disown his own child?

"So, how did you two meet?" Fernanda asks. "Michael is so secretive about his life, even his own mother doesn't know he's dating."

Her gaze drifts toward him even as his drifts to me.

"Yeah, baby." His lips jerk. "How did we meet?"

I narrow a stare, a wicked grin on my face.

"Well..." I place my palm on top of his thigh this time and give it a hard little squeeze until I hear his low growl. "Michael saved me in a way. Isn't that right, *baby*?"

It is true. He kinda did.

Giovanni chuckles, and Michael shoots him a glare.

"Aww, that's my boy. Always helping others," Fernanda gushes like her son is a fucking hero.

If you only knew, lady.

Maybe she *does* know who he is. I mean being the wife of a Mafia boss, she must know.

"Daddy saved me too," Sophia adds. "He's a hero."

Confusion settles over my features, and I look around the room for answers. "How did he save you?"

The words slip out, and I notice a momentary shift in Michael's demeanor. But Sophia is oblivious, because she just keeps talking, and I eat up every word.

She jumps right into his lap, pivoting to me, feet dangling over his thighs. "When I was a baby, I was in a building that was burning, and Daddy rushed in before the firemen could get there because he heard me crying."

I gasp, a hand jumping to my chest. My eyes clasp to his, and in his gaze, I discover a flicker of emotion hiding beneath.

Sophia continues, "Then he took me out and made me his daughter because my parents died."

He saved a complete stranger's baby? Risked his own life? Then raised her? Who is this man that's now my husband?

Sophia's arms slip around his neck. "He got a cut on his cheek when he saved me." She glances at him. "Right, Daddy?"

He runs his fingertips over the thick scar, those eyes never leaving mine. "Yeah, baby. And Daddy would do it all over again."

My heart jolts, like it's come undone. And if I thought I wanted him to

kiss me before...oh, God. Now I'm the one who wants to kiss him.

"See, I told you Daddy was a hero," she says. "Now he's saved us both."

MICHAEL

The way she looked at me when she found out about Sophia was like she was seeing me for the first time. Like I was a man worth something, not the monster she's made me out to be.

I liked seeing her soften for me just as much as I like it when she fights me. But none of that matters. None of it means a damn thing, because nothing between us has changed. This little dove will eventually be free.

I give her a lingering glance right before I leave the room with Gio and my father, who asked for a meeting. Sophia is chatting about how Elsie should do her makeup for the wedding and the flower girl dress that she can't wait to pick.

My chest grows heavy.

Seeing them together...it quietly unsheathes the desires I'd buried of wanting a wife, a family, before I decided it wasn't in the cards for a man like me. But in these short few days, this woman has given me a glimpse of what having a family could be like.

I should hate her for it. For giving me a taste without even realizing it. But I don't. I just want her gone. I need her gone. She'll never be safe with me.

Following my father out to my office, I close the door behind them. My father takes his seat at my desk. Like he's the king of it all.

"Just heard Faro is dead," he tells us matter-of-factly. "Sal's the new don."

I go to the bar and pour us all a whiskey. Seems like the occasion to celebrate.

"Where do we send our condolences?" Gio chuckles, taking a glass from me while I place one before my father.

"How?" I ask, leaning against the door as I take a swallow of the liquor, the burn rolling down my throat.

“Got these Cavaleri boys creating hell for them.”

“Why does that name sound familiar?” Gio asks, sitting down on the leather sofa.

“They’re boys they messed with back in the day,” our father explains. “Bianchis killed their kid brother and father. But now they’ve got a bunch of hotels or whatever.”

“They killed a kid?” Gio shakes his head. “Damn.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “Not much older than Sophia.”

My fist tightens around the glass with such force, it could crush within my palm.

“Those boys are hungry,” Dad continues. “My contacts there say they’re going after all the Bianchis until every last one is dead.”

“Well, good.” Gio shrugs. “Fuck ’em. If we can't do shit, someone may as well do it for us.”

This is good. If they’re gone, so will be that club they run.

“There’s something else I heard.” My father leans back in the armchair, his eyes curiously taking me in as he rocks back and forth.

I already know he knows something he isn't saying.

“What is it?” I drown in the rest of my drink because I know what’s coming, but I’ve prepared for this.

“Who’s the girl, Michael?” The question is point-blank. He knows.

“Just a girl.”

“How did you two meet?” He keeps rocking, eyes tearing into me.

“Let’s just say she came out of nowhere,” Gio offers on a laugh.

I turn sharply to him.

“What?” He flips a hand in the air. “It’s the truth.”

“What do you want to know?” I say. “Ask it.”

He leans forward, elbows against the edge of the desk as he places his glass down with a clank. “There’s something else I heard.”

I wait for him to continue, not saying a goddamn word.

“A few days ago, they lost one of their girls. A runner. Agnelo says they’re looking for a pretty one with long black hair.” He tips up a brow. “Know anyone like that?”

I march a few steps and meet my brother on the sofa, my body language casual. “There are many women who fit that description.”

“Sure.” He nods, and I know he doesn’t buy it. “But none at the same house where you were last seen asking for Faro.” He pauses, holding my

gaze. “Be careful, son. You don’t want to topple the calm boat we’ve been on. We’ve been able to keep to our side while the Bianchis stay on theirs. If she’s their girl, take her back.”

Rage churns in my chest, the blood rushing in my head as I grind my teeth. “Like hell I will. She’s not theirs. And even if she was, I’d never send her back to that.”

He sighs. “They’re going to find out, and it sure as hell better be after she’s your wife, because if not, they’ll have proper claim to her. She’s their property. Do you want an all-out war?”

“I’ve never been afraid of a fight.” My simmering voice rises. “Are you?”

His face tightens. “I’ve never been afraid of a goddamn thing. You’d best remember that.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway.”

He gives me a confused stare.

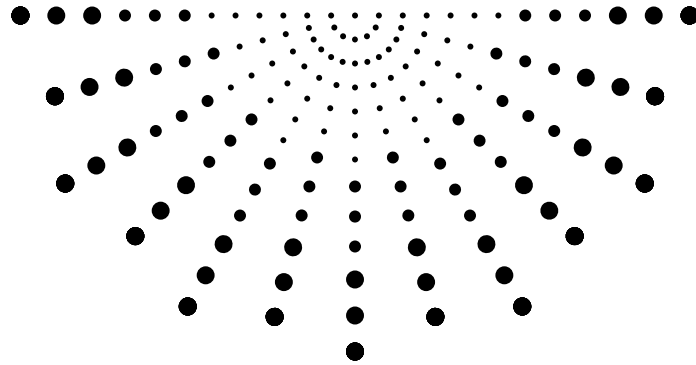
I leave my glass on the desk, making it to the safe. Once I enter the code and it clicks open, I remove the folder containing our marriage certificate and slam it down before him.

“She’s mine already. They can’t touch her.”

He stares at it for a few seconds before he looks up. Then his face cracks, and he chuckles, throwing his head back. “That’s my boy.”

Elsie is now a Marino, and there’s nothing the Bianchis can do about it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ELSIE

His family left a little bit ago, and luckily, no one asked me any more questions about our nonexistent relationship.

I can't believe I'm actually married, or that my fake wedding to a mobster is in a week or so. His mom was already calling up caterers to set up a date. The wedding will be here on the property, and considering how large the grounds are from the tour I got after they left, I'd say there's plenty of room.

He has everything you could possibly want right here: a tennis court, an indoor swimming pool, a movie theater for a dozen, a bowling alley. The grounds are filled with acres of greenery, a large oval pool that I got to enjoy the other day with Sophia, and a gazebo beside it, filled with loungers.

I remember when Jade, Kayla, and I would sing karaoke by my parents' pool. We'd play songs, and I was always forced to sing. Apparently I'm good at it. I haven't sung the way I used to. I miss it. But when the Bianchis stole me, they stole my voice too.

My mind drifts to Kayla again, wondering, hoping that she's alive enough for me to save her.

"Goodnight, princess," Michael says, kissing Sophia on her cheek as he tucks her in.

And me? I'm staring at him. This father. This man. This awfully attractive man.

But it's not his looks or his clothes that are drawing me in now. Not even

the commanding aura about him. It's the tenderness that he hides within. That's the most beautiful thing about him. And I don't think he even realizes it.

His love for his daughter outshines everything else, even when I know that the man underneath the clothes is a cold-blooded killer. But that same man saved a child. Risked his life and rescued her from a fate far worse than I even had. He did that.

How do I make sense of him? This contradiction before me?

"Elsie, could you read me a bedtime story?" Sophia asks, glancing past her father, her toothless grin hitting me right in the heart.

My eyes sting at the thought of something as simple as reading a bedtime story to a child. Something I've never even done before. But I want to.

My feet are moving before I have a chance to run into the bedroom Michael and I share.

"Of course," I tell her, blinking back tears.

Michael catches it, his gaze seeing them even as I try to hide them away. But there's no hiding from him.

His features grow intense, that rugged jaw clenching as he gets off the bed. I hurry to the huge bookcase against the left side. It's one of those that are part of the wall, books filling all four shelves.

"What would you like to read?" I run my hands past the spines, and all the time, I feel his eyes on my back.

"You pick," she offers, and my heart flutters.

I wanted this someday. A family. Children.

But this is all pretend. I'll be gone in a year, and this little girl and her father will forget me like I never existed.

I remove a copy of *The Wimpy Kid* and make my way to the bed.

"I love that one!"

Her head hits the pillow, and she pulls the covers up to her chin while I take my spot on the edge, starting to open the book.

"Can you lay next to me?" Her brows knit.

I couldn't say no even if I wanted to. And I don't want to.

I scoot in, tucking her over my chest. Page after page, I read her the words, her giggles uncovering a world of forgotten dreams trapped in my soul, helping to replace the nightmares now buried there.

I peer up at Michael as I lie next to his daughter, pretending she's mine. And as he observes us together, the harshness on his face cracks just a little,

and I swear his lips move to form a twinge of a smile.

We make it back into our bedroom, and it still feels weird calling it ours. I don't belong here – in this house, in his world. None of it is mine, and I don't want it to be.

He pushes the door to a close, and I'm suddenly alone with the monster beneath the man. My skin skitters with tiny little ants.

“We have to talk,” he says, stalking over to me, his baby-blue button-down practically ripping at the chest, conforming to the pecs underneath.

“About?” I finally slip out of my heels, groaning, my feet aching.

I glance up at him, catching his nostrils flaring as his gaze languidly slips down my figure.

“The Bianchis know you're with me.”

“Oh, God.” My arms spread with goose bumps, my heartbeats thumping loudly in my throat. “Don't send me back there. I have to help—”

“Help who?” He tilts my chin up with the back of his index finger. “The girls at the house?”

When I don't say anything, he only continues.

“You can't save them, Elsie. There's nothing you can do for them. Do you understand me?”

But I refuse to accept that, hostility filling my eyes. He gives me a frustrated slip of his breath.

“Tell me you understand, Elsie.” His voice drops into something deep and raspy, causing my stomach to bottom out.

He drops his lips too close to mine, our eyes tangled, seeking more. That pull...it's there whether we want it to be or not.

“I need an answer, Elsie. Tell me you understand. Tell me you didn't do something stupid.”

I scoff, shoving his hand off my face. “Married the wrong woman if you thought I'd listen to what you had to say.”

In a blink, his arm sweeps around my lower back, the large span of his palm clenching around my ass, pressing me into the swell of his bulge.

“You're maddening, you know that?” he growls on a sigh. “I'm trying to

keep you safe. Believe it or not, I don't want you back with them either."

His lips hover above mine, and I taste the liquor from his breath.

"So, God damn it, say you'll listen to me. Don't you dare try anything."

"You don't understand." The words tremble out. "My friend Kayla is there. She's one of my best friends."

I don't want to give him a piece of my past, but maybe if he knew me, really knew me, he'd want to help us.

"Jade, Kayla, and I were best friends in high school. We took a road trip together after our senior year, and they sabotaged Jade's car and took us from the side of the road. I don't know where Jade is now, but Kayla and I have been together for the past nine years, Michael. Nine whole years with those animals. The things they did to us..." The back of my throat throbs with the painful memories.

He breathes out heavy, that face turning with rage. It's everywhere on his features.

A chill skitters up my back, but I continue. "I swore I'd go back for her. She was too scared to get in your car."

I feel the tears trace down my cheeks, and as he stares deep in my eyes, his brows bend with emotion. He reaches a thumb toward me and wipes away a single tear.

"Can you imagine what they're doing to her because of me?" I grip his wide wrist. "Please, help her. I'll do anything you want."

He draws in a long breath, eyes hooded, and my hope grows that maybe he'll actually do something. That maybe there is a hero beneath the killer.

"I'm sorry, Elsie. But there's nothing either one of us can do for her."

"No!"

I shove at his chest, but he doesn't move an inch.

"You bastard! How can you just stand around and do nothing? How?" I roar, a sob slipping out. "How?!"

I shove at him again, but his arm remains fastened around me.

"What if this was your daughter? Would you just leave her there?"

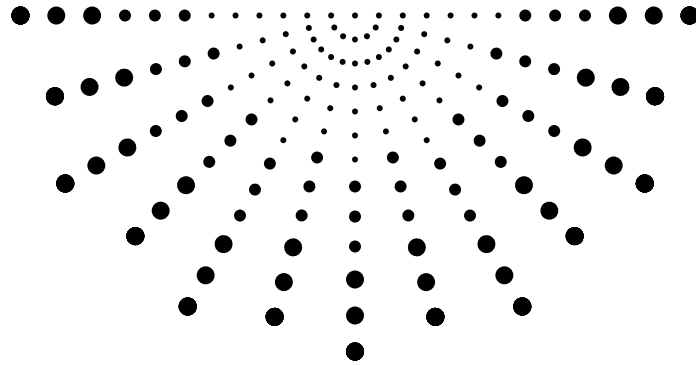
I swallow past the raw pain carving up my insides. I can't give up. I won't.

"You're a coward!" I swipe harshly under my eyes, and when I push at him again, he lets me go.

Anger, so much of it, fills my veins, hating this man I was starting to...I don't know, like? But now I don't even want to look at him.

With a long sigh, he passes a hand down his face. And without turning back, he enters the walk-in closet and stays there even after I get into bed and cry myself to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ELSIE

I can't see the clock on the wall as I wake, but I know the night still fits the sky, the blackness seeping through the curtains. A little light makes its way in from the moon, shining bright above.

My husband sleeps soundly beside me, his tanned bare back visible, the comforter slung over his hips. Hoping not to wake him, I sit up, flipping my legs off the bed and rising to my feet.

When he doesn't move, I breathe a sigh. The last thing I want is to talk to him after he refused to help Kayla.

How can he fucking live with himself? Having all that power and not using it for good. My chest grows heavy, the resentment brewing.

I start for the window, raising my eyes to the moon, that magnificent sight before me. If I look hard enough, I swear it smiles back at me.

Rubbing at my eyes, I know I won't be able to sleep right now, so quietly I walk toward the door, hoping to get a glass of water and a snack. But when the floorboards creak beneath my feet, I freeze, my pulse jumping to my throat.

He grumbles, turning his face to the other side, and I stay glued to my spot, hoping he doesn't see me.

I stay that way for a few moments more before I attempt another step, and when I pass his side of the bed, I catch the sight of a gun. That definitely wasn't there before.

Without thinking, I move toward it. And before I realize what I'm doing, I'm right in front of it, like it's calling for me, like it wants me to have it.

My fingertips glide across the cold black metal, wrapping around it, and I pick it up, feeling the weight of it in my palm. I slowly raise it until it's pointing to the back of his head, my shaky finger on the trigger.

I could just kill him and run. No one would know. And if they found out, I'd have Kayla free by then. I don't care if Michael's people find me after that.

But then the image of Sophia walking in and finding him that way destroys me. I can see her screams, her cries for her daddy, shaking him, her hands with his blood on them.

What am I thinking? I'm not a killer. This isn't me. I don't kill people.

But that's not true, now, is it? I've killed before.

I fit a hand over my mouth, remembering that very day, but I push the thoughts away. Just as I lower the weapon back on the nightstand, intending to go and get that glass of water, he flips over, his hand shooting out to grab my wrist. My pulse slams in my neck as my entire body shivers.

He turns on the bedside lamp, and I find a predatory smirk lining his mouth. Those charcoal eyes narrow, his fingers tightening around my wrist.

I can barely breathe, chest climbing with every hurried breath. "I..."

What the hell can I say to explain what I was doing? Nothing. There's nothing I can do or say to dig myself out of this hole. Because the man before me knows I was about to kill him. And now, he's going to kill me.

"Should've taken the shot when you had the chance, my little dove."

A hand swoops around my lower back, harshly lifting me off the ground until my body's pressed over his and he's holding me there with the power of his thick forearm. And through the comforter, I can feel him hard, his thickness pushing right into the juncture of my thighs as those eyes delve into mine.

Fear mingles with desire like it did the day he held me up against the wall by my throat. That's what he does to me: scares me while turning me on.

I told you I was sick.

The gun's still in my palm, as though glued to my skin, while his rough hold of my wrist keeps me prisoner.

"I'm disappointed, wife," he rasps. "To try and kill your husband when the ink on the paper has only just dried."

I'm afraid to move, to speak. His eyes are full of wrath, making a chill of

darkness coat over my skin.

“I hate you,” I breathe, though the words feel like a bitter lie even to me, because all I want is to kiss him.

His cold chuckle swoops down my body, prickling down my spine. He arches his hips in one harsh stroke. I let out a single croaky moan, and the most satisfied smirk lands on his face.

His lips curl at the corner. “You moan like that for every man you hate?”

His heavy palm slithers down to my ass, grabbing a fistful through the nightgown I have on, pushing me further into the swell of his cock.

I hiss out a groan, hating it. Hating what he’s doing to me. He laughs like he’s just proven a point. Like he knows that even though my heart may deny him, my body...it wants him bad.

“Nothing smart coming out of that mouth now, is there?”

He bows his hips once more, and my eyes fall to a mid-close. A whoosh of a breath tumbles from my mouth, my hand trembling enough for the gun to fall onto the bed. My heartbeats pound, filling my ears, any response lost in my throat.

“You may make my cock hard...” The whisper of his tone is laced with an undeniable urge. “But I can still sleep well at night knowing that you’re dead for crossing me.”

He drops his grip of my wrist, and now he’s the one holding the gun in his hand. With his palm still on my ass like he owns it, he shoves the weapon to the underside of my jaw.

There’s a callous glint in his eyes as he stares up at me. “Tell me what I should do to you.”

His gaze zeroes in on my mouth, and my tongue snakes out to swipe across it on impulse.

A throbbing pain slams into my jaw. But he won’t scare me. I’ve been scared for too many years to die without at least fighting back.

“Kill me,” I grit, narrowing my gaze. “Because if you won’t help Kayla, I might as well be dead.”

His intake of breath is sharp as he gives my ass a little squeeze, and in one quick motion, he’s on top of me, the gun pressed up against the pulse thumping in my throat.

“I *should* kill you. One bullet and you’d be dead.”

He runs the muzzle of his weapon down my neck, slowly grazing it over my hip, lower...until it slinks down my bare thigh. I feel helpless, pinned

underneath him, while his hard body molds roughly into every curve.

I should detest this feeling of weakness. I should grow enraged, but it doesn't come. Not at all.

The rigid length of his cock nudges into my core, and instead of being horrified at that too and wanting nothing to do with it, I grow achy and even more aroused. My teeth sink into my lower lip as he watches me, the gun tipping up toward my inner thigh, and on instinct, I spread my legs wide, giving him better access to my most intimate place.

With him, I somehow forget that my body hasn't been my own in forever. With him, I feel myself, like I am me and these feelings are real. They're mine, and no one can take them away.

His chest widens, eyes hooded as he rides the gun up my inner thigh, hunger dripping from his gaze as he lowers his lips to my neck. I can hear the rush of his breath at my ear, causing my skin to come alive, to crave him more – this monster, this madness of a man who's my husband.

"You are a naughty little thing." His voice is gruff. "If it were anyone else, Elsie, they'd be dead already."

His hips rock into me, and my pussy clenches as I feel myself grow wanton and dazed with desire.

"But, no matter what I tell myself, I can't seem to kill you. And I've never hesitated to kill anyone. Until now."

Before I know what I'm doing, I tilt my hips higher to feel him on me.

"Fuck." He grits his teeth. "You drive me insane." He rises on his elbow, fingers finding my jaw and gripping tight. "I can make you come right now. All you have to do is tell me you want it."

I swallow on a sharp exhale, his hips slamming into me with gentle strokes. My words won't come out, even as I try to say them. The need climbs, the throbbing so strong, all I want is to get lost in it. In him.

"Elsie, my sweet Elsie." He practically hums the words.

My body is molten, every inch of it on fire for a man I should not want in any of my lifetimes.

But I do. I need him. I want him. I want to feel him inside me.

Am I truly ready for that? Maybe not. But maybe I can get off with him pressed up against me. Maybe I can let go and really forget what the men in my past have done to me.

He gazes into my eyes, a thumb swiping across my lips as I pant louder the more he thrusts his hips deeper.

The pistol slinks up further, until it reaches that spot where my thigh and my core meet. He moves his hips back a little, shoving my panties to the side with the muzzle, the gun tracing up my slit until my breathing turns ragged and a smirk etches to his mouth, a satisfied one.

“You’re not scared.” He utters the words like a statement, like he can tell I’m not afraid at all.

Instead, I grow even hungrier for that orgasm. Staring into his eyes, I ride the muzzle of the gun, spreading my thighs wider, wanting it on my clit.

“Fuck.” He clenches his jaw, sliding his body off to the side, his gaze now dipping to my thighs, watching himself stroke me with his weapon.

“You don’t know how bad I want inside you right now, pounding into your pussy like I own it.”

“I just tried to kill you,” I whisper softly on a moan, his words hitting me with a slice of intense desire.

“I know...” His gaze hurries to my eyes, brows tugging. “But I could never kill you. Not now. It’s a problem I never expected to have.” His lips move to my ear. “So the next time you pull a weapon on me, wife, make sure you do it right.”

My hand flies to the back of his head, pushing his lips deeper into my neck, wanting him, while I draw my hips in circles over the pistol, wishing it were his fingers there instead.

“Michael,” I cry, tugging his hair as he groans.

“You keep saying my name like that, and it’ll be bad for the both of us.”

“None of this feels bad right now.” The words slip out velvety soft as I gasp from the friction of his mouth on my skin. “I haven’t felt this good in a long time, if ever.”

“God damn it.” His rough breaths are as heavy as the pounding of my pulse.

My eyes drift shut, my core pulsing with the need I’ve never felt before. Not this way, not this strongly.

“I’m close,” I tell him, not sure if he’ll even care.

“Not like this,” he says.

And before I can say another thing, he quickly lowers down my body, grabbing the undersides of my knees, and pushes my thighs apart.

“Is this okay?” he asks with utmost sincerity as he looks down at me, at the place so many other men have hurt me.

But I won’t let them win. I won’t let them take more.

I lift myself up on my elbows, watching the striking intensity of his gaze as he places the gun on my side of the bed before lowering his nose to my panties, gathering the nightgown up to my hips.

And without looking away from me, his mouth cups my pussy until I gasp, and his tongue snakes out to circle my clit. Even through the cotton, I can feel him as though it's happening bare.

"Fuck, I need to taste you." His resolve crumbles, as though he's losing control.

I want him to do it, to just do what he wants without asking me for permission. I need him to control this. I want to feel it, to know it's okay. That wanting it this way is okay, even after what's been done to me. I'm safe with him, or at least I'd like to imagine that I am.

My palm lowers to the back of his head, and I yank his hair. His powerful gaze narrows and we stare hard into one another. There's something unspeakable there, and when I pull firmer, the muscle in his jaw tics.

An invisible switch flips in his eyes, and he pushes my hand off his hair, pinning it to the bed. He grabs the other and cages it beside my thigh.

"I'm gonna give you exactly what you need, little dove. And you will come for me, with those gorgeous thighs strangling me as you do."

Then, in one single move, he flips me onto my stomach, grabbing both of my wrists and holds them prisoner over my head.

His body is on top of me, and that feeling of ownership, of losing all control, is back. My body goes on alert like it wants to fight, but it wants this too. His hot breath is at my neck, and it feels like some of the other times when those men would push into my body, taking what they wanted while I lay there, screaming, crying.

But no one ever came to help. No one cared.

Sometimes there was more than one man at a time, and the last thing they worried about was me. I was there for their pleasure.

"It's okay." Michael's voice breaks me from the nightmares of my past, as though calling me to the light. "No one's going to hurt you again. I promise you that."

His hips rock in gentle circles over my ass, and I breathe a sigh of relief, as though hearing his voice has brought my soul out of despair.

"That's it, Elsie. Feel my cock. This is what you do to me."

I let out a strangled moan just as his hand fits over my hip, those fingers slipping under my body until they reach between my thighs. He roughly

pushes up the dress as I lift for him. He doesn't attempt to touch me bare. Those fingers rub my pussy through my panties, and I can feel the wetness coating his fingers.

"You're mine," he hums. "And this is gonna be mine too. It's only a matter of time. We both know that, don't we?"

"Yes," I confess on a whispery breath. "Please, Michael. I need..."

"I know what my wife needs."

You. I need you.

And that's when he yanks my panties to the side and two fingers enter me deep, stretching me wide until I buck against the invasion, my moans coming in gasps.

"Yes, yes, yes," I cry.

He fucks me roughly, his left hand in my hair, yanking my head backward as his talented fingers rid me of the shame of wanting it this way. Hard. Pinned down on the bed. At his mercy. His. Whatever way he wants it.

"That's it. Come on, little dove. Sing for me."

And when his thumb circles my clit, I scream his name. "Michael, I'm coming!"

Stars burst before my eyes like fireworks, my toes curling. But he doesn't stop. He thrusts harder, adding another finger until I feel myself climb again.

What the hell is happening?

I clasp around him as though my body doesn't want to let him go.

"Mm, so wet. You're gonna show me how good you can come on my tongue."

I feel the cool air on my back as he rises, but I have no energy to move. He doesn't bother with removing my panties, tearing them off of me instead.

I happen a glance behind my shoulder, finding him giving my naked ass a heated look. A single palm lands with a deafening slap on my behind.

I gasp with a cry, but he doesn't do it again. Instead, both hands are there, spreading me open for his perusal.

"Fuck," he growls. "You're so beautiful. Every inch of you is."

My body shivers, watching him watching me. He looks at me like he worships me, and I like it.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he says when he grips my hips, those fingers biting into the skin there, and instead of flipping me around, he fits his face right under me, and nerves explode in my belly.

I should fear it – fear a man being this close to that intimate place – but I

don't. Not when it's him.

The men at the club never did this to me. They preferred objects or their dicks. They saw me as dirty, I'm sure, but not Michael. Even knowing where I came from and what's been done to me, he doesn't care. My heart tightens in my chest, and I fight it. Fight what he's doing to it.

I gasp when I feel his hot breath at my core, jolting me with a need so raw, I'll get on my hands and knees to beg to be released of it.

"Michael," I cry. "Please..."

"You sound good begging your husband for his mouth."

My eyes roll back as his long tongue slices up my wet slit, like he's parting the damn sea.

"Oh, God," I groan, my hands balling into fists, the sheets crumpling within them as I ride his face, not caring if he can breathe or move.

He spans me from above, gripping each side of my ass with his palms, spreading it wide. And his groaning vibrations tremble over my clit. My need for release wafts through with a vengeance.

My fingernails claw the bedsheets, thrashing while he eats me like I'm his seven-course meal. Like he lives to do it.

Two fingers enter me with ease, while he fastens his other hand around my ass to drive me closer to him. A rumble of satisfaction escapes from deep in his chest when he sucks on my clit.

It feels like an out-of-body experience, sensations tingling down to my toes. I can't take another second of this.

"I'm close. Oh, God. Don't stop." I beg for something I already know he'll give me.

His fingers curl inside me, and I almost fight the need. It's too strong. Too much.

Yes...

His teeth nip and tug my clit, fingers still thrusting deeper as I moan and gasp and call out his name.

"Harder," I plead. "Please, Michael, I need it harder."

He groans under his breath, and his tongue dives into my pussy, his teeth lightly grazing over my clit.

I scream out a moan as the pain mingles with pleasure, my hands coming under to touch my beaded nipples, pinching them hard as he licks and sucks me.

His tongue gives me no reprieve, until the sensations grow so strong that

tears line the rims of my eyes. It's all too much. My body feels like it's warring with itself.

He flattens his tongue and swipes once. Then again...and again...and...

"Yes!" My hands curl around the pillow, hips bucking wildly, feeling like I'm going to explode.

His strong hands keep me right on top of his face until my orgasm ravages out of me in wave after wave of ecstasy.

This man just gave me something I never even thought I was capable of having again. His tongue now lazily flicks my clit while my body jerks, coming down from the high.

When the throes of my release ebb, he presses a kiss to my pussy and then each of my inner thighs, and I grow hazy, my heart lurching.

I can barely move as he slides out from beneath me, his body now pressing over mine. He snakes his hand around my throat, those fingers pushing my head back until I meet his eyes from above.

"I was right all along..." He gives me a lopsided grin, tongue winding around his lips to lick the taste of me off his mouth. "You do taste sweet."

It looks like he's covered in me, and I try not to get embarrassed, but fail. My heart races and I can barely catch my breath.

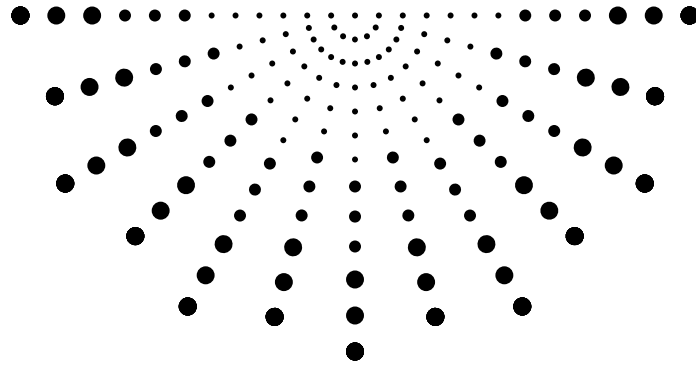
His knuckles reach for my face, slowly sliding down my cheek. "Sleep well, my beautiful wife. And tomorrow, you can go back to pretending you didn't just squirt all over my mouth."

I did what?

I stare wide-eyed, unable to say a word.

He chuckles, sliding off me to fit himself behind my body, a palm on my stomach pulling me into him, holding me protectively. And I realize he didn't even kiss me, and that he's still very much hard.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



MICHAEL

My wife is irresistible. And after those orgasms I gave her, all I can think about in my office the next day is doing it again tonight. The way she gave me her trust. I could practically feel the acceptance as I tasted her.

I could barely sleep after that. My cock refused to soften, thoughts of her invading me all night, wanting to wake her so I could feel her come with me inside her.

But she's not ready for that. I'm surprised she was ready for what happened yesterday. I could tell she liked me restraining her. She didn't have to say it for me to understand. It was in her eyes, the way she yanked my hair.

Damn, I loved the pain. I can be as rough as she wants me to be. I can tie her to my bed for hours, torture her until she lets go, until she learns to trust a man again.

But I'm not worthy of her trust, not someone who's done the kinds of things I have. But she can use me. I'm okay with that. She isn't mine, not forever. This is just sex. That's all we'll have. I'll help her heal, if that's what she needs, so that one day she can be ready for some bastard who doesn't get his hands dirty. Who won't end up being the cause of her death.

Every time she's around, all I want is to kiss her. But I can't. I don't kiss the women I fuck. Ever.

That's what she is. Nothing more. That's the way it has to be, even when it tears me up inside to see how good she is with my Sophia. But I can't have

Elsie thinking there's any chance that this could be more. Because it can't.

My burner vibrates in my pants pocket, and I know exactly who's calling, because I'm the one who called him first.

Removing the phone, I answer.

"What do you have for me?" I ask Nico, the best freelance assassin in the country. With the price he charges, he'd better be.

"Nothing." His tone is sharp. Cold. Just the way I like the men who kill for me.

"What do you mean, nothing?" I tighten my hand around the cell. "Where are the girls?"

"They were gone when we got there. Not a sign of anyone in the house. It was empty."

Fuck!

I loosen the tie at my neck, feeling like it's suffocating me.

"Any cameras in the house?"

"There were," he says. "But they were removed. The place was wiped clean."

I clench a fist on my lap, leaning back into the chair at my desk.

I thought I could do it. I thought I could help Elsie's friend and surprise my wife. But I failed.

I can't even tell her. If she finds out her friend is gone, it'll tear her up inside. And I won't do that to her, even if it'll show her that in some fucked-up way, I'm on her side.

Her husband. Her captor. And her fucking savior.

Yeah, so much for that.

"I spoke to some dealer across the street," Nico explains. "He said the girls left four days ago."

"Are you sure he said four?"

"Yeah." He pauses. "Same day his girl broke up with him."

I scoff.

"What do you want us to do?"

"Clear out."

"Okay." The line goes dead.

Four days ago was when Elsie escaped that place. They must've taken the girls somewhere else in case Elsie came with the feds. They don't have them in their pocket. They're not as easy to buy. We've tried, too.

I can't go to Elsie empty-handed. What the hell else can I do with no

fucking leads? We have no way to know which rathole they're keeping the women in.

I'd have nothing to lose by calling Agnelo and seeing if we could come to some kind of deal for Kayla. I could make him rich.

My father won't be happy if he finds out, but this is my call. The Bianchis can't touch Elsie anymore.

Two seconds later, the phone is ringing.

"Michael Marino," Agnelo snickers. "What can I do for you?"

"You know why I'm calling."

"Yeah, you have something that belongs to me."

I drag a sharp breath into my lungs. "She doesn't belong to you."

He chuckles. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. Haven't you heard?" I pause, dragging it out. "She's my wife now. She belongs to *me*."

He laughs wryly. "A man like you would rather have a whore for a wife?"

I slam a pounding fist into my desk, the pen holder tipping over. "Call her a whore again, Agnelo. I dare you."

The rage fills my veins, and I can almost hear the blood rushing to my head.

"Didn't mean no disrespect to your *wife*. But you should know how many have had her pussy in this city."

I grit my teeth so fucking hard, my jaw aches. "We may have a treaty, Bianchi, but say one more thing about my wife and I will nullify that agreement to shreds, along with your life. Do we fucking understand each other?"

"I have too much respect for your old man to take you up on that offer." His tone turns threatening. As though I'd ever be afraid of him. "But you'd better listen to me, Michael. You'd better watch that mouth. I won't stand for no fucking disrespect from you."

"You're the one disrespecting what's mine. And Elsie is every bit *mine*. You say one more thing about her, and I will kill you. It's that simple."

He laughs. "You just met the girl, and you married her? Was this your way of undermining my family? Faro may be dead, but we're still fucking breathing!"

"Not for too long, I hear."

"You mean the Cavaleris?" He scoffs. "You think we're afraid of some little shits from the old neighborhood? I'll personally kill those rat bastards."

His breathing gets heavy. “Faro put a damn bullet in their eight-year-old brother like it was nothing before putting one in their old man. You think we won’t kill those three now?”

“I’m sure you’ll try.” I roll back and forth in the chair, enjoying the irritation brewing between his words. “But they got one of you already. Doesn’t seem like they’ll have much trouble getting rid of the rest. I’d watch your back.”

“You arrogant prick.” His voice grows shrill.

“I could help you with the war that’s already at your feet. Give you some of my men. More weapons. I only want one thing. A girl named Kayla.”

His laugh is laced with mockery. “Is that why you called? To beg for her friend?”

When I don’t answer, he goes on.

“Tell her she’ll never see either of them again. She’s gonna wonder every day whether they’re dead and never truly know.”

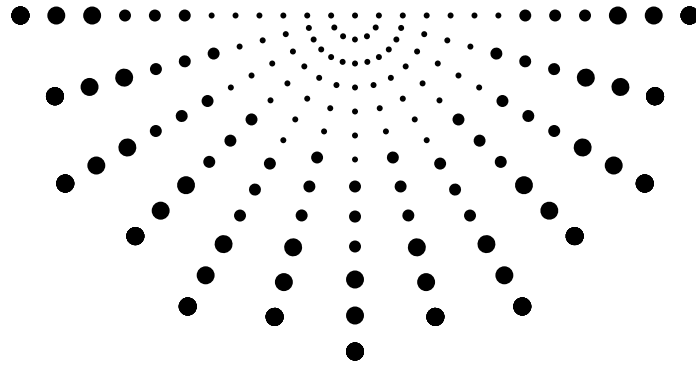
Boiling rage roars inside me. I want to find him, and I want to bury him alive. I knew calling this bastard was a mistake, but I had to try. For her.

“I don’t need help from you. You hear me?”

I end the call. There’s nothing else to say.

I’m going to have to tell Elsie, and she’s going to hate me even more once she finds out I couldn’t get her friend back.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



ELSIE

The water pounds over my face, and it almost feels like drowning. I wonder what drowning actually feels like. I'd want an easier way to go, something less painful. I've been through enough suffering.

From the very beginning when they took us, the pain began. And every year, it got worse. When we were first taken, they brought me and Kayla into an empty warehouse with cages all around, each one filled with women and children.

I tried to run, biting one of my captors on the arm and ripping out a piece of his flesh. Then he beat me. Days later, they dragged me and two random girls into a car, blindfolding us, then placing woven bags over our heads.

When we arrived, they threw the three of us into a room. But we weren't alone, and that day...that was when I truly realized how truly evil people can be.

“Shh,” I tell the girl whose name I don't know. “You're going to be okay.”

But that's a lie. I already feel my tongue burning as I say those words out loud.

Three men sit on the red velvet sofa, black masks covering the top half of their face, a sinister sneer planted on each of their mouths. Their suits are as dark as the souls they no longer have. Because doing this to us, it's inhuman.

The girl cries louder, covering her breasts with her hands. She looks like she's my age. Eighteen, nineteen tops.

The other girl beside me is maybe a couple years older. I can't be sure. I don't know them.

But I am them.

We're all the same. Every one of us.

The men have violated us so many times that I've lost count in these last few months. I've tried to block it out, lying there, hoping that if I don't make a sound, they won't hit me. But they usually do.

There are some who prefer to just get the sex over with, but others...their appetites are a lot more depraved. And I have an eerie feeling that the men before us share that same thrill. Once they're done with us, once they pay our captors, we're returned back to the cages.

"Drop your hands," the man in the middle demands, heaving a raging breath as he moves off his seat, stepping up to her. "If I have to ask you again, I will make you do it, and you won't like it when I do."

"Just do it," the other woman says, her voice ripping with a cry, a bruise on her face from the man she was with last night.

But the girl won't drop her hands, shielding herself from their view.

My body is bare for them, my arms at my sides. Fighting them won't make a difference. They get their way in the end. Fighting only serves a purpose when you have a chance to win. And with them, we don't.

When she doesn't do what he wants, he grunts in frustration. He picks up his belt from the floor beside him. And with cruelty stamped in his gaze, he runs it up her trembling thigh.

My eyes grow with terror, my pulse splitting my heart into two.

He whips it out, striking her on the forearm. "Drop those fucking hands. Your body is going to be ours whether you like it or not." His free hand roughly grabs a chunk of her hair and pulls upward, his face nearing, teeth baring. "You were expensive. And me and my friends will enjoy every penny of what we paid."

He whacks her hip, and she yelps, her hands shaking as she sobs.

"Stop it!" I tell him. "You're hurting her."

His eyes snap to mine, but there's no life within them. Darkness is the

only thing they hold.

“If you don’t shut your mouth, you’ll be next.”

The words have me in a state of panic. I don’t want that to be me, but I don’t want that to be her either.

My body jolts as he hits her again, harder this time, right across her back. And with the next blow to her stomach, she collapses on the ground, and he’s doing it over and over.

“You fucking whore!” he screams as he strikes her until blood seeps out from the raw welts on her back.

My heart pounds until my chest aches, my tears falling endlessly as I weep, the girl beside me inconsolable. My eyes go to the two men, looking unaffected while they sit and watch, a drink perched in each of their hands. This is fun to them. They’re enjoying it like they’re watching a performance.

He drops the belt, forcing his shoe into her back as she lies there sniveling, his foot burying deeper. And before I can stop myself, I run for the small table, only a foot away, and pick up the only weapon I can find: the ice pick.

With a guttural scream, I rush for the man who holds that poor girl on the floor. He turns instantly, a wicked tilt of his mouth as he releases her, slowly marching up to me. I stay in place, my pulse thundering so loudly, I grow dizzy.

The other two men don’t do a thing except laugh. They think this is funny. That I’m a joke.

“You bitch. Now you’re going to pay for it.” He grabs my arm, trying to pry the pick out of my hand.

And he almost does. He almost takes it from me even as I fight it, tightening my fingers with whatever strength I can muster.

But just when I think it’s over, that he’s going to kill me, the other girl jumps onto his back, clawing at his face while she lets out a growling scream, like a caged animal finally set free.

“You fucking whores!” he snaps, twisting her arm, his back to me as he throws her onto the floor. “I’m going to make you bitches regret this.”

He lifts his foot, ready to stomp at her stomach, but he doesn’t see me coming. The ice pick is still in my grasp as I tiptoe behind him. The men keep laughing, oblivious that someone like me could take down one of them. But without another second’s thought, I slam it into the man’s neck, pushing it as deep as I can.

He stills as I rush back a step. His foot drops like lead against the tiled floor.

“Shit...” the other man says, both of them quickly jumping off their seats, grabbing me from behind while the ice pick is still jammed in him.

Unsteadily, he turns and collapses with a thud.

“Who’s laughing now?” A cruel grin takes hold of my face, anger swelling in my gut.

“You’ve really done it now, little girl.” The asshole’s voice behind me creeps up my neck, and I can practically taste the foul liquor on his breath as he tightens his arm around my middle.

The other one takes his phone out of his pocket and dials, and when someone answers, he says, “We need you in room two.”

A few seconds later, the door opens, and in walks Agnelo, the man who bathes my body in utter fear.

“What a mess.” He swipes a hand through his gelled-back black hair, then shuts the door with a thud. “Which one of them did it?”

The one who called him gestures toward me with a tilt of his head.

Agnelo snaps those deathly eyes my way and marches up slowly. I break into a full body tremor, barely able to swallow.

His hand snakes out, and he grabs my chin, staring at me with a menacing gaze. “Do you know what you’ve done? Who you’ve killed? The mess I’ll have to clean up because of you?”

He strikes my cheek with a heavy palm. I cry out from the sharp sting, the other man laughing cruelly at my ear.

“Nothing to say, bitch?” Agnelo slaps me again, and the older girl gasps a cry.

The one who was beaten is barely moving. I wonder if she’s already dead.

“I—I’d do it all over again.” I snarl, even as the tears swim down my face.

I won’t let them scare me. I don’t fear death. Death is better than this.

“Bring me the other girl,” Agnelo demands.

The man obeys, grabbing the older girl’s arm and making her stand, even as she trips on her feet.

Agnelo’s hand falls to her hip, the lines of his forehead more pronounced as his eyebrows rise. His fingers slowly crawl down between her legs as he fondles her.

“Aren’t you pretty... It’s too bad you’re going to die today.”

She shudders, her shoulders shaking. “P-please. I—I’m sorry. Don’t kill me.”

“Too late for all that now.”

He marches over to me, reaching into his pocket and removing a gun.

Oh, no.

I shut my eyes, my labored breaths pounding through my lungs.

Don’t look. Just don’t look. It’ll be quick. You won’t have to suffer anymore.

The mental pep talk doesn’t do a thing to stow away the panic beating through my insides.

“Take the gun.”

Agnelo’s voice slams through my thoughts, and I stare back at him, finding his hand extending toward me with the weapon in it.

“What?” I whisper.

Does he expect me to kill myself? I can’t do that. Can I?

“Take the gun. Now!” he roars.

I jerk back, tears streaming down my cheeks, a shaky hand reaching for it. I hold it in my grasp just as the man behind me lets go.

Agnelo snatches my arm, the gun jittering in my palm while he leads me to stand in front of the girl.

What is he doing?

As I stand before her, taking in her ashen face, her tear-filled gaze, all I want to do is take her and run. But there’s nowhere we could go. Not from our captors. They’d find us anywhere.

“Shoot her,” Agnelo says from behind me.

I turn sharply to him. “Wha-what? No.”

My pulse pounds in my head, over and over until my head spins.

Please tell me I heard him wrong. Please!

“Either shoot her or I’ll kill you both.”

I swallow past the pain lodged in my throat. “I won’t kill her.” My lower lip trembles. “Kill us both, then.”

He chuckles. “You’ve got balls. I’ve gotta give you that.”

He reaches for his pocket, taking out a phone.

“What are you doing?” Fear trickles down my arms, goose bumps treading up my skin like they’re being sewn underneath my flesh.

“Calling one of my guys so he can kill both of your friends instead.”

“No!” I lunge for him. “Please! Don’t hurt them. I’ll...I’ll do anything

you want. Anything. Just not this.”

My chest heaves. My throat dries. I can't kill another person. I won't.

“This is what I want.” His lips curl up. “Do this, and they won't die. Don't and...well, you should know by now how good I keep my promises.”

Yes, I do. I've seen him kill before. It's easy for people like him. But not for me.

I pivot toward the other girl. Her life is just as valuable as my friends'. Just as valuable as anyone else's.

“You have until the count of three, Ellie.”

It's the name they gave me. That's what they do, give us different names that are similar to ours. Like they're teasing us with our past, treading it into our new beginning. Another form of torture. But I pretend that name isn't me. I'm Elsie. That's who I'll always be. They can have Ellie. She's theirs, but Elsie is mine.

“One.”

“You're sick!” I holler. “You are going to go to hell.”

He chuckles. “You don't have time to waste. Decide. Your friends or this nobody.”

The girl sobs and begs me to spare her – begs and pleads – while I cry along with her. I reach out a hand for hers, but Agnelo yanks me back by my hair.

“You did this to her. From this day on, you'll always be a killer. First, him.” He jerks my head toward the dead man. “Now, it'll either be your friends or this woman. And it doesn't matter if your hand is on the trigger. You'll be the reason your friends are dead.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss as he tugs harder, my scalp burning.

“Two.”

I can't kill my friends. Maybe I can kill myself. I start to raise the gun toward my head, and he laughs.

“If you can even manage to kill yourself, it won't change a fucking thing,” he grits. “I'll kill all three. You won't escape this.”

No! No! No!

My hand wobbles as I lift the gun, aiming it at the innocent woman before me.

“Please...” she cries. “Don't kill me.”

Her hazel eyes hold on to me, begging for life, begging for a chance at something we will never get. We are not of this world anymore. We're dead

already. No one can save us from this. Maybe we should all die.

*“Do it now!” he screams as she wails, her palms out in front of her face.
But that won’t stop a bullet.*

“Three.”

Pop.

The sound of the gun punctures the air, and the bullet pierces her right in the middle of her chest.

I killed someone. Someone that mattered. Me. I did that. I can never forgive myself.

The water sluices down over my head as I drop onto the shower floor, my palms filling with tears, washed away with the water. The echoes of my anguish grow louder, my sobs riddling through me with wave after wave of regret.

I’m a murderer. No better than Michael. The reasons for why I did it don’t matter. All that matters is that I did it. I took her life selfishly. In saving my friends, all I did was prolong their suffering.

I can’t make myself stop crying. It’s as though remembering that has brought everything to the surface. All the things Kayla and I have been through. All the things we were forced to see and do.

My chest tightens, and I claw at it, gasping and gasping for breaths that don’t enter my lungs. It’s a good thing Sophia is still at school. I wouldn’t want her to hear me this way.

After I killed that poor girl, I became numb for a while. I tried telling myself that I, Elsie, never killed anyone. Ellie did. But that only worked for a week. Until I started dreaming of her. The guilt...I still live with it. I always will.

My fingers sink into my drenched hair as I scream out on a sob. Remembering that day, feeling like it’s happening all over again.

I don’t even know her name. I killed her and I don’t even know her name.

Suddenly, the glass door slides open, and I jerk my head up on a gasp to find Michael there, concern stretching over his face.

“What are you doing here?” I swipe under my eyes, huddling into myself,

making sure my arms are covering my breasts.

“Are you all right?” His brows furrow, and that scar of his jerks.

“I’m fine. And I’m...uh...naked. Can you go?” Nerves bubble through my voice.

He ignores it, reaching for a towel and walking inside the stand-up shower, the water dripping down his back, soaking up the cotton of his gray shirt and black trousers. But he doesn’t seem to care, because those intense eyes are on me, demanding I obey.

“Get up,” he says, opening the towel for me.

I want to fight him. It’s what I do. What I’m good at. But as soon as I risk a gaze up at him, it all crumbles. It all washes away. And all that’s left is a woman who dares to dream of a man who actually cares enough to hold her as she cries. Wanting nothing else but that.

“Come here, little dove. Let me make it better.”

My heart swells, tears blurring my vision. And with a gasping cry, I do. I go to him. I stand up and rush into his arms as though nothing else matters but the utter feel of them – their strength, that power, and God, that safety.

He tucks my head into his chest as he tightens those arms around me, while I let the pain fall, as though I’m excising it from existence. It’s hard to believe that this man I’m supposed to hate, the one who took away my freedom, is the one comforting me now.

“Want to talk about it?” he asks, soothing syllables lulling me into a calming state.

“No.” I sigh heavily. “I’d rather forget.”

He slants his face away from me, his gaze smoldering and softly dark. “What can I do to help you do that, baby?”

Baby. He called me “baby” like I’m his. The word sinks into my gut and blooms. But when I start to feel the power of that one word, a simple word, I extinguish it like a burning flame. I’m not his baby. I’m nothing.

Don’t let him fool you.

His knuckles rake down my cheek, my face tingling, every inch of me shivering from his touch alone, from that mere look of affection in his eyes.

“Nothing you can do for me.”

He hugs me tighter, strong, masculine hands running up and down my back.

With a weighty sigh, he says, “Let me put you to bed. You should rest.” I’m tired. So damn tired. My head. My heart. Everything is tired.

I nod, and together we step out of the shower. Without his eyes leaving mine, he grips the towel with both hands and rubs it over my arms, drying me there.

Slowly, he lets it fall, exposing my breasts as he dries them too, going to my stomach, my core. He makes sure every inch of me is dry, lowering onto the floor, gliding the towel up one leg, then the other.

And the whole entire time, he looks right at me, even as he wipes between my thighs. It's as though with one look, he's telling me, *you're more than your body and your skin.*

You're more. You're mine.

His little dove.

He gets back up, towering over me, hands cupping my cheeks, the towel now lying on the ground. And I find myself wanting him to kiss me, like I have wanted all those other times. That surge of need is so strong, I can't stop gazing into his eyes, can't stop my heart from beating.

He inhales long and deep, eyes hooded, and when he lowers to kiss my forehead, my lower lip trembles. This is too much. I don't want to feel this much.

I want to tell him to go while also wanting him to stay. There's a battle waging between my head and my heart, and I'm not quite sure which one is winning.

Every inch of him appears as though he's struggling too. Struggling not to touch me. To kiss me. He wants me, but he won't let himself have me. It's the first time in a long time a man has respected me enough not to force me.

"I'll take you to bed," he tells me, swooping his arms under my thighs and lifting me up against his chest.

He cradles me like I matter. Like I'm important. To him.

And in this moment, as my heart beats faster, I don't care that his eyes gradually roam my body. I don't care that they narrow as they take in the swell of my breasts, the curve of my hips. I don't feel dirty when he looks at me.

For once, I feel beautiful.

He takes me out the door, carrying me toward the dresser and removing one of his shirts. Not one of mine. I don't know if I'm reading too much into it, but the fact that he wants me in his clothes makes me feel a little bit better. He places me on my feet, and I lift my arms for him to slip that shirt onto my body.

When I glance down, I can see the thick outline of his cock, and my toes curl.

His chest broadens with a harsh breath, and I wrench my gaze away, my cheeks burning at being caught staring.

“Come on, baby. Let’s get to bed.”

There’s that word again, causing my stomach to flip-flop like mad. What is he doing to me?

He takes my small hand in his large one, and I go willingly, following him toward the bed. He cups a palm around my face, staring into my eyes so deeply, I feel the pull of his emotions straining out of him and straight into my heart.

“What did those bastards do to you?” he whispers, his thumb stroking my lips in the most tender way.

“Everything,” my tearful voice says.

“Elsie....” He sucks in a breath. “I wish...”

“You can’t go back and save me.” I place a hand over his, the one still holding my cheek. “But you can save the ones still suffering. Please, Michael.”

His long lashes drift down as his eyes shutter for a brief moment. “You don’t think I’ve wanted to help, Elsie? Do you think of me that way?”

My brows bend. “I don’t know what to think. But I do know you haven’t helped Kayla.”

His jaw flexes. “We signed a treaty with them. That’s the only reason why. We stay out of their activities, and they stay out of ours.”

Raw emotions ache in his gaze. This is hard for him. I can see that now.

“We live in peace that way, and if it wasn’t for Sophia, I’d have torn up the fucking agreement my father made with them, and I’d have killed them all. For you.” There’s conviction in the darkened pools of his gaze. “That treaty is the only thing keeping Sophia safe. They would kill her to get to me.”

My eyes enlarge. I hadn’t even thought of that.

“Oh, God. I...I’m sorry. I didn’t realize... But I guess it shouldn’t come as a shock to me considering what they do to children.” Tears fill the rims of my eyes. “I get it now. I’m sorry I said those things to you. That you’re a coward.”

But now, I realize one thing for sure: to save Kayla, I’ll have to do things on my own. Somehow. Even if it means angering my husband.

“It’s okay.” The corners of his lips jerk. “You weren’t wrong about some of it. I’m not a good man. But we don’t deal in people. Never have.”

He pauses, his mouth opening, but it shuts just as quickly, his lips tightening in a slight grimace.

“What is it?” I ask, knowing there’s something he’s not saying.

His head shakes softly, as though telling me whatever it is will be painful somehow. My pulse slams in my neck with growing anticipation.

“I have to tell you something. I don’t think it’s right to keep it from you.”

A shiver runs up my arms. “Just tell me.”

He drops a single hand away, clasping it tight around my hip. “I sent one of my men to the house.”

I pitch my head back, confusion settling over me. “Where Kayla is?”

He nods. “Where Kayla was.”

Nausea hits my gut with a vengeance.

“She...she’s dead?” I stammer.

Oh my God. I can’t breathe.

“No, baby. No.” He clutches the back of my head. “Shit, I’m so sorry I made you think that.” He kisses me on the forehead again. “They moved the girls. The place was wiped clean. They did it as soon as you left.”

“Oh, God...”

A ball of dread hits the back of my throat. How will I help her now?

“Are you sure she’s still alive?”

“Yeah.” His eyes are wrought with certainty. “I called Agnelo, hoping to come to some kind of agreement and get Kayla back for you, but—”

I let out a small gasp. “You did that? For me?”

My eyes gather with heavy tears. He risked his family’s safety for me. I’ve never had that. No one has cared about me since my parents. My friends.

I don’t even know what to do with that. It feels foreign. Like it’s not happening to me.

“You deserve to know your friend is safe. I know how it feels to want to protect the ones you love. I don’t fault you for it, Elsie.” His shoulders drop just slightly. “But I failed you. I’m sorry for that.”

“But you tried.” I cup the stubbled cheek of a man who’s given me more than he realizes. “That means something to me.”

“Not enough.”

And the way he says that, the way he looks at me while doing it...

“But I’ll keep trying, little dove. I’ll get my men on it. We *will* find her.”

If he really means to help us, it's better than me foolishly thinking I could do this on my own. He has more power, more people, than I could dream of.

"Thank you," I whisper.

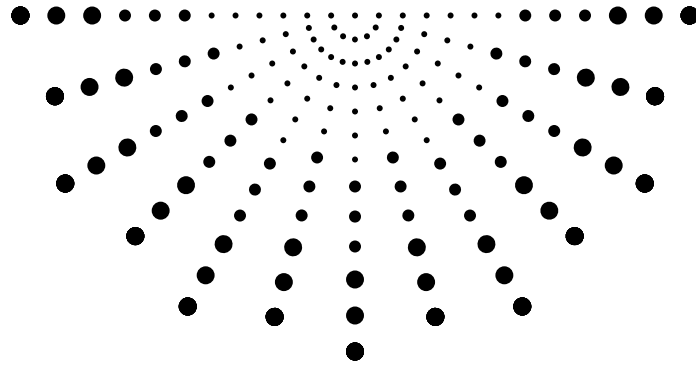
Instinctively, my arms jump around his neck, and I hold onto him while he holds onto me.

"You should rest," he breathes against my ear.

But instead, he holds me closer, like he doesn't want to let go.

I don't want him to let me go either.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



MICHAEL

“Why did you come home so early?” she asks minutes later.

Her leg’s hooked around my hip, and she’s so tightly wrapped around my body that if she moves her knee even a little, she’ll feel how badly I want her.

Does she not realize what she does to me? How much she’s uprooted every feeling I’ve tried to bottle up? Her cheek presses up against my chest, and she practically purrs.

My teeth grit until my jaw aches, my eyes staring at the ceiling while I count to ten like a damn child. That’s what I’ve become.

But fucking her would be wrong. If tasting her was enough to send me to the edge – to make myself believe that I could kiss her, just once, when I swore I’d never kiss a woman again – then fucking her could change everything. And I’d never risk that.

Instinctively, I tighten my arm around her and pull her even closer. “I was checking the cameras around the house, and then I heard you crying. I wanted to check on you.”

She lets out a silky laugh, almost as silky as her velvety skin, and when she looks up at me, her features soften. “I’m completely going to ignore the fact that you were watching me naked in the shower and focus on the part where you left work to make sure I was okay.”

“In my defense...” I chuckle, brushing my fingertips up and down her arm. “I didn’t actually see you naked.” A languid smirk tugs at my mouth.

“The camera doesn’t let me see inside the shower. Unfortunately.”

She bites on her lower lip, and my cock jerks.

My God, this woman.

“Semantics.” She smiles seductively until it suddenly disappears. Her brows snap, and she drags in a long breath. “Thank you for caring enough to come.”

“You’re my wife now.” I bring my other hand to her face, grabbing her chin between two fingers. “It’s my job.”

Moisture builds in her eyes. “I’m not your actual wife.”

“You are,” I remind her, my thumb tracing her jaw. “For a year, you’re my wife. In every sense of the word. And I’ll do everything to protect you.”

Does she not realize I mean that? I’d burn the earth to see her smile, to erase every instance of pain she still carries inside her. I never meant to have a wife, not a wife I actually feel this way for. When she’s gone, she’ll forget me. But I’ll never be able to forget her.

“Let me tuck you in before I head back to work.”

I start to slide my arm out from under her, but she rises on her elbow, grabbing a fistful of my shirt and staring straight at me with those damn soulful eyes.

“Do you have to go?” she whispers.

I’d give her anything in the world right now.

My heart pounds, and my palm snaps to her nape, clasping roughly, my face lowering to her. “Do you want me to stay?”

And those lips, her lips...they almost near mine.

She nods softly. “Please....”

Her warm, intoxicating breaths caress my mouth, calling to me, begging me to take what feels like mine already.

But she’s not mine. She can’t be.

“I don’t want to be alone right now,” she says.

I don’t want to be alone either.

I touch my forehead to hers, emotions warring inside my heart. Too heavy to ever say out loud.

“Then I’ll stay.” I kiss her softly on the top of her head, knowing I can’t kiss her in the one place I desperately want to. “Let me get out of these clothes first.”

Reluctantly, I get off the bed. Taking out my cell, I start to dial, and my assistant answers as soon as it rings.

“Alison, I won’t be back for the rest of the day. Cancel all my meetings and reschedule them for this week.”

“But, sir, you have a meeting with Wentworth Global about the expansion.”

Elsie stares at me curiously, and my mouth quirks as I hold her gaze.

“I don’t care. Make it work. Tell them I had an emergency.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Thanks.” I end the call.

“Did I just keep you from something important?”

She’s damn adorable, and goddamn enticing with my shirt on her body. That’s all she should wear...unless she’s naked, and fuck, does she look good naked.

I tried not to stare when I got her out of the shower, but with those curves, it was almost impossible. And now, with those rosy nipples practically poking out of my shirt, and knowing she’s completely bare under there... well, I’m finding it difficult to focus on anything else.

“Nothing is more important than being here with you. Everything else can wait.”

Her cheeks flush, and she fits me with a wild stare.

The tie around my neck cinches tighter the more her eyes bore into mine. I can’t take a second more of how she’s looking at me. The desire to tear that damn shirt off her body and show her what I want to do to her becomes unbearable.

Before I act on my desires, I head for the dresser, needing to change out of my work clothes. Giving her my back, I start to undo my cuffs, then the buttons of my shirt before peeling it off.

Her eyes...I know they’re on me. My dick knows it too – throbbing for her mouth, her pussy, to feel this woman come undone and say my name while she feels every ounce of pleasure I allow her to have.

The muscles of my back flex as I lower my fingers to my waistband, slipping off the belt with a heavy clank. I pull my trousers down my thighs and remove my boxers next.

I register the gasp of her breath, and it has me turning to look at her. I instantly regret it, because those eyes – those large, tawny eyes – are full of the same lust coursing through my blood.

Her parted mouth trembles, gaze darting down from my hooded eyes to my fully erect cock. Her gaze grows wider. And so does her mouth. Instantly,

I imagine filling that mouth with the taste of me.

Her heavy breaths taunt me, while her fingertips brush over her collarbone. Her eyes go downcast, as though she's uncomfortable looking at me.

"I'm your husband, little dove," I say, voice gruff, slowly stepping toward her, wanting every inch of distance between us to evaporate.

I want her like I've never wanted a single person in my life.

"Don't be shy with me." I take another step. "You can look." My footfalls grow closer. "You can touch. It's yours, Elsie."

Her lower lip disappears between her teeth as she dares a look into my eyes while I'm naked before her. Completely, utterly naked, in both body and heart.

"Do you like looking at me?"

"Yes," she confesses on a whisper.

"I like looking at you too." My fingers reach her shoulder, fledging down her arm, and her skin wakes with a blanket of goose bumps.

Her free hand tentatively skirts out toward my cock, but then she snaps it back, like she's afraid.

"Touch me, wife. I want you to."

Her brows bow as she gazes up, and those innocent eyes...they're my undoing. I keep my arms at my sides, waiting and wanting...

Once, her hand circles around the crown of my cock.

"*Fuuuck*...that's it, little dove. Stroke me."

She clenches her fingers tighter, unable to close them around me.

"You're so big," she breathes.

I chuckle with a groan as she strokes me again. "If you're trying to make me harder, you're succeeding."

She fists me tighter, slowly bringing her hand up, as though testing the feel of me.

I hiss, throwing my head back. "You don't know what you're doing to me. The way my body wants yours. It's demonic. I'd rip you to shreds."

My pulse thrums wildly when I narrow her a gaze, and a moan escapes her, her thighs rubbing one another.

With a growl, my restraint splits in half. And in a flash, my hand sinks into the back of her head, tightening in her hair, yanking her head back.

"You want me too, don't you?"

A gasp slips out of her perfect lips. Her hand still tight around my cock

has me insane with hunger, with a craving so raw I'd give up my soul to have her.

"Are you wet between those thighs, little dove? Are you aching for your husband to take the pain away?"

"I..."

Her eyes dart nervously between me and the floor, and she drops her hand off my hard-on. I miss it already.

"What is it?" I gaze at her intently. "Tell me what you need, and I'll make it happen. I want to hear you say it."

Her teeth bite into that lip I want to devour. "I..." Her attention darts down. "I don't think I'm ready to sleep with you."

"That's okay," I reassure her, keeping my tone casual even when every part of me rejects the idea. She's what matters, though. "We have a year to figure this out."

I tuck her chin in my tight grasp, pulling those eyes to mine.

"Do you want me to take care of you? Do you want me to make you come?"

I'd die a thousand deaths just to watch her fall apart again.

"That doesn't seem to be fair..." She glances shyly at me, the corner of her mouth tilting up. "...seeing how hard you are."

I flash her a wicked smirk. "I have ways to take care of that."

Her brows dip, and I swear there's a hint of jealousy in the pull of her features. Does she think I meant another woman? I laugh internally.

Good. I like knowing she finds the idea of me fucking someone that isn't her as repulsive as I do.

"Not another woman, little dove." I cup her cheek in my palm. "I have hands, and it's not the first time I've used them with thoughts of you."

Her eyes enlarge.

"That's right." I chuckle. "It hasn't been easy to have you here. You're a surprise in my life in every damn way."

I inch closer to kiss her forehead. My breaths grow ragged, my other palm slipping around her ass.

"You're a beautiful woman. And denying my desire for you would be foolish."

She sucks in a struggling breath, and her face suddenly turns serious. Grabbing my wrist, she drags my hand to that warm space between her thighs.

She pants, looking up at me with insurmountable vulnerability.

“What now, little dove?”

As she tightens her gaze on me, she pushes my fingers to her bare core.

“Touch me.” She swallows with a swell of her chest. “I—I...”

Embarrassment stitches up her cheeks, pooling with a rose-pink hue.

“Hey...” I clasp the back of her neck. “Don’t be shy. There’s no shame here. Not with me.”

She nods and tries to look down, but I don’t let her, keeping her eyes on me with a yank of her hair.

“I’ve never felt this good, this alive, with a man before,” she finally says. “And I...I want you to touch me, Michael. Roughly.”

Her lips tremble like there’s more she’s trying to say.

“Anything you need. Just say it, baby.”

She lets go of my wrist. “You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

She runs a hand down her face.

“I can’t even believe I want that. There has to be something wrong with me,” she flusters, glancing at my chest, then lower.

“How can I like something like that with everything that’s been done to me?” The words fall quickly, like she’s trying to deny her mind what her body clearly craves. “But I want it with you. Is that crazy?”

“No.” I shake my head. “You’re allowed to desire whatever you want. And you’re always safe with me. I promise never to hurt you. I’m not them.” I brush my knuckles down her cheek as I stare affectionately into her eyes. “You have the power here.”

Her breaths shudder rapidly, her lashes fluttering to a close, and then she speaks again. “I need you to hold me down when you—”

“When I make you come.”

I allow her to keep those pretty eyes shut. I want to hear every word, and if this is how she feels safe, then it’s how it’ll be.

“Yes...” She pauses. “I want to fight you off, but not be able to.”

“Look at me,” I demand.

And like a good girl, she obeys.

“It’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Her eyes swim with tears and her chin shakes. “Are you sure?”

Fuck, the way she asked that...she splits my heart wide open. Emotions plague my chest as both of my hands hold her face.

“There’s not a damn thing wrong with you. You’re perfect, Elsie. Just

perfect.”

My lips drag down to hers, only a centimeter keeping us apart.

“Too perfect,” I admit.

Her hasty breaths dance across my lips.

“Lie with me,” I tell her, taking her hand as I gently pull her toward the bed, flipping the comforter over. “Get in.”

I let her go, and she slips her body over the sheets while I get a pair of sweats from the dresser. Having a layer of clothes will prevent me from being stupid with her. This is already difficult for me.

Once I have them on, I get into bed beside her, propping myself on my side using my elbow, staring down into those eyes I’d pay to get lost in.

I let a single finger draw up and down her arm, and her chest quivers in the wake of my touch.

My entire body feels like it’ll combust from the sheer look of her eyes on me, the vulnerability there surging through me. I want to take care of her – and not just her body, but her heart.

“If you need me to stop, just say ‘break.’ Okay?”

She nods quickly, inhales rivaling her exhales.

“Spread those thighs apart.” My voice shifts. Darker. Edgier.

I know it’s what she needs. And it’s what I’ll gladly give her.

On impulse, I see the instant fear grips her, like it’s choking the life out of her. And instead, she tightens her legs at the knees, shaking her head in refusal.

A smirk slants over my mouth just as my knuckles brush down the side of her face. And before she can take another breath, I grab her hips, roughly flipping her onto her stomach. A hand greedily snakes into her hair – grasping, pulling her head back until my mouth fits around her ear.

“I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way, won’t we, little dove?”

Her harsh breaths whip across the pillow when I lower my body on top of hers.

I roll my pelvis around her curvy ass, my cock still hard for this woman.

“You feel that?”

She gasps out a moan as I arch into her again.

“Yeah, you do.” I bite her earlobe with a growl. “I think it’s time I see that pretty pussy, don’t you?” I thrust into her, my body surging with desire.

“Think you can be my good girl and spread open wide so I can have a taste?”

“No,” she groans with a whimper.

“That’s too bad, little dove, because you will come for me...over and over until I’m satisfied you’ve reached your limit.” I rise up over her, dragging a finger down her spine, dipping it between her ass cheeks, and she pushes it up for me. “My slutty little wife wants her ass fucked, doesn’t she?”

“Michael,” she cries, while my cock aches for her.

Fuck...

I fist the hem of her shirt and draw it over her hips. “Look at you, exposed for me.”

I slap her ass with a heavy hand, and she cries out, shaking it side to side. And as she does, I let my fingers slip into that warm pussy, cupping her there.

She fights it, claspings tightly, attempting to wiggle out of my clutch.

With a laugh, I press her body into the mattress with mine. “Where do you think you’re going?” My fingers sink into her hair, and I yank her head back, bending it until our eyes connect. “I’m going to have you, whether you give it to me or not.”

Then my knee is there, roughly parting her legs apart. Our gazes are hot and heavy, a darkened lull of emotions. She swallows her lower lip into her mouth, biting hard around it.

“No, please,” she cries even as she groans with undulated pleasure.

Without looking away, I easily push her thighs apart further, even as she protests, jerking beneath me.

I fit a hand between our bodies and push the tip of my finger into her tight little hole, wet and slick, going all the way in, until I’m inside her.

“Fuck, you were gonna deny me all this?”

“No, stop,” she groans while I bury my finger even deeper, curving it inside her.

“Yes...” I add another digit, pumping into her with hard strokes. “You’re going to come just like this and you’re going to scream my name as you do.”

My other palm slips around to her throat, tightening, feeling the vibrations of her moans as I give her more of what she needs.

“I’ll make you come pinned down. At my fucking mercy. The way you were the moment we met.”

“Michael,” she gasps, spreading wider for me. “Please.” A needy grumble curls out of her.

“Mm...” I slide in and out of her with ease even as she tries to clamp her thighs. I tighten my hand around her throat. “Keep them open.”

My thumb circles around her clit as she cries, clenching that pussy around

me. I play her softly like I once played my guitar: stroking, working her until her ass jerks off the bed.

“So wet. So pretty.” I coax that orgasm, my voice lost to the hunger slipping around every syllable. Pulling out of her, I rub her wetness around her inner thigh. “This is what I do to you, and it’s what I’ll always do.”

I slam my fingers back inside her, not allowing her a second to breathe.

“Oh, God!” she screams.

“All mine,” I growl. “You’re all mine.”

She keeps her eyes on me, the intensity between us growing palpable. “Your pussy is tight as fuck around me right now. You need to come bad, don’t you?”

Her reply comes as another moan, my thrusts turning untamable, my cock practically ready to explode.

“You ready to fly, my little dove?”

“With you,” she gasps.

“No one will hurt you again.” The growl escaping me is damn near possessive.

I fuck her like I want her to never forget. This feeling. Not any of it. Not ever.

Then she comes with a scream, my name a prayer on her lips. “Michael! Oh, God, yes!”

Her entire body convulses, her core shuddering.

“That’s right, little dove. I’m your God now.” I thrust harder until she gives me every single drop.

I slow the tempo, while the sounds still coming out of her have me wanting to make her explode once again.

Seconds pass before she finally stills, her breathing frayed as I flip her around by her hips, needing to look into her eyes, the eyes of the woman who’s slowly tearing apart all of my defenses. My chest widens with a rush of an inhale while she looks at me with a foggy gaze, like she’s been thoroughly fucked, yet I haven’t even done what I want to do to her.

I lean toward her mouth, her eyes warm like the sun, and I swear the need to kiss her becomes overwhelming.

Closer.

I get closer. Needing to know what it’d feel like.

Fuck. No.

I draw back a fraction, taking my fingers into my mouth and sucking the

taste of her dry. Those stormy eyes find mine in the haze of our desire and refuse to let go.

“Sweet every time.” My mouth twitches.

I come to lie beside her while she attempts to get up.

“Don’t move,” I tell her, lowering the shirt back down her thighs.

The blanket comes next, and I cover us both. With an arm tucked under her, I fold her over my chest. With a long sigh, she burrows deeper, her leg draped around my heavy, throbbing cock.

Peaceful minutes drift before she speaks in a quiet voice. “Do you think I’ll ever find Kayla?”

“I’ll do what I can to help. I swear.”

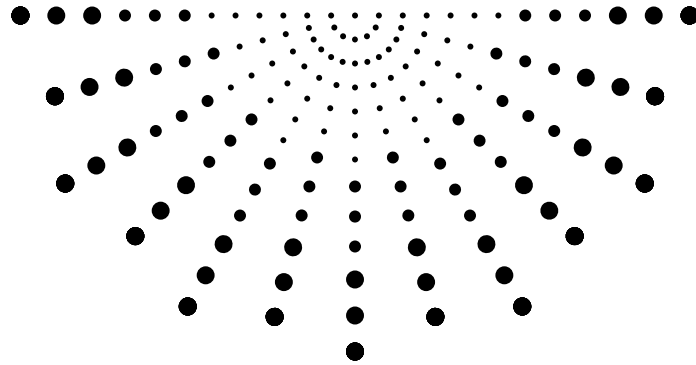
She sighs brokenly, and I want to give her the moon and the stars.

“I believe you,” she tells me. “But right now, just hold me and pretend.”

“How long do we pretend for, Elsie?” I close my eyes and hold her even tighter.

“Until it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ELSIE

Something is off with Michael today. He isn't the same carefree man who held me yesterday.

I can't believe I told him all the things I wanted him to do to me. It was the first time I said them out loud. And he gave it all to me without hesitation, and he didn't think I was weird for it.

But I've barely seen him today. He appeared tense all throughout breakfast, staring at his phone like it was about to go off like a bomb. Then he excused himself and has been in his home office for a couple of hours already. He claimed he had business to take care of, but I'm not sure if that's the entire truth.

With an iced coffee in hand, I flip through the channels in the den, bored out of my mind. The house is empty, other than the cleaning staff and the bodyguards watching the estate twenty-four seven. Sophia should be home in a few hours, though, and I always have fun with her.

When I finally find a decent show to watch, someone rings the doorbell, and I almost jump out of my seat.

Heavy footsteps stride closer and I look behind me to find Michael walking toward the door.

"I'll get it," he tells me, barely looking my way as he passes toward the foyer.

"You ready?" says a voice I know to be his brother, Gio.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

I hear them shuffle farther away, and I get up, wondering where they’re going. Following them, I slowly tiptoe to see that they’re both heading toward the door that leads to the garage.

“Are you leaving?” I ask him just as they’re about to go.

“Hey, sister-in-law.” Gio grins playfully, but my eyes stay glued to my husband.

He inhales sharply, whispering something to Gio, who leaves us alone, heading out to the garage.

“I have business to take care of. Then I’ll come back, and we can watch a movie or something.”

He forces a smile, but all it does is makes me even more nervous. Something is going on.

He gradually erases the distance between us until he’s right before me, and my body knows it too. Awareness flutters over my skin.

“What kind of business?” I ask in a soft tone, the speed of my pulse increasing from the sudden eerie look in his eyes.

“The kind that involves blood, Elsie.” He stamps out the words like a threat, and the sudden realization hits me.

“Do you mean...” My eyes widen.

“Yes, I’m about to do exactly what you’re thinking, so make sure you stay here.” He reaches for my nape, a strong hand clasp tight around it. “The bar room will be locked anyway, in case you get any ideas.”

He kisses me on the forehead, those full lips perched to my skin as though he doesn’t want to let me go. Seconds trickle by, and he hasn’t moved. His heavy breathing wafts around the space between us.

He gradually shuffles back, pinning me with an affectionate stare. “Go and explore the house. I want you to enjoy yourself while you’re here.”

But the idea of doing anything but thinking about what he’s about to do is unimaginable. “Do...do you really have to go and kill someone? What did they do?”

He’s suddenly on me, holding my face in both hands, pinning me with an intense glare. My stomach flips.

“He fucked with my family, and there’s no coming back from that, little dove.”

He slowly drifts both hands away, and with a final look, he gives me his back and walks out the door.

My husband may be tender with me, but he's still a killer. And right now, that killer hungers for blood.

MICHAEL

"Who sent you?" I roar, slamming another punch into his face.

"Fuck you!" the asshole laughs.

But he won't be laughing soon enough. Not when the real fun begins. And that's when he will tell me who sent him.

Being who we are, there are many enemies. And now that my mother has announced our engagement in the paper, our enemies want to come for my wife.

He was here for her. My little dove. And *no one* touches her.

He managed to penetrate the electric gate, but only because I let him in. My men were given the word to disarm it. I wanted to see who sent him. I spent all morning watching my men beat him for answers, answers he's refused to give. And now, with my brother by my side, we will get them.

"You thirsty?" I ask him. "You look really thirsty. Where are my manners?"

I reach for a bottle of my most expensive vodka.

"My mother would be ashamed of me for not treating my guests with the utmost respect. Right, Gio?"

"Yes, Ma would be very upset. So how about you pour our good friend here..." He grabs a fistful of his hair and pulls his head back. "...a drink?"

He flips the chair backward until it's only standing on its back legs. One of my men throws a towel over the man's head, and when I approach him, I pour that shit all over his face, until he's coughing and choking like a rat.

"You want more, you motherfucker?"

My man hands me another opened bottle, and I pour that one over his face too. I want him on the brink of death. I want him to look Satan in the eyes right before I yank him back out.

"It's expensive. Can you taste it? Only the best for my guests."

Gio laughs.

And once the second bottle is empty, I yank the towel off his face.

“You ready to talk yet?”

He can barely catch his breaths from his gasping.

“Who fucking sent you?” I grab his throat and squeeze until his blue eyes enlarge, his cheeks bright red.

Seconds trickle by, and I grow less patient by the moment.

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” I squat behind the chair to retrieve one of the small-bladed knives lined up on the floor.

“I’m going to cut every piece of you until you’re small enough to fit into my freezer.” I sharply turn his face toward it with the blade, piercing his cheek, drops of blood pooling at the tip of the knife.

His gasps come stronger.

“You don’t believe me?” I tilt his face back to mine, the man no older than me.

If he has kids, then today was the last day he ever got to see them. Because he *will* die. There’s no coming back for him.

He eyes me defiantly.

“The last man who was inside that freezer couldn’t pay his debt. What do you think I do to people who come after my family?”

He looks at me smugly. I’m gonna take my time with him.

“I’ll take out your eyes first. Then your tongue. Then your fucking teeth, one by one.”

“Fuck!” the man hollers, his resolve breaking. “I can’t! They’re gonna kill me!”

I lower my face to his. “You’re going to die, no matter what.”

The knife slices under his jaw, cutting him clean, blood dripping down onto his lap.

“It just depends how fast you want it to be. Now, you have one more chance.” I straighten. “Who sent you?”

His shoulders rock as he cries, eyes closing as he does.

“Name!”

“F-f-fuck.” He snuffles. “Okay. I’ll tell you. It...it was...” He snaps his eyes to me. “The Bianchis. They told me to get in, get your fiancée, and get out.”

“Motherfucker!” Blood rushes to my head, my fist landing on his face over and over as I roar with rage.

“This is war,” Gio says. “This is a declaration.”

“They wanted to be coy.” I grasp the back of the man’s shirt. “They sent one guy for that reason.”

Agnelo must’ve planned it after we spoke.

“I hope the Cavaleris kill Agnelo soon,” I say. “Because if not, I’m coming for him and his brothers.”

I can be patient when it serves my needs, but I don’t have much left in me. Not after this. But the thing with Raph is not over, and fighting two wars will only cause me to lose good men. The best thing we can do is give the Cavaleris a chance to destroy them.

“What do you wanna do with him?” Gio asks me, removing a nine from his holster and pointing it at the man’s temple.

The asshole weeps, his body shaking in protest.

“We’re going to cut off his head and send it to Agnelo.”

“No!” the man screams. “Please, I’ll do any—”

Pop.

His head slumps downward as Gio puts his weapon away.

“He should thank us for not chopping it off while he was still breathing,” he says, walking off to our stash of knives and getting out a large butcher knife.

Once he’s back, I reach a hand for it. “I want to be the one to do it.”

My pulse is calm, but the wrath inside is blazing. I may not know who’s hurt her in the past, but I can stop anyone else from touching her again.

With the knife in hand, I take his head, blood dripping from his neck once I’m done.

“Make sure it’s same-day delivery,” I chuckle.

We have our own shipping company. Makes deliveries like these much easier.

I drop the head on the plastic lying across the floor.

“I have to get Sophia and Elsie out of the city for a few days,” I inform Gio, who’s already rolling the head into another sheet of plastic. “Maybe I’ll take them to St. Barts until the heat dies down.”

“That’s a good idea.”

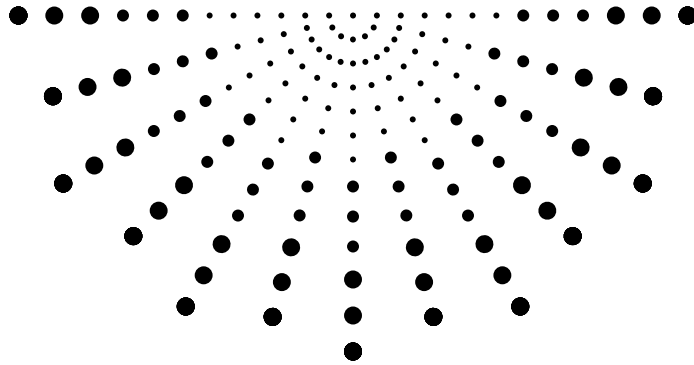
“Yeah. Let me go and get cleaned up before I have to pick up Sophia.”

“Go. I’ve got this.”

“Thanks.” I clasp his shoulder.

“Always, brother.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



ELSIE

“Are we really going on a trip to our hotel?” Sophia squeals after Michael informs us that we’ll be flying out on his private jet in three hours.

Imagine my fucking shock.

“Our hotel?” I question, darting a gaze from him to her.

“Yep! It’s Daddy’s hotel. He’s the boss, and we go to the beach there and have ice cream. Sometimes, Daddy sings and plays the guitar on the beach with the people who work at the hotel.”

He laughs. “I do own the hotel, and I only sometimes play the guitar.”

I look at him curiously. Why the hell are we going on a vacation out of nowhere? This makes no sense. He was just killing someone, and now we’re going away?

“You never told me you sing,” I say.

“You never asked.” The sides of his eyes crinkle as he grins.

“You sing nice like Daddy,” Sophia says. “Maybe you and Daddy can sing together when we get there!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, princess,” he chuckles. “How about you go and take out your suitcase from the closet and figure out what you want to bring with you. I’ll help you pack. Mabel is coming with us too.”

“Yay! I can’t wait! No school!”

She rushes out toward the stairs while I carry the shock on my face as I stare at him.

“Why are we really leaving, Michael?”

His breath hitches as he moves closer to me. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Tell me anyway.”

He runs a hand down his face, heaving out a sigh, his shirt straining around his mountain of a bicep. “The Bianchis sent someone to take you from me. But they failed.”

“Oh, no...” I clasp a hand around my mouth.

They came for me that easily. What if they come when he isn’t here to protect me?

Oh my God. Kayla. They might use her to try and get to me.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about, little dove. The man they sent, he’s dead now.”

My brows shoot up. “Is that who you were...”

He nods. “Yes.” He picks up my hand, his lips softly landing on the top of it, the kiss too gentle for a man so hard. “I was distracted all day because of it. I’m sorry.”

His palm lands possessively around the top of my thigh, fingertips forcing their way into my flesh.

“You’re under my protection now.” His eyes pin me with conviction. “No one will hurt you. I’ll kill them all.”

“I believe you,” I tell him.

And that’s because I do.

Eight hours later, we arrive at a large, pristine hotel, nestled in acres of land. We settle into one of the penthouses, with an adjoining room for Mabel and Sophia. The hotel isn’t like one of those giant resorts, but a boutique kind with everything you could want. Three restaurants, two pools, a private beach only for the guests.

The ocean, though...it’s been a while since I’ve stepped into one. The pool doesn’t come close. I remember once, my parents and I took a trip to Aruba. The water was almost as beautiful as it is here. So clear, you could see fish swimming around your feet.

Sophia splashes around in the water with Mabel, while I just stand watching them, toes curling in the sand.

As soon as we got here, unpacked, and had breakfast, I slipped into a bathing suit, and we've been here ever since. But I can't seem to make myself go in, quietly observing the waves instead of joining them. I bend my face to the sun, enjoying its warmth, smiling as the rays hit me all over. I've missed the sunlight. We never got out during the day. We were closed off from the world, like forgotten little dolls until the darkness came to play.

"You like it here," Michael says.

I jerk my head toward his rugged voice as he appears beside me, holding a slushie he went off to get for me.

"Do you really own all of this?"

Because I could get used to it.

I stare directly at his face, trying to avoid an eyeful of his very chiseled six-pack encased in all that glorious, tanned skin.

"Yes, it's mine." A flirty grin dances on his lips. "Why? Will you come visit after you're through with me?"

My heart quickens. I don't know how to answer that. Because I might want to.

When I don't say anything, he glances out to where Sophia giggles, and I find him smiling with so much love, my heart weeps. Their relationship is so beautiful. I envy it. I miss my parents so much it hurts. I wonder if I'll ever get to see them again.

He gazes at me once more, and it isn't lust that I find when I look at him. It's affection.

"Come on..." He holds out a hand. "Come swim with me, little dove."

I peer over at him, then stare out into the turquoise water, wanting so badly to take him up on his offer.

He doesn't give me a chance to refuse, because he grabs my hand and pulls me to the edge of the waves. Closer, until the water washes ashore over my toes and tears sting my eyes.

"I've got you," he says, reaching a palm for my cheek and cradling it like he would a child. "I've got you, baby."

Tears swim in my eyes as I nod, knowing that he does. And together, we rush into the water, and for once I feel free.

MICHAEL

An hour later, with my back against a tree, I watch them dancing on the sand. My wife and my daughter. Together. Like it's real. Like somehow this woman has always been here. Like a ghost of what could be.

Elsie's long white skirt twirls in the wind to the music, her hair sweeping across her face as she and Sophia laugh, running in circles, holding hands.

The sun illuminates Elsie's face like she was born to glow beneath it. The light to my darkness. But she's not meant for a life like the one I've been born into. And every single time we're together, when I feel myself get lost in her eyes, I'm spit back out into the present, where I'm reminded of why we can't ever be. I can't let her die like Bianca did. She'll always be my weakness, and my enemies will know that. They'll use her to get to me. To destroy me. I can't allow her to pay the price.

I fear every damn day that I'm going to lose my daughter. Even the full-time guard I have assigned to her doesn't alleviate my concerns. I can't live in a world where I fear losing two people in my life. Love is not worth the pain that it costs to taste it.

I still remember it: the day Bianca died, when I got that call. When nothing was ever the same again.

“Sir.” Alison rings the speaker in my office. “There’s a call on line three for you.”

I hit the button on the phone. “Take a message. I’m busy.”

“I would...uh...but it’s your brother, Raph. He says he’s been calling your phone, but you haven’t answered. He sounds upset, sir.”

“Put him through.”

“Okay.”

I pick up the receiver and hit the third line. “Raph? What’s going on?”

For a few seconds, all I hear is his heavy breathing.

“Raph?”

I’m on my feet already, grabbing my keys from my desk, heading out of the office in a hurry. My pulse slams in my neck in those seconds it takes me to head out the door.

Something happened. Heaviness hits my gut. Alison stands up as I pass, brows tightening. But I ignore her, rushing for the garage.

“Raph, talk to me. What happened?”

More silence, and that has me running into my car and gunning down the road. I don’t even know where I’m going. He wasn’t at work today because he had a meeting with some investors. After that, he was heading home to surprise Bianca with a night out. That’s where he must be.

Fuck, did something happen to her?

“She’s been shot.” His exhales roll heavily, like the tide.

“Who?” I weave from lane to lane, honking at every damn car going slow. “Bianca? Are you at the house?”

“Yeah...fuck, her pulse is light...hang on. Help is coming. Fuck!” he shouts. “The ambulance is on the way. I don’t know when it happened. The... the cameras were tampered with, like they knew where they were.”

He mutters a series of curses, and something heavy clatters, like he’s tossed something against the floor.

“I’m on my way. Only a minute. I’m going to stay on the line, all right?”

“She can’t be dead. I can’t be responsible for this. We had our issues, but I never wanted this...fuck!”

“Of course you didn’t. This isn’t your fault.”

“Of course it is! This is what happens when we get women involved with us. They die. They fucking die! Now her parents will have to bury their daughter, and I will have to bury my wife!”

I speed through the last couple of miles, stomping on the gas, almost crashing into the car in front. “She’s not dead. Don’t talk like that. She’ll be okay.”

He doesn’t say anything the rest of the way, only his heavy panting does the talking. I’m finally pulling up into the driveway, rushing out the door, just as the sirens of the ambulance get closer.

The entryway is open, and I run in, finding them on the floor in the kitchen, a pool of blood around her body. There’s too much of it.

He looks up at me, face ashen, his white t-shirt spotted with bright red.

“They fucking killed her,” he grits out, just as two EMTs rush in with a stretcher.

“How long ago was she shot?” one asks while checking out her vitals.

“I don’t know. Fuck!” He presses a fist into his temple. “Just save her!”

Then they’re on her, adding a mask around her nose and mouth.

Raph gets up, standing beside me.

“Patrick did this. You know he did,” he whispers. “And he’ll answer for it.”

He sounds sure. Did he see one of their men?

“We’ll talk about it. After,” I tell him just as quietly.

“There’s nothing to talk about. They come after ours, we come after theirs.”

“We’re going to take your wife to Montclair Hospital.”

“I’m riding with her.”

They carry her out, and he rushes behind them.

“I’ll call the family and follow you there,” I tell him.

He nods, getting into the back of the ambulance before it speeds off, the volume of the sirens decreasing as they get further away.

I use my key to lock up his house before slipping back into my car. We all got each other’s keys just in case there was trouble.

I call Gio, and he answers on the second ring.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

The music blasts through and I hear the laughter of women.

“Get to Montclair now and call Mom and Dad. Bianca’s been shot. She may not make it.”

“What? Fuck! I’m leaving now. Sorry, ladies. I’ve gotta go,” he tells the others. “Who do you think did this?”

The noise is almost all gone.

“Raph thinks it’s the Irish as payback for not letting them open their casino in our turf.”

“Then I’ll kill Patrick,” Gio fires. “And his entire bloodline. With my bare hands. If they think they can come after our women, they’re gonna think again.”

“We don’t know if it’s them yet. We have to find out more first. If Bianca is alive, we get the information from her and then we kill him.”

“We are here today to give our love and support to the Marino and Ricci families, who have experienced great tragedy in the passing of Bianca Rose Ricci...”

The priest continues, but I tune the rest out, sitting beside my family with Sophia in my lap, her tears falling down her cheeks.

Raph said Bianca once told him she’d want a closed casket so her loved ones didn’t have to see her that way, so that was what he did. But he got to say his goodbyes in the morgue. He’s completely lost without her, and I don’t know if he’ll ever get over it.

Nicolette couldn’t even handle coming. She up and left, sending her parents a letter saying she needed time alone.

I get it. No one wants this kind of pain. The sisters weren’t close by any stretch of the imagination, but they’re still blood, and it still matters when your blood dies. Their parents aren’t doing any better. To lose a child...

I tighten my arms around my daughter. I’d rather die than lose her. This kind of heartache...I don’t ever want to feel it.

“Please don’t die, Daddy,” Sophia cries softly, her cheek against my chest.

“Hey, baby, I’m not going anywhere.” I kiss the top of her head. “Daddy’s going to stick around for a long time.”

“Promise?” she sniffles into my shirt.

I glide a hand up and down her back. “I promise, princess. I’m never letting you go.”

I press my fingers into my eyes, hating the remnants of that day. All those days, in fact. It’s what killed our family.

Patrick vehemently denied he was responsible for Bianca’s death, and we never found proof that he was lying. But Raph wasn’t convinced. He resented us for not fighting. He wanted payback. For Bianca. For her family. No

matter what it cost. He thought he'd failed her. That our name caused her this.

He confessed to me in the hospital after she was pronounced dead that they were having a lot of problems and he was even considering divorcing her. But he never actually told her. I think it's guilt that ate him up too. So he did something stupid.

He hired some men and went after the Quinn family himself, taking out some of their top men, including Patrick's nephew.

Patrick wanted revenge. He may be ruthless, but he's also a patient man. He let Raph grieve because he knew what losing a mate felt like. He lost his own wife to violence when his five children were young. So he pitied my brother, enough to spare his life for a few months before word started that he was looking for Raph. But my brother had gone into hiding, and I'd never give him up, even when Patrick asked.

He knew, though, that a war on my brother meant war with me. He's done everything to find him and has come up empty.

But I came to him with an offer he couldn't refuse. Something that will bridge the mending fences between the Mob and the Mafia and assure that Patrick gets the retribution he's been seeking.

Gio won't be too thrilled about it, but he'll get over it. Eventually.

I don't trust Patrick at all, and I didn't want to make this deal, but at least this way our enemy becomes more of a friend. If one can call Patrick that.

He's a smart man. Thrives on blood and war and loyalty. The Irish even have a covert academy to ready the next generation of killers. No one knows exactly who the members are or where the academy is. Everything is kept top secret.

I reach a hand into my pocket, taking out my cell. Gio should know by now if there's been any other attempts on Elsie.

Michael

Any news?

Gio

Nothing. They're too busy getting fucked by the Cavaleri boys. I think it's time we introduced ourselves and thanked them for a job well done. So far, at least.

Michael

Let it play out. I don't want the heat, not unless it benefits us. I need

as many of our men alive as possible. We need them for the war that may be coming with our brother.

Gio

Let's hope it doesn't come to that. I don't want to believe he's doing all this. It's not like him.

Michael

We'll find out the truth soon enough. For now, keep your eyes peeled and inform me if you hear anything.

Gio

Will do. Take care of that wife of yours.

I scoff. Knowing my brother, he's laughing right now.

I slip the cell back into my pocket, watching Elsie and Sophia again. I could do it for hours. Sophia turns to me, a wide smile on her face.

"Daddy!" She holds out her hand for mine, her features bright and carefree. "Come dance with us."

She has my damn heart squeezing. If she only knew what kind of father I truly am.

Elsie flings a piece of her dark hair away from her face, a smile forming over her pink lips, and slowly, her hand reaches for mine too.

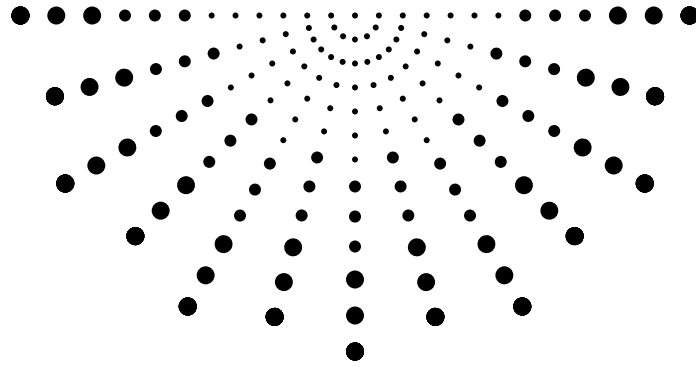
"How can I say no to that?"

The soft, rhythmic melody drifts from somewhere on the beach as I tread over to them, circling an arm around both of my girls and swinging them off their feet. We spin around and around, my toes digging into the warm sand.

Sophia's laughter flits all around us, filling me with magic.

And then Elsie's eyes journey over to mine, and her smile...well, it's got a whole lot of magic in it too, and I'm not sure what to do with that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ELSIE

We spent the entire day yesterday on the beach, only coming up for air when our stomachs told us we had to eat. Sophia loves the water as much as I do. Building sandcastles and swimming in the calm, cool water is what heaven must be like, if it even exists.

Michael sits with her on the sand as she buries him in it, giggling while he shakes his head.

“Better not get any in my mouth, princess,” he chuckles.

“Well, I didn’t exactly mean to last time.” She props a hand on her hip, fixing her pink sunglasses before picking up her shovel and dropping more sand around his middle.

“You look good down there,” I tease, biting into my bottom lip, because this man does all kinds of things to me.

But when he’s being a father...God, I just want to throw myself at him and kiss him hard.

He flips his sunglasses off his eyes, thick brows popping. “Keep talking, baby, and I’ll bury you with me.”

Please do.

“Uh-huh. Good luck catching me.” I laugh, starting backward, waving goodbye with both hands.

“Don’t fly too far, little dove,” he warns as his eyes narrow.

“Don’t worry.” I wink, and his nostrils flare. “You’ll always manage to

find me.”

I turn around, glancing at him over my shoulder, his gaze haunting like matching flames, equal parts passion and fury. I like making him a little angry, knowing he’s probably itching to get his hands on me. And I like what he does to my body when I piss him off.

I head for the bar, needing something to cool me down, especially right about now.

Distance grows between us, and I wander toward the bar all the way at the end of the beach. I like walking. I never got to do that.

On the way, I pass by two guys, both around my age, sitting on some loungers with some beers. One starts to whistle real low.

“Damn,” he whispers when I’m right by them. “She’s fine as hell.”

“I think she’s with that guy,” another says, and I see him staring where I had come from.

“You married, sweetheart? ’Cause if not, I’ve got a private jet with your name on it.”

That’s when I pause mid-stride.

Did he say a private jet?

This is my chance to help Kayla. It has to be a sign. If I can somehow get myself on that jet and fly out of here, instead of pretending to be one happy family that we are not, then I can find my friend and the others. Or at least I can die trying.

“Uh, I’m not married,” I tell them, twirling my hair, the corner of my mouth twining up. “That’s my brother and my niece.” I giggle. “Where are you guys from?”

“Cali,” the one who whistled says. “What about you, pretty girl?”

“New York. You think you can fly me there?”

Hopefully, they don’t try to kill me.

“Hell yeah, I can.”

I quickly glance behind me, expecting to see Sophia and Michael where I left them. My pulse jumps.

Where are they? Crap. What if he saw me?

I face the two men again.

“Which room are you staying in?” the guy asks, his eyes wandering down my body, the red bikini not leaving much for the imagination.

I definitely can’t tell them that. “Uh, how ab—”

But suddenly, the color vanishes from the men’s faces. Their eyes

practically explode as they stare behind me.

“You’d better stop talking to my wife before I cut your tongue out.”

I gasp, goose bumps spreading up my arms. His voice slinks up my back like a ghostly touch, an apparition that has arrived as though from thin air.

“Whoa...” The guy raises up his palms in defeat. “The lady said you were her brother. No disrespect meant.”

“Did she now?”

His arm sweeps across my lower belly, pinning me to his front.

“Tsk, tsk, little dove,” he whispers, warmth spreading like a caressing, yet deadly touch across my neck. “And here I thought we were getting along so well.”

His thick fingers bite into my hip while my heartbeats gallop up my throat. He sucks my earlobe into his mouth right in front of them.

“The punishment you’re going to endure at my hand for this...” His inhale is as harsh as the words pounding into the pit of my stomach with fear, entwined with insane desire.

My breathing grows tumultuous, because I know he means what he says.

“Pack up your belongings and get out of my hotel.” His tone is low and menacing; I tremble where I stand.

“What?” The guy who hit on me starts to get up, a snarl on his face. “We didn’t know she was your damn wife. We’re just trying to enjoy ourselves.”

“Are you deaf or just stupid?”

Michael moves me to his side, grabbing my wrist to keep me close while he draws a threatening step forward.

“I said...” he grits. “Get off my property.”

“Let’s just go, man,” his friend says, grabbing their towels and beers.

“Whatever...” He starts to rise. “I don’t need your shitty hotel anyway. Enjoy the crappy Yelp review I’m about to post for your piss-poor customer service.”

“You can write whatever you want about me.” Michael chuckles, but it’s a scary kind of laugh, the type that would scare even the bravest men. “But mention my wife in it and I’ll hunt you down, and your tongue won’t be the only thing I cut out of you.”

The man’s eyes go round as his friend drags him by the arm and they’re walking away.

Watching them go, I try to get my heart to a normal pace, but it’s impossible with Michael standing this close to me, anger seeping out of every

pore. He holds me like I'm his possession. Like he can't wait to initiate his wrath. His chest heaves as he watches them go, his free hand curling into a white-knuckled fist.

"What are you gonna do to me?" I swallow, scared to look at him.

He turns slowly, and now all I can do is stare into the eyes of my husband, the ball of nerves climbing up my throat. I wish I could go back in time and tell myself how stupid this plan was.

But we can't go back. We can't undo what we've done.

He grinds his jaw and grasps my chin. He lowers his lips until they're a breath away from mine.

"Everything you deserve." His words hold promises of what's to come.

I grow shivery, yet hot, my skin tightening all over from his radiating gaze heating me from the inside out.

"You will pay for your actions."

He presses his thumb to my bottom lip. My chest lurches with my panting.

"It's the only way you're going to learn what it means to be my wife." He brushes the side of my face with his hardened knuckles. "No man will ever get to have you, not when you're a Marino. I will end them before they even try. Do you understand me?"

His voice is a cocktail of masculine prowess, sending me further into a state of confusion, one where I'm not sure if I fear him or want him.

I nod, but barely, lips parted, inhales sinking me faster into whatever is happening between us.

"Good. Now, let's go." He brings his hand to mine and tugs me behind him, while I try to match his step.

"Where?" My voice is small, the ache between my thighs growing.

Because whatever punishment he has waiting for me, I hope it's as good as when he held me down and made me come. I've been craving his touch since then, unable to forget it, consumed with the memories of his expert fingers turning on the switch inside me. One I didn't know I even had.

"Back to our hotel room. Mabel has been instructed to keep Sophia occupied for an hour."

"Just tell me what you'll do to me." I almost sound like I'm begging, following him off the beach.

He doesn't say a word as he leads me back inside the hotel and inserts a keycard into our suite. His hand is at the small of my back, and I feel the

heaviness of it. I'm struggling to breathe as he pushes me into the room so gently, like the sleeping beast before the attack comes.

My shoulders dart up and down as the door clicks to a close, the sound vibrating through the space. My hands go to my arms, and I run my palms over my sensitive skin.

With my back to him, I say, "All I wanted was to find my friend. That's all. I promise."

"And what were you going to allow them to do to you in exchange for that ride on his jet?" His tone is warm and gravelly against my ear, his lips dipping to my collarbone, teeth grazing my skin.

My heartbeats grow wild. Prickles line up my arms, my legs, everywhere.

"Were you going to let them touch what's mine, little dove?"

He circles his hand around to my hip, fingers skirting down, dipping to the juncture of my thighs. He traces me there as I fight to control my groans.

"Answer me." He cups my pussy like it's his. Like he's the only man who will ever touch it.

"I..."

I don't know what to say. I don't know what I'd be willing to do for a chance to save my friend.

"You're my wife," he grits. "And I'll treat you with the respect that comes with that title. But if you so much as let another man put a finger on you, I'll deliver his heart to you as a wedding present while it's still beating. Are we clear?"

I nod, my pulse thrashing, my throat going dry. I can barely move. Barely speak. Yet my core throbs, enjoying this side of him. Craving it, even.

"Let me hear you say it." He rounds his other hand and cups my jaw roughly, snapping my head back to meet his fiery gaze. "Who do you belong to?"

"I..."

I have lost all ability to speak from that hungered look in his eyes.

"I belong to you," I whisper, giving him the only answer there is to give.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Good girl."

He constricts his hand around my throat until breathing becomes almost impossible.

"I'm going to help you remember exactly who this pussy belongs to, little dove, so that you never forget." He kneads my core with the heel of his palm.

"How?" I gasp, my lungs heavy with lustful anticipation. "How will you

do that?”

“Do you recall what I told you the last time my palm met your ass?”

His tone oozes with command, and I ache everywhere. For this man. For my husband. Wanting whatever punishment he deems worthy.

His fingertips leave my core, stroking down my spine and into the crook of my ass. He lifts the red bikini bottom with one digit and runs it against my bare behind. My toes curl. I’m so turned on, I’d let him do whatever he wanted.

“You...uh...you said you’d spank my bare ass if—”

“If you opened that smart mouth of yours. That’s right.” A palm squeezes my ass cheek. “It seems your mouth is always getting you into trouble, wife.”

Then before I can even defend myself, he hooks his arm around my stomach, scooping me up in the air, seating himself on the sofa, and throwing me onto his lap as I yelp.

“What are you doing?!”

I try to wriggle out, but his forearm presses into my back while his other hand yanks down my bikini bottom, exposing me.

“I’m going to show you how much of a brother I’m not.”

His bulge presses into my stomach as I welcome the pulsing need in my core. Because even as I fight him, even as I try to fruitlessly break free, I want his fingers to touch me, to make me feel the wanton hunger that seeps through my veins when I’m with him.

My body begs for a man I shouldn’t want. Yet I do. I want this, no matter how deprived I feel for wanting it.

His hand caresses my ass cheek while I stifle my moans of pleasure, grinding over his knee with desperation.

Heat burns my cheeks, my breathing growing shallow, my nails clawing at his calf. I try not to make a sound, not to show him how much I’m enjoying this, but I slip as I groan.

He growls with satisfaction as his palm strikes hard against my behind. Skin meets skin, the sound echoing like thunder.

“Ahh!” A strangled cry twists out of me.

“How many times should I spank you for what you’ve done? Hmm?” He massages my flesh, like my body is his to manipulate as he wishes.

But I can’t answer. Words don’t come, only the sounds of my pleasure fire through me. My clit pulses with fervor the more he palms my ass, forcing me deeper into his rigid length. I know he’s doing this on purpose. Torturing

me. Showing me who's in control.

"Once," I whisper out the answer, lying to the both of us.

Because I hope he doesn't stop there. I want the pain and pleasure. I want it all.

My eyes capture a glimpse of him over my shoulder, finding the look of both man and beast, someone too far gone to stop. His cock is thick and hard, his eyes a fiery mess of emotions. It's like he wants to punish me with orgasms until I break. Until I cry actual tears.

Please. With you is the only way I seem to have them.

"Once?" He chuckles, spanking me even harder this time.

I cry out, gyrating my hips over him, pinching my knees shut. The ache... it's so strong. My stomach tenses with knots or loosens with swirling butterflies. I don't even know. I feel everything at once. All I want – no, all I need – is for him to make this throbbing pain go away.

"Please..." I beg.

The shame of that one word, to beg a man for this...it fills me with disgust, yet I crave it all at once. It feels too good to be at his mercy, to lose the control, but to have it at the same time. He won't hurt me. Not like they did.

"I think I'll add a one in front of that number," he labors with a breath, his palm striking me again.

I gasp, my skin on fire.

"Count," he demands as my body jolts around him. "Count!" His growl rumbles through his chest. "Count every time I mark this beautiful ass and remember this pain the next time you even think of letting another man near you."

He spans me again as I wince, my pussy rubbing up against his thigh, the friction causing me to grow slicker. I can feel my clit roaring with an orgasm I desperately fight for, the need spreading down my legs, up my spine.

"Three." I shudder.

"How does it feel to be punished by your husband? To be spread open and held down like a little slut?"

The sounds coming out of me no longer sound human. Those words – this feeling – it's too good.

Put your fingers inside me. Make me feel even better.

But I don't say any of that. Instead, I count as another slap comes over

my other cheek. Then another.

“Five.” I flinch while he continues to assault my skin, now raw and burning.

I count again and again until I can feel myself dripping out and onto him. The need to come becomes almost barbaric.

My cheeks heat, not with shame, but from the burst of pain and pleasure filling me.

“Ten.” A loud moan slips out, my hips grinding over him.

Faster and faster, the pulsing beat of my arousal washes over me in waves of warmth.

“Fuck,” he grunts under his breath, his fingers dipping down my ass cheek, pressing them into that spot where my core meets my thigh.

“Yes,” I gasp, wriggling, trying to get his fingers to slip inside me.

“Were you going to show them this ass?” his voice husks out seductively, and it forces another pant from me.

“Yes! I—I mean no.”

I don’t even know what I’m saying. I just want him to keep touching me.

“Yes?” His growl is damn near diabolical as a finger swipes in through my slit and my hands curl. “Were you going to show them this perfect pussy too?”

“Oh my God...” I groan. “No, Michael. No...”

I drive myself into his thigh, needing to be fucked.

Just when I think he’s finally going to touch me and let me come, a palm strikes me one last time.

“Eleven,” I gasp, my ass arching, my chest rising higher and higher, my heart thumping against my rib cage.

I try to get up, but he forces his forearm into my back, keeping me his willing hostage.

“Who said you were allowed to move?”

A whimper crawls out of me while I wait to see what else he’ll do. My entire body is alive with a current, like I’m electrified. Like one touch and I will burst. God, I need this so badly.

His large hand rolls down my ass again, a single finger inching closer to my pussy.

“Yes...”

I groan as he runs two fingers over my swollen lips, pressing them together, tighter, until my clit rubs against them.

“Please, Michael,” I huff, my body trembling.

“Shall I check how wet my wife is?”

Oh, God, the dirty talk is only making my clit thud, pleading for him inside me.

“No,” I cry, but really I mean yes.

But he knows what I like. What I need.

“That’s too bad.” He pinches my soaked lips, and the sensation to my clit sends a shudder down my spine. “This is my pussy. And I get to play with it.”

He forces my thighs open with a palm against the inside of them, but I fight the intrusion, my body jerking as I try to keep them closed. He’s stronger, though, his claim on me ruthless.

I bow my ass up, desperate, needy, and ready to shatter.

Then he’s there, a fingertip slipping into my intimate place, dipping inside, then flicking around my clit.

“Goddamn, you’re dripping. That’s how wet you are from my palm. For my cock.”

He dips a finger inside, letting go of my back. He uses that hand to grab a fistful of my hair, bending me to his eyes.

“You will *never* let another man touch you or look at you bare.”

While I’m married to him, right? That’s what he means?

He adds another finger, driving them inch by inch until he hits me deep.

“Michael, please...” My brows knit, a knot of desire almost bursting inside me.

“Say it,” he demands, his thrusts powerful enough to have me screaming his name. “You’re going to say it.” His voice thunders deep in his chest, his gaze cutting into mine.

I welcome the look of his dark, hooded eyes. Crave it like my soul’s on fire.

“I...”

He fucks me harder until I can barely hold on, until I almost fall. “Yes... oh, God!”

Almost there. Almost... But then he slows.

“No! No! Please don’t stop.” I snap a hand to his thigh. “I will never... Michael!”

I try to finish the sentence, but oh, God...he slams his fingers inside me again, giving me no mercy, ramming deeper, again and again.

“You keep saying my name like that, and I’m going to force you to your

knees and pry your mouth open until you swallow every inch of my cock.”

“Mm,” I whimper, rubbing myself on him as he fingers me rough.

“Finish that sentence,” he demands, moving easily through me. I don’t even need to touch myself to know how wet I am.

He pistons into me, hitting that spot that is ready to make me spill. “I will...never...allow another man to touch me or look at me because I—I’m yours.”

Then suddenly, he stops.

“Michael, please,” I beg with gasping breaths, my body pleading to be released of this brutal agony.

His hands are no longer on me.

“Get up and get dressed for dinner,” he says sternly.

My body feels like jelly. I can’t seem to move.

“Michael...” I whimper.

He can’t do this to me. I need this. But no other words come out.

Gently, he brings me to my feet, hands against my thighs as he lifts my bottoms up securely around me.

The back of his hand nudges my chin up to meet his eyes. The hunger... it’s still within them, calling for me.

He pulls to his height, towering over me, and he bends lower, until our lips trace over one another’s, breath to breath. He brings those fingers that were just inside me near both our mouths.

“Lick them clean,” he instructs, drawing back and pushing them into my willing mouth.

And as I lock his gaze to mine, I suck my arousal until there’s nothing. He pulls his fingers away, a small, satisfied smirk tilting up his mouth.

“You won’t touch yourself.” He cups my center, a dark glint within his eyes. “You’ll feel this pussy ache until I decide to grant you relief. Do you understand me?”

But he doesn’t have to tell me that, because I couldn’t even if I tried. He doesn’t realize that in all the years of torment, he’s been the first man to bring me pleasure. And without him, I won’t be able to get myself off. I haven’t touched myself since before I was taken.

“Yes,” I croak a barely there response.

“Good girl.” His chest expands with a weighty sigh. “Don’t make me do that again. It hurts both of us.”

His hand grips my jaw, his labored breaths, the lustful gaze setting me

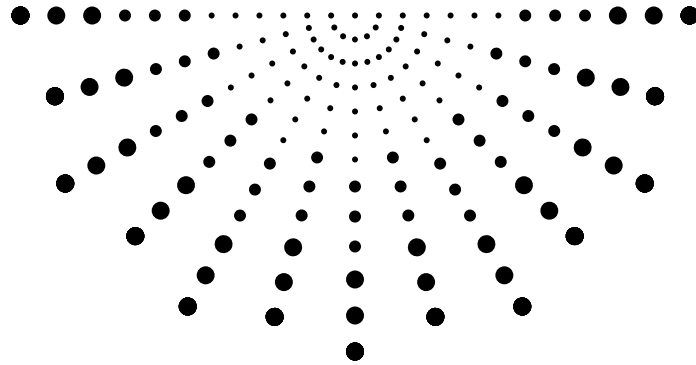
ablaze. His brows bend with emotions tugging at his features.

“But you needed to be taught that, real wife or not, you belong to *me*. Every inch of you is mine, little dove. And don’t you forget it.”

Then he gives me his back, strutting out the door and leaving me frustrated and alone.

But I should be used to feeling that way by now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



MICHAEL

We're at one of the restaurants overlooking the beach, but the only view I want to look at is the one sitting across from me.

While she stares out into the ocean to her left, I'm staring at her, unable to peel my eyes from how beautiful she looks in that strappy bright green dress.

We haven't talked about what happened earlier, her over my knee, bare and wet. But it's all I've been able to think about.

When I first saw her talking to them, all I saw was red. It was easy to get out of the sand. Nothing could've stopped me. Not even a goddamn brick wall. I followed her where she couldn't see me, away from the water, up where the restaurants are.

She thought she could get away from me before I was ready to give her freedom? She doesn't know who I am just yet, does she? I have people watching the property at all times, some pretending to be guests, and every tree on the beach is strapped with a bug. One can never be too careful.

After I left her in the hotel room alone, I went to listen to the entire conversation she had with those men. I knew she wasn't flirting with them. But I didn't know exactly what reason she had for telling them I was her brother. Not until I heard the recording.

She can try to run, but she can never hide. I will always find her, and I'll bring her right back until her debt to me is paid.

But I'm fooling myself if I think that's all this is, that all I want is for her

to right the wrong she committed.

She peeks uncomfortably at her plate of salmon, picking at the food with a fork, barely eating a bite. Her cheeks flush as she coyly catches my eye, reminding me of how pink they can really get when she's begging me to come.

I try to fight the smirk making itself at home on my face, try to tuck away all thoughts of her bent over my knee. Not the right time to get hard for my wife. Not when I can't do shit about it.

"Can we go back to the beach after?" Sophia breaks through the tension.

I know even Mabel can sense it, her hazel eyes jumping to me questioningly. She knows me well enough to sense something's amiss. She's been with me since I brought Sophia home at only a month old. I knew nothing about babies, and she was there to show me all the things I couldn't figure out myself.

The only reason I even knew Sophia was a month old was because someone we know in the government was able to track down her birth certificate. I decided not to change the name she was born with. She was Sophia – my little fighter, screaming her lungs out while the flames roared around her, untouched, as though they were afraid of her. They should be.

I never thought I'd be a single father, but I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. Being Sophia's dad has given me purpose, shown me that I'm not just an enforcer in the Messina family, but a man who has something to live for.

"So, Elsie..." Mabel picks up a glass of water, eyeing Elsie while taking a slow sip. "Will your family be attending the wedding?"

Elsie's brows flinch as her gaze darts to me. She forces a smile, gazing at Mabel.

"They don't live close. It'd be difficult for them to come. But they would love to see their only daughter get married." At those final words, she fits me with a glare, picking up a piece of asparagus and sticking it into her mouth.

"That's a shame," Mabel says. "I'm sure they're sad about it."

"Yes." She nods, clearing her throat. "It's been a while since I've seen them. Time...it just gets away from you, you know?"

"Oh, yes, tell that to the old lady at the table," Mabel laughs.

"You're not *that* old." Sophia giggles. "Okay, maybe like a little teeny amount old. But not as old as Doctor Singer. He has gray hair all over his head. You only have some."

“Well, then...” Mabel straightens her spine and lifts up her chin. “I’ll take it.”

Elsie lets out a laugh, the weight lifting off her shoulders like someone has removed the bricks she’s been wearing. They return, though, as soon as she looks at me. When she remembers where she is and why. Because she’s with me and she’d rather not be.

Eventually you’ll be free. And I won’t stop you.

“You’re so pretty, Elsie.” Sophia’s eyes shimmer as she stares over at her.

Elsie’s eyes glisten with affection. And my heart, if you can call it that... it beats faster. It always does when I see them together.

“Not as pretty as you.” Elsie places her hand over my daughter’s, who looks at her as though this woman is her best friend.

“Daddy.” Sophia turns to me. “Could you braid my hair like Elsie’s?”

My stomach tightens. That’s one thing I’m still learning how to do. Hair. I can only do the basics. How the hell do women do this? I try, but I fail her every time. It’s never perfect, not like Elsie does it.

If I didn’t have my mother and Mabel, I’d have to hire someone just for that. But I want to learn. I want to be enough for my girl. To be the one to give her anything she needs.

My chest swells on an inhale as I drink the rest of my whiskey before moving my chair back. “I can try.”

“Aww,” Mabel gushes. “You’re such a good dad.”

Elsie, though? Her smile is gone, her brows furrowed as she watches Sophia hop off her chair and into my lap.

I remove the bow on the top of her head and start on parting her hair into three sections, looking at Elsie’s side braid, hoping to replicate it. It’s too damn complicated, but I can’t fail my daughter. She’s counting on me to do this right. But as I start, I realize there’s no way it will ever look like my wife’s. Hopefully, Sophia doesn’t realize that.

My jaw clenches when I find myself messing up, trying to steady my breathing as I undo what I did and try again.

Elsie shifts her chair back and rises slowly. “Would you like me to show you how? My mother taught me a long time ago.”

Her mother. Of course she did. Another reminder of what I’m keeping her from. What I’m keeping my daughter from having.

With my gaze unwavering, I nod, and Elsie pulls an empty chair beside me. And fuck, my heart does that thing every time the three of us are

together. I crave it, yet I hate it. A constant reminder of a family I won't have.

And as she teaches me, her eyes twinkling, all I manage to think about is how good it'd be if she'd stay with us a little longer and teach me all the other things I may never get to learn without her.

"Time for bed, princess."

We stroll out of the restaurant, Sophia holding both of our hands.

"But, Daddy..." She pouts. "I'm not that tired."

But her huge yawn betrays her.

"Sure, you're not." I lift her up in the air and over my shoulder as she giggles.

"Good night, Sophia." Elsie grabs her head and kisses the top of it. "I'll be at the beach," she quietly tells me.

"Why can't I come?" Sophia grumbles.

"Because you're six and you need rest." I tickle her belly, eliciting another laugh. "I'll meet you there as soon as I'm done," I say to Elsie, a hand on her hip, tugging her close to me to whisper into her ear. "And this time, try not to run away from me."

"I promise to be good this time," she breathes into my neck. "Wouldn't want that form of punishment again."

"Are you still throbbing, baby?" I groan under my breath at the thought of finishing what I started.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" She moves back a step, and I set her free. "I'll see you later."

Her mouth flirts with a smile as she struts away, shaking her hips in a way that already has me internally cursing my dick for getting hard. I watch her disappear out of sight.

"Why don't you go join her?" Mabel says. "I can put little miss to bed. Isn't that right, Sophia?"

"Yeah." She yawns again as I place her back on her feet. "I know you want to kiss her, Daddy." She flings her shoulders up, her head slanting to the side, those long lashes batting.

I want to kiss her. Goddamn, I want to kiss her. But I can't. I swore I

never would, not unless...

Kneeling down to my daughter's height, I slant my palms against her face. "I love you, princess. Sleep well. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

She flings her arms around my neck and holds on. "I really love her, Daddy. I'm so happy she's going to be my mommy."

Those words are a punch to my gut. She's going to be wrecked when Elsie leaves.

Fuck!

"I'm glad you do, princess. She adores you too."

It's not a lie. I can see it. Everyone can.

Rising to my feet, I kiss her cheek before they head for the elevators. Once they go up, I march down the same way Elsie went.

Darkness flitters across the sky, but the beach has light poles illuminating the way down. I stride across the sand, immediately seeing her close to the water and approaching her from behind. She splashes her feet in the ocean, looking so at peace.

"You're beautiful." My voice falters.

I almost didn't realize I had said that out loud. It was as though my heart was talking instead.

She turns sharply. "Oh my God. I didn't hear you."

"I'm sorry if I scared you." I take a step to her.

"You don't scare me, Michael."

My mouth slightly tips up. "But you scare me."

She scoffs. Like it's the silliest thing in the world. But she has no idea...

Her gaze holds mine and we stay silently that way, too much distance between us. My heart beats loud enough for the world to hear its echo. She does that to me. This woman. But all I've done is ruin her life.

"I'll leave you alone," I tell her, starting to turn away when all I want is to hold her.

"Stay," she whispers.

And my breath's caught in my lungs, heaviness slamming to my chest.

Does she really want me here? With her?

"I was just enjoying the water." She takes a step closer. "It's been so long. I've missed it. All I want is to be near it."

I take a step closer too. "What else do you miss?"

Because I want to give her everything.

Her face alights with a smile. "I've missed music. I used to sing all the

time.”

I’d give anything to hear her sing for me. With me. It’s been so long since I’ve picked up my guitar and sung. But that stopped when my world was ripped from under my feet. When everything I thought I knew vanished.

Her gaze doesn’t waver from mine, and before I know it, we’re both in front of one another, and all I want is my hands on her.

“I miss books too.” She smiles real big.

I let my knuckles draw down her cheek, and she leans into my touch instead of away from it, sucking in a long, content breath.

Fuck.

“I was a huge nerd back then,” she continues. “Reading on weekends when others would much rather go to a party at some rich kid’s house.” She grins as though lost in her memories.

I want her to keep talking. Her voice is my own music.

Her fingertips go to mine, and she softly brushes against them as she looks at me. And I feel it, really feel her touch as though it’s everywhere.

“I miss the holidays.”

My other hand leaves her cheek and stretches around the small of her back, needing her near, wanting to kiss her, to forget the damn rule I have of never kissing a woman. Because that means more to me than sex, and I wish I could give her that.

Her chest climbs higher with her heaving breaths, her gaze as warm as her exhales fall across my lips.

“I miss my family, laughter, and genuine happiness,” she tells me, emotions imprinted on every word.

And the way she stares at me, it’s as though she’s reaching into my very heart and finding the soul that makes it beat.

“I miss feeling alive, like the way…” Her mouth trembles, as though she can’t seem to finish that sentence.

“The way what?” The pads of my fingers bite into her hip.

“The way I feel when I’m with you,” she breathes.

I inhale a shaky breath, dropping my hands away. “Don’t say things like that to me.”

“Why not?” She cups my cheek, and my eyes shutter to a close.

“Because it makes me want things I shouldn’t.”

“Like what?” she murmurs.

My gaze slams to hers.

“Like a woman like you in my life. In Sophia’s life.”

Her eyes widen.

There’s something raw and vulnerable in my voice, and I don’t try to hide from it because with her, it feels right to be this way.

“Everyone deserves to be loved, Michael.” She says it so frankly, as though it’s the truth.

“Not me, Elsie. Not with everything I’ve done. I don’t deserve it.”

“You do. There’s goodness in you too. I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it.” Her thumb strokes my lips. “I feel it right now.”

“What else do you feel?” My eyes grow heavy.

That question is dangerous. It holds the power to undo me.

“I feel your hands on me.” Her fingers skate up to the back of my head. “And I want…” Her lips shudder, her gaze unwavering.

“What do you want, little dove?” Willing to give her the moon shining brightly above.

“I want you to kiss me.”

Fuck.

How do I tell her that I can’t? That it means too much to give her something I haven’t given any woman in sixteen years, even while she’s the only one I want to give it to? But I can’t kiss her only to watch her walk away.

“I don’t deserve that, either. When you’re free of me, you’ll meet someone who can love you the way you should be loved.”

She peers down, her features sullen.

I grip her chin, tipping it up with my fingers. “If he doesn’t, I’ll give you my gun and you can shoot him. Or better yet, I will. I’ll kill anyone who hurts you.”

Her brows bend. “Is that your answer to everything? Violence?”

“It’s the way it’s always been.”

“What if it can be different? Would you want it?”

I’ve thought of it. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t. It can give Sophia safety. A real life. But it’s never been in the cards for a man like me. This is my life, and I have to accept it. I’m technically the new king on the throne, but no one will know until the wedding.

“I can’t waste time thinking about things that will never happen. This is who I am. And there’s no changing that.”

She sighs, her gaze lowering to her feet. “Would it be okay if I still called

Sophia when I'm no longer your wife?"

I drag in a long, tattered breath, looking up at the stars.

This woman. Who is she, and why the hell is she trying to take my heart with her?

"I-it's fine if..." she stammers.

My gaze snaps to hers, and her mouth stays frozen on a part.

"Of course it's okay." I clutch her nape, slanting my forehead to hers. "It's more than okay."

"Good." I can hear the smile in her voice. "She's kinda growing on me."

You're kinda growing on me too.

ELSIE

Somehow, we've ended up on the large beach towel we left behind earlier today. His body's curled around the back of mine, the wind softly billowing over our skin.

He holds me with a palm against my stomach, tucked into him as I stare out at the flickering stars above.

"How did you end up as Sophia's dad?" I ask him, pivoting myself so I can face him.

It broke me to hear him say he doesn't deserve to feel the love of a woman, because he does. He may have his faults, but he isn't like the Bianchis. Like those men who hurt me.

His fingers stroke my face, tucking a piece of my loose hair behind my ears, his gaze making my stomach tighten.

In the days we've spent together, I've found myself softening for him, even when everything within me wants to run.

But not from him. Not really, not anymore. To help Kayla. That will always be my priority. Just like protecting his daughter is to him. I don't fault him for that. She should be his priority.

"We were in the process of buying an abandoned building," he explains, his fingertips still brushing over my face, causing my arms to prickle. "When I went to check it out, a fire broke out on the second floor. My father called

911, and we were waiting for them to show when I heard what sounded like a baby's cry."

His eyes drift shut, and he inhales long and deep.

"We heard that squatters sometimes stayed there, so I had to go in," he tells me once that dark, hypnotizing gaze is on me once more. "I couldn't risk a baby dying while I just stood there. So I rushed in, even as my father yelled at me to stay. I took off my jacket and covered my mouth with it. She cried louder, and I followed the sound up the stairs, barely finding them at first because the smoke was everywhere at that point. And when I reached the second floor, she had stopped crying, and my heart...fuck...I thought she was dead."

His eyes grow foggy, emotions flashing within them, as though he's there, in that exact moment.

"But I kept going even as the smoke burned my lungs. I needed to make sure she was still alive. And that's when she started crying again." He sighs. "My feet started moving even faster, following the noise. I was surviving on just the adrenaline alone. But I found her, next to who I later found out were her dead parents."

"Oh my God." My hand clasps my mouth. "Did the fire kill them?"

"No," he shakes his head. "The needles in their arms did."

"So sad." I bite into my bottom lip.

"Yeah, she deserved better. By some fucking miracle, she wasn't harmed. Not even the smoke could hurt that girl. She's the fire that'll burn the world to the ground." He laughs fondly. "She may not share my blood, but she is every bit my baby girl."

Tears swim in my eyes. "She's lucky you found her."

His thumb swipes under my lower lashes, taking my tears with it. "No, she's the one who found me."

And the way his gaze penetrates mine, I'm not sure if he's talking about Sophia anymore. I swallow through the butterflies skittering up my throat, because whatever I'm feeling, I shouldn't be.

But all I'm doing is denying what I already know: I'm starting to feel something for my husband.

My fingers trace the scar on his face as his gaze grows heavy-lidded. "How did you get this?"

"As I was coming down with her, that little girl tucked inside my jacket, something fell from the ceiling. I saw it, just as it was about to hit us, so I

sidestepped and tripped, landing on something else that burned me.”

Wow. He really is a hero.

“I’m sorry.”

“You find it repulsive?” His voice drops and its utterly devastating, like he really thinks it is.

“No,” I say, looking right at him. My lips slant to his cheek, and I kiss him there. Once. Twice. “I find it beautiful.”

“Elsie...” he groans on a whisper, his palm rolling up my back, fingers buried in my hair, tugging it. “How do you do that?” His tone drops.

“Do what?” I whisper, my body alive again, my heart following in its wake.

This man...he burns my world to ash and builds it up again into something I never thought could be mine.

“Make me want something I’ve denied myself for so long.”

His lips cut through our distance, so close I taste the lingering trace of whiskey on his breath, feel the trace of his mouth brushing up against mine. But with a harsh swell of his lungs, he drops his forehead against my temple and sighs, like kissing me is the only thing and the last thing he ever wants. Like he’s fighting a war just to stop it from happening.

“After our deal is done, I’ll fly you to your parents, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

My heart lurches at the thought of never feeling what I do right now, and sadness grows within my chest. Is that what missing someone who’s right in front of you feels like? This emptiness?

What happens when I leave them? Will I really be able to stay in touch with Sophia? Will that be enough? I’ll be with my parents, miles away. I’ll never see her. See him. And it already hurts.

“Okay,” is all I can manage.

Because he can’t be the one for me, not in this life. No matter if my heart is telling me to try. To get to know him more.

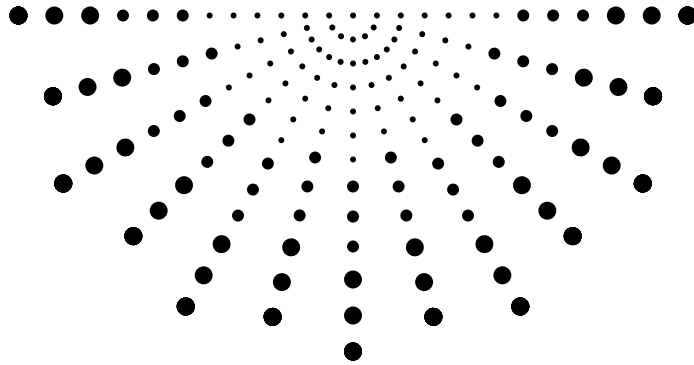
It’s as though I’m split in half. One part wants to stay, while the other... she wants to be free, to find her family, her friends. To be with them again. To escape the danger that comes with a man like Michael.

He can’t be my safety. No matter how good it feels to be with him. Staying with a man who belongs to the type of family he does is like being part of everything I hate. He may not have done what the Bianchis have, but his family is connected to that life, and I should want nothing to do with any

of it.

But as I close my eyes and see myself with those I love, it's as though a piece of my heart is back with him – and with Sophia, that little girl who's more than grown on me. I care deeply for her, and I'm afraid I'm starting to care deeply for her father too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



MICHAEL

“Remember when Uncle Gio threw Uncle Raph in this pool?” Sophia giggles as she splashes my face.

My eyes stay glued on the woman lying on the lounge, listening to us with a glint in her smile. That white bikini she’s wearing has been driving me insane for a good hour, and all I can think about is ripping it off her tanned body. I’m not even ashamed that I’m only half-listening to my daughter. Blood rushes to my cock as my wife stands, holding on to the rail while descending into the pool to join us.

“And then Uncle Raph dunked him really hard,” Sophia continues.

“Yeah, I remember, princess,” I mutter, a lazy smirk crawling up my mouth as Elsie approaches, kissing Sophia on the top of her head while her eyes connect to mine.

Sophia’s arms lock around Elsie and squeeze tight. “Is Uncle Raph ever coming back, Daddy? I really miss him.” She peeks up at me, her expression crestfallen. “When is his work trip going to be over?”

“I don’t know. Soon, I hope. But he misses you a lot.”

“Are you sure? He never calls me.” She frowns.

“Of course. You are still his favorite girl. He has no phone where he is, baby, or he would’ve.”

Her little sad face wrecks me, and Elsie rubs her arm, gently consoling her.

“Sophia!” Mabel calls from the other lounge, placing the book she is reading down on her lap as she sits up. “Come, you need more sunscreen.”

“Coming.” She begrudgingly separates from Elsie and climbs out.

“Is Raph the brother you won’t talk about?” Elsie asks, flowing toward me.

“He’s the oldest one.” I nod.

“I’m glad he’s alive.” She threads our fingers, and I can see it through the water, loving the simple feel of just holding her hand. “I actually thought he was dead, but was nervous to ask.”

“No, but he might as well be.” I pull her body flush to mine, a hand planted on her ass.

Her lips part in that way they do when I touch her, and I gaze down into her eyes and wonder what kissing her would feel like.

Why do I want to find out so badly when it’s never mattered before?

“What happened?” she whispers.

From the corner of my eye, I find Mabel and Sophia by the swing set.

“About a year ago, his wife was murdered. He went after the Irish as payback, and now they want him dead.”

She gasps, her eyes growing round. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. But I will get him out of this.”

“Daddy!” Sophia yells over from the edge of the pool. “Come swing me! Mabel doesn’t do it as high as you.”

“Oh, you...” Mabel shakes her head as we both look over at them.

“Come on, Daddy.” Elsie pulls my hand with a bubble of laughter. “Duty calls.”

How the hell is she this perfect?

The following evening, the sun long gone, we sit on a blanket lying across the cool sand, Sophia in my lap, Elsie right beside me, while Mabel rocks in the hammock.

It’s been a while since I’ve been back to this hotel. Not since Bianca died. The last time we were here was exactly the day Sophia remembered.

I came with my brothers, when things were still good. It was only a week

before Bianca was killed. Who could've predicted that it'd be the last time we were all happy?

Torches flicker around us while one of the staff members plays his guitar. Whenever we'd come here as a family, I'd play the guitar for everyone. Fuck, I don't even know when the last time I picked it up was. If it wasn't for Mabel constantly taking it out of the closet and wiping the dust off of it, I'd never have looked at it again.

A few of the hotel guests gather on the beach, swaying to Johnny playing a melody I have never heard him play before. Sophia bobs her head, and when I dart a gaze to Elsie, I find her lips moving in silence with the words she clearly knows.

The more I stare at this woman – brave, beautiful – the more I want to ask if a man like me could ever get a chance with a woman like her.

Because I can take, and I can claim, but a woman can be the one to give, and I want that. I want her acceptance. I want a chance. Everything I fear be damned, because this moment with my girls...it's everything I could want.

Before I can change my mind, I kiss my daughter on the cheek and whisper to her before she giggles. Taking my spot, she huddles close to Elsie, who gapes at me as I make my way to Johnny, asking him for the guitar.

"Of course, boss," he says, clapping me on the shoulder. "It would be an honor. We've missed you here."

He stands off to the side as I settle down with the guitar in hand. I stare down at it, my fingers stroking the strings as though memorizing them, asking for their permission.

And with a song in mind, the one I hear in my thoughts every time I gaze at her, my fingers start to play.

Eyes closed, the melody rushes into my veins, the words tortured and haunting, about finding and losing love, about the wicked games of falling for someone when you never expected it. Never wanted it. Yet all you can do is dream of her, fall even harder as the world burns at your feet.

When I let my eyes wander to hers, I find the awestruck look within them. I sing my damn heart out, capturing her gaze and refusing to let it go. Because this song, it's everything I feel.

Her lips begin to move silently, as though she's afraid to sing out loud. But all I want is to hear her.

I stop playing, hushed whispers erupting when I jut a hand out for hers. "Sing with me, little dove."

Everyone stares. At her. But she's only got eyes for me.

I can tell she's nervous as hell. But gradually she starts to rise, the hem of her long yellow strapless dress dancing around her ankles.

Once she comes toward me, I play again. But this time, I don't sing a word, because she does. And when I hear the power of her voice...goddamn. She sounds like an angel.

The crowd gazes at her as she comes to sit next to me, her body swaying side to side. And I swear, I've never heard anything this beautiful.

ELSIE

I can't believe I managed to sing again.

And it was beautiful. He was beautiful. The way he looked at me the entire time he sang, as though the words were meant for me, as though his heart was opening to let me in the way mine is beginning to.

He gets ready for bed, both of us showered and changed. His black sweats hang low on his hips, exposing that deep V, his well-defined abs flexing when he finds my eyes on him.

"Like what you see, do you?" He bows a single brow, his smirk cocky.

Yes. Yes, I very much do, especially when I recall how you had me pinned over your lap while you spanked the holy hell out of me yesterday...and didn't let me come, you bastard.

It's all new to me, these feelings. This attraction to a man. But I'm not ashamed to admit that he can set me off no matter what he wears – one of his suits or barely dressed, I find myself scorching up like a wildfire.

"Not at all." I glance away, fighting a smile. "I was just examining you for, uh...possible mosquito bites. They can sometimes get infected, I'll have you know."

"You're a very thoughtful wife." His voice oozes with masculine rasp as he saunters toward me. He circles an arm around my lower back, wrapping me into his body, his nose in my hair, inhaling deep. "You smell damn good, like dinner and dessert."

"Michael..." I groan, that familiar ache building.

“Yes, baby?” His lips fall to my neck, soft lips caressing across the erratic thunder of my pulse.

My head falls back as he continues to assault me with his mouth, teeth raking up to my throat, sucking on my lobe as he groans. A hand skirts up my inner thigh, fingering the hem of my shirt – his shirt, the one he insisted I wear. He didn’t get any arguments from me. I like wearing his clothes, and he likes seeing me in them.

He fits a hand under the shirt, tracing the waistband of my panties, playing me as well as he played the guitar. The sounds coming out of me create their own melody, but I seem to have lost the courage of the woman who had asked him to hold her down and make her come. I can’t seem to ask him for anything now.

Desire pummels inside me while his lips suck and kiss down my neck, nipping at my shoulder.

When he drags up my shirt, brushing his fingers over my panties, my toes curl and his name slips from my lips on a moan. My palms land on his bulging biceps, liking how powerful they are.

“You have an incredible voice,” his deep-chested tone rasps. “Everyone should get to hear it.”

“You gave me the courage,” I groan when he grabs the back of my neck, snaking his fingers through my hair, tugging my head back.

He kisses me hard on the jaw, rubbing my pussy through my panties, and my clit throbs, my body sparking with desire.

“Michael....”

“Ask me,” he demands. “Tell me what you want.”

“Uh...I...I’m tired.” I swallow the nerves.

What the hell are you doing?

But it’s too late. The damage is done; the words are out there.

He kisses me once against my shoulder, broad hands rubbing up and down my hips. “Then let’s go to bed. We fly back tomorrow evening.”

I turn to him. “Already?”

“We can come back whenever you want,” he says, the back of his hand brushing down the side of my face.

“I shouldn’t be here. I should be fighting to get my friend back.”

The guilt, it eats at me whenever I think about Kayla, and what I should be doing for her.

“Baby...” I feel his heated gaze soaking up my skin.

And God, whenever he calls me that, my entire body shivers. I want to hear it again and again on a loop.

“I’m trying like hell to find her. I swear. All I’m asking for is time.”

My brows knit and an ache settles behind my eyes. “She may not have that.”

I settle my cheek on his chest, and his arms come around me, molding me to his body. It’s kinda sad how beautifully we fit together – two people who couldn’t be more wrong for one another.

“My mother texted earlier,” he cuts in. “The wedding date is in a week from today.”

“I can’t believe she can plan a wedding this fast.”

“Easy when you know the right people.”

I gaze up at him. “So once the wedding takes place, you’ll take over for your father?”

“Yes. The marriage license was to protect you from the Bianchis. They’re not supposed to come after you once you’re my wife.”

“But they still can...” Fear stamps my gut.

“They can try.” He cups my cheek as he stares into my eyes with conviction. “But anyone they send will only end up dead, little dove. I’d kill every single one of them. For you. This city will rain with their blood before they ever get a drop of yours.”

My heart trips in my chest at the sincerity in his tone, those eyes overshadowed with darkness, and there’s no fear within me. There’s awe and relief there instead. The man who had wanted to kill me will now kill *for* me. It’s the safest I’ve felt in forever.

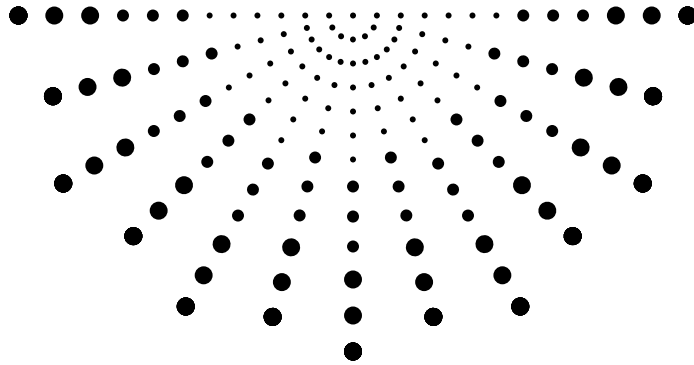
“Come...”

His large hand swallows mine as he leads me to the bed, flinging the comforter over, allowing me to climb in, with him close behind. He leans over me, his gaze roaming my face before he lowers and kisses the corner of my mouth.

I drag in an unsteady breath, and with a sigh, he settles on his side of the bed and turns off the lamp.

“Good night, little dove.” The deep timbre of his voice slithers up my thighs as though memorizing the path his hands just took.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ELSIE

I toss and turn, unable to fall asleep with him beside me. The need in my apex grows more ravenous as the seconds fall into the distance.

I fight the ache, turning to the side as gently as I can, hoping he doesn't notice my restlessness. I will my eyes to close, trying to forget about the gorgeous man sharing my bed, night after night.

Slowly, I gather a look at him from behind my shoulder, finding him with his back to me. My hand slips under my shirt, fingers tentatively sweeping over the softness of my panties. My heartbeats pick up speed as I reach inside them, fingertips sliding down my damp slit. A loud breath escapes past my lungs and my eyes enlarge, hoping he didn't hear that.

When I don't hear him rustling, I continue to explore myself, slipping a finger deeper, rolling it over my throbbing clit. That feeling inside my gut begins to sprout as I leisurely swipe, slowly dipping a finger inside me. I can't stop staring at him, this beautifully powerful man, those muscles beneath his skin rippling with his soundless breaths.

A tiny moan slips past my lips and, wide-eyed, I quickly turn away completely, holding down a breath while it burns within my lungs.

He's going to catch me. I can't do this in front of him. I can barely do this at all. Seconds drift by, and he still hasn't made a sound.

Thank goodness.

I try again, pushing myself beyond my comfort zone.

I have to do this. I have to own my body again. They don't get to have me. But then my head starts to fight it, the arousal clouded by the memories of those men, their filthy hands invading all the spaces I once considered sacred.

They took me over and over, until I hated my own skin. Until I begged to die. And even with miles between us, they're still here taking everything. Embedded in my flesh like they've never left at all.

My breathing grows heavy, and even as my body begs for release, I can't seem to do it. My fingers freeze against my core, and my inhaled breath turns jumpy as I fight the onslaught of emotions crawling up the back of my throat.

Why did I think I could do this?

"Don't stop." His voice sounds off behind me.

I gasp, clamping my mouth shut, holding my breath, hoping I imagined it.

Fingertips skate down my arm. "I know you were touching yourself, little dove, and I want to hear you finish. I want to hear you make yourself come."

I pant. "I...I can't."

"Why not?"

His hand falls over mine, finding it in the darkness. He holds it in his as he forces my panties to the side with his thumb. And when he pushes my own fingers into my clit, I groan.

"I haven't...done that...not since..."

His lips drift to my neck, brushing slowly up to my ear, and he whispers, "Then let me help you, baby. Let's do it together."

He forces my fingers to move, making me stroke my clit. My heart hammers. My pulse races. The desperation of my orgasm clings to me.

"Just like that," he groans. "It's just us. No one can hurt you when I'm here. I'll always keep you safe."

He grinds his thick and heavy cock behind me.

This feels too good. The way he makes me touch myself. Feel myself the way I should be free to.

"Spread wider for me, baby," he demands.

When I don't make any attempt, he grabs on to my leg and drapes my calf over his thigh, hooking his foot over my ankle to stop me from closing my legs.

"Michael," I say on a moan, feeling owned. Like I'm his.

I continue to rub myself with him and it's the most erotic thing I've ever felt.

“Let’s put those fingers inside you.” He nips my earlobe as I moan in succession. He takes my finger and guides it inside me, dipping it in and out slowly. “That’s it, just like that. What a good girl.”

My nipples harden at the praise, needing more of it. I rock into my palm as he gently drives my finger further, pushing it deeper every time.

My breathing takes on a life of its own, my tiny moans setting him off with a growl.

“I think you can take one more.” The throaty rasp of his voice oozes with approval, having me ready to come undone.

His lips spread kisses down my neck, teeth raking my shoulder blade. Then he forces another one of my fingers into my soaked pussy.

“Look how well it fits.” He clutches my fingers, fucking me with them, ramming them deeper. Harder.

“Yes...” I cry. “More...please...”

“You’re so perfect. Such an obedient little wife, doing what I asked.”

His dirty talk is making the sounds coming out of me sound inhuman, my body swimming with an exhilarating sensation. He forces my fingers faster, slipping them out, rolling my wetness around my clit, over and over until my legs tremble.

“You’re so beautiful. Too beautiful for me. But here I am, taking what isn’t mine to take.”

“It’s yours.” I heave out a gasping breath.

He doesn’t realize I’d give him all of it. Every broken and bruised fragment of my heart. Because he’s managed to make me feel something I’ve yet to feel at the hands of a man. He’s managed to make me feel cherished. And even if our marriage is fake, even if it’s not forever, I’ll take it anyway. It feels too good not to.

He buries my fingers back inside me.

“Oh, God, Michael. I’m close.” I attempt to catch my breath as he drives me closer to the edge.

He fully takes over, thrusting my fingers with a hurried tempo, and when his thumb skirts up to my clit, fingering it, I scream. I fall. I let him take me somewhere I never thought I’d go. This feeling...it’s foreign, it’s freeing.

It’s mine.

“That’s it, little dove. Let go and come for me.”

“Yes, yes, yes! Oh fu—” The words are trapped in my throat, because as soon as my body climbs down, it’s three of his fingers inside me.

And he doesn't stop. He fucks me with a vengeance, slamming hard, his palm fisting my hair as he takes me while his lips kiss and bite my neck. The orgasm is euphoric and never-ending; the way he stretches me has my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

"You're gonna come again." The commanding timbre of those words enflames my senses. "You're going to take it all. You're gonna squirt for me like my good girl until it's enough for me to lick off your thighs."

"I...can't..." I stammer, my body shuddering, my ass pressing up against the length of his hard and heavy cock.

"You can." His gruff voice fills my ears, his hand tightening around my strands. "You'll see what you're capable of."

"I...oh, God!" I scream as the surge of another orgasm builds and my body flares to life once again.

"Fuck my fingers," he growls. "Take what you need. It's yours, baby."

His mouth swallows my earlobe as his hot breath hisses across my neck. I know I'm close. I can feel the warmth and the tingles rushing into my toes.

"You're about to spill, baby," he rasps. "And my only regret is that it's not around my mouth. But I'll have that again."

He thrusts his hips into my ass.

"I'll have all of you, my little dove, because you were made for me."

I quiver from the feel of him, from his deep voice as he works me faster. The relentless power of his command of my body is earth shattering, until I shatter too.

"Michael!" His name drops from my lips like a pledge of devotion while my body convulses in complete euphoria.

"Right here, baby. Shit, look at you."

I didn't even notice that he was on his knees, staring at my pussy while he plunged his fingers in and out of me. I don't even care because I can't stop coming. I've never been this turned on in my life.

"Look at you squirting, and it's all for me."

His thumb gently rolls around my clit, and I jolt, finding his hungry eyes on mine, the head of his cock poking out from his sweats.

He slows his fingers until they slide out, and instead of wiping me off of him, he runs them across his lips before he sucks them.

I watch him taste me, unable to keep my eyes off of him, my heart beating out of my rib cage. When my gaze jumps back down to the big bulge between his thick thighs, all I want to do is taste him too.

Without thinking twice, I prop myself up on my elbows and reach for it, my hand squeezing the crown.

“Fuuuck...” His hand snaps to my wrist. “What are you doing?”

I stretch an arm toward the lamp and turn it on, gazing up at his heavy-lidded eyes. “I want to give you what you gave me. I want to try it with you.”

It’s always been forced on me, but this time I’m giving it freely. It’s my choice.

“I don’t have much strength to be the bigger person right now, Elsie,” he grits, pinning his gaze to mine, his voice snapping.

And it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard. To see him this way and to know I did that...I want to see what else I can do.

“Please, baby, if you don’t want my cock down your pretty throat, you’d better tell me right now.”

His eyes narrow, hungered and brutal lust seeping within them, a promise of the rough man I want.

I nod.

“Say it. I want to hear you tell me how bad you want to suck my cock.”

My top teeth scrape along my lower lip, the ache between my legs now back.

“I want you to fill my mouth with your cock,” I whisper. “I want to watch you come.”

My pulse thuds at what I’ve just said, unable to imagine saying it to a man.

But I did. I said that. And it’s true. Every word of it.

He hisses a breath, his gaze jumping to the ceiling for only a second before those eyes snap to mine. And the man staring at me is the same man I met the first time: a hunter. A savage.

“Take it out. Show me how a good girl sucks dick.” A finger tilts up my chin. “You wanna be my good girl, don’t you?”

I nod, completely and utterly breathless. Every ounce of me wants to please him like he did me. Reaching a hand inside his pants, I stroke his velvety length until he groans and swears, saying my name on repeat, like it’s a song he wrote just for me.

“Baby, you keep stroking me like that, and I’m gonna explode around your hand before I ever get to feel your mouth.”

A gasping cry falls out of my lips before I start to tug his sweats down his strong, powerful thighs, that thick cock springing out.

My eyes slide down the length of it, wanting to know what he tastes like, what he sounds like when he feels good. And the more I stare at it, the more I want him inside me. I take him in my palm, testing the feel of him against my hand.

“Fuck!”

He drops his head back, and I watch him as I start running my hand up and down from root to tip.

He groans, staring back at me, his fingers sinking into the back of my head. “Not a goddamn woman on this earth has made me feel this good.”

How can that be true? A man as powerful as him has had plenty of women throw themselves at him, doing whatever he wanted. And me? What do I offer that they haven’t?

My hand slows. He must be telling me what I want to hear.

And why should it even matter to me if it’s true or not? This is just us fooling around. It means nothing. My eyes fall to my movements, no longer wanting to look at him.

He curses under his breath once I increase my pace; I shove those thoughts away. But when I think about him sleeping with another woman, touching her like he’s touched me, my stomach twists and my hand jitters around him.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his palm lowering to cup my face, and a thumb under my jaw forces me to look at him.

My heart beats faster, and those eyes...they gaze at me like I mean a damn.

I shove his hand away, and his jaw clenches.

“What’s wrong? Tell me.”

There’s a slight edge to his tone, but I don’t answer. I can’t. I’ll sound childish. He’s not my husband. He’s not even my boyfriend.

He pulls his sweats back on.

“If you can’t do this...” His thumb strokes my lips, voice growing softer. “You don’t have to. There’s no pressure at all.”

A knot hits the back of my throat, and before I can stop myself, I say, “Just don’t lie to me, okay?” My heartbeats pound inside my chest. “I don’t need to be told I’m the only woman who’s made you feel good when it’s bullshit.”

“Bullshit?” he snickers, grabbing my hips and whisking me onto his lap as he settles on the mattress, my thighs straddling him, his cock rubbing up

against me. “It’s not bullshit, little dove.”

He tightens an arm around the small of my back, his gaze boring into mine, stirring my heart with feelings, with wanting more. With him. With this man who was never supposed to be anything but a mistake. His knuckles slowly brush down my cheek, his gaze unnerving me, sending goose bumps scattering down my arms.

“I’ve fucked a lot of women, Elsie, but just to come. I never needed anything else. None of them mattered. None of them managed to get under my skin the way you have.” His palm cruises up my spine, fingers threading in my hair as he pushes me lower, brushing his lips with mine. “I don’t know what’s happening when I’m with you, and I’ve tried like hell to fight it, but I’m coming undone.”

His voice drops, and I don’t even need to look at him to know he just told me the truth. Because all I have to do is close my eyes and listen.

I fight my emotions, afraid to want something. To have something that won’t be taken away.

“For the first time in my life…” he quietly says. “I want to bleed for someone other than my daughter.”

His chest expands as he yanks my head back.

“I want to bleed for you.”

Moisture builds in the veil of my eyes, my chest quickening with harsh breathing. What does this mean? I’m afraid to wonder, afraid to ask. Dreams are for little girls who don’t know the cruelty of life. How can I be that little girl now?

The width of his large hand covers my nape, affection gripping his features as our deepened gazes align.

I gasp almost breathlessly when he drags me down to meet his mouth, his warm breath a concoction of everything I crave.

“I swore to myself it’s not safe to fall. To feel.” His forehead meets mine, fingers tangled in my long strands. “But with you, like this, I can’t seem to care. Fuck, Elsie, I want to kiss you so badly.”

My stomach flips, my fingers slicing in between the long tendrils of his hair, tugging roughly as he groans. “Then kiss me, Michael.”

Two hands hold my face as he forces himself back, his brows tugging. “You don’t understand what that means to me.” His eyes flutter to a momentary close. “The last time I kissed a woman, I was twenty.”

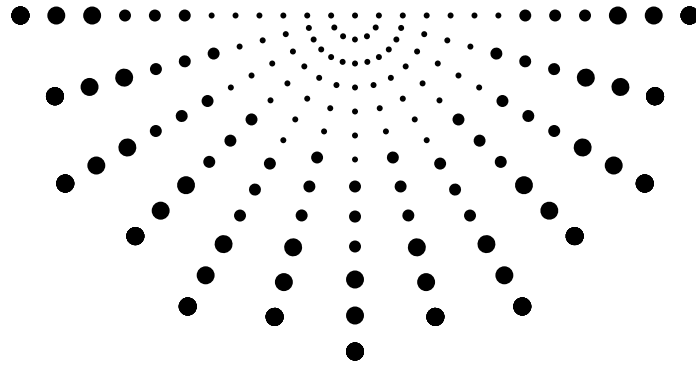
My eyes snap wide.

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because...” He lowers my face to his. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

And the next thing I know, he captures my lips with his, kissing me once – just once – and it's as though my soul unravels.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



MICHAEL

I kiss her like a desperate, starving man. One who hasn't known the true power, nor the intensity, two people can create when they feel this much for one another.

And with Elsie, I feel like the world is mine. Because she is that world, and I hadn't been living in it until she came along and showed me how beautiful it can be.

To kiss someone seems like it's nothing – two mouths meeting – but with her, it's everything I've been missing. Every single piece of the puzzle that has come undone is slowly returning to its rightful place.

I don't even remember the last time I did it. It didn't mean a damn thing before I made the promise to never do it again, not until it meant more. And with Elsie, more isn't even enough of a word to define what my heart feels in this moment.

I nip and suck on her bottom lip, groaning as she does too, rocking her hips on top of me. My palm fists her hair, and I slant her head, deepening our connection, needing it to fill the very marrow of my bones. My cock lies heavy and throbbing between us, my skin alive as though breathing for the first time.

Everything is somehow heightened. My body. My heart. My soul. I feel it all. Really feel it for the first time.

And I know with a certainty no one can break that after today, there's no

one else I'll ever kiss again but Elsie Marino.

ELSIE

He groans as he presses my mouth deeper into his, kissing me with every passion that's been gathering between us, like a combustible flame waiting for just the right spark.

His hands rough the fabric of my shirt, fingers riding up my back, into my hair, tugging, pulling. His tongue demands entrance as I hum out a moan, my nails scoring his back, his shoulders, anywhere I can touch him.

This all-consuming need flitters through me, and all I want is him. I want to bare myself to him in every sense of the word. I want to be his, and I want him to be mine, if only in this moment.

His mouth grows more urgent, teeth tugging my lower lip, sucking on my tongue. I've never been kissed like this in my entire life. It's like a possession, like he wants to mark himself on my skin forever, so that I never forget what kissing him felt like.

And I know he's succeeded. No one can top this. The way I feel right now, it's his until the day that I die.

"Please," I cry when his mouth sucks on my jaw, teeth raking my skin as I rock my hips against him.

He growls under his raspy breath, tongue riding from my throat to my lips.

"What are you asking for?" He brushes his lips to mine. "Use that smart mouth of yours, little dove."

"You know what I'm asking for." I barely get the words out.

"You wanna see how good we fit together, don't you, baby?"

"Yes," I gasp as he bows his cock right into my clit, fisting my hair in a rough palm, narrowing a beastly gaze at me.

"Then I'll show you." He flips me over in one fluid motion, settling on his knees before me, spreading my thighs open.

His palm rides my pussy, delving into me as I moan, my nails digging into the mattress beneath.

“You just tell me how you want it.”

His nostrils flare as I whimper his name, needing to come again from the way he touches me, my panties creating even more friction.

“I want you to make me feel again. Break me from my cage and let me fly.”

“I’m gonna do that, little dove. I’m gonna have you soaring.” With his index finger, he flips my panties to the side, staring at my core as he swirls a finger around my clit, sending a jolt down my spine. “I’m gonna fuck this pussy so good, you’re never going to forget me.”

The tip of his thick finger enters me as I buck against it, and he keeps it there, teasing the hell out of me.

My brows snap when his steely gaze goes to mine.

“I’m going to fuck you every day that you’re my wife,” he promises. “Until you’re not. Until every man after will never compare. Until you’re alone in bed, remembering me while your hands are touching what will forever be mine.”

I can barely breathe. His words, the way he touches me...it all becomes too much. It all makes me quiver and ache and want everything. Because I don’t want anyone else but him.

Slipping his hand away, he searches for something in the drawer of the nightstand. And in his hand is a condom.

He pauses, staring right at me, and the intensity I find there...it’s too much. I heave a gasping breath. My chest grows heavy, my pulse drumming in my ears.

He roughly lowers his pants and tears off the wrapper of the condom with his teeth, all the while keeping our gazes locked.

My stomach rolls watching him as he seats himself fully into it, tossing the wrapper on the floor. He spreads my legs open, rolling his fingers up and down my inner thighs.

“So soft,” he whispers. “So beautiful.”

I pant, gripping the sheets. His palms tuck under the back of my knees, and he pulls my hips up into the air, his cock nudging at my entrance.

And that familiar fear, it tethers to me. I snap my eyes shut, tightening my lips together.

“Shhh,” he lulls. “I’ve got you, baby. I’m right here. You’re safe. They don’t get to come between us. You’re mine now.”

That has me slowly lifting up my lashes, finding no danger here. Not even

a hint of it as I stare at this stranger who somehow became more.

“Concentrate on me, my little dove. It’s just us here. Just you and me and what we feel.”

“Do it,” I say, focusing on his face, his eyes, needing the intimacy of this moment.

He grinds his jaw as he slowly pushes the crown of his cock inside me inch by inch.

“Fuuuck...” he hisses, stroking my clit with his thumb.

“Keep going,” I gasp.

He continues until he’s halfway inside.

“Please,” I groan. “Just do it hard.”

He growls under his breath, teeth gritted. Both hands encompass my hips, fingers biting into my flesh, and with one hard stroke, he slams himself fully inside me until I let out a cry. The pleasure twines with pain, and I like both. I want both. And he gives it all to me.

His thrusting drives deeper while I try to keep my voice low, not sure why I’m afraid to show him how much I enjoy it. He grunts, his cock surging thicker, hitting me so deep, I can’t help the whimpering moans that escape me.

“That’s it, let me hear you.” He lowers his body forward and perches himself on his elbows, dropping my thighs as he gazes at me with aching tenderness, his hips slowing a fraction. “It’s okay to enjoy your husband’s cock. It’s okay to feel good, Elsie.”

He circles his pelvis, and my mouth parts.

“Because this is good. You look damn gorgeous wrapped around me.”

He cups my face with his free hand, his thumb stroking my parted lips, and slowly, he lowers his mouth to mine and steals my gasps away, his tongue not asking for an invitation as it sinks into me, tasting me as he groans in approval. His thrusts deepen, the pace increasing with the desire spilling from his lips.

My hands go to his back, gliding downward until my fingertips sink into the hardened muscle of his ass.

His teeth tug at my lower lip, and his grunting turns animalistic. “Now that I’ve had a taste of what it feels like to be with you, I’ll never get enough.”

“Michael...” I cry.

My brows snap as he rams so fast, the sensations in my body become too

much, like fireworks crackling. I close my eyes on impulse, my core clutching tightly around him.

But he slows his movements. “Open those beautiful eyes and let me watch you come.”

I do what I’m told. My body is his to command. He knows just what to say to make me even needier.

And as he lifts up, back on his knees, he bends my thighs until they’re beside my shoulder and lets go. He plunders deeper. Faster. Losing all control. Those eyes never separating from mine.

“Fuck, fuck!” I scream as heat washes over me with a red-hot current, spreading from my chest down to my fingers and toes, until I tremble, until I fall. “Michael!”

His name on my lips has him grunting, pounding into me as sweat coats his brows.

The release rolls through me like wave after wave of unsurmountable pleasure.

“Damn perfect,” he groans as he flips me over until I’m on top of him, and he’s still completely hard and inside me.

“Ride my cock, baby.” He grabs my throat, bowing his hips hard, rotating them.

The need to come again has me spinning out of control.

My palms land on his chest as I start to move, circling my hips around him, not sure what I’m even doing.

The men, they took all the power. We were helpless. We were nothing to them. They demeaned us. Hurt us.

But with Michael, there’s no pain. There’s only pleasure.

My fingernails run up to his neck and I clasp it tight, feeling the vein there throb as our eyes align. And once I move faster, bouncing up and down his cock, he fires a curse, clenching his teeth. His other hand snaps to the back of my neck, and he yanks me to him and kisses me.

I move faster, owning the power that’s been taken from me. I’m the one who fucks him, my release cusping to the edge. I’ve never wanted a man to come inside me this badly before, condom or not.

With them, I was forced to take the pill, and the men always wore condoms, or they were kicked out of the club. Being with them made me sick.

But with Michael, I find myself craving him bare. I want him spilling

inside me without a barrier.

“Fuck!” he snaps, his orgasm mine as I capture his lips and let him have me.

I can feel him grow thicker, our bodies meeting in hard slaps of skin on skin, and the friction to my clit has me begging him to fuck me harder.

He does. He takes over, thrusting so rapidly I scream, his fist tightening around my throat.

“Michael!”

“That’s right, baby,” he roars against my lips as he chases his own release.

Faster. Deeper.

Yes...

I feel it the moment he comes, shooting inside me. His thumb rubs the erratic beat of my pulse while he kisses me, nipping my lower lip, unhurried passion treading through us until his movements slow, until he’s given me every drop.

He removes his hand from around my neck, mouth feathering against the corner of my lips, then my jaw as his chest rises higher with each breath.

“How am I supposed to let you go now?” He kisses in between my breasts, his heartbeats pounding over my palm. “The mere thought of anyone but me touching you has me wanting to commit murder.”

He groans, wrapping an arm around the small of my back, and drags me against him, his searing breaths teasing my lips.

“My heart feels like it’s going to rip right out of my chest, Elsie.” His voice drops. “I’ve never felt this way before.”

The way he just said that...

“Michael,” I practically cry.

My heart tosses with pummeling beats.

I’ve never felt this way before either.

I know what I could be giving up if I leave him. Him wanting to kill because of what I do to him should have me scared, but it does the opposite. It only makes me feel more cherished.

His jealousy, the confession of what I make him feel is all I hear, until it consumes me, saturates my soul until it’s all I want. To be desired to this magnitude.

He kisses my temple, another arm slinging over my back as he holds me tightly, bound to him. I roll my hand up and down his arm, listening to his

heart beating like mad because of me.

And my heart? It beats just the same, as though our rhythms are symbiotic, joined as one.

A knot forms in my gut. I don't want to hope. I don't want to dream. I want to go back to the woman I was when I first met him, the one who didn't dream of silly things like a future with a man. Because men...they hurt women like me.

But Michael hasn't hurt me, has he?

Neither of us says anything for a while. We just listen contently to each other's breaths, to the quiet melody of our heartbeats.

"Are you okay?" He cuts through the silence, kissing the top of my head.

"Too good, in fact."

But there's more I want to say, like how imagining him with someone else kills me too. That he makes me hope and wish, and I've always been afraid of both.

His chuckle rumbles in his chest, and I hold on to him just a little tighter.

"So, twenty, huh?" I ask, trying to pivot the conversation. "Why was that the last time you kissed someone?"

I find that incredibly hard to believe, but as soon as he told me, I knew it was the truth.

He takes a long pull of a breath. "That was the first time I saw my father having an affair."

I jolt upward, my brows arching, and he gives me a weakened smile.

"He was all over a woman at a bar my friends and I happened to go to that evening. His mouth was all over her, someone who wasn't my mother. He was kissing her like he kissed my mom. Like it meant nothing at all. When I confronted him, he laughed and brushed it off, saying that one day I'd understand. But I knew from that moment..." He sighs heavily, shaking his head. "I didn't want to be like him, and I swore an oath that the next time I kissed a woman, it'd mean something. That when I finally found that woman, I'd never kiss anyone else again."

Did he just say...

I gasp. "And I mean something?"

The word is a mere whisper as tears fill my eyes.

No, I can't possibly...

"Fuck, little dove..." He places his palms on the back of my head as he lowers my forehead to his. "You do. And I'm sorry for that."

Why would he be sorry? I mean something to a man, and it's not because he paid for me. A quiet sob pours out of me; I'm unable to contain it.

He brushes his lips over my mouth, rocking his hips against me, like he wants to permanently attach himself to every inch of my skin.

And I'd let him. I'd give him everything.

My chest squeezes. This is too much. These feelings...I don't know what to do with them.

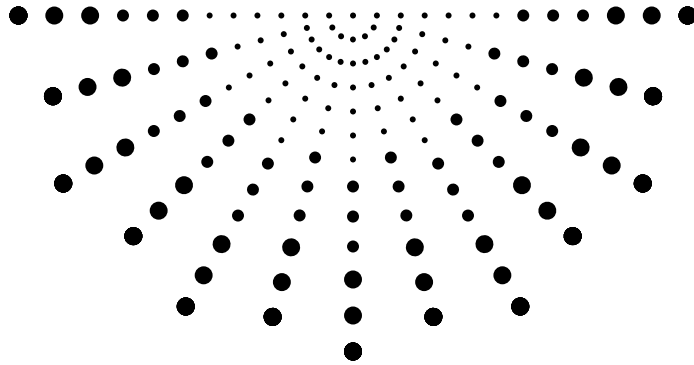
"After Bianca, my brother's wife, died, I swore off relationships completely. Before that, I had wanted a mother for Sophia, but none of the women were what my daughter needed. But the desire to give her the mother she deserves vanished the moment I realized I'd only be putting another person in danger. And Sophia would be left mourning another person she loved. But seeing you with her, and how happy she is... For a moment, I saw it."

"Saw what?" I whisper.

"Saw what it could be like. The three of us."

His hand cradles my cheek, and it rests there as he stares deep into my eyes, undoing every crevice of doubt festering within my head. The ones telling me how wrong we are for one another.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



MICHAEL

“Oh my goodness,” Mom gushes the following day as we return back home. “Sophia, you got so tanned!”

“I know, Grandma.” She rushes toward Mom, giving her a hug. “We had so much fun, swimming and dancing.”

“Your dad danced?” Gio chuckles.

“Oh yeah.” She slowly nods with a mischievous squint to her eyes. “He even sang. And so did Elsie. She sings just as nice as Daddy does.”

“Okay, Sophia. That’s enough of that.” I shake my head when my brother laughs.

But inside, I’m laughing too.

She giggles. “We even swam in the same pool Uncle Raph dunked you in, Uncle Gio. Do you remember?”

At the mention of my other brother, my mother tries to smile, but her brow twitches like it does whenever she’s upset.

She misses Raph most of all. I know how much this has affected her, how much pain she’s riddled with. I promised I’d find a way to get him back to her. But I just need time.

I turn toward Elsie, who’s standing awkwardly on my left, playing with her fingers as she watches my mom with Sophia. But me? I’m staring at her. She takes my breath away.

How is that possible? How can I feel this much for her? And how the hell

do I stop it? She's too perfect to be my wife, too perfect to ruin. But if I keep her, I'll do just that.

Yet, the very thought of never kissing her again, never waking up beside her...fuck. I can't lose her. I'd give it all up if I could – the title, the family. For the mere chance of seeing what we could be.

I could go legit. I have enough power, enough money. There's nothing stopping me. Gio could take over the family. But is that even enough to keep her safe? Or am I merely fooling myself into believing that it could?

"You're obsessed already, huh?" Gio whispers to me as he approaches.

"How can I not be?" My voice drops, not giving a shit that I've just admitted I have feelings for Elsie to someone other than myself.

"Damn..." He scoffs. "What exactly happened on this trip?"

"Too much," I admit just as my father comes out of the kitchen, where he was making a call.

His features grow tense as he approaches me. "Patrick wants to meet. Soon."

"He's ready to collect," I say.

It's not a question. I already know everything, and I'm ready to play.

"I'll go," I tell them in a hushed tone.

"He wants us all there." He places his cell back in his pocket.

"Fine." I nod. "After the wedding, then."

"That's what I told him. He was a little offended he didn't get an invitation, though." My father chuckles.

"I'll make it up to him."

ELSIE

"That girl simply adores you," Fernanda says, handing me a cappuccino she just made.

I smile fondly, taking a sip in the kitchen, where it's quiet. "I adore her too. She's such a sweet child."

"She really is, and I'm not just saying that because she's my granddaughter."

Her amber gaze wanders to where Sophia ran off, wanting to grab the new dolls Michael bought her on the last day we were away. You'd think he gave her the moon, the way her eyes lit up. And his did too.

It's beautiful to see the way he is with her. Something powerful in that. It only adds to my attraction to him, which is more of a problem than I can afford.

My focus has to remain on Kayla. It's been just over a week since I left her alone. She must think I abandoned her. But I could never do that. I just don't know how to help. What can I possibly do that Michael hasn't? He's doing everything he can.

"Michael is a reserved man, you know."

Fernanda zaps through my thoughts, and I peer over at her.

"He's always been this way, but with you..." Her mouth slants up. "You're good for him. You make him happy, and that makes me happy too." She pats my hand as she takes a sip of her coffee. "No matter how old your kids get, they're still your kids and you still want them to have a full life, and Michael has done everything in his power not to live the life he deserves."

She encloses both hands around her mug, staring into it.

"It's like he's purposely trying to avoid being happy. But I hope that has stopped now that he has you," she says, glancing up at me, her eyes gleaming.

I can tell she's a kind woman and probably was nurturing to her sons, unlike her husband.

"Oh!" Her hand jumps into the air. "I almost forgot. Galina made your dress, and it's waiting for you in the bedroom."

"Wow. Uh..." I clear my throat. "That was fast."

I met her once when she came to measure me, asking about the kind of dress I pictured myself in. I honestly had no idea. I told her to do whatever she wanted. It doesn't even matter, does it? None of this is real, even when all of them think it is.

"She had around ten people working on it, day in and day out." She places her cup back on the counter. "I can help you try it on. I want to ensure it's perfect for your special day."

She grins wide, and suddenly, I'm excited. It's crazy, but I want to see myself in it. I want Michael to see me in it on our wedding day.

"I'd love that." A smile tugs at my lips. "Thank you."

"Let's go, then. We can get Sophia to join us."

I quickly finish my coffee and leave the cup behind as I follow her out into the den.

“Sophia, sweetheart,” she calls. “Where are you, honey? We’re going to go see Elsie put on her wedding dress.”

In that moment, I catch the look in Michael’s eyes as he watches me. His gaze is full of heated intensity, the kind you feel coursing through your veins.

My pulse speeds up, prickles awakening my flesh. I run a hand up and down my arm just as Sophia runs over to us, holding a doll with bright pink hair.

“Yay! Can I do your makeup?” She peers up at me with hope tugging her features.

“Uh...” I force a grin.

“No, princess,” Michael interjects, coming to stand beside me. “We don’t want any makeup to accidently mess up the dress, do we?”

He tucks her chin in his palm as she narrows a gaze, considering what he said.

“I guess not.” She shrugs. “But I can do it on the actual wedding, right?”

Michael chuckles, his gaze lifting to the ceiling.

“How about...” I say, arching a brow. “...we get someone else to do our makeup and hair, and be queens for a day?”

“Hmm...” She dabs her index finger on her temple. “After we arrive there in our Cinderella carriage?”

“Yep!”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

She reaches out her hand for mine, looking all serious, and I shake it, fighting like hell not to laugh.

Michael’s chest widens, his face growing serious, and for a second, I wonder if I said something wrong. He draws his mouth over to my ear, fingertips grazing the small of my back, making me shiver.

“You need to stop doing that,” he whispers.

“Doing what?” I breathe, feeling like all eyes are on us.

“Making me fall for you even more than I already have.”

My heart jumpstarts, and I rear back to find him with a haunted look in his eyes, as though whatever he’s feeling is the worst possible thing to happen to him.

“Come on, Elsie!” Sophia pulls my hand, but I barely budge.

It’s as though neither he nor I can rip our gazes from one another.

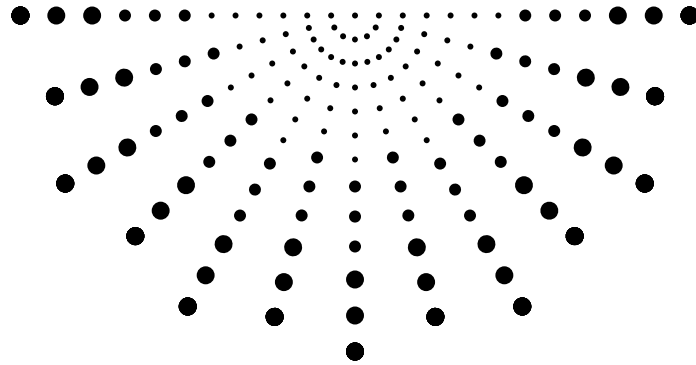
His palm reaches for my wrist, cinching tight as he tugs me up against the hard edges of his body. His lips hover against my ear.

“I can’t wait to see you in that dress,” he rasps. “But mostly, I can’t wait to get you out of it.”

Oh, God.

I’m so screwed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ELSIE

The past few days have flown by, and every day, it's as though I've rooted myself further into their lives, like I'm part of their family already. Day after day, we've laughed, we've played.

My God, it feels real. Like I belong in the arms of this man. Like the rest of my life isn't crumbling. Like he didn't force me into this marriage with no way out. But we've come so far since then, and I don't want to go back.

He groans beside me, an arm slung around my hip, his cock hard as he rocks his hips against my behind. "Good morning, wife. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby." A smile slips over my mouth as I turn over, throwing my arm around his neck and pulling him for a kiss.

It was meant to be quick, but nothing with this man is ever fast. He flips over me, pinning me to the bed with the heaviness of his body, kissing me slow, arching his erection into me as I let a little moan slip out.

"I could get used to waking up this way," he groans, his lips flirting over the skin of my neck while a slew of gasps swims out of me.

"Me too." I bury my fingers in his hair, panting with heavy breaths as he brings my body to life, the way he's promised to do every night we're together.

He's taken me every way he's wanted, and I've submitted to it all, wanting it all. He's made me love my body, and I almost forgot that it was mine until he reminded me. His words, his praise, the way he makes me come

for him...I've never had that. Never wanted it the way I do with him.

"I have a surprise for you. A little pre-wedding gift." He stares at me beneath a set of thick brows, a smirk twining up his mouth.

I can't believe the wedding is tomorrow here at the house.

"Will I like this surprise?" I tilt my head sideways, biting down on the smile appearing.

I can't even recall the last time someone surprised me with something, and I'm looking forward to whatever he has planned.

"You're going to love it." There's a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"When will you show me?"

"Now..." His lips mark the slope of my neck, mouth sucking and kissing my skin. "If I can manage to get out of this bed without fucking you." His voice swells with masculine husk, and the growling sounds vibrate around my mouth as he rakes his teeth over my bottom lip.

"You can fuck me after you show me." My cheeks heat up at the same time I say that.

He bows his pelvis into my core, and I throb there, needing him right now and not wanting to wait another moment to feel him inside me.

"I like the way you think, Mrs. Marino."

My heart flips. He's never called me that, and he shouldn't. Being together may feel good, but it's temporary, and so is that title.

"Don't..." I say, my gaze wanders away from his. "I'm not your wife."

My chest tightens.

"None of this is real, Michael. We're not really married."

"According to our marriage certificate, we are, my little dove."

There goes my heart again, beating in a frantic pace.

He chuckles, all deep and low.

"You know what I mean." I huff out a breath, daring a look at him.

His features soften and he cups my cheek. "Does this feel fake?"

He brushes his lips over mine, and I release a gasping sigh.

No, it doesn't.

But it is. My breaths grow shallow, my body weak. Too weak to deny what he does both to my body and my heart.

"Because when we're together like this..." He drags his knuckles across my jaw. "I forget how we got here."

I do too.

But I can't seem to say that to him. Not yet.

Can we truly make something of this? Can I really look away from what he does to others, enough to stay? But if I were to ever consider staying, I'd need a real relationship. I want him to meet my friends, my parents. I don't want to hide.

Oh, God. My parents.

What if they somehow find out about the wedding and think I'm living a life without them? Or worse, what if they report it to the police, and the Bianchis kill Kayla and the others to cover up what they've been doing?

"Can we talk about something?" My tone skitters with nerves, and he instantly lifts up on his elbows.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to call my parents." I pause. "To let them know I've made it out and that I'm okay. They may call the cops if they somehow find out about us. *Please, Michael.*" My brows furrow. "I won't tell them a thing about you or our arrangement. I promise."

He releases a deep breath, his eyes searching mine intently, and I can tell he's wrestling with the idea.

"I'll keep our deal," I plead. "I'll be yours for a year until you don't need me anymore, but they've suffered long enough." I grab his forearm. "I was their only child. I meant the world to them. As a father, you have to understand their pain."

"Baby..." Affection flickers in his eyes.

"Don't you say no." I shake my head, my frenzied pulse filling my ears. "Don't you da—"

He places a finger against my lips, silencing me. "I wasn't going to say no."

My throat swells from his words.

He's really going to let me call them?

He kisses me gently against my lips, and my panting echoes.

"Are you serious?" I'm ready to burst into tears.

"Of course I am. I'll give you one of my burners, and you can call them today. Sound good?"

Tears well in my eyes, and I can no longer fight them. I throw my arms around him and practically suffocate him against my chest as his laughter vibrates against me.

"When can I go see them?"

He moves his head back a little. "Soon. Sometime after the wedding."

“Okay.” I nod. “I can live with that. But please don’t make me wait too long. I really miss them, Michael.”

Tears trip down my face, and he gathers them with his thumbs, lips lowering to each cheek.

“I know you do, baby. And you’ll be able to see them as much as you want.” He kisses the tip of my nose next. “They’re only two hundred miles away. I can arrange for you to be flown there whenever you wish.” He inhales roughly. “I’d never purposely keep you away from your family. I know how important that is.”

“Thank you.” I sniffle, warmth radiating through my body.

“For what?” he scoffs. “I’ve done nothing for you to thank me for.”

“You care.” I shrug, emotions clouding my voice. “For a girl like me, that’s everything.”

“Fuck, Elsie, you deserve so much more than that.” His eyes penetrate mine with longing anguish. “I’m not a good man. I never will be.” He sighs dejectedly. “I wish I could be the man to give you everything, but I don’t know how to do that.”

There’s so much vulnerability pulsating in between his words that all I want to do is be honest with him, the way he’s being with me.

“But you already do that,” I say, slipping my palms to the back of his head. “I know what I feel when we’re together, and it’s something I’ve never felt before.”

His chest expands on a rough breath.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to accept your life, but I want to,” I admit, emotions wafting through my voice. “So what if we try, Michael? What if we say fuck it and we give each other what we both deserve? Because you deserve love too.”

I slant my lips to his and kiss him tenderly. He sucks in a shallow inhale, dragging his eyes to a close as I continue.

“I know you’ve spent your life protecting Sophia and wanting a mom for her, but you deserve someone too,” I whisper, brushing my mouth over his.

“I don’t deserve you.” He lowers his forehead against my chest, his breathing warm and heavy.

“You’re right.” A small laugh bubbles out of me. “You probably don’t.”

“I *am* right.” He looks up and there’s no humor there. “You, Elsie, are perfection, while I carry more flaws than are worth a damn.” His sigh is full of pain. “I don’t know what you see in me.”

“Oh, Michael...” A mournful smile tethers to my lips as I tilt my head to the side, and he returns a hard stare at me, as though waiting for me to prove him wrong. “I see a man who loves with his whole heart.”

My fingertips feather over his scar, and he drops his brows with a vulnerability tethered to his features.

“I see a man who took in a complete stranger and became her father, who’d do anything for the people he cares for.”

I brush my hand through his hair, and his eyes flutter to a brief close. “I see a man who spends days feeling like he’s not enough when he is, when he does everything he can for everyone else but himself.”

I raise my shoulders up to kiss his forehead, and his eyes dance across my face, breathing hard like the entire world is riding on his shoulders.

“You’d really stay? With me?” His gaze searches mine for the truth. “Are you sure? Because once you’re truly mine, there’s no way I’ll ever let you go. No way I’ll be able to.”

“I want to stay. But...”

“But what?” He asks it like he fears the answer.

“But I want a real relationship, Michael. One where you get to know the people in my life while I get to know yours. One where we get to know each other too.”

He gives me a devilish smirk. “You’ll still have to be my wife while we...” He thrusts his hips into me. “...do all this getting to know each other.”

“I’ll manage to survive the torture of it.” I roll my eyes on a moan.

Hungered kisses mark my jaw, his warm breath swirling up my neck while he continues to roll his rigid cock into me.

“Whenever I think about you leaving me...” His voice is a broken rasp, and his body stills.

“I’m right here.” I take his hand and place it against my beating heart. “Not going anywhere but out of this bed so you can give me that surprise.” I pop a playful brow.

His laughter is full and hearty as he captures my lips with his, tongue rolling around mine. And suddenly, he’s on his knees, throwing me over his shoulder.

“Hey!” I yelp, but I’m laughing too now as he slaps my ass, carrying me out the door.

“Keep quiet up there. I need to fuck you at least twice before Sophia wakes up.”

The clock in our room reads seven, and luckily for us, she's still fast asleep as we make it down the stairs.

"Just twice, husband? Are we losing our stamina in our old age?"

He chuckles and smacks my ass nice and hard. "You're gonna really get it now, baby."

"Good morning, you two," Pearl says from the kitchen just as we step in, lips tight with a knowing smile as he lowers me to my feet.

"Good morning." He clears his throat and puts on that boss man tone that's so damn attractive.

But I know the real him. The carefree Michael. The one who laughs with me like no one's watching. The one who holds me when I have a nightmare until I fall back asleep. And I like knowing that I have something no one else does. Because that man is the most beautiful of all.

"Would you two like breakfast?"

"Not right this moment. I have something I have to show Elsie." He grabs my hand and squeezes, and my heart squeezes right back. "If Sophia happens to wake up, keep her in the kitchen."

"Of course." The knowing expression on her face has my cheeks burning.

"Thank you," he says as he pulls me out of the room.

"Did you have to say that?" I whisper while we stroll away. "She's going to think we're sex animals or something."

"With the way you were screaming my name last night, I'd say one of us is."

"Shut up!" I whisper-shout, smacking him on the chest as I giggle.

My cheeks flush even more as he glances at me with a deep smirk. He drags me by the hand into his office.

"Wait here," he says, going to his desk and grabbing something.

"Is that a tie?" My eyes grow. "What are we doing with that, exactly?"

He chuckles. "It's the only thing I have to blindfold you with."

My pulse pounds, my body growing rigid. "I...uh..."

Images of being blindfolded while being taken to the sex club suddenly assault me until I grow dizzy, until my hands tingle and my throat closes up. I claw at my chest, rapid breaths firing out of me.

"Hey...baby...hey."

I can barely see him, barely hear him, my senses blurred and dull.

"I'm here," he says. "It's okay. Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't think."

His arms come around me, and he holds me protectively for seconds.

Minutes. I don't know how long, but I can finally feel my pulse slowing down.

"Shhh. I've got you, little dove. I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry." There's anguish trapped in his voice.

Gradually, with his reassurance lulling me out of the shadows, I start to come out of the living nightmare I was sucked into.

"I...I'm sorry." My body heaves from my still-ragged inhaleds.

"You have nothing to apologize for." He wipes under my eyes with his thumbs, and I hadn't even realized I was crying.

"They used to blindfold us when they took us to that...that place." I swallow past my dry throat.

His jaw flexes, the vein at his neck throbbing.

"Please forgive me." His brows tighten and his palms draw near, holding my face in them.

"It's okay. You didn't know."

"I should've." He blows a breath. "We don't have to do this right now. Let's just go back to bed where I can hold you."

"No." I shake my head. "Show me whatever it is. Please. I could really use the distraction right now."

"All right."

But he makes no effort to move. Instead, he lowers his mouth to mine in a slow, unhurried kiss, his lips remaining there long after he stops. His hand firmly clutches my nape, his breathing heavy, as though he's struggling to let me go. As though he blames himself for all I've been through. But I get why he couldn't help us. He had his daughter and she's his world, and that's how it should be.

He draws back, picking up my hand to his mouth and kissing the top of it. And with an overwrought sigh, he leads me out of his office and down a long corridor until we stop at a white door, a room I have not been in.

"I've been trying to keep this a secret since we got back, and it's finally complete."

My heartbeats quicken, from excitement this time, as I swivel my gaze between him and the door.

"Open it."

Anticipation bubbles in my chest as he lets go of my hand, and slowly, he reveals what he's been hiding.

"Oh, my God..."

I slap a palm over my mouth, warmth rolling down my body, shock and awe battling for space in my heart.

“You...you did this?” I struggle to speak. “For me?”

“Does that mean you like it?” he asks with a laugh.

“Oh, Michael...” My voice is a soft exhale, the tears bleeding from each word, unable to contain the magnitude of what I’m feeling. “This is...”

The rest of that catches in my throat.

“I...I can’t believe you did this for me,” I cry, throwing myself into his arms.

“I told you my wife would want for nothing, and I meant every word.” He pins me tighter to his body. “I want to give you everything you’ve missed out on. You deserve a place that’s yours, somewhere you can sing and read to your heart’s content.”

My own library and my own music room. That’s what he’s given me. He leads me further inside.

“I love it.”

I soak in the sight before me: a large room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, some empty, some full, while on the other side there’s a grand piano and what appears to be a small recording studio with more equipment than I would even know what to do with.

My gaze falls to his, this man who’s managed to make me believe that good men exist and that, somehow, he’s one of them.

“Do you even know what this means to me?” I look at him once more, unable to express how I feel in words.

He smiles while I’m swallowed up with tears.

His gaze is unwavering and his eyes swim with emotion. “I’m glad I can give you something that means as much to you as you do to me.”

I gasp, grabbing him around his neck and slamming my lips to his. And I kiss him. Slowly. Passionately. Deliberately. And with our kiss, I hope he realizes he’s already given me enough.

The cell phone rings once, twice, but there’s no answer. Immediately, I drop the cell into my lap, my stomach in knots.

My foot bounces in the music room hours later, unable to pick that phone back up, to dial my mother's cell number. After Michael located it, I realized she kept the same one she had from before I was taken.

What do I say to her? She's going to have a million questions. My parents will want to find me and get me home. But that won't be possible.

With a sigh, I lay my head on his shoulder, and his arm curls around me in that protective way.

"It's okay, baby. You're allowed to be nervous. Take your time." His voice surges with tenderness, but it doesn't do a thing to calm me.

"I don't even know what to say. It's just..." I huff out a breath.

"Just tell her you're okay. That you're safe. That you'll be back with her soon. That's all she'll really want to know."

I find the courage to pick up that phone again and dial her number.

And this time when it rings, someone actually answers.

"Hello? Who's this?"

I jerk back, wild eyed and staring at Michael, shaking my head, tears swimming in my eyes.

I can't, I mouth.

"Hello? Anyone there?" Mom asks.

She sounds happy. Why should I go and upheave their life? What if they're better off?

"Talk to her," he whispers, knuckles brushing down my cheek.

"I—"

My eyes widen, because the word wasn't said with a whisper. She heard me.

Oh, God.

"H-hello?" Her tone drops a notch. "Wha-what did you say?"

She pauses, but I can still hear the quiver of her breaths.

Does she recognize me? Could it be possible that after all these years, she remembers my voice?

"Say something. Please," she implores and a wave of paralyzing emotions washes over me.

"I'm sorry," I cry softly, not even sure what exactly I'm apologizing for.

But all I'm met with is stark silence.

Her gasps are there, though, echoing through the line. She knows. She has to.

"El—" She chokes up. "I...oh my God. Is...is that r-really you?"

“Mom,” I sob.

My vision goes fuzzy, my body shattering as I weep, unable to say anything else.

“Elsie? Oh my God, Elsie! Baby!” She’s the one crying now. “How? We thought...”

She doesn’t finish. She continues to cry. But I know she meant to say she thought I was dead. After so many years, who could blame them?

“Where are you?” she pants, panic in her tone. “Are you in danger right now?”

“No, I’m safe. I’m okay.”

Her exhale is that of relief. “Who took you? Please, we need to bring you home. Your father is at work, but I can three-way him now, and we can both come get you.”

“I can only imagine how scary this has been for you, Mom,” I whisper. “But I’m okay now. I just can’t come home quite yet.”

“What do you mean?” The words rush out. “Is someone there? Are they hurting you?”

“No. No one’s hurting me anymore,” I cry, glancing over to my husband, and he takes my hand and holds it in his lap. “I’m safe now.”

She cries and cries. And I let her.

She sniffles before she says, “I have to call your father. We have to tell him.” She sobs. “Oh, Elsie, we missed you so much. My heart. You’re my heart. Every day without you has been excruciating.”

Her breathing turns shallow.

“We tried so hard to find you. The police gave up, but we never did. To this day.” She takes a second pause. “I scour the Internet for missing and trafficked girls.”

“Mom...” My heart breaks, and I weep.

“Oh, God...” she trembles out. “That’s what they did to you girls, didn’t they?”

“It’s over now, Mom. I’m okay now. I swear.”

“Oh, my poor baby.” Her weeping wrecks her. “Are Jade and Kayla with you too?”

“No. But I have a friend, and he’s helping me find them.”

She inhales sharply. “He?”

“Yeah.” I fix a gaze at Michael. “He.”

“Are you really safe, Elsie? Give me a sign if you’re not, and I’ll find

you. I promise you.”

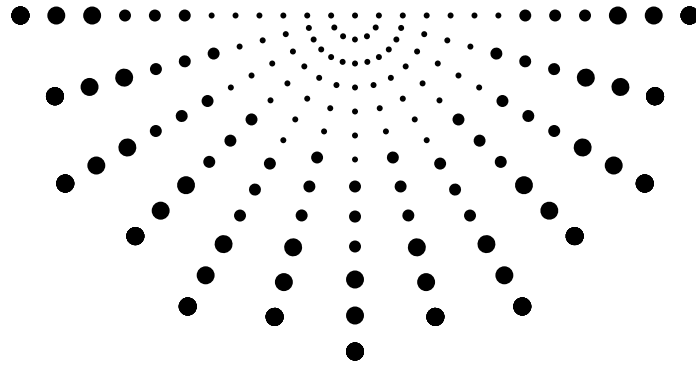
“He’s not like them, Mom. He saved me.”

My heart swells as I look at him, his kind eyes doing wonders to the shattered fragments of my aching soul. And with him, those same fragments have slowly begun to rebuild, finding a new home right here.

His mouth tilts up at the corner, and he picks up my hand, lifting it to his mouth and kissing the center of my palm.

“I’m singing again, Mom. And music never sounded so good.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



MICHAEL

She spent a little more time on the phone with her mom yesterday, telling her what she could about me, that she'd see them when she could, that she'd call them every few days.

She got to speak to her father this morning, and hearing that man break down on the phone like that...fuck, I felt it. His pain. If that was my baby girl, I'd rip the heads off everyone who's hurt her. But he isn't like me, but luckily for her, I am.

Once the Cavaleris kill the Bianchis, their whole institution will crumble, and I'll find the ones who hurt her. Maybe not all of them, but some. They'll pay. I'll gut them until there's nothing left inside.

But that'll wait for now. My immediate focus is on making my wife happy, and seeing her smiling and laughing yesterday with her parents reiterated that I did the right thing allowing her to speak to them.

I'm not used to feeling useless. I'm a doer. If there's a problem, I fix it. But I can't fix her past. I hate thinking about what they've done to her.

"You okay?" Gio asks, slapping a palm to my shoulder.

"Yeah."

I run a hand down my face, cracking a fist as I turn toward my brother.

"You clean up nice when you want to," I chuckle.

His black tux matches my father's, who's already seated with the rest of the guests out in the garden.

“Yeah...” He fixes his bowtie and smirks. “Gotta give the women what they want.”

“Don’t fuck anyone at my wedding.” I arch a brow.

“That’s why they invented limos.” He flips a hand in the air, and I punch him playfully in his stomach.

“Shit...” he groans on a laugh, crouching over. “I’m going to let that one go since it’s your wedding and I don’t want my sister-in-law to kill me for messing up your pretty face.”

I chuckle, shaking my head, picking up my glass of whiskey, and finishing it in one swallow. It burns as it goes down.

“Don’t worry,” he continues. “I’m keeping tonight PG-rated.”

“Why’s that?” I pass him his drink, and he takes it.

“Because there’s only one woman I’ve been interested in fucking, and she isn’t here.”

“You’ve got a girl, and you didn’t tell me?”

The idea of a “girlfriend” for my brother is sleeping with the same woman for more than a week, so I’m not taking any of this seriously.

“She’s not my girl. Not exactly.”

I chuckle internally. And there it is.

“But damn, she’s perfect for me.” He grins. “It’s like we’re meant to be.”

“I bet you are.”

“Believe me. We are.” He practically sighs. “She’s a badass. Just my type. Can’t seem to get her out of my mind.” He closes his eyes, a slow-growing smile on his face, as though he’s thinking of her right now. “Hair so red, it’s been anointed in fire and painted in flames.”

“What’s her name?”

His gaze clouds, eyes growing distant. “No clue.”

I stare blankly at him. “How the fuck do you not know her name?”

He shrugs. “She’s private.”

“Uh-huh. How do you know she’s not a fed?”

He chuckles. “I watched her kill a man. She’s not like any fed I’ve ever seen before.”

“Enemy, then.”

My brother can be careless with women, and whoever she is, I already don’t trust her.

He pulls in a long breath, then releases it sharply. “If she’s been sent to kill me, I’d go willingly.”

“I’m happy for you. Just don’t die.”

“If I go, make sure you give me a good send-off. I want a parade in my honor with floats and shit, and don’t be cheap about it.”

“You’re not getting a parade.”

“Come on. I’m the one who’s dying.”

“When did you meet her?”

He pauses, like he doesn’t want to tell me.

“A while ago,” he finally says.

I give him a curious stare. “So how come we’ve never met her?”

He rubs his temple uncomfortably, and before I can ask more, Alison walks into the den. Mom hired her to help coordinate the wedding. She clears her throat, her cheeks turning pink as she eyes Gio, pulling her black pencil dress down to cover her knees.

My brother doesn’t pay her any mind, though. His eyes appear lost, as though he’s still thinking about that redhead. Now I’m really curious about this mystery woman. My brother sleeps with women for fun. He enjoys them – their company, their bodies. But he’s never wanted to stick to just one. Until now, it seems.

But if my brother won’t find out who this woman is, I will have to. Our enemies are everywhere, in every facet of the criminal world. Who knows if she was sent to get info on us through him?

“Sir.” Alison clears her throat. “Elsie and your daughter just arrived by carriage. They’re ready for you.”

“Thank you.” I nod.

“I’ll go and make sure Elsie has everything she needs. Congratulations, sir. She seems wonderful, and wow, does she look amazing. Wait until you see her.”

That has my heart jolting.

She wanders out the door and dashes to the other side of the house, where Elsie and my mother are. I had sent them all to a hotel to get ready, where a team of makeup artists and hairstylists waited for them.

My mother wanted to be there and help Elsie, since she has no one. She asked me why Elsie’s family wasn’t in attendance, and I had to lie, telling her they couldn’t make the long journey. Not like I could tell her the truth.

“All right, let’s go,” I tell Gio, who’s already walking before me. “But this conversation isn’t over.”

“I know,” he laughs sardonically.

Once we make it to the back door leading into the garden, I wave to the guests as I march down the aisle.

There are four hundred and twenty people in attendance. Once we're done here, they'll move over to the other side of the estate, where tables and heated tents have been set up with a band, and more food than an average person has seen in their lifetime.

I have a rule, though, to never waste food. Everything untouched and uneaten gets donated to food banks around the city.

We make it to the priest, who congratulates me. And a minute later, the music changes and I see my little Sophia practically hopping with excitement down the aisle. Tossing pink petals down, she grins wide, her lips covered in a bright red lipstick. I'm sure that was her idea too.

Her dress is one poofy sparkly thing; her long hair is curled around her shoulders, with a sparkling tiara adorning the top of her head.

People clap and cheer while she waves to them all, knowing she's the princess of this castle about to welcome the queen.

My queen.

I can't believe this is happening.

She continues to decorate the ground with petals, finally making it all the way down. But instead of settling beside my father, she runs to me. I kneel for her as she clutches her arms around my neck.

"This is the best day of my life, Daddy," she utters excitedly. "Elsie picked this crown for me. Do you like it?"

She backs away so I can see it.

"It's beautiful, but not as beautiful as you." I tap her nose, and she giggles.

"Sophia," my father whispers, waving a hand for her. "Come to Grandpa."

"Okay, time for Daddy to get married, princess."

She places a hand against my cheek and kisses the other. "I'm so happy, Daddy. I love Elsie so much."

"She loves you too."

With a deep breath, I give her a tight hug, and she runs off to my parents.

And that's the moment the music changes and everyone gets to their feet, eyes toward the way my wife will soon be arriving from.

I ball my hands into fists, my pulse hitting an all-time high. I don't get nervous. It's not in my DNA. Until now.

I know she didn't agree to this. It's not how most people do it, but she's mine in every sense of the word.

I keep my eyes glued to the way she's supposed to be coming from, unable to wait another second, the anticipation practically killing me. I haven't seen her since this morning when the limo took her to the hotel.

But I don't have to wait long, because she's there, strutting toward me in the distance, and my God...she's breathtaking. A damn goddess. Beautiful is an inadequate word to describe the way she looks.

My mother is walking her down. And seeing them together, knowing that my mom had offered and she'd accepted...fuck. It's unconventional, but that's what makes her and I unique.

My mother loves her already. She's mentioned it more than once. How could she not? There's no one like Elsie. No one at all.

My breaths grow shallow, and I'm damn near choking up as she comes nearer, sparkling from every corner of her strapless ballgown. A lace veil covers her face, but I can see her eyes, and they're holding mine like a raft.

Wow, I mouth, knowing she can see it, and that has her lips jerking up at both corners.

Only a few steps remain between us, and I'm about to take her in my arms and right upstairs where I can tell her exactly what's on my mind, what she does to this heart of mine. There was no room for a woman inside it, but she made room, pushing away all my doubts, kissing away all my imperfections.

She's before me now, her chest falling softly with her jerky breaths. With the amount of people here, I can't blame her for being nervous. She knows none of them. She's here alone.

She's strong. Capable. And all mine.

She grins at me, and instantly, everything else disappears but her. All I can see, taste, and hear is her. Nothing else matters. It's as though one single smile of hers has inflamed all my senses, and I know deep down that she is the one for me, and that I'm never letting her go.

"Congratulations, my boy," Mom whispers into my ear. "You be sure you spend every day being a good husband to that girl, the way I have raised you to be."

"I promise, Ma."

I press a kiss on the top of her hand, and she pats my face before giving Elsie a hug and taking her seat on the other side of my father.

My fingers reach for Elsie's and hers reach for mine simultaneously as we gaze at one another, moving nearer, and I take both her hands in mine.

"You're the most gorgeous woman in this entire world."

I ignore the priest as he clears his throat, either saying he wants to start or telling me to behave. Either way, he can wait until I'm done.

"Thank you," she whispers. "I was nervous you wouldn't like the dress. It's so big and sparkly. I feel like royalty."

"That's because you are, little dove. You're my everything, and I'll take care of you for the rest of my life." I drag air into my lungs, lowering my mouth to her ear. "Later, I'm going to show you just how much I love you in this dress...and out of it."

"Michael...there are literally a million people staring at us right now," she says, her eyes darting to her left, where dozens of eyes watch us silently. "You can't be saying things like that to me."

I let out a barely there chuckle, squeezing her hand.

"Are we ready?" the priest asks, and she quickly turns around.

"Uh, yes, we are. Sorry." She nervously laughs, and the guests erupt with their own round of laughter.

As the priest starts, I try to focus on what he's saying, repeating whatever I need to repeat, but all I want is for this day to end so she and I can be alone.

I don't know how long he talks for, but once I hear the part that involves kissing the bride, I clasp her face in both hands, staring deep into her eyes, and I show her all the ways this marriage is real.

ELSIE

I've never been to a big wedding. The last wedding I remember attending was for my aunt, a month before I was taken, and it had maybe a hundred people in attendance.

But this? I don't even know what to call this. The tents are set up with more tables than I can count, vases with peonies and lilies at the center, hanging crystals and tea lights dangling around the branches. Chandeliers sparkle from above as Michael holds me in his arms while we sway together

to a song I'm not even listening to. Because being in his arms, I forget everything but the feel of him.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" His hand glides to my lower back, my head resting on his chest.

"I am. This is incredible. I can't believe it's my wedding." I pause, perching back to look at him. "How do you know this many people?"

"It's a hazard of the kind of life I lead."

He runs his palm up and down my bare back, and my skin shivers. I can't get enough of those big, strong hands all over me.

He looks around the room, and his jaw sets tight when he looks behind me. "All of them are staring at you and I don't like it."

My breath catches in my throat. His expression is downright deadly.

I laugh under my breath. "You can't stop men from looking at me, Michael."

He snaps his free hand to the back of my neck, pulling me to his mouth, his lips brushing mine. "Do you want me to show you how wrong you are, my little dove?"

His pupils darken, eyelids lowering with the swell of his arousal, a smirk raising one side of his mouth. I swallow an inhale – not from fear, but unfathomable desire.

"Michael."

A few men approach us, and my gaze zaps away from his.

His arm tightens around me as they near, and if we were animals in a jungle, he'd be tearing through their necks with his teeth. I drop my head against his shoulder, curling my arm around him.

The men before me are older, maybe his father's age. "We just wanted to say congratulations, boss. We're honored to be here."

He nods, his expression ruthless.

Oh, crap. It just hit me. He's the boss of the family now. It's official. This is what he wanted from the moment he met me. What he needed me for.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Marino," they tell me with a curt nod.

I thank each of them, and more men arrive, as though the first few have opened up the floodgates. Everyone wants to shake Michael's hand, to tell him that their allegiance is his.

My stomach skitters with nerves. I'm married to the boss of the Mafia. I definitely didn't see that in my future. Not that I really saw a future in the last nine years.

But Michael has given me one, hasn't he? Something to look forward to. A life not riddled with constant torture and fear. With him, I'm free in ways I never was before. Yet, I'm also shackled in ways I never saw coming.

His world equals danger. How much danger can I take?

But I told him I'd try, and I intend to keep that promise.

Once the last few men leave, he tugs me back into his arms and we dance like no one has just disturbed us. I breathe in the scent of his expensive cologne, arms draped around his neck, his gaze locked on me.

"I thought they'd never shut up," he husks out, nudging up my chin with the back of his fingers, sinking his lips against mine and kissing me slow.

And every time he does, every time our mouths meet, I remember how much it means to him to kiss someone again. To kiss *me*. I matter to him. It's the one reminder I have when the doubt creeps in, when my mind tries to convince my heart that we're not right for one another.

Together, we dance to a few more songs before we settle into our seats and start on the food one of the waiters just brought out for us.

Taking small bites of my steak, I watch the guests dance, laughter all around us. But when I focus on two couples slow dancing in the center, I instantly stop breathing.

My fingertips grow cold, and the fork I was holding slips from my grasp, landing with a heavy clank onto my plate.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

All the air evaporated the moment I saw their faces.

"Elsie?" Michael calls to me as though from a distance, as though I'm underwater, drowning.

Lower. Lower.

"Baby, what's wrong? You're trembling."

He runs a hand down my arm, but I can barely feel it. My skin's icy. My mind replays the last time I saw those two men. What they did to me...

"Tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it, I swear to you," he clips in a deep baritone, but it sounds more like an echo.

I jump to my feet, my head spinning, the music pounding in my ears. The chair falls backward behind me as I rush out, clawing at my chest, gasping for air.

Oh, God. I'm gonna die here.

I can't breathe. I heave, pushing past guests, trying to get away.

Strong arms are around me from behind, and I scream, clawing at

whoever it is.

“It’s me, little dove. It’s Michael, baby. Shh. I’m here.”

I turn toward his voice, my eyes finally registering him, and I break into heavy sobs.

“Come here.” He slips an arm around my back and holds me against him as I cry. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

“I can’t go back. I can’t look at them.” I choke the words out.

“Who? Who were you looking at?” He weaves back and cups my cheek, devotion spilling from his hardened stare. “Tell me who they are, and I swear to you, I will make them pay.”

“Don’t ma-make me say it, Michael. Please,” I cry, tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Someone here hurt you?”

My chin quivers and I nod, my eyes going downcast.

“You tell me which one, and they’ll be dealt with,” he grits, his nostrils widening once I glance back up.

His eyes are full of ferocity, and I know he means what he says.

“W-what will you do?”

“What needs to be done.” He drags both palms to my hips. “I can’t find them all, but I can give you this, little dove. So let me.”

He buries his face in the crook of my neck, breathing me in with long inhaleds, a broken man vowing to make things right the only way he knows how.

“I swear...” he says, drawing back. “They’ll atone for their sins and beg for your forgiveness before they die.”

I take a few deep breaths, anger slowly replacing the panic. They deserve this. They should pay. I tilt my chin up to my husband, the one who promises to do anything to keep me safe, and I tell him what was done to me.

“They were never supposed to take their masks off...”

My eyes wander into the distance, replaying it as though it’s happening again.

“But they were drunk and sloppy,” I explain on a ragged sigh. “They took them off as they brutally raped me and another girl I don’t know.”

His chest jolts as he listens, his fingers digging into my hips. He’s barely restrained. A dark savage is buried underneath that expensive suit, and I’m about to meet him.

I gaze at him, tethering myself to him instead of the horror of the past,

and say the words out loud.

“They mocked us, burned us with cigarettes as we screamed for them to stop. But they held us down and continued to hurt us. They beat her, Michael,” I cry. “Beat her so badly they killed her. She was maybe sixteen.”

His eyes slam shut, his body rattling with fury. His hand rushes down his face, his eyes growing round.

“I’m gonna fucking rip every goddamn limb from their body. They’re going to pay for this, baby.”

Rage is fitted all around him, but when he looks at me – really looks – his eyes grow tender, and I almost burst into tears again. He cups both sides of my face.

“You’re going to point them out for me, little dove. Okay?”

My brows furrow.

“Don’t be afraid. They can’t touch you here. You have all the power. You hear me?”

I nod frantically, new tears filling my eyes. He removes a handkerchief from his pocket and blots under my lashes. When his lips meet my forehead and remain there for long, agonizing seconds, my heart...it completely hurts with how much I’ve come to care for him.

“I’ll do anything for you,” he sighs, taking my hand.

“I know you will.” I bring his knuckles to my lips and kiss them, and together, we march back inside the tent.

That’s when I see them again, still where we left them, unaware of whose wedding they’re actually attending.

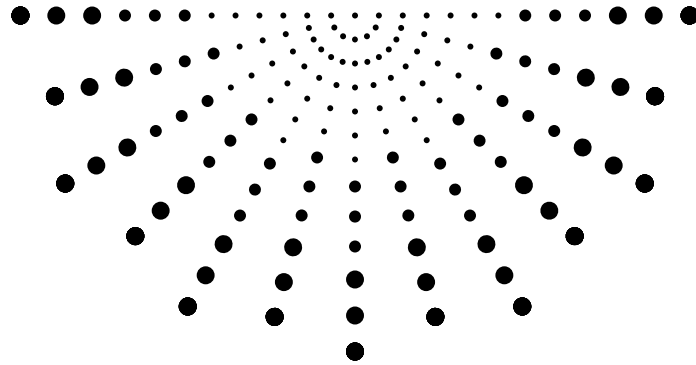
“The one with the blue shirt, next to the woman in the pink dress, and the man beside him dancing with the woman in the green gown.”

Instantly, his hand is in his pocket, and he removes his cell, snapping a photo of them before making a call.

“Nico, I’m going to send you a photo. Take those two men to the bar room. Don’t make a scene. Tell them I need to speak to them about business. Have my brother and the men ready.” He pauses. “That’s right.”

He places the phone back into his pocket, and side by side, we sweep past a small crowd and into the house, practically unnoticed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



ELSIE

“Michael.” The voice of one of the men falters just as we step inside, sweat beating at his brow. “What’s this about, my friend?”

Must be the men with their palms on their holstered weapons that has panic swimming in his eyes. I’m sure they don’t recognize me. I barely look like that woman, especially with the way I’m dressed. They’re used to seeing my flesh, my skin bare for them to poke and prod. Not the wife of one of the most powerful men in this city.

“Did we do something to offend you to be treated with such hostility?” the other one deadpans.

“Senators.” Michael’s leery grin sparks to life, and his scar jerks as he stares at them.

They must know that there’s something to fear, that this will be bad for them, as they slide back a step. But one of Michael’s men plants his hands at their backs, keeping them still.

“Look, Michael, whatever this is, we will fix it. I promise,” the first one says.

I don’t know their names. We never did.

“If this is about the expansion of the lot you recently purchased, w-we... uh, we can speak to some people. Consider it done,” the same one continues.

“Sit.” Michael gestures with a hand. “Relax.”

My palm is tight within his, and I know he’s trying hard not to squeeze

my fingers. He's seething. Ravaged. He wants blood. And these men deserve nothing less.

"We'd rather stand," the other one says, combing a hand through his gray hair.

His eyes are crystal blue, so peaceful, yet the man is as vicious as the waves of the ocean crashing in through the storm.

Michael's face grows cold.

"I didn't say you had a choice. Now sit," he snaps sharply.

Their eyes expand, and one of his men grabs each one by the backs of their shirts and shoves them down into the two chairs already there.

Michael takes my other hand and pulls me into his chest. "I can never give you back what they took from you. But I will make sure that they can't hurt you anymore. You will watch them die. And they will know why."

"D-d-die?" one of them stutters. "What have we done? Please, Michael, don't do this."

"Oh my God..." the other man gasps.

But we ignore them. This overwhelming sense of gratitude washes over me, and I throw my arms around him.

"Thank you." I shatter with emotions beating through my heart, coating my throat, tightening my stomach.

"You never have to thank me for a thing." He forces himself back, holding my face in his hands as he stares deep into my eyes.

And I feel it, that connection between us. It's in the way my soul stirs. In the way my body feels warm and light, as though I'm floating.

He kisses me softly. And every time he does, it's like the very first time. He drags himself away, brushing his thumb across my mouth, and with a long inhale, he turns his attention back to the men.

"So, gentlemen..."

He casually removes his suit jacket, handing it to his brother, uncuffing his shirt and pulls the sleeves past his firm forearms. His biceps flex, thick veins bulging beneath his skin.

"We have quite the problem before us, and I'd like to know how you'd solve it."

"Please, Michael," one of the men begs. "Whatever it is, I swear, we will fix it."

Michael jerks up his chin to a few of his guys, and they immediately reach into a large black canvas bag, revealing a pair of zip ties.

As soon as they start toward them, the men plead for mercy, their eyes darting all around the room. But they must realize there's no escaping.

"What the hell is this?" the second one asks.

They try fighting off Michael's guys, but it's no use, and their arms are easily tied behind their backs.

Michael does nothing but glare with a taunting look set in his eyes.

"You're insane!" the man continues. "I've helped you, and this is how you repay me?"

Michael casually kneels and retrieves a gun from his ankle. My eyes widen. I had no inclination it was even there. Without a second thought, he makes it to them and smashes the butt into the temple of the one who was just talking. His voice is now lost to his pitiful groans.

"Now, Alan," Michael tells the other one. "Will you fucking cooperate, or do I need to do the same to you as I did to Bobby here?"

Alan raises his hands. "No. J-just don't kill us. Okay? We won't say a word to anyone about this."

Michael snickers. "I know you won't."

He struts to the corner of the room and takes his time dragging a chair over to them. He drops it right in front of them and settles into it.

Bobby's head wobbles side to side as he attempts to come to.

"You love your wife, don't you, Alan?"

"I...yeah. Of-of course."

"Good." Michael pats his knee with a cruel smile on his face. "Now, imagine Claire was kidnapped."

"What?" His eyes grow wide. "Don't you touch her!"

A rough chuckle scratches out of Michael's throat. "I'm not the one hurting women, Alan."

He bends his face into him, his breathing rougher by the second.

"Now, as I was saying. Imagine she was taken, sold into sex trafficking, where men paid to do whatever they wanted to her. What is it that they did to you, baby?"

He turns to me over his shoulder, and shame fills my cheeks.

"It's okay." Affection fills his gaze as he rises, moving toward me.

My stomach flips. He clutches my chin in his palm, his brows bending with emotion as he gazes down at me.

"I'm sorry, baby," he whispers. "But I need you to tell them who you are. I want them to know you're no longer alone. That I'm here now. That you,

Elsie Marino, have the power.”

I tremble out a nod, and with a rush of my breath, he shutters his eyes and kisses my forehead before turning back to them. He holds my hand protectively, both of us with our eyes on the men who hurt me. I summon the courage even as my body swells with fear, and I repeat everything I had already told him.

“Oh my God. You...” Alan whispers, his eyes bugged.

And I must admit, seeing that shock on his face, it’s worth the momentary dread I felt.

“Don’t you fucking address my wife!” Michael roars, dropping my hand and rushing to him, throwing a heavy punch into his chin.

Blood spurts out from his lip, and he screams, but Michael doesn’t stop. He hits him over and over, as though he’s possessed. As though he’s expelling every bit of rage that’s been bottled up.

He finally stops, his entire body shaking from the pummeling of his breathing.

“Michael, we...we...I...” The other man finally comes to, his eyelids fluttering while he tries to formulate a sentence.

“Nothing to say?” The room echoes with Michael’s diabolical laughter, like the devil himself has taken over.

“I’m sorry,” Alan cries, spitting out blood. “We didn’t know—”

“Know what?” Michael slams the gun into his cheek. “Know that she’s my wife? Does it matter whose wife she is? Whose fucking daughter?”

He smashes the weapon into Alan’s face again, then again, until you can’t make out his features any longer. Alan coughs up blood, trying to reply, but nothing else comes out. Michael raises the gun and points it square into Alan’s crotch.

Pop.

The bullet roars to life and Alan’s wild scream plunders through the room, ringing louder.

If I hadn’t had the kind of life I did, I probably would be affected by this much blood and violence. But I’ve seen innocent women beaten and killed, so seeing someone who deserves it take a hit doesn’t do a thing to me.

“Mi-Michael...” Bobby whispers, barely able to look at him, like he’s wafting into unconsciousness again. “I—I’m s-s-sorry.”

“You’re not sorry, you sick son of a bitch. You’re sorry you got caught.” Without a second thought, he shoots him in the dick too, nothing left there

now as he howls like a dying animal.

Michael's footsteps crunch over to me. Taking my hand in his, he bores his eyes right to mine, extending the weapon in his hand to me.

"Take it, little dove. Make them bleed."

"What? No." I shake my head. "I can't."

He clasps a palm to my cheek, staring firmly into my eyes. "You can. You have to be the one to kill at least one of them. You have to know that you are my wife, and my wife doesn't cower to anyone." His bloody knuckles brush down my face. "They don't get to hold the power anymore. It's yours now, baby."

He clutches my hand, opening up my fingers, and places the gun inside. I stare unflinchingly at him.

Can I really do this? Can I take another life?

"Show them what you're made of."

I drag a shallow breath into my heavy lungs, and gradually, I face them, stepping closer, Michael behind me.

When I look at them now, all I see are the men they were that day they hurt me. All I see is what they did to that girl who was someone's child. They didn't care. She was nothing but a toy they used until she was no longer needed.

And now, here, I can hurt them. I can make sure they never do this to anyone else.

"A bullet to the chest. That's all." Michael's voice is gravelly at the curve of my ear, fingertips stroking up my arms as I grip the gun in both hands and point it at Bobby.

His face awakens with terror, every stitch of his features corrupted by fear. "Please...I—I'm sorry."

"Do it," Michael says while Bobby sobs, no longer as tough as he was that day.

My heart thrashes in my rib cage, my fingers slowly pulling on the trigger. Just a little more and....

Pop.

I stumble back with a gasp, and Michael is there, taking the weapon from me and holding me in his arms while my entire body convulses.

I killed him. Oh my God. I killed him.

My hands tremble around his back, my pulse slamming in my ears.

"It's okay, baby. You did what you had to do, and I will do the rest." He

kisses my forehead. "I'm proud of you."

Taking the gun, he levels it to Alan's chest. "You deserve a lot more, but this is our wedding, and people will start to talk."

Alan raises his head, but barely, his cheeks marred with open wounds.

"I—"

"Go to hell," Michael grates before the sound of the pistol shouts into the night.

Alan instantly slumps forward, spilling crimson from the hole Michael put there.

"Get rid of them," he instructs his people just as he goes over to the sink and washes the blood from his hands. But his white dress shirt is speckled with it.

Oh, God.

He takes the jacket from Gio and buttons it, and just like that, there's not a trace to be seen. He still appears the same, while I'm a mess. Or at least I feel like I am.

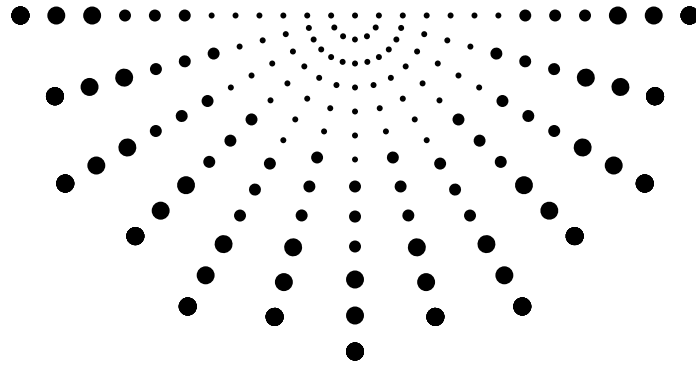
"Come on, little dove." He approaches me, taking my hand and leaving a soft kiss on my knuckles. "Let's go enjoy the rest of our wedding."

How can this be so easy for him? My heart beats loudly; I'm afraid everyone will know what we did.

He leads me out into the garage, and right before we enter the house, he pauses, removing that handkerchief from his front pocket and carefully dabbing my cheek.

And as I stare down at the gray cloth, I find it painted with specks of red. As I lift my face, we lock eyes, forged in our sins until death do us part.

CHAPTER THIRTY



MICHAEL

I wanted her to be the one to enact the final blow to the men, but I knew killing both would've been too much. She could barely handle the one I made her do. It's a powerful feeling to end the lives of the ones who hurt you. It's like coming full circle. She deserved that after what they'd done.

I don't revel in it, the act of taking another man's life, but I will do it with a fucking smile on my face when it needs to be done.

After we left, we joined the wedding like nothing happened. The wives of those two bastards had a lot of questions, but my men informed them that they had to leave after getting an urgent call. I made sure we planted that fake call on their phones. It's untraceable. They'll never be found. And the detectives on our payroll will put on a show of looking for them, but in the end, they'll do nothing.

Sophia's long been tucked into bed, completely exhausted after the wedding, while Elsie fumbles with the pins in her hair, her dress still on her, the one I promised to strip her from.

"Let me," I say, walking up behind her, gliding my palms up her soft bare arms, and the hairs there stand up in attention.

My touch makes her nervous or aroused, and I'll be finding out which one soon enough.

"Are you okay?" My question comes on a whisper as she nods, while my hands climb to her hair, removing each pin with careful precision. "You are

the most beautiful thing I've seen in my life, Elsie Marino."

Her breath catches, and even her breaths consume me. *She* consumes me with the enormity of my feelings for her.

With her back to me, I continue to undo her hair that's pinned to one side until it's all free, spilling across her back in thick waves I run my hands through.

Leaning into it, I inhale long and deep, her floral scent an aphrodisiac. "Goddamn, you smell good, baby."

My lips drift down to her shoulder, kissing her softly up her neck.

"Turn around for me. Let me see you. Let me see those eyes."

Her body shivers as I pull away, and she gradually faces me, her brows knitting.

"What is it?" I cup her cheek. "Tell me."

There's worry snaking through her features, and I hate seeing that. As soon as she tells me what's bothering her, I plan to erase it.

"How..." She swallows harshly. "How do you kill so easily?"

Of course that's still on her mind. She's not like me.

I capture the other side of her face with a palm. "I'm sorry I made you do that. Killing for the very first time...it's hard. Maybe I should've done it myself. Maybe—"

"He..." she interrupts, her chest climbing higher on a hitch of her breath. She shuts her eyes. "He's not the only one I've killed."

A shot of adrenaline hits me. But I don't react. I want her to tell me who she had to kill. What those fucking bastards made her do.

"It's okay..." My thumbs stroke her cheeks. "Killing someone shouldn't be easy, baby. Not for angels like you..."

Her eyes go downcast, but I tilt her chin up with the back of my hand.

"I'm not a good person, Elsie. But you've made me want to be. For you. For Sophia. Even for myself."

Tears fill her eyes as she tethers her gaze to mine, and I swear my damn heart comes undone. This insurmountable feeling she brings out in me – this sheer passion with which I crave her and want to protect her – it's permeating my soul.

"I killed a girl," she says tearfully. "She was young. She didn't do a thing, but I killed her because if I didn't..." She breaks with a heavy cry. "They swore they'd kill Kayla and my other friend Jade."

Her chin quivers, and it breaks me, making me want to avenge her pain.

She avoids my gaze. “It’s not your fault, Elsie. You didn’t have a choice.”

“But I did.” Her voice strains as she peers up, tears tracking down her cheeks. “I chose my friends over her. What does that make me, Michael?”

“A friend. A person. A *good* person.” I hold the other side of her face and stare deep into her eyes. “That’s what you are, my little dove. You chose your friends. You chose love.”

She cries heavier, but I only continue. She has to know this is all true.

“Never be ashamed of that. Loving someone is the most powerful thing we can do, yet it’s our greatest weakness because people can use that love to destroy us.”

I brush away the moisture from under her eyes, wanting badly to kiss away her pain, make her feel the way she makes me feel. Like the world is right.

“Michael...” she gasps.

But I swallow the rest with my mouth as I kiss her, slicing my tongue between her lips, hand fisting her hair with a fierce growl as her tongue swirls with mine. She tastes like all things forbidden, like sin and salvation. A temptation so powerful that a man is simply no match.

My palm rides up her back, undoing the corset, needing her out of this dress and bare for me, skin to skin, body to body. I want inside her like it’s the last thing I’ll ever get to do in this life.

It’s almost undone, the top loosening around her breasts. My lips brush down her neck, nipping her skin, tasting her, while I tip her head up by the pull of her hair, giving me better access. I groan, raking my teeth up to her jaw, sucking on her lower lip.

When I first saw her through that window – when our eyes connected – it was like I could feel her suffering, like it spoke to me. I had a feeling she was going to try and escape into my car. I knew the moment she was in the back. Thanks to the motion detectors I have in all of my vehicles, I get an alert on my cell immediately.

I pretended I had no idea. I don’t know why. But I wanted to see what she’d do. And once she tried to save that bastard’s life, I knew she’d be the perfect wife.

Little did I know how perfect she’d actually be.

“We can have everything together.” My mouth coasts down her throat, her pulse thumping wildly against my lips. “You, me, Sophia. A real family.”

“I want that too,” she groans, an emotional pull in her tone.

She feels this. She feels *us*.

I flex my jaw, kissing up to her lips, looking back into her eyes as I drag myself away.

“We will have it all.” I palm the back of her head. “You’ll never hurt again.” My gaze deepens into hers. “You’ll be cherished. You’ll be mine.”

“I want to be yours more than anything,” she whispers. “I want to stay with you. I really do. I want us to try and be a family.”

“Are you sure?” I lean in, resting my forehead against hers, my heart beating a mile a minute.

“So sure. I don’t have any doubts about any of it anymore, Michael. I want you so badly,” she pants.

“I want you too, little dove. In all ways.”

My hands slide to the back of her dress, undoing the last loop, while her hands cup her gown to her body. Her chest rises and falls in a chaotic rhythm, her breaths getting heavier as I step back.

Her mouth parts as I take her in, standing there before me.

“My goddess. My wife. My everything.”

Her shoulders tremble as she watches me watching her.

“Drop those hands, baby.” My voice is a rough command.

And it’s a beautiful thing to watch her obey.

Slowly, she moves them to her side, and the dress begins to fall, uncovering her a second at a time, teasing the hell out of me.

My cock surges to life once I see her bare breasts, those rosy, taut nipples calling for my mouth. I’m throbbing at the sight of her and wanting more.

My fingers grip the top of the dress, and without taking my eyes off of her, I slip it down past her hips until it pools around her feet. My pulse fills my ears as she stands there with just a thin piece of white fabric covering that place where she’s warm and slick for me.

I drop to my knees, helping her step out of the dress, her strappy silver high heels still on her feet. My hands glide up her smooth, velvety skin, my fingers hooking into the thin straps of her thong.

I stare up at her, finding her already staring right back at me, and I start pulling down her panties, exposing her bare slit.

The thong stretches around her thighs as she rocks on her feet, pressing her inner thighs together. I reach for her core with my index finger, pushing it into her.

“Michael...” she strains with a hiss, her fingers curling in my hair,

gripping tight.

A groan rumbles in my chest as I yank her panties all the way down, and she steps out of them. I pick them up, bringing them to my nose and inhaling as I gaze up at her. Her cheeks heat up, and that has me smirking.

“Don’t be shy with me, little dove.” I run two fingers down her pussy. “I love everything about you.”

I stuff her thong into my pocket, and she stares wide-eyed.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“Put it under my pillow.” A lazy grin swells over my mouth, and she bites into that full bottom lip.

I open her up, bringing a leg over my shoulder, and she glistens for me. My mouth waters, needing the taste of her on my tongue.

I look up at her in wonder, aching to take her slow. To savor her. The way she looks at me, hand cupping her breast...fuck. She’s the most beautiful thing.

My palms hit her bare ass, yanking her close so her pussy is only a breath away, even as I continue to hold her gaze.

“I’ve always been the king. But I’ll gladly worship at your feet.”

“Michael.” She chokes on a gasp as I roll my tongue between her wet lips, tasting her.

I swirl the tip of my tongue around her clit just once before I let it drift downward, teasing every inch of it.

“Yesss...” she gasps, her hand roughly clutching on to my hair, her pussy dripping down my tongue.

I groan as she yanks my hair hard, the pads of her fingers massaging my scalp as I swirl and tease. Her body grows tense, thighs trembling while my tongue flattens on her clit and rides up.

“Fuck, baby, you taste like heaven.” My voice tightens with a deep-chested grunt as I wrap my mouth around her pussy and suck her clit into my mouth.

“Yes!” Her fingers bite into my scalp as my tongue sinks into her tight hole.

I peer up at her. “Goddamn, I need inside you.”

“I...” She breathes heavily, her eyes boring into mine. “I want that too. Please...”

My knuckles slink up her inner thigh, and the pad of my finger rubs her clit. She jolts, groaning my name.

“I’m gonna have every inch of you. I’m gonna make you come over and over until you can’t take any more.”

“Now. Please,” she begs, throwing her head back.

“Not until you drip down my tongue, wife.” I pinch her clit.

“Oh, God!” She snaps her eyes shut on a cry.

Then my mouth is back on her – lapping, stroking – her hands pulling my hair on a gasp, twining with her heavy moans.

“Please, Michael...”

“Mm,” I hum, pitching back, looking up at her, running my tongue over my lips to taste her some more. “You gonna come nice and hard for me, little dove?”

She nods frantically, tugging on my hair, trying to push me between those trembling thighs.

“That’s a good girl.” With a growl and a palm clasp on her ass, I slam her pussy back down onto my mouth, two fingers stretching her and fucking her rough while the tip of my tongue plays with her swollen clit.

She screams my name as her release hits, her body jolting, her walls convulsing around my fingers in ripples until it slows.

Placing her leg down, I get to my feet, my hand gripping her hair and yanking her head back in one single thrust.

“My cock’s throbbing for you, baby,” I grit.

She sighs on an exhale, unable to speak, but her eyes watch me, wanting more. I can see it all over her face.

“I could eat that pussy for every meal and never starve.” I cup her there, rubbing the heel of my hand around her drenched core.

She lets out breathless little noises. Damn sexy as hell. And when her eyes skitter down to my cock, I wrap a hand around her pretty little throat and squeeze.

“Do you want it?” I fist my hard-on in my palm with my free hand, stroking it as she watches me, tugging on her beaded nipples.

She nods, and I drag my zipper down.

“On your knees, then, my little dove.”

She likes it dirty. I can tell from the mere flush of her cheeks.

I grasp her jaw, parting her mouth roughly with my thumb. “You’re gonna take every inch until you gag. Understand?”

She nods again, biting into her bottom lip, and fuck, I want to be the one to do that.

“Come on, now,” I hum. “On your knees. Don’t make me ask again.”

She finally obeys, kneeling before me, looking up at me with those big brown eyes.

My fingers slide into her hair, wrapping those soft strands around my wrist. “Take it out and fill your mouth with it.”

Her throat bobs as she reaches for my pants, pulling my boxers down with them, and my cock falls, hard and heavy, ready for her.

Her soft hand cinches around the thickness, her fingertips barely able to reach around. I narrow a gaze into her heated eyes that tempt me with everything unholy. She snakes out the tip of her tongue, rolling it around the crown of my cock.

“Oh, fuck...” I curse through gritted teeth, fisting her hair roughly.

And in one quick move, I ram my cock down her throat. She gags and moans, but doesn’t move back an inch. She takes it.

“That’s it, baby. That’s my good girl.” I push her down even more. “Relax your throat and take all of me.”

I can feel it when she does, groaning as she swallows me fully, the sound vibrating down to my aching balls.

“Oh, damn. Just like that. Look how beautiful you are, down on your knees, so willing to please your husband.”

She moans, tilting her head, pulsing her head faster.

I wrap her hair around my wrist and drive her all the way down, then back up again, in a hurried tempo. The noises she’s making have me close, a heated sensation slamming into the base of my spine.

“Mm...what a good wife, sucking me so good.”

Nothing has ever felt this damn good. This woman, the things she does to me...

“Stand up,” I demand, yanking her head back, needing to feel her around me when I come.

But instead, she fights it, glancing up at me with glassy eyes as her tongue flicks the head of my cock.

“Damn, baby,” I hiss. “You keep sucking me like that and I’ll be shooting down your throat instead of your pussy.”

Her hand clasps my balls and squeezes, and that’s when I know I have to end this.

“I need to come inside you.”

I force her to her feet by her hair.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper, looking into her eyes, round and dizzy with desire. “You’re my undoing.” I grab her hips, walking her backward to the bed. “My blessing and my curse.”

“Michael...” she breathes.

My lips drag up at the corners, my heart filling with all the things she makes me feel. Makes me want. “From the moment you barged into my life, I could think of nothing but you. It’s damn near an obsession, and I’ve never been obsessed with anyone in my entire life.”

She gasps low, and I take my time lowering her onto the bed, me on top of her, those thighs welcoming me as they open.

I prop myself on one elbow, her gaze spilling with passion, my gut stirring with how much I want her. Need her. Fisting my cock, I line it up against her pussy, and the way her lips tremble as I move a fraction has my entire body stirring, wanting to make this perfect for her like all the other times. But somehow, this feels different, and not just because it’s our wedding night.

She wants me. She wants us to be a family, and I’d beg on my hands and knees for her not to go.

I connect her eyes to mine and tell her all the things she makes me feel.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited for you?” I confess as her eyes grow hazy. “All my life.” I stroke her lips with mine, breathing her in. “I thought I was bound to be alone.”

She gasps as she stretches with another inch of my cock.

“That no woman would ever walk through my heart...” I sink deeper, my palm sliding up, clasping her nape as I keep our eyes connected. “But you, little dove...you barged right in and made yourself at home, and now you’re mine.”

I thrust all the way inside as she lets out a cry.

“And I’m every bit yours.”

I slam my lips against hers, capturing the waves of her moans, as my hips pound into her with brutal force, wanting her to feel that every word I spoke was the truth. This woman, her love for my daughter, her acceptance of us, the way she looks at me...I want it all. I want a future I once only imagined.

“Oh, God, Michael. Harder, please,” she groans.

I know what she needs and how she needs it. I pull out in one quick move and flip her onto her stomach. I roll my palm under her, raising her ass in the air. She gazes at me over her shoulder as I line my cock back to where it

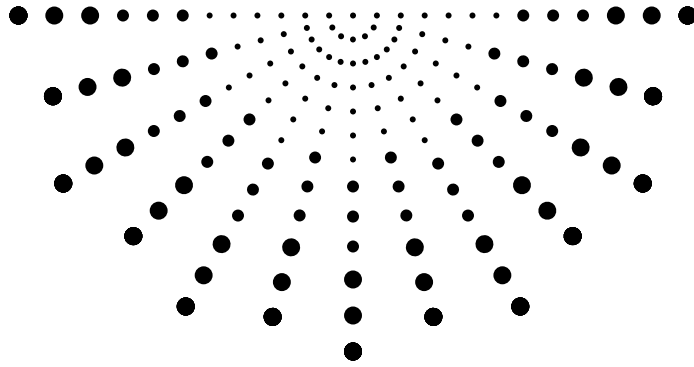
belongs and thrust deep.

Her hands clench the bedsheets as I undo my tie, pounding into her while lifting both of her hands and tying them together at the small of her back.

My fingers skim up her spine as she arches for me, gasping my name, and I grab a handful of her hair. “You’re gonna come for me just like this, tied up and at my mercy.”

The next thing I hear is her screams as she spills around me, and seconds later, I join her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



ELSIE

I felt every bit his wife last night. In every sense of the word. In the way he held me after we made love. Or fucked. I don't know what to call it. Can it be both at the same time? He took me in every sense of the word, yet he also made me feel wanted and cared for.

"Are you sure you have to go?" I pull him in by the lapels of his suit, dragging his mouth to mine and kissing him hungrily before I shove him away with a pout, knowing he has to leave.

"I'm sorry, baby."

A slow-growing smirk makes its way to his sinful mouth as he fixes his striped burgundy tie.

"If this wasn't an urgent meeting..." he says, his voice deep and smooth. "...I'd be home with my girls. But I have to be there."

"I understand." I drag him to me again by the sleeve of his steel-gray suit, kissing him one last time.

My palm clasps around that scar I love, like I'm trying to keep it safe. He burrows into my touch, his eyes slowly closing, a smile stretching over the entirety of his face.

"I wish I didn't have to go," he murmurs. "I'd spend all night getting to know your body again, then holding you close as you fall asleep."

And instantly that pulsing at my apex comes barraging and my heart skips a beat.

“Hurry home, then.” I tug my lower lip between my teeth.

He grips a handful of my ass, pulling me flush against him. “Believe me, I’m already thinking about coming home to you.”

“Bye, Daddy.” Sophia walks into the den, and we instantly separate like there’s a fire burning between us.

She’s all ready for bed, her pink pajama gown on, but one can’t miss that giant frown on her face.

I don’t know what kind of meeting one goes to at eight at night, but in his line of work, anything is possible. I didn’t ask where or with whom. If he wanted me to know, he would’ve told me.

“I’m sorry I have to go, princess.” He kneels, wrapping his arms around her. “I won’t be too long, though. I’ll give you a kiss when I get back.”

“Promise?” Her voice drops with melancholy.

“I swear.”

I can never tire from seeing how devoted he is to her. Even when he talks to her, you can practically feel his love for his daughter. He kisses her forehead.

“Okay.” That gets her grinning.

“Alright, ladies, Daddy has to go.” He rises, straightening his jacket, walking back over to me.

Those eyes, the way they gaze at me...my stomach churns.

“I’ll miss you,” he whispers, low and husky, planting a kiss on the corner of my mouth before he sets to go.

Hours later, and he’s still not back. It’s close to midnight. Where could he be? I’m sure he’s fine. Maybe the meeting ran late. I tighten the cell he gave me in my fist, my foot bouncing on the bed.

“Screw it.” I shoot him off a message.

Elsie

Hey, just making sure you’re okay. Call me. About to go to bed.

I wait and wait, but another hour passes, and still nothing.

What if something happened to him?

My heart pounds. I can't lose him.

There's suddenly a small knock on my door, and I sit up straighter as it starts to part.

"Elsie..." Sophia tiptoes in, rubbing her eye with a fist. "I had a bad dream. Can I..."

Her chin wobbles, honey-colored eyes lodged with tears.

I throw the cover up.

"Come on in," I tell her, scooting over, and she smiles wide, wiping under her eye, a light brown teddy in her grasp as she climbs in with me.

She sighs, lying on her side while I tuck her in, kissing her on the back of her head before I lie down too.

"Where's Daddy?" She yawns.

"He'll be home soon. Don't worry," I promise her, pulling my arm tighter around her.

Yet all the while, I lie there and worry if he'll make it home alive.

MICHAEL

I didn't expect this to take so long. I wasn't lying to Elsie when I told her I had a meeting. It just wasn't your traditional kind.

Gio called me twenty minutes before I left, telling me there was a man at one of our casinos blabbing about the Bianchi club. So he called me, knowing I'm looking for Kayla. I expected the son of a bitch to talk by now, but it's been two hours, and he hasn't said one useful thing.

This is taking too long. I have to get back home. Retrieving my cell, I check for missed calls from Elsie, but the reception in the casino is never great.

I'm hoping to give her some good news when I return. Finding her friend is one of my priorities. I owe that to her.

"Please. I don't know where the girls are, I swear," Trevor wails, tied up and rattling in the chair, blood dripping out of his mouth, three of his teeth already missing.

He did tell us something: he's one of the Bianchis' capos. And either way, he's going to die tonight.

"See, I think you're lying." I pick up another set of pliers, smaller this time, drawing closer to him. "This one will hurt worse. It'll take longer to get that canine out."

With every step I take, fear trembles in his eyes.

"B-B-Bianchis don't tell us anything unless we have to know. They moved some of the girls. But I—ahh! I don't know where. I swear, Michael... Please!"

Fuck! If I can't save Kayla, if she dies, Elsie will blame me, and she'll have every reason to. I didn't help when I could. I didn't stop the Bianchis from running that club.

"If you have nothing to offer me. I have no use for you," I tell him.

I'm on him in a second, prying his mouth open with both hands, even as he tries to close it. His arms jitter behind his back, his legs secured too. He can't move. He's helpless.

Once the pliers hit his mouth, once I start to yank, those groans turn to full-blown screams. I don't stop until every one of his teeth is gone, until he hurts like he's made those women, those kids, hurt. He confessed his sins to me. He told me what he's done at the club and with whom. He must pay for his vile transgressions.

My exhales come out razor sharp, blood coating both of my hands. I'm more animal than man right now, and it's a good thing Elsie isn't here to see it. The pliers fall out of my hand with a clank.

Trevor doesn't see me reach for my nine. He doesn't see the shot coming, not until the very last second when I pull the trigger.

The bullet rips right into his forehead. Clean.

"Take care of this," I tell my men, jerking my chin at Trevor, while I head for the sink and scrub away the evidence of my own sins.

"Yes, sir." They comply immediately, getting him off the chair and down on the plastic.

I remove my suit jacket, splattered with drops of crimson, and leave it behind. I examine the rest of myself and find my clothes spotless.

Gio follows me out the door and up the stairs.

"You going home?" he asks as we step out to the casino floor, loud rowdy conversations buzzing around us.

Everyone here knows what happens in the basement, and none of them

want to be on the receiving end.

“Yeah. I’ve gotta go home.” My smile makes it all the way to my heart. “My girls are waiting for me.”

“Girls?” He arches a thick brow and fights a laugh.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “And shut up about it.”

When I arrive home, the house is quiet, the only sound coming from my footfalls as I climb up the stairs. Once I got to my car, I saw the text she sent me, and I immediately texted her back, hoping she was still awake. But there was no response.

She was worried. About me. I’ve never had a woman worry about me before. But to have a woman like her worry about me? My God. It’s as though Elsie has somehow always been here. But it’s all new to me, and I’m trying to be someone she can rely on.

As quietly as possible, I step into Sophia’s room, hoping to give her that kiss I promised. But I find the bed empty, part of her pink comforter hanging off the edge.

“What the hell?” I mutter, rushing for my bedroom, and as soon as I open it... “Fuck.”

The sight before me has me wanting to drop to the ground and thank the universe for what I have.

My daughter is scooted against Elsie’s chest, Elsie’s arm draped around her. An ache lodges in the back of my throat as I remove my shoes and start removing my clothes, changing into a t-shirt and sweats.

Flipping the covers over, I carefully slip into the bed beside my beautiful wife.

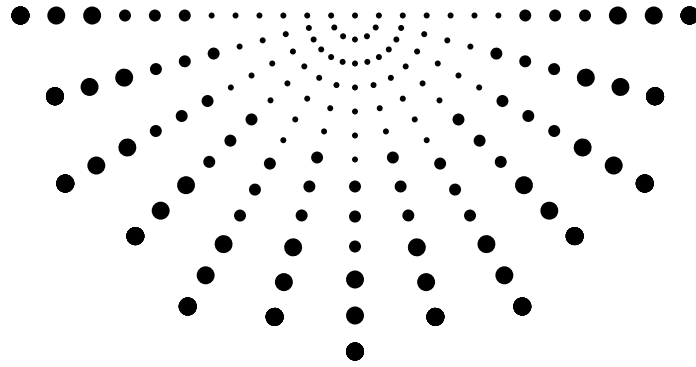
Elsie grumbles, molding her body into mine, and my cock stirs to life. But I don’t just want to fuck her. It’s more than that. It’s the connection we share, the passion we exist in when we’re together. She’s everything to me.

“Michael?” She yawns, her eyes fluttering as she looks behind her, sleep still etched to her features.

“It’s me, little dove,” I whisper, kissing her bare shoulder. “I’m home now. Go back to sleep. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

With a sigh, her body stills, and I pull her closer to me, not wanting to ever let go, afraid I might lose her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



ELSIE

The sun streams through the slit in the curtains as my eyes adjust to the bright light. A hard, thick body is at my back, and the sweetest little girl is huddled in my arms.

“You awake?”

That deep, raspy voice wakes up every inch of my body, his warm breath coasting up my neck, his soft lips landing right under my earlobe.

“Yes,” I whisper, turning my head over just enough to see him smiling, and something flips in my stomach.

It’s in the way he looks at me, eyes glazed and heavy-lidded. That’s all it takes for my heart to dance to a melody all its own.

“I’m sorry I didn’t respond to your text yesterday,” he explains, rolling his knuckles across my jaw, and my skin prickles. “I had no reception.”

“It’s fine. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

I can’t let him know how sick with worry I was. He’s going to think I’m insane.

His features grow taut, and quickly, he props himself up on his elbow. “But I do, little dove. You were worried about me.”

Gently I slide my arm from under Sophia and turn over. His gaze locks with mine, and there’s something intense in it that has me concentrating on every one of his words.

“I appreciate that more than you know.” The timbre of his tone wavers

with emotions as his gaze drops to my lips. “I’ve never been close enough to a woman for her to care whether I made it home alive.”

My heart lurches. It makes me sad to know no one has loved him before.

“I do care about you, Michael.” I clasp the side of his neck.

His eyes grow tender. “I’m grateful for you.”

He sucks in a long breath, and slowly, his lips fall to my temple and he kisses me in that gentle way he does.

“I have a surprise for you later today,” he breathes as he drags himself away. “And it involves a plane.”

That has my curiosity piqued.

I narrow a stare. “As in I’ll be going in one?”

He chuckles just under his breath. “Yeah, baby. We’ll be flying again.”

Anticipation flickers in my gut. “Where?”

“Can’t tell you that.” His thumb lazily draws down my cheek as those adoring eyes stay perched to mine. “It’s called a surprise for a reason.”

“Oh my God. Did you find Kayla?”

Please tell me he has. Nothing would make me happier.

His face falls.

“Oh…” My throat tightens.

We’re never going to get her back.

“I’m sorry.” The broken strain in his voice makes me hurt.

“It’s okay.” I pick up his hand and lead it to my mouth, pressing a kiss to his fingers. “I know you’re doing your best.”

His jaw strains. “But it’s not good enough.”

Six hours later, and we’re miles away, up in the clouds, flying somewhere he still won’t tell me.

“Please fasten your seat belts as the plane reaches its destination,” the pilot announces.

Sophia bounces with excitement as Michael secures her back in her seat.

“Please, Daddy.” She pouts, dropping her head against her shoulder. “Tell me where we’re going!”

But he only chuckles with amusement. “You’re not going to get it out of

me, princess, no matter how cute you are.”

“Oh, come on, bro.” She rolls her arms over her chest, shaking her head with a roll of her eyes.

“Bro?” He laughs in disbelief. “Who taught you to say that?”

“Uncle Gio.” She shrugs, all proud of herself.

He leans into me and whispers, “I’m gonna kill my brother. I’m not ready for her to stop calling me ‘Daddy’ just yet.”

“You’ll always be her daddy.” I cup his face, my lips curving into a faint smile. “No matter what she calls you. She’ll always look up to you. Come to you when she needs someone. She’ll always be your baby.”

He sighs deeply. “Thank you.”

I let my head fall over his shoulder.

“But I’m still going to kill my brother.”

We both laugh as the plane makes its descent, hitting the runway with a jolt before it slows to a stop.

“You’re now free to unfasten your seat belts,” the captain says. “Please enjoy your trip.”

Michael undoes Sophia’s belt while I do mine. When we’re all on our feet, he takes out his cell and types something out quickly before placing it back in his pocket. He side-eyes me as we head out of the plane, and that has me even more excited about what he’s got planned.

As soon as we climb down the steps, I breathe in the cool, crisp air, my eyes wandering to the horizon, where the sky blossoms with rich hues of crimson and fiery gold.

When we make it all the way down, I suddenly notice a car a short distance away. A white sedan. Nothing special about it. But I stare at it anyway, wondering why it’s here and why we’re suddenly moving toward it.

“Who’s in that car, Michael?” I ask, peeking up at him, my heart frantically beating as though it knows before I do.

His eyes bore into mine, the corner of his mouth lifting in a lopsided grin. “Some things are worth the wait, little dove.”

I shiver; this feeling of unexplainable heaviness hits me all at once. A pounding of emotion swelling inside me. Tears are suddenly gathering within my eyes when the car door opens. We’re too far to see who’s inside it. But my feet are moving faster, past Michael, past Sophia.

Someone steps out from the passenger side. I see her black stilettos first.

“Mom?” I burst with a cry, my vision blurry.

No, it can't be. He didn't.

"Elsie!" she cries.

I don't know which one of us runs to the other first, but I'm breathless, rushing into her loving arms.

"Mom!" A sob wrenches out of me; I'm weeping as she clutches me with every fiber of her being.

"Baby. My sweet baby." She grabs my face and stares into my eyes like she can't believe I'm here, and I get it because I can't believe she's here either.

Tears track down her reddened cheeks, like the waters of unending falls.

The driver's side door opens, and when I see my father, the moisture pooling in his eyes, his chin trembling, I shatter all over again.

The wave of our agony, the years of separation...it all swells, it all builds, until it bursts. And together, we fall apart in each other's arms.

I can't believe we're sitting in the same home I once spent my childhood in. It still looks exactly the same, like they were afraid to change a single thing about it in case I returned. There's even still that crack in the granite, the one Dad put in when he was fixing the sink. It was three days before I was taken.

I remember everything about that day. Mom was making coffee and I was eating a scone when the pipe burst all over Dad. Then it was all hands on deck, me running off to get some towels and Mom shutting off the water supply. Dad went off to get more of his tools, but accidentally hit the counter with a wrench when he returned. He meant to fix it, but I guess after I was taken, it was the last thing on their minds.

Michael took Sophia out for ice cream, giving my parents and I time alone. They've been tearfully staring at me for a few minutes now, touching my hands and arms as though I'm a figment of their imaginations.

"We were so happy when he called." Dad chokes up, referring to Michael. "I didn't think we'd be seeing you so soon." He pauses, taking a deep breath, swiping under his eyes. "My God, sweetheart..."

My chin trembles; I'm completely overwrought with emotions. I can't believe Michael planned this as a surprise. I haven't had any time to thank

him. He did this for me. However unconventional our relationship is, this right here...it matters. He cared enough to call my father and arrange it.

He grabs my hand and holds it in his lap, while Mom drops her head on my shoulder.

“We didn’t think this day would ever come,” he cries. “We did everything we could to find you, but it’s like you vanished without a trace.”

“It’s not your fault,” I sniffle. “It’s mine.”

My mother’s comforting arms come around me. “No, no, no. Don’t you do that, baby. It’s not your fault.” Her gaze slams into mine, and she wipes away my tears with her thumbs. “You were just a girl who wanted to experience the world. Don’t you ever blame yourself.”

“So who exactly is this Michael to you?” my father asks.

And I’m not quite sure what to tell them. But I lead with the truth.

His gaze drifts down to the giant rock on my left hand.

Oh, crap. I forgot that was there.

“You’re...” He sucks in a breath. “You two are married?”

I grimace. “Yeah. Kinda. I mean...”

I swallow down the nerves climbing up my throat, my heart rate increasing.

They both stare bug-eyed at me. I mean, how can I even blame them? They just got me back after years of being without me. Now, I’m married to some random guy. I shoot out a sharp exhale.

Here goes nothing.

“I met Michael by chance when I escaped where I was. And the only way to protect me from the people who took me was by marrying me.”

I know that’s not exactly the entire truth, but I care about him, and the last thing I’d want is for my family to hate him.

“So this is more of a convenience marriage?” Mom furrows a brow.

“Um...” I twist the ring around, my foot bouncing. “I guess, yeah.”

Dad’s entire face shifts with anger I’ve never seen before. “The people who took you...who are they?”

“The worst kind of people, Dad.”

A whoosh of a breath escapes my throat, and I start at the very beginning from that moment we were taken, giving them pieces of the painful past, just enough for them to understand what I went through without scarring them more than they are already. I finish with how Michael and I met, telling them I broke in and he kept me safe from the Bianchis.

Dad's features contort with anguish and rage while Mom cries uncontrollable tears. Maybe this was a mistake. I should've lied. I should've spared them added trauma. What's wrong with me?

I ball a fist, my nails digging into my palm.

Dad jumps to his feet. "I'm calling my friend at the police station, and we'll get the feds involved."

"NO!" I leap toward him, grabbing his wrist. "Dad, please!" I shake my head frantically, brows furrowing. "You can't. They'll kill Kayla and Jade. They have a lot of crooked cops in their pocket. Let Michael deal with it." My tone grows shaky. "Promise me!"

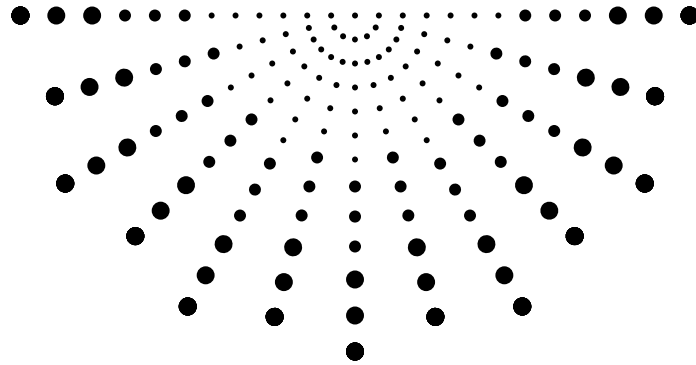
His demeanor shifts into the adoring dad who'd never do a thing that would harm me. "Okay, sweetheart. Shh."

He grabs me in a tight embrace. And I cry against him as his arms hold on to me like they used to when I was little. These hugs...oh, how I've missed them.

"I won't do anything, honey. Please, just don't cry."

But I can't seem to stop the endless river of tears – of heartache, of loss. So much loss, so many years without them. Gone. Just like that. Taken from me. From them. And there's nothing any of us can do about it other than to live in the present. It's the one thing we have left, and I won't let it pass us by. Not for a second.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



MICHAEL

“I hope it’s not too weird to sleep in my old room.” Elsie laughs nervously, fidgeting in front of me while we stare at the posters of Taylor Swift on her wall. “Yeah, I kind of used to be obsessed back then.” Her throat clears in a nervous way, but it only makes her more adorable.

“She’s not too bad.”

I run my fingers up her spine, and she shivers.

“Come here,” I whisper, flipping her to me, getting lost in her eyes.

That pull between us, this force driving us into each other...it’s unexplainable. I draw her closer, soaking my fingers into her hair, tugging hard, those lips brushing over mine.

“What you did for me...” She sighs against my mouth. “Thank you.” She peppers a kiss to the corner of my mouth, and my heart flips inside my chest. “I can’t tell you what it means to me.”

“I’d do anything for you, little dove.” My palm squeezes her hip. “I thought you knew that by now.”

“Maybe you should remind me.” Her tone grows silky smooth, teasing me with her desire.

My pulse, my heartbeat...they all beat at once, and with a growl, I cover her mouth with mine, devouring her the way I’ve been dying to do all damn day. But I let her have her time with her parents, knowing I’ll have her for the rest of my life.

She groans as her hands ride down my back, jerking up my shirt until I feel her hands on my bare skin. My tongue swirls with hers before I suck her lower lip into my mouth.

I wrench myself away on a strangled curse, dropping my forehead on hers. “If we don’t stop now, I’ll fuck you in the same room where you once only dreamed about getting fucked the way I fuck you.”

She gasps, her chest falling up and down in quick succession, her eyes filling with shameless need as I dare a gaze at her.

“Do it,” she grits.

I mutter a curse, snapping my hand tighter in her hair, pulling her head back and exposing her neck for my greedy teeth to rake against it.

“Fuck me however you want to,” she groans. “They won’t hear a thing. They’re all the way downstairs.”

“With the way you scream when I pound into that pussy, the whole damn state will hear you.”

I grunt when she bites into her bottom lip, and I let my thumb stroke between her lips, parting them.

“Please, Michael...”

“Mm, my wife is so greedy.” I wind her hair around my knuckles, my other hand sliding down her stomach, fingering the waistband of her leggings. I dip inside, finding her bare.

“No panties, huh?”

Her breath hitches, those eyes drowning with need.

“Did you want this to happen? Did you want me to find you like this?”

When a grumble is her only reply, I yank her hair harder.

“Answer me.”

“Yes...” She trails off, voice growing raspier. “I wanted you to touch me as soon as we left that house to get on the plane.”

“How did you want me to touch you?” I kiss her hard, pushing off so I can watch her as a single finger traces up her slit.

She lets out a moan as I stroke her clit.

“Is that how you wanted to be touched, little dove? Under my control? To do with what I want?”

“Yes...” she cries as the tip of my finger enters her, those walls clenching around me.

“Look how wet you are already, and I haven’t even done a thing.” I slip two fingers inside her, and she gasps out a moan. “How do you think I should

fuck you? Hard? Slow?”

“Yes, don’t stop,” she whimpers, throwing her head back.

I pick up my tempo, the tightening of her cunt telling me she’s not going to last long.

Slowly, I pull out, and she grunts in protest, but I don’t wait another moment more as I flip her around and throw her onto the bed, yanking her pants down her ass and pressing her into the mattress with a palm around the back of her neck.

“Much better.” I spank her ass hard, watching that skin turn red.

“Fuck me, please.” Her voice is a weeping of brazen desire.

She works her ass higher, getting on her hands and knees, like she’s trying to reach my cock.

I chuckle, slapping a palm to her other cheek. “You keep popping your ass like that and I’m gonna fill your other hole.”

I play with the rim of her ass, slipping a digit inside her until my first knuckle. She bucks against it. And when I fill her pussy with three fingers while thrusting into her ass with my thumb, she screams my name, loud enough to wake a dead city.

Goddamn, this woman owns me. Every aching part of me.

I roll with a low chuckle, my cock throbbing for her. “Yeah, that’s it. Take it all, my greedy little dove.”

She fists her pink and purple blanket. “Yes...Michael...”

Her words die in her throat, lost in the chaos of her bliss, and she falls apart, letting me have her. Letting me own her body the way she’s beginning to own my heart.

And without another moment to waste, I drag my sweats down, line my cock at her soaked entrance, and thrust all the way home.

With my body draped over hers, I take her with reckless need, with the hunger of a man desperate for the woman he’s falling deep for. The one woman in the world who has the power to make him fall to his knees and beg her to keep him. To love him. To never let go.

I am that man, and my Elsie? She will always be that woman.

ELSIE

“Are you cheating?” Dad teases Sophia the following day as we play Monopoly on the dining table. “There’s no way you could beat me three times.”

She giggles, shrugging, all smug.

“I practice a lot. Pearl, our cook, plays with me, and I always win.” Her brows rise in challenge.

My parents have officially fallen smitten with Sophia. Who could blame them? That girl could turn two rivals into friends and make them do whatever she asked. She’s got that sweet way about her.

“A cook, huh?” Mom chimes in, a smile fluttering across her mouth, while her eyes scan Michael’s. “What exactly do you do?”

This is the first question either of them have directed at Michael. I think they’re trying to tread carefully so as not to upset me, which I do appreciate.

He shifts uncomfortably. It’s kind of funny to see him that way. He’s always so collected and sure of himself.

“I own a host of businesses, ma’am.”

I’m glad my parents have never heard of him. I’d imagine they’d have a huge problem with me being married to a mobster.

“No need to be so formal,” Mom says. “Seeing as you’re my son-in-law and all.”

Michael juts out his chin. “I know we just met and I’m sure our relationship came as quite the shock, but I want you both to know...” He darts his attention between my parents. “I care very deeply about your daughter, and I promise to do everything in my power to protect her from now on.”

“I hope so,” Dad exhales dolefully. “My daughter is my baby, and knowing everything that’s been...”

He pauses, shaking his head, the pain he carries on his face evident from the tug of his features.

“I understand, sir.” Michael leans in closer to the table. “I swear to you, man to man, my wife and my daughter come before anything, even myself.”

Dad nods solemnly, their gazes unwavering. “I believe you.” His eyes soften when they happen at Sophia, sitting across from him. “Now, seeing as you’re the champion, I think a celebration is in order.”

Her eyes widen in wonder as she stares up at him. “Like a party?”

Dad narrows a thoughtful gaze. “Kind of like a party. How does ice cream and warm chocolate chip cookies sound?”

“Together?” Her mouth parts, eyes growing even larger. “In one bowl?”

Michael chuckles, swinging an arm around my shoulders.

“Well, of course,” Dad says, rising to his height as she practically throws her chair back and joins him. “And seeing as you’ve won, you’re getting two scoops.”

“I really like it here.” She grabs his large hand and holds it in her tiny one. “A lot.”

Standing at the door, getting ready to go back home the following evening, it feels like my heart’s being ripped from my body. I wish there was a way for me to be with them and with Michael at the same time. I know he’d let me stay if I wanted to, but the problem is, I don’t want to leave him – or Sophia.

“Do we really have to go?” Sophia whines, staring at Michael, begging him to stay.

She’s grown fond of my parents in the couple of days we’ve been here.

“Unfortunately, Daddy has to work. I’m sorry, princess. But we’ll be back very soon.”

He looks to me with those words, and I force a smile, the back of my eyes aching with emotion.

“Do you promise to come back soon?” Mom asks, her features zipping with a frown, and I can tell she’s trying hard not to cry.

“I do.” He nods. “I’d never keep her from you.”

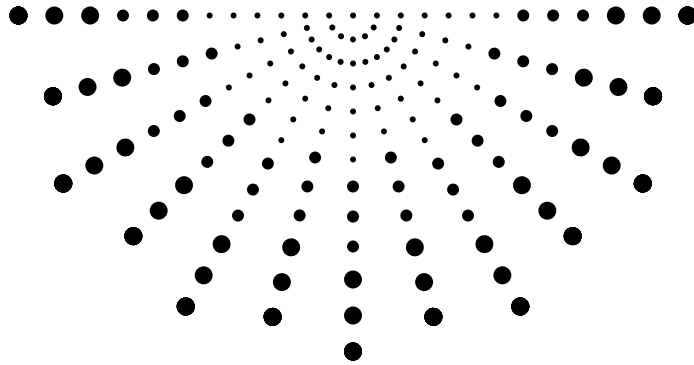
“Thank you.” Mom reaches her arms for him and hugs him for a brief moment before her glistening eyes go to mine.

It physically hurts, and I fight the oncoming tears.

“Please video chat me every day.” She clutches my face in her palms, tears working their way out into her eyes.

“I promise, I will.” I look to both her and Dad, simultaneously throwing my arms around them and never wanting to let go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



MICHAEL

It was hard to watch her say goodbye to her parents, who clearly love her. But I kept her from them. I won't come between them anymore. She can see them however often she wants to. I'll ensure the Bianchis don't find her.

It's been quiet lately, anyway. Seems like they're still busy fighting the war with the Cavaleri brothers. Last we heard, only Agnelo remains. And I hope when he meets his end, it's fucking brutal.

Elsie stretches her gorgeous body beside me the following morning, all of us now home. I lift on an elbow, and a smile creeps to her mouth as she catches me staring at her silky red nightgown. My fingertip runs over her nipples, poking through the fabric, and she rocks her hips deeper into the mattress.

"Good morning, wife." I pull out a smirk, my knuckles rising and brushing under her chin.

"Good morning, husband." She groans. "Do you really have to work today?" She fists her small hand around the head of my throbbing erection. "Or can you keep me company in bed a little longer?"

I grumble out a curse as she jerks me, making me want to stay in bed with her all damn day.

"I'm about to eat you for breakfast if you don't stop," I warn, though it's not much of a warning since I know how much she enjoys the things my tongue can do.

“They do say it’s the most important meal of the day.” A smile swells on her lips, her tone dripping like honey.

She’s enjoying how turned on I am for her, and I like that she is. I’ll never get this hard for anyone else but my wife.

“Do they now?” I flip over her in one fluid motion, taking both her wrists and pinning them to the mattress right up against her thighs.

My body rocks against her core while my gaze stays pinned with hers.

Have I made love to anyone before her? Did I even know what that meant until she came into my life?

My mouth drops over hers, brushing our lips together. “If I could marry you all over again, Mrs. Marino, I would.”

She inhales sharply, her brows crouching.

“Michael...” she hums with bated emotions swimming in her eyes.

“Don’t say my name like that, or we’ll definitely not get out of this bed at all today.”

“Won’t see me complaining.” She gives me a wicked little grin, and I instantly need inside her.

“Was gonna make myself wait to have you when I got home...” I let go of her wrist and shove her nightgown up her body. “But there’s no way I can wait now.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I rub the tips of my fingers over her bare little pussy, about to be my meal, when a knock on the door has me grumbling.

That’s definitely not my daughter. She doesn’t knock like that.

“Who is it?”

She rolls her hips on a rasp, trying to get me to touch her deeper.

“Sir,” one of my men says. “You have company out front, and they won’t leave.”

I instantly jump out of my bed, my heart racing. If it’s one of the Bianchis’ men, the shit I’m going to do...

“Stay here,” I tell her, grabbing her jaw and kissing her hard.

She sits up, her features tugging with alarm. “The Bianchis?”

“I don’t know.” I cup her cheek in the span of my palm. “But you’re going to stay here until I find out. Got it?” I bend to kiss her once more. “Don’t you dare disobey me.”

I stroke my lips with hers, and she hums out a moan. I start to go, but she snaps her hand to my wrist.

“Be careful.” Her brows gather. “Please.”

“You worrying for me...” I lift her hand up and kiss the top of it. “Is something I’ll never get over.”

Her expression softens. “I mean it.”

“I meant what I said too. Stay here. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I will.”

I reluctantly let her go, and with one final look, I march out the door, closing it behind me.

My man is there, waiting. “Sir, they say they’re the Cavaleris, and they’re looking for Elsie. There’s a bunch of them there. They demand to see you.”

That gets my attention.

I start for the stairs, and we quickly reach the bottom.

“You sure that’s what they said?”

“Yeah. They’re strapped and pissed.”

Sounds like they’re living up to their very fine reputation.

I chuckle. “So am I.”

My other man at the bottom hands me a pistol.

“And they’d better have a damn good reason for coming here, because they disturbed me from a very good morning with my beautiful wife.”

I *will* find out why they’re asking about Elsie. If they came to hurt her, they won’t make it out of here alive.

Slipping my gun into my waistband, I open the door to find a crowd of people. Four of my guys aim their guns at a group of five men, more of them still seated inside a second SUV.

They thought they could come to my home and display their weapons like this?

“Put your fucking guns down,” my voice booms, and their eyes all go to mine.

“Tell your men first,” a tall one with green eyes says, glaring at me.

If it wasn’t for my girls in the house, I’d kill him.

I wave a hand down, and my men lower their guns.

“See how easy that was?” I snicker, curling the corner of my mouth. “Now, boys, why don’t you put away your toys so we can have that chat you came here to have?”

“We’re not looking to make friends,” another one with eyes just as emerald adds gruffly. “We came here for Elsie, and we know you have her.”

“Who?” A callous smirk forms around my mouth.

A car door opens, and out walks a woman I very much know.

My chuckle rumbles through my chest. “Chiara Bianchi. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Shut up, Michael.” She props a hand on her hip, donned in black leather pants. “Hand Elsie over. And if I find out you hurt her, I’ll kill you myself.”

I throw my head back with a laugh. “You haven’t changed much, have you?”

Her tight-lipped smile doesn’t quite make it to her mocha-dipped gaze. “No. So don’t piss me off. I am my daddy’s daughter.”

“I did hear about his untimely passing,” I mock. “My condolences.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m really broken up about it.” She snickers. “Now, I wouldn’t want to kill you the way I did him.”

“You?” Amusement lines my features. “That’s definitely not the way I heard that story.”

“Well…” She marches up a single step. “Want me to demonstrate?”

“I’m a gentleman.” I raise my hands up. “I’d never dream of hurting a woman.”

“Yeah, you’re a real gem.” She rolls her eyes. “Now, where is Elsie?”

“How do you know this Elsie?”

If Chiara is involved, there’s no way they’re here to hurt her, but I still don’t understand how she, of all people, could know my wife.

“If you don’t know her, then why do you care?” Chiara challenges with a tilt of her chin.

“Seems you came all this way, so she must be important. Consider me curious.”

“She’s a friend of a friend who’s like family. So that makes her family.” She tightens her palm around her waist, an outline of her own weapon clearly visible. “Now, where did you lock her up?”

She takes a step closer to me, and that gets the first man with the green eyes to clench his jaw. Ah, so she’s taken now. Well, I’m happy for her. She deserved more than that piece-of-shit father she had the misfortune of being related to.

“I haven’t locked Elsie up anywhere. I’d never harm a woman.”

“Yeah,” she laughs sarcastically. “Cut the bullshit.”

Her features grow harsh once more.

Suddenly, the front door swings open and out walks my disobedient wife.

“Don’t hurt him!” She runs toward me, right into fucking danger.

The shit I’m gonna do to her ass for this.

“Elsie, get back in the house. Now!” I roar.

“No.” She walks up right in front of me, as though instead of it being my job to protect her, it somehow became hers to protect me.

My damn little warrior. She makes me proud, even when I want to kill her right now for putting herself at risk, especially for me.

I round an arm around her middle and drag her behind me. But she doesn’t stay there, coming to stand beside me.

“Who the hell are you people and what are you doing with my husband?”

“Husband?” Chiara’s dumbfounded expression has me tightening my mouth to stop from laughing.

“Yeah, we’re married.” She pops a brow. “Now, who the hell are you all?”

Another door flings open, and a woman I don’t recognize steps out, the wind sweeping her light brown hair across her face.

“Elsie?” she cries.

“Kayla?” Goose bumps break across Elsie’s arm, and I slowly drop mine, shock weaving itself through me. “Oh my God, Kayla.”

She rushes for her friend just as a tall blonde woman walks out, her face stricken with tears.

“Jade?” Elsie sobs, glancing up. “You’re together? Oh my God!”

And all of them are now in each other’s arms, shattering together.

ELSIE

My sobs only get louder once we finally make it inside. I’m unable to stop staring at the two women I thought I’d never see again. Kayla and Jade are right here, right next to me, and I keep blinking, wondering if I’m seeing an illusion.

Maybe I’m dreaming. That has to be it. There’s no way they made it out too. No way they were the ones who found *me*.

“Are you...real?” I sniffle, tears distorting my vision.

They laugh and cry and nod simultaneously, tethering their hands to mine as we sit side by side on the sofa.

“I never thought I’d find you guys.” I blot at my eyes, emotions stitching up the back of my throat.

Kayla throws her thin arms around me.

“I was so worried about you when you left. And I swear...” She pants, staring with red-stained eyes. “I swear I never told them anything, no matter what they did to me.”

And with that confession, that they did in fact hurt her because of me, my head falls against her chest, and I weep. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It-it’s all my fault. I abandoned you.”

She draws away. “No! You did the right thing. You had to try.”

“And, Jade.” I hug her to me at the same time. “Oh, Jade.”

“We’re all alive,” she says tearfully. “I never thought that I’d see either of you again. I never even wanted to dream of our reunion. I never wanted to hope.” Her voice crumbles.

The guys stand off to the side, quietly giving us our moment.

“How did you find me?” I ask, dashing my gaze at them both. “How did you two end up together?”

Jade sighs. “It’s a long story. But it all started when I met Enzo.”

She relives her entire ordeal. Her past at the Bianchi strip club, the afterhours when she was forced to service people, and her days at the sex club.

Agnelo tortured her. Beat her. Raped her. His cruelty saw no bounds. And if raping her wasn’t enough, fathering her child wasn’t either. When she gave birth to her son, Robby, Agnelo took that baby from her and kept him. She had to live without her son, not knowing what was being done to him. The only time she ever saw Robby was once a month at Agnelo’s approval.

She has him now, thanks to Enzo and his brothers. They’re the ones who found Kayla too and saved the rest of the women and children that were being kept in cages.

“Agnelo is dead,” Jade adds. “I want you to know he’ll never hurt anyone again.” She squeezes my hand.

“He’s really gone?” My breaths still in my lungs.

“That’s right,” Matteo, one of the brothers, says.

“Well, that deserves a toast,” Michael adds, removing a carafe and some crystal-cut glasses and pouring honey-colored liquor into them.

“Is that whiskey?” Enzo reaches for one of the glasses, taking a gulp. “Sure fucking is. The good stuff, too.”

He grins once he swallows some, and his brothers pick up their drinks too.

“Got any beer for my lightweight of a brother?” Enzo elbows Matteo, who narrows him a glare. “It’s okay, baby bro. Not everyone can handle a real drink.”

Matteo flips him off, taking that liquor into his mouth and downing the entire thing. But his eyes enlarge, and his face appears as though he’s about to vomit.

Enzo chuckles while the other two shake their heads.

“These kids...” He clamps a palm against Matteo’s shoulder. “They’ll never learn.”

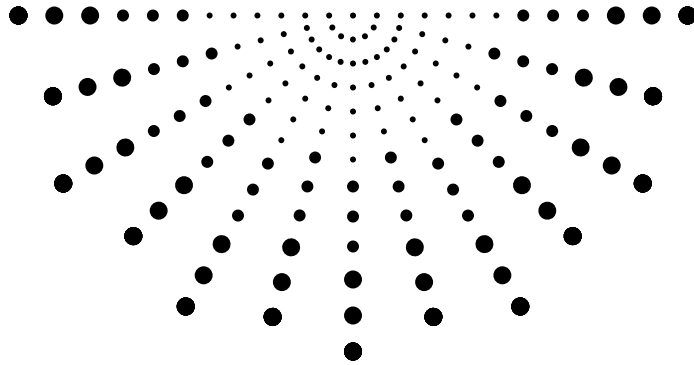
A rush of footsteps tramples down to greet us, and Sophia appears, teddy in hand, a small fist rubbing her eye.

She bows a thoughtful brow at all these people, marching up without hesitation.

“Are we having a party, Daddy?”

“You know what, princess?” Michael kneels and scoops her up into his arms. “I think we are.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



MICHAEL

The next two weeks fly by in a glance, and every day has been better than the last. I've never laughed this much, never felt this much. Like my heart is permanently outside my body. She makes me feel that way every moment we're together.

But with each passing minute, I've been dreading the war that's coming. The one I've known was coming all along. Now that most of my father's men are loyal to me, I've been gathering the ones I can trust to fight alongside me in the battle I'm surely going to win.

But winning isn't what's most important to me. I have to keep my girls safe. That's the main priority. This can't touch them. He can't know we're coming.

I've been building a plan in these last few weeks, hoping he surrenders peacefully, hoping we won't require a fight where casualties fall on both sides. But if it comes to it, we're ready. We're coming for him. This will all end one way or another.

"Don't dip your fingers in the sauce," I tell Sophia, who's helping Elsie make her grandmother's mac and cheese.

She's been cooking a lot lately – and singing too. Now that she has Kayla, Jade, and her parents back, talking to them every day, all she does is smile. Her friends have already stopped by for a visit twice. I'm glad she has the people she loves back.

“What’s the fun in that, Daddy?” Elsie glances at me behind her shoulder, dipping her finger into the sauce too.

Those sultry eyes dancing with a glint, staring right into my soul. Her lips jerk with a barely there smile before she sucks her finger clean.

A groan thunders out of me, my jaw clenching. With a sharp inhale, I walk to her from behind, grabbing her throat and pushing her head against my chest.

“You keep sucking like that...” I whisper into the shell of her ear, my voice as rough as gravel. “...and I’ll have something else for you to suck on later.”

I register that low gasp, and she’s clearing her throat, laughing nervously, her palm gripping the edge of the counter so hard her hand jitters.

With my other hand, I dip a finger into the sauce too. Drops spill when I near her mouth, and I spread her lips, allowing her to suck the taste of it off me.

“Daddy!” Sophia giggles. “You just told me not to do that.”

She slaps a palm against her forehead, shaking her head, while I watch Elsie’s pupils dilate as she sucks me dry.

“Good girl,” I tell her, holding back a groan, when the tip of her tongue circles around me, and my cock instantly throbs.

I swipe across her lips with my thumb, cleaning her up, a smirk fitting to my mouth when her cheeks build with a slight shade of pink.

“Okay...” She fumbles, righting herself, picking up a ladle she almost dropped. “Let’s get this sauce in the pan and into the oven.”

She side-eyes me as she spills it over the macaroni, while I admire her. And not just her beauty, but all of her: the way she smiles, the way she carries herself with such ease, the way she holds my daughter’s hand and treats her like she’s been her mother our entire life.

The next morning, she’s purring in my ear, rubbing her thigh up against my cock. And I’m ready to bury myself inside her like I just did minutes ago.

“Don’t go...” she moans.

All I want to do is stay in this bed beside her, to feel her warmth instead

of getting on a plane with Gio and Father to meet the Irish on their turf, but this is important. It's part of how we end the family feud between us. It's also when Gio finally learns what he has to do to help mend the bridge between us and the Irish. If I had told him beforehand, he'd never have agreed to come, and I'd have another problem to solve.

But this way, in front of Patrick, he can't refuse. Sometimes, we have to make sacrifices for the sake of our family and their safety, and this is his. He'll forgive me eventually.

"I'm sorry, baby. I promise to be back by tonight."

"Okay." She sits up on her knees, watching me rise to button my shirt and zip my pants back up.

She catches her bottom lip with her teeth, her gaze swinging down my chest and lower, to my thighs.

"Better stop looking at my cock that way, or I'll be very late for my meeting."

"Looking at it how?" she teases, that lustful gaze narrowing.

I button up the cuffs, picking up my suit jacket and throwing it back on while pinning my gaze to hers.

She spreads her lips up into a teasing smile, a brow bowing. And in a flash, I clutch the back of her head, roughly fisting her hair, gritting as I drag my lips to hers, licking between them.

"Like you're begging me to force that mouth open and have you choking on it."

She whimpers, and my mouth is on her in an instant, growling as she moans, all teeth and lips. This kiss...it's hungry, maddening. I kiss her like I might never see her again, like it's the last one we'll ever share. And being who I am, that may well be true.

When I draw back, we're both breathless.

"You keep kissing me like that, and I might just not let you leave." She gasps for air, landing another kiss to my cheek, throwing her hands around my shoulders.

"I'll miss you." The confession rolls off my tongue without hesitation.

"And I you." She sighs, grabbing my hand and getting out of bed, her fingers slicing through mine.

She clasps my cheek, staring up into my eyes, and I feel this sudden pull to stay, this heaviness in my chest coming out of nowhere. But I know I have to go. This meeting needs to happen today. There are four men patrolling the

house. The girls will be fine.

I reach for my knife and remove it.

“Take this,” I tell her, stretching out my hand for hers.

“What?” Her eyes round. “I can barely use one.”

“Sure didn’t look that way when you had that gun pointed at me while I was pretending to be sleeping.” A smirk lands on my mouth until my features grow harsh.

“That was...uh...” Her lips jerk. “Different.”

“Oh yeah?” I arch a brow, cupping her ass, squeezing that damn thing in my palm. “How’s that, baby?”

“I wasn’t *actually* going to kill you.” She rolls her eyes. “Maybe.” A small laugh bubbles out.

“It’ll make me feel better if I know you have something to protect yourself and Sophia with.”

Her features grow tense. “Who would hurt us? The Bianchis are dead.”

“Just take it. As a precaution.”

I don’t remind her that I have a lot of enemies. Some of them even look like friends. No reason to make her worry even more.

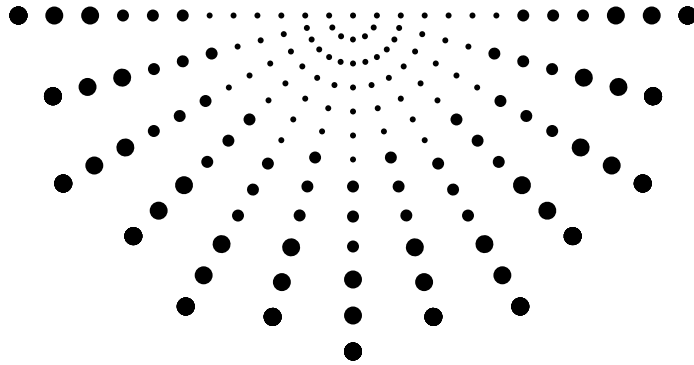
“O-okay.” She tentatively grips the handle and takes it, staring down at it in both hands.

“I hate this too,” I tell her. “But it comes with the price of being mine.”

I bring my lips down to hers and kiss her softly.

“And you *are* mine,” I whisper. “All mine. Remember that.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



MICHAEL

“What do you think he’s going to want?” Gio asks when we arrive at the private airport, two SUVs already there.

The Irish are anything but not punctual.

“We’re going to find out,” my father says. “But if it’s your brother’s head...” His eyes flip to me as we march toward the vehicles. “You will give it to them.”

I drag in a quick, tight breath. “I will agree to what’s best for this family. You forget that I’m in charge now.”

My tone is laced with quiet rage, and he knows me well enough to sense it.

He snickers from my left. “And *you* forget who the hell *I* am.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I strike back.

“Whoa, you two. Relax.” Gio curses under his breath as we approach the men dressed in black, waiting for us with rifles strapped to their backs.

We stretch out our arms as they pat us down. But they’re not checking for weapons. They’re checking for wires. Can’t be too careful.

Getting into the back of the SUV, we ride in silence through a small town about a hundred miles outside of Boston. Patrick likes to keep to himself, so he bought a large piece of land – I’m talking acres of farmland – and built a bunch of houses for his three sons and two daughters, plus a few others for those loyal to him. Rumor is that’s where the next-generation academy is too.

Where kids become killers. But no one has ever seen it.

The car halts in front of a sprawling three-story red brick home, cattle grazing in the distance, scattered across the bright greenery. If anything, the place is deceiving. No one would think that the Mob resides in a place like this.

“Follow me,” one of the men says.

We shuffle out, entering the house, a whiff of garlic in the air.

“Come in, come in,” Patrick’s voice booms as he walks out of the room to greet us by the door.

He wipes his hands on his apron, wearing jeans and a plain old white t-shirt. His hair is gray, sprinkled with black, matching his thick brows. He’s almost as tall as my brothers and I. Looking at him, one would never suspect that he runs one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the country. Their syndicate runs three states across. They have money. Territory. Weapons.

And most importantly, they have a leader whose only goal is growth.

“You must excuse my bloody appearance.” His thick Irish brogue is hard to miss. “I was making seafood chowder. You will have some, aye?”

“Thank you,” I say, stepping closer, shaking his hand. “But I was hoping we’d get right down to business.”

His grip is firm as he eyes me sharply.

“Ahh...” He waves a dismissive hand. “You young people, always in a rush. Isn’t that right, Giancarlo?”

My father snickers. “You know how it is, Pat. You’ve got boys. They think they’re smarter than us.” He clasps Patrick on the shoulder, and together, they move into the kitchen. “I’ve gotta try that chowder. I keep hearing how good it is.”

“What’s Dad doing?” Gio whispers over to me as we slowly trek behind them.

“What he always does,” I mutter. “Acts like he’s everybody’s friend until he stabs them in the back.”

Silently, we walk into the kitchen, a round wooden table already set with bread and glasses of water.

“Sit,” Patrick says over his shoulder, pouring chowder into bowls and placing them before us.

We wait for him to settle down before we start to eat.

“I appreciate you all showing up.” He takes a long sip of his water,

looking me dead in the eyes. “It’s time we settle this.” His cup lands on the table with a thud. “My nephew’s death has gone unanswered long enough, wouldn’t ya say?”

In that moment, my father gives me a knowing look. He suspects it’s Raph’s head he’s looking for, but I know better. I have for a long time.

“What do you have in mind?” I take a spoonful of chowder out of courtesy.

I have no interest in food. I want this done so I can return to my girls.

He sighs deeply, still holding my stare from across the table. “The only thing that will settle this...is a marriage bond between my youngest daughter, Eriu...” He peers at Gio with a slow-growing grin. “...and your brother.”

“Whoa.” Gio backs up into a chair, almost flipping backwards. “Are you saying I’m supposed to marry your daughter?”

“Aye.” He casually dips his spoon back into the bowl, eating as though he hasn’t just announced a marriage. “She’s quite the beautiful young woman.” Patrick’s expression is unreadable as he peeks up at me from beneath his salt-and-pepper brows. “Are you refusing my terms?”

“Look...uh...” Gio runs a hand down his face and breathes a heavy sigh. “I’m not marriage material. Your daughter would be better off with anyone other than me. I promise you that.”

“Well...” Patrick scoffs, pushing his bowl away. “It seems that you’re the one I want.” He starts to rise. “If you don’t agree to this, you’re asking for war, young fella. You understand?”

“Of course he’ll marry Eriu,” my father chuckles, slapping Gio on the forearm. “Isn’t that right, son?”

His features flit with restrained fury.

“May I have a moment with my brother?” I ask Patrick. “Alone.”

With that, my eyes go to my father. I don’t want him here either.

“Of course.” Patrick begins to stand, and my father follows suit. “How about you boys meet us in the living room when you’re done here? My daughters and my sons will be joining us, and you can meet your new bride, Giovanni.”

With a chuckle, he marches out with my father, and we’re alone.

“Listen, Gio, you—”

“Fuck!” he whisper-shouts. “You knew about this, didn’t you?”

He practically flings the chair back as he jumps to his feet.

“I did.” I let out a hard sigh. “I won’t lie to you.”

I shuffle over to him, even as his breathing turns noisy, and he looks about ready to kill me.

“But trust me, this is the only way to save our brother. This is what he wants, or we go to war. One we may never come back from. Are you ready for that?”

“Fuuuck!” he grits, forming a white-knuckled fist, digging it into his forehead. “Why the hell couldn’t *you* marry her? You needed a wife anyway.”

“He didn’t want me. Said I was too old. She’s only eighteen, and you’re thirty. I guess it’s better than my thirty-six.” I flip my hands in the air.

He paces back and forth, muttering under his breath, slapping a hand to the back of his neck.

“How do you know you won’t like her? Meet her. See what happens.”

“You don’t understand.” He pauses, glaring anger pouring through his eyes. “The girl I was telling you about. That redhead...” He curses once more.

“What about her?”

His eyes grow pained.

“She’s all I think about. All I want. Fucking hell!” he grits in a low tone. “How do I marry another woman when all I want is her?”

His voice cracks, and I’ve never seen my brother hurt this way. Not about a woman. And I pity him in this moment. If this were me and I had to give up Elsie...I’d scorch the earth before I’d allow another woman into my bed. But there’s no choice here. None that I see. Not yet.

“Look, I get it. But the only option we have right now is to meet her.” I grip both his shoulders and level a look at him. “So let’s go do that. Then we’ll figure out what to do. We can stall as much as we can. You’re not marrying her right now. Maybe she won’t even want you.” I grin.

He sneers. “Everyone wants me.”

But even as he jokes, there’s tension there. This is killing him.

“Let’s just get this over with before I find an exit out of this place.”

I nod, and together we walk out of the kitchen, not even sure where to go. But one of Patrick’s men is there.

“This way,” he says, walking ahead of us.

We turn left and then right, until we hear voices and laughter. My father’s. Patrick’s.

Gio takes a long breath, his eyes closing before he cracks his neck and

puts on the biggest smile right before we enter the room.

“Ahh, there you two are.” Patrick rises.

And as he does, as he walks over to the two women there, Gio’s face goes ashen.

“Fuck,” he mutters, unable to look away.

“Let me introduce you to my two daughters,” Patrick goes on, oblivious to my brother’s reaction.

We stand across from the two women as their father walks to the first.

“This is Iseult, my oldest.”

The woman stands there, her bright turquoise eyes like two daggers poking holes into the wall she’s staring into.

Patrick moves a few steps to the next one, who smiles at my brother, her lips tight as she practically bats her long honey-hued lashes. “And this? Is your bride, Eriu.”

Gio’s completely ignoring him, though. Because his eyes know only one woman, and it’s not his bride. It’s her sister. And her hair...it’s a bright, fiery red.

“God damn it,” I mutter under my breath, then lean into his ear and whisper, “Is it her? Is she the one you want? The sister?”

He nods, not looking at me.

“This is bad,” he says just under his breath. “Real fucking bad.”

My father watches us intently from the red leather sofa. Three men are beside him, who I presume are Patrick’s sons from their appearances, all with pale green eyes like their father’s. Their expressions are stoic as they assess us.

“What are you boys talking about there?” Patrick calls. “Enlighten us. Please.”

He flings a hand in the air.

In that second, Iseult’s eyes momentarily go to Gio, her brows tightening. But just as swiftly, she hides behind her well-constructed mask, her features turning emotionless.

“May I go, please?” she addresses her father. “It doesn’t seem like I’m needed here any longer.”

“You may not,” he says dryly. “This is going to be your brother-in-law and our new family.” He looks disapprovingly at her with a tilt of his jaw. “Have some manners, darling. You will stay like everyone else.”

She forces a smile, her pale green eyes sparkling. “Yes, Father.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.” Eriu softly smiles, shyly fingering her brown hair.

She looks nothing like her older sister: shorter, softer in her expression and mannerisms. And that’s when I recall what Gio said about having watched Iseult kill a man, and...well, that makes sense. She looks like she could handle herself just fine.

“Sit down, boys,” Patrick tells us, gesturing toward the loveseat. “I want you two to meet my sons, Tynan, Fionn, and Cillian, as well.”

Unlike their father’s short gray hair, theirs is dirt brown. I can see the resemblance with Eriu from their matching green eyes, but Iseult looks as though she doesn’t even belong.

The brothers, all with their serious damn faces, nod curtly while the women stand there gazing at my brother – one with tenderness and one with a wild fury – and it’s no surprise that my brother fell for the latter. He always had a thing for women with, uh...spirit.

Iseult’s gaze jumps between my brother and the wall behind him, and her entire face strains, like she’s unsure if she wants to kill him or run off and cry.

“Let the women sit instead,” Gio finally says, and we move aside so they can do just that.

Except Iseult narrows those eyes at Gio, and the vein at the side of her neck throbs.

“I prefer to stand,” she shoots off harshly while her sister thanks him before taking her place.

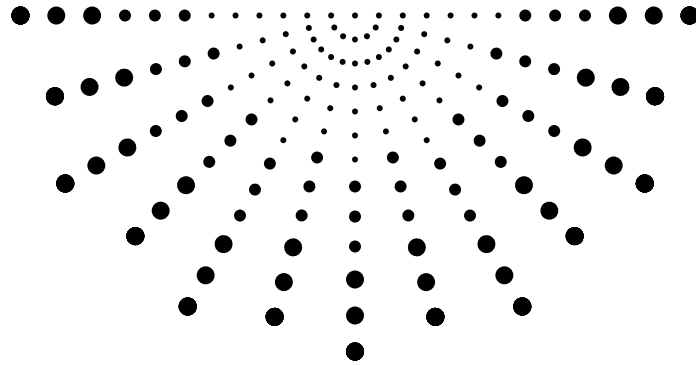
“Gentlemen. You see that, Eriu? What a perfect husband for you.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Her cheeks turn pink as she plays with her fingers, tilting her eyes up at Gio.

But all he does is fight the desire to look at her sister, his jaw twitching. Iseult’s gaze skitters up to him, then shoots away as though he’s made of fleas.

This would be funny if it wasn’t dangerous.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



ELSIE

She twirls before me, giggling while her pink poofy skirt spins right along with her. I play another song on the radio, both of us in the music room Michael set up for me, having the best day. It's been like my little oasis, and I love sharing it with her.

"This is sooo much fun!"

She shakes her hips to an upbeat jam while I swivel on the reclining chair, sipping on an iced coffee I made.

"Come on, Elsie!" She bounces on her feet and grins. "Dance with me!"

Laughing, I turn up the music and place my drink on the side table so I can join her.

My heart skips a beat when her little palm grabs on to mine, and just like her father, she fits perfectly in my messy life. I love her fiercely. She'll never have to doubt that she has someone else who'd lay down their life for hers, because I would, time and time again.

I slip my hand into her other, and together, we dance, we jump, we laugh. We dance and laugh like we've never done before. It's magical and beautiful. And in this moment, I truly realize I'm finally happy. I'm finally free. I'm reunited with my family, my friends are alive and safe. I get to video chat with all of them whenever I want. Things are good.

Best of all, I can be with the man I'm falling for. And falling for him has been like dipping your toes in the ice-cold waters and realizing it's pretty

warm inside. Once you get used to it, that is. And sure, his life is not one I'd have blindly chosen, but now there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

"Are you my mommy now?" she suddenly asks over the music as we slow, one song leading into another.

I jerk back at the question, but I do what I can not to show the shock on my features. The problem is, I don't know what I am to her. I mean, I'm not her mother, though the thought makes me sad somehow. Because I want to be.

"Would you like me to be?" I lead her back to the laptop connected to the speakers so I can lower the music.

"Ugh, duh! You're the best." She rolls her eyes playfully, her lips turning up with a wide grin.

We both settle into the sofa and she jumps into my lap, her thin arms holding tightly to my neck, her face buried in my chest.

"I—I love you, Elsie," she whispers.

My heart literally flips and my eyes water over. "I love you too, sweetie." I hold her closer. "I want us to be a family too."

"Really?" Her voice grows with excitement, her eyes dancing with a glint as they take me in. "You really want to be my mommy?"

"I really do. I—"

But the words die in my throat at the sound of glass shattering. A bullet fires seconds later from somewhere in the house.

"Elsie?" she cries, her eyes widening with sheer terror, her body shuddering. "W-w-what is that?"

A gasp stills in my lungs. The pulse in my neck spikes.

"It's okay, sweetie." I quickly rise, holding her in my arms as I take her to the walk-in closet. "Hide in here."

I open the door as quietly as I can and place her down inside.

"No!" she cries just as a hail of gunfire rings out from somewhere in the house. "I want my daddy."

Oh, my God! What's happening?

"Shh. You have to stay quiet," I tremble out. "Don't move, baby. Okay?"

I squeeze her hand; my heartbeats explode into a thundering gallop.

I have to call Michael. Where's my phone?

I scatter a gaze around the room, not finding it.

Then it hits me. I left the damn thing on the couch when we were watching a movie earlier.

No! No! No! How the hell will I reach him?

“Daddy,” she wails. “Daddy.”

More bullets crack through the air, closer now.

“I know you’re scared, sweetheart, but we have to try and be brave, okay? You have to hide in here like a big girl. And I’ll call Daddy. But you have to stay here.” I try to close the door, but she slams her palm against it.

“No, please, Elsie, don’t leave me alone,” she pleads with an endless river of tears pooling in her eyes.

My breathing labors as panic swells within me. Shouting from multiple voices rises from the distance. Things smash somewhere beyond, clattering against a hard surface, causing both of us to jump.

My stomach heaves and my entire body shudders. “I’ll hide with you, okay?”

A gasping inhale flays out of me when footsteps catch behind the door. I tiptoe into the closet and close it just as floorboards creak. Sophia gasps, and I cover her mouth with a palm. Our breathing is labored and chaotic in the sheer darkness we’re cast in.

“There’s a drink in here,” a man gruffly remarks. “They’re definitely still in the house.”

His croaky voice is curled with darkness and vile intent, his footfalls threading right beside us. Sophia’s hand clutches mine so tightly, I fear her fingers will break.

“Look everywhere and find them. We need them alive.”

I don’t hear a response, just another person’s stomping. My chest tightens, and my body tremors while I try to keep it together for Sophia. I’ll keep her safe with my last dying breath. I won’t let them hurt her.

They start marching away, increasing distance between us, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. We can hide here until they realize they can’t find us.

Sophia lets out a small whimper, and suddenly the door is yanked open and we’re faced with a masked man, his teeth stained yellow as he gives us a leery grin.

“There you two are.” His soulless brown eyes slink down my body, and my insides curl with disgust.

“Please, just don’t hurt her,” I beg, clutching a sobbing Sophia into my side with both arms. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m right here.”

“Don’t worry.” He chuckles at me, patting her head, and she jumps back. “You’re coming with the girl.”

Then, in a flash, another masked guy appears, storming at us and grabbing my arm.

“No!” I scream, shoving at him, attempting to claw my way out, while the other one grips Sophia, pulling her away from me.

“Elsie!” she screams.

Our hands are still holding on, but the more they drag us away, the more they slowly separate, until all we can feel is each other’s fingertips. Until they’re gone too.

“Don’t you touch her!” I holler at them.

But they ignore me, dragging us out of the room and down the hallway until we’re in the den.

Two chairs wait for us there, and my gaze whizzes from the men to Sophia as they push her down on one of them. The radiance in her face from before has been replaced by full-blown panic.

“I’m right here, sweetheart. I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

But I’m lying. I can’t do a damn thing.

“Gonna tie her up,” the guy says, removing zip ties from his pocket and wrapping them around Sophia’s wrists while she wails, tears caking up her cheeks.

“You animals!” I fight the hands keeping me hostage while he shoves me into the other chair. “She’s just a baby! Let her go. Do you realize what her father will do to you when he finds out what you’ve done?”

“He won’t do shit, because he doesn’t know who we are,” he snaps, gripping my jaw, his breath as foul as his soul. “And by the time he comes home, we won’t be around to say hello.”

“Shut the fuck up,” the other one grits, and he instantly does.

Sophia continues to cry while I do what I can to reassure her. How the hell will I get us out of this? I don’t even have Michael’s gun with me. Stupidly, I left it in the bedroom, in a drawer. I didn’t want Sophia to see it and get scared, but that was a mistake. If I had it, I might possibly be able to save us.

But there’s two of them and one of me. Maybe I’m fooling myself.

It’s then that I realize Michael’s men are nowhere. Are they involved? Are they dead?

Oh, God. We don’t stand a chance, do we?

The man takes my wrists behind me, and I form tight fists, palms down, while he straps my hands with zip ties around the back of the chair.

Soulless monsters. Savages. I wish Michael was here. He'd make them pray for death. But he's too far to get to us in time, even if he knew what was happening.

"What do we do now?" the one who tied me asks the other.

"We've got some phone calls to make." He gives me a once-over. "They won't be going anywhere. Let's go."

He gestures toward the front of the house with a tilt of his chin. Together, they wander to the entrance, and when the slam of the door registers, I turn to Sophia.

"Elsie, I'm sc-scared," she weeps while I work my hands, seeing if I can slip myself out of these ties.

It's one thing I remember learning at one of those women's self-defense classes my mom would make me take as a teenager. They told us to tighten our fists in the palm-down position if someone tied up our hands with zip ties, then turn the palms into a prayer position and shimmy out. It was the one thing that stuck.

"Will we die?" Sophia's tearful voice whispers out.

"No. Absolutely not."

My heart breaks from the way her body shivers, those eyes so sad and scared.

"It's okay, Sophia. Don't cry, okay?"

But my pained voice gives my fear away.

"We'll get out of this. I swear we will. Your father will come," I lie.

She nods, her tears leaking down her face, her brows tightening every time her chest jumps with a pant.

"Please don't let the bad men hurt me." Her snivels wreck me to tiny pieces.

I'd do anything to set her free, even give up my life for hers if they'd let me. But from the sounds of it, they still want us alive, and that gives me hope.

"I'd never let anyone hurt you. I love you, Sophia. You be brave for me."

"You promise Daddy will find us?" She sniffles, panting with heaving breaths while I wiggle my hands little by little.

Hurry! They could come back at any minute. And this time, they might kill us for what I've done.

"I promise."

I twist my hands, and somehow a quarter of one begins to slip out.

“Oh my God,” I mutter, working harder, ignoring the sharp stinging pain. Almost there. Halfway out. Just a little more, and...

I gasp as one hand slides out just when one of the men walks back in.

Shit. Keep still.

“Do you two need water or something?” the one with those yellow teeth asks, the grip of his gun visible from his waistband.

If I could just get to it somehow. I could snatch it up, then shoot him before calling the cops and Michael.

“Please, I think my wrist is bleeding,” I cry, faking the tears this time. “Could you check on it?”

“Ah, hell,” he mutters, stomping over to me.

Just as he arrives by my knees and makes that turn behind me, my hand snaps and grabs the gun.

“Whoa...” He raises his hands in surrender when I point it at his dick. Slowly, he backs away. “You don’t wanna do this, lady. He’s about to walk back in, and he’ll shoot you and the kid.”

“You *will* let us out,” I tell him even as my hand jitters, and I use the other to steady the shaking.

Sophia whimpers, but I can’t look at her. Not until he’s either dead or gone.

“I can’t do that.” He shakes his head. “We have a job to do, and we’re gonna do it.”

“What the hell is taking so lo—” The other one marches in, and as soon as he sees me, he whips out his revolver.

I don’t even blink as I pull the trigger. Sophia screams as the man falls to the floor.

“Jesus hell!” the man before me curses, gaping at his friend with blood pooling around his center.

“Keep your fucking hands up!” I zero the weapon at his chest, my shoulders stiff, my hands clammy.

“Okay, lady. Relax.” He does as he’s told. “Just tell me what you want. I don’t want trouble.”

“How many of you are at the house?” My limbs are shaky, but I fight to keep it together.

“Just us, I swear. The others are dead.” He tries to take a step back, but I shake my head. “Michael’s men killed them.”

“Where are Michael’s men?” My heart thuds so loudly, nausea swirls in

the pit of my stomach.

But I ignore it all. My only focus is on getting Sophia out of here.

“They’re dead too.”

Shit!

“I’ll go, and you’ll never see me again.” He picks up his arms higher in the air. “I don’t even care. Not enough money for this shit.”

“Throw your weapons on the ground.” My voice is steady, yet every inch of me is drenched in sickness.

I’ve known a lot of terror in my life, but this is something else entirely. And I think it’s because of Sophia. I’ve never had to protect a child before, especially one I loved with all my heart.

When he doesn’t move, I get off the chair and take a single step forward, aiming the gun at his forehead.

“Weapons. Now.” Venom drips from my tone.

“Okay, okay...” He reaches into his ankle and removes the gun there and throws it to the ground.

“Push it away.”

And he does.

“Show me the other ankle.”

His jaw clenches.

I knew it.

He reaches for it, and there it is, the other weapon. He slowly places it down by his feet and kicks it over.

“Don’t you fucking move,” I warn. “And back away from the girl.”

He listens like a good little soldier while I keep my eyes on him, strutting backward toward my phone, hoping it’s still on the sofa.

Continuing to point the weapon, I start to dial for the police.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“Please, there was a break-in and—”

I lose all ability to speak, the phone slipping out of my grasp and tumbling to the floor.

“You little bitch,” he sneers, flipping open a knife he just removed from his pocket. “I ain’t going back to prison.”

He takes a single step toward Sophia, and she screams.

“Get the fuck away from her!” I shout louder, wanting the dispatcher to hear.

I aim the gun at him.

“Ma’am? Are you there? What’s your emergency?” The sound of a woman’s voice vibrates against the floor.

“I will shoot you. Step away from her,” I warn the asshole.

“I bet you can’t even use that thing.” He chuckles. “I’ll kill you both, then off myself before the cops show.”

He continues toward Sophia. Only a few feet remain.

I stop listening to the woman on the phone, only hearing Sophia’s muffled cries. Instinctively, my fingers push the trigger. A little at a time. Until...

Pop.

He groans as a bullet rips through his arm, and Sophia’s shriek abruptly wakes me up from the shock.

I rush toward him, firing another bullet to his thigh, then one to the other, making sure he can’t leave. He will answer for this. Michael will want that.

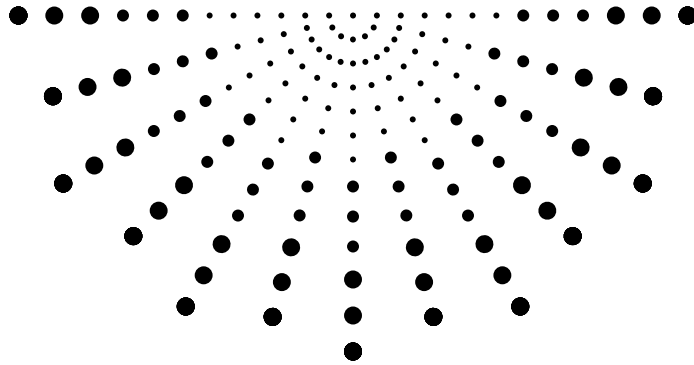
Blood oozes from his wounds like an unending stream of his depravity. I lower to the ground while he fights to sit up, glaring a hateful look at me. His nostrils flare, teeth bared, chest flailing.

I don’t give him another second of my time, immediately rushing to Sophia and freeing her from the binds.

She jumps off and into my arms, her entire body sagging and shivering.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.” I crush her against me as we both fall apart. “I’m never going to let you go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



MICHAEL

“Thank you for stopping by.” Patrick walks us toward the door, and I can’t wait to get home to Elsie and my daughter.

Just as my father and Gio make it outside, Patrick calls me over for a private chat. When I step up to him, his eyes scatter behind me as though wanting to make sure no one hears what he plans to say.

“Are you sure about this, Michael? It’s family, after all.”

I nod once. “Sometimes family doesn’t mean a damn thing, and sometimes we’d do everything to protect them.”

“If you’re sure...” He flips his fingers in the air. “There’s no going back once you pull the trigger.”

“I’ll do what must be done.”

“Well, I, for one, think you’re doing the right thing.”

Just as I’m about to go, my cell rings. I immediately get it and I find Elsie’s name on the screen.

My lips jerk with a smile I can’t seem to keep to myself.

“Marriage looks good on you,” Patrick says, his mouth thinning.

“I know,” I toss out as I press a button. “Hey, ba—”

“Michael,” she sobs, and my pulse jumps to my throat. “Oh, God...they came for us.”

I can hear Sophia sobbing, and my heart...I never knew it could feel this much pain. My vision clouds, my throat constricting.

“Elsie?” My feet are moving out the door on autopilot. “Who came? I’m on my way. Fuck!”

There’s a buzzing in my ears, like something just exploded in my head.

Patrick’s right beside me as I yank at the collar of my shirt.

“Men with guns. They tied us up. They said they wanted us alive. I shot them. One is still alive. I—I...please hurry.” She sniffles. “The police are on their way.”

“I’m going to find out who did this, baby. And I’m going to make them pay.”

All she does is cry harder.

“Someone came for your family?” Patrick asks with concern in his thick, gray brows.

I nod, listening as she tells me more of what transpired while I was here, leaving them helpless.

“They tied up my fucking daughter. My wife,” I grit.

My fingers curl with undulated rage, my heart slamming in my rib cage. How the fuck did they take out my men? How many were there? And who sent them? I will gut the one still standing until he squeals like a pig.

“Take my sons with you.” Patrick waves them over, and they come. “We’re family now.” He claps my shoulder, his stare intense.

“I won’t forget this,” I tell him as I rush for the SUV still outside, Gio and my father already inside.

I need to get on that plane right now before more people come for my girls.

I get in next to Gio and slam the door shut, tightening the phone still in my grasp. “Elsie, listen to me carefully. There are car keys in the bar room. Right under the lion statue. Take them. They’re for the blue SUV.”

“Where are we supposed to go?”

“To a safe house.” I shoot off the address. “Repeat it for me.”

She does.

Dad turns from the passenger side and looks curiously at me.

“I’m going to bring you two home, but not until I find out if it’s safe for you to return.”

“Hurry. We need you,” she gasps on a breath.

“I need you too, baby. Both of you.”

“Hurry back.”

“I’m coming home, baby.”

Then the call goes dead.

“What happened?” my father implores.

Suddenly, his phone goes off too, just as I was about to tell him.

“Yeah?” he shoots off as he stares at me with concentration. “When?” His jaw pulses. “What did it say?” He inhales, nostrils flaring. “We’re going to kill him.”

Gio and I look to one another in confusion.

“Send me a photo of it.” Then he disconnects the call, passing the phone to me. “One of our new restaurants just had a fire.” His tone seeps with vitriol. “Guess who left a note?”

My brows furrow as I drop my gaze to the screen, and as I enlarge the photo, I find the note he’s talking about.

My entire body stiffens, and I clench a tight fist.

“What does it say?” Gio asks from the passenger side.

“Until we meet again, brother.”

“Fuck,” he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

And I instantly know, if he’s involved with what happened to my girls, this will end today.

He’s crossed the line.

“It’s time we come face-to-face with our brother and settle this once and for all.”

“Who sent you?” I pummel a fist into the man’s face as blood seeps from his mouth.

Elsie did good shooting him, keeping him alive for me. As soon as I found out she called the police, I called my contact at the precinct and told them not to show up, that I had it sorted. He obliged. He always does. He runs the precinct.

“I...” The bastard before me coughs harshly, his breathing labored. “Don’t...know.”

“Liar.”

I lower to him, my teeth clenched, and I bash my forehead into his. I barely register the pain as he screams.

“I’ll kill you slow. I’ll cut you into a million fucking pieces...” I grab a fistful of his hair and yank. “...if you don’t give me a damn name.”

“He’ll k-k-kill my family.”

“Not if I kill them first.” My features turn animalistic. I can feel it without even seeing myself in the mirror.

It’s just me and him here. My brother and father went to check on Elsie and Sophia.

“I’m done playing games. You came after mine, and I’ll come after yours.”

I step back, grabbing the knife on the ground beside his feet. When I level it to his throat, his chest fights for the air he’s about to lose.

“If you don’t talk now, I’ll come after everyone you love. Your children. Your parents. Your wife. Everyone will die because of you. So, tell me...” I edge the tip of the blade into his throat, cutting him clean, but just on the surface. “Who hurt my family?”

His mouth starts to move, fear trickling in his dark eyes as he looks at me.

“Speak up!” I bend my ear closer, until I can almost make out a name.

“It’s...” he stammers.

But once he gives it to me, that’s when my world turns upside down. I wanted to believe he’d never stoop this low, that he could never hurt Sophia. But I was wrong.

I straighten, the knife still grasped in my palm when I lift it up and pierce his neck hard, turning the blade until the very last breath leaves his lungs.

With a bloodied hand, I retrieve my cell and make the call I can finally make. It rings once before his voice comes on.

“Yeah?”

“It’s happening. In three hours from now, we’re taking him out. Get back to the house and get everyone ready.”

There’s a long pause, but finally, he speaks.

“We’ve been ready. See you soon.”

The next thing I know, I’m in my car, heading for the safe house, because I need to see them before I go off fighting, not knowing if I’ll return.

“Daddy!” Sophia rushes for me.

I drop to my knees, emotions gripping the back of my throat as I hold her tight, taking in a long breath, never wanting to let her go. My baby could’ve died. I could’ve lost everything that mattered to me.

“Daddy is sorry.” My voice throbs with an ache. “I’ll never leave you alone again.”

She pulls back, her tiny hand engulfing my cheek. “It’s okay, Daddy. It’s not your fault. They were bad people.” Her chin quivers. “But Elsie...she saved me.”

I shut the door behind me, lifting her up in my arms and marching out of the foyer, needing to see my wife for myself to make sure she’s okay too. This place isn’t as big as my home, but it’s big enough to navigate.

“Where’s Elsie, princess?”

“She’s with the doctor on the couch.”

I freeze, gazing up at her. “Why does she need a doctor, baby?”

“The bad men shot her arm, and...”

I don’t hear the rest as I rush for the living room. And that’s when I see her...

My pulse thrashes, my entire body growing ice cold.

“What happened?” I ask the doctor, dropping Sophia to her feet, and she rushes toward Gio.

The doctor peers over at me, wrapping gauze around her upper arm.

“I’m fine.” She forces a smile, but it doesn’t last. She winces as the doctor finishes.

“How bad is it?” I ask Simon, our personal doctor.

“It’s a graze. She got lucky. She’ll be fine.” He starts to collect his things.

“Fuck,” I grumble under my breath.

Fine? She’s not fine. She could’ve died, and it’s all my fucking fault.

I should’ve sent her to her parents. She would’ve been safe. Why did I think I could ever give her the kind of life she deserves? I can’t even keep my own daughter safe.

And I can’t keep Elsie safe either.

ELSIE

“We have to talk,” he tells me, and I sense the tension gripping the timbre of his tone.

He paces in the now-empty safe house, while dread bathes me with goose bumps clinging to my skin. Whatever he wants to say, I know I won’t like the sound of it.

I’m glad no one is here to hear it. Gio and their father took Sophia back home. She barely wanted to let me go, but I convinced her I’d see her soon, and reluctantly she left with them. I was so close to losing that little girl who’s become mine. My God, the very thought...

My stomach churns when I see her dead body before my eyes.

That’s the panic talking. The fear. She’s okay. She’s safe. I am too.

I stride to Michael and take his hand in mine, stilling him in place.

“What is it? Just say it,” I implore, begging him to look at me, my heart thumping with a beat too loud to contain.

His knuckles slowly climb to my face and softly brush down my cheek. The look in his eyes spills with glaring intensity, as though he’s already saying goodbye. My gut bottoms out. Because whatever he’s about to say, it’s going to destroy me.

His breath is long and deep. “I’m falling for you, Elsie. Falling hard and fast, and there’s not a damn thing I want more in this world than you. But I can’t...” He pauses.

I gasp, my lips trembling with words that won’t come, with tears that won’t spill. This is goodbye, and my heart’s already breaking.

“I won’t watch you die, knowing I could’ve stopped it from happening.” He rolls his hand around to my nape, gripping with power, with want.

My heart races as he pins me with a striking gaze.

“Do you see the kind of life I lead? What happened to Bianca?”

He shakes his head, pain threading through the turn of his words.

“What almost happened to you? I would die before I let that happen,” he whispers, dropping his forehead against mine, hands cupping my neck, his warm breath searing me in my ever-growing demise. “You’re better off without me.”

Every word from his lips carves into the marrow of my bones.

It hurts.

This hurts.

“No...” I back away with a cry. “I won’t go.” My chin rises even as my fingers tremble. “I’m not leaving.”

His demeanor shifts and hardens. “This isn’t a choice. Your bags have already been packed, and they’re waiting for you on the plane.” He backs away completely. “You will go, and you will forget me.”

“No, Michael!” I shout. “You can’t do this to us. To *her*. You’re breaking us before we’ve even had a chance.”

I rush up to him, taking his hand, my heartbeats flailing in my chest.

“Please, don’t do this. We can be a family,” I stammer past the anguish seeping into my heart, and for the first time, I beg a man for something.

And I would do it again.

His eyes drift shut, and his chest widens with a long inhale.

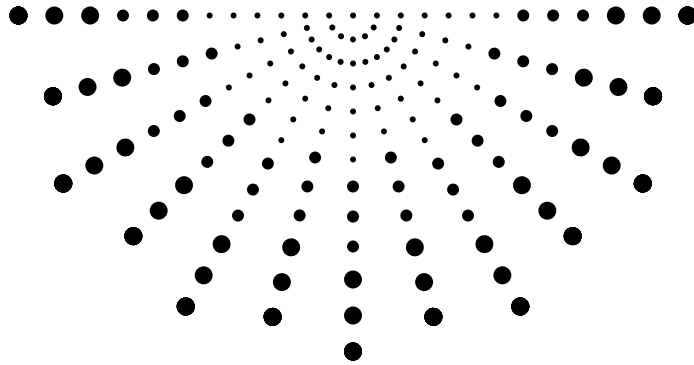
“I want that too, but...” He snaps a gaze at me, and it’s cold. Ruthless. “It’ll never happen.”

He picks up the cell he gave me from the sofa and hands it to me. And when he whistles, two men suddenly appear, marching toward me.

“No.” I shake my head on a whimpered cry.

But he starts to go, giving me a look over his shoulder, doused in his own pain. And with a drop of a sigh, he walks out on me and the life we could’ve had.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



MICHAEL

“I warned you!” My father bangs a fist atop the bar, the most loyal of our men gathered with us. “I told you Raph was too far gone, but you wanted to give him chance after chance.” His sharp inhale is thick with wrath. “What he did to Sophia...I’m going to kill him myself.”

“You won’t do a thing.” My tone’s dipped in madness, coated in the taste of revenge. He won’t see this coming. “He’s my kill.”

I face the men now.

“Any of you kill him, and you die. Understood?”

“Yes, boss.”

“We go in less than three hours,” I tell my father. “Are you coming with us?”

He snickers. “You think I’d miss this?”

“I thought you retired?” I plaster on a slow-forming grin.

“Not for this.”

“Fine. We all go, then.”

The men scatter, leaving Gio and my father. I reach for the decanter and pour myself some whiskey, drowning in the burn as it sweeps down my throat.

But this is nothing compared to what I’m feeling without her already. I miss her in the most violent way. Like a part of me has been cut out permanently. I never knew what I needed until she came into my life.

My hand digs for my cell in my pocket, hoping Elsie texted something. Anything. Even to curse me out, because I'd deserve it all. I hurt her.

But there's nothing there at all. She's truly gone.

Maybe someday she'll thank me for not ruining her life. And on that day, I'll still be the same man, wanting her the same way I do today. Never forgetting a moment we've spent together.

I lead the way through the dark woods, past the trees, our bodies brushing against the low shrubs on both sides. The only reason we can see a goddamn thing is because of the moon. Or we'd be blanketed in utter darkness.

Only a short distance remains between my brother's fortress and the war we've been destined to have.

We've brought thirty of our best men, including Patrick's sons. He'll be outnumbered and outgunned. We will win.

Once we make it out of the clearing, our feet hit the grass, and we march forward. His house towers from beyond, guarded by a tall steel fence.

"Where are his men?" my father asks behind me, expecting them to be guarding around the perimeter.

"Maybe he knows we're coming and they're hiding somewhere, waiting to smoke us," Gio adds.

My eyes drift over the three-story brick house. It's dark inside, except for a single window with a bright light, a shadow slipping past the curtain.

"He's home," I whisper. "Move in."

We go as one, nearing the fence from the back end so he can't see us coming. One by one, the men climb over, their weapons at the ready once they hit the ground. And slowly, we march forward. I'm the first climbing the four stone steps leading to the door, quietly trying the knob, not expecting it to open.

With a finger in the air, I tell them all to hold their positions before I gradually push the door, finding the place empty, a small lamp in the foyer providing the only source of light. My gaze hits the spiral staircase up ahead, a good yard away.

"It's time to end this, brother," I shout, my words echoing. "We have you

surrounded.”

Silence greets us when I pause to see if I can hear him.

“Show yourself. Don’t be a coward.”

Laughter plummets from somewhere in the distance, his footfalls thudding nearer.

“Never been a coward, Michael. I’m glad you all finally decided to come.” His voice drags closer. “I’ve been waiting for this for far too long. Seems like I’m not the coward after all.”

His chuckle’s filled with vitriol, and the next thing we see is a barefooted Raph climbing down the stairs.

My men draw their weapons and point them at him.

“Where are your men?” I ask him.

“They’re gone.” He stretches out his arms, descending lower, one step at a time. “And as you see, I don’t have any weapons.” He continues toward us. “You came here for one purpose, so let’s get it over with.”

“Kill him, Michael,” my father grits.

“Nice to see you too, Pop.” Raph doesn’t simply stare *at* my father, but into him, as though he’s stabbing him with a mere look.

I gesture for Patrick’s oldest son, Tynan, to grab Raph, and my brother immediately raises his arms in surrender.

“Tie him up on the chair. Do to him what he did to Sophia and Elsie.”

“How is my favorite niece doing?” he asks, a smile tethered to his face while my men yank and throw him on top of a stool one had grabbed from the kitchen.

“Misses you.”

He inhales and shuts his eyes, his expression growing less harsh at the mention of my daughter. “I miss her every day.”

“You fucking liar!” My father rushes at him just as the men tie his arms behind his back with zip ties. “After what you did...” He hits him with a punch square to his jaw. “...you don’t deserve to even utter her name.”

Raph doesn’t so much as flinch. He only glares harder at our father. And I’m there separating them.

“Stay back,” I tell him. “This is my kill. My daughter.”

“And she’s *my* granddaughter!” His chest expands as he bangs a fist to it.

“Yeah.” I nod slowly. “She is.”

“No mercy for the enemy,” Raph chuckles, his features blanketed with roughness. “Isn’t that what you taught us?”

“That’s right.” Our father narrows a hardened expression at Raph. “And today, you’ll learn what that statement truly means.”

“I think the only person who’ll be learning that lesson....” Raph laughs cruelly, instantly separating his arms in one single move. “...is you.”

The zip ties scatter to the floor as he pushes up to his feet, stalking closer to my father, whose eyes have grown two sizes too big.

“W-w-what is this, Michael?” He backs away, the shock swimming in his widened gaze. “Shoot this traitor! He—he came after your daughter!”

But no one does a thing to stop Raph. Instead, when he extends a hand toward Cillian, Cillian hands him a pistol. And in one swift moment, all of Raph’s foot soldiers come out of hiding and stand beside him.

Gio shuffles a step, jerking his head back. “What the fuck is happening?”

My mouth curls with a sneer.

“I’ll explain everything in a moment,” I tell him, unable to peel my eyes from the man who destroyed everything, blaming Raph for it all.

I couldn’t wait for this day. Waiting for a chance to avenge his sins. But I had to become king before I destroyed the former one. I needed the men’s loyalty, and I had it. Most of theirs, at least. I needed them to know what he had done to the family. Watching and waiting to destroy him has been the hardest thing I’ve had to do.

But this is where it ends.

Especially when he put my daughter and my wife in harm’s way. No one does that and lives.

“The only traitor I see, Father...” Raph lifts the weapon and points it straight at his chest. “...is you.”

Our father backs away, his breathing rapid. But with a loud click behind him, all the weapons point at his head, every one of the men ready to strike him dead at my command. Because they’re mine, after all.

Raph moves forward, the muzzle of the gun pressing into my father’s forehead. “Are you ready to admit what you’ve done? How you tried to blame me for everything you’ve been doing?”

Fear binds my father’s body. I can practically taste it. His face contorts in shock, but there’s a momentary shift, and suddenly he’s laughing, his shoulders rocking.

“Is this a joke?”

He turns his head to me, and I raise my semi-automatic at him as well.

“What the hell are you doing, son? After everything I’ve done for you?”

His tone rises. “After I gave you *my* rightful place? You turn on me?”

“You turned on this family,” I remind him. “You know what you’ve done. You know why you’ve been blaming Raph for everything you yourself have orchestrated.”

“Michael?” Tension swells with a blanket of rage on Gio’s face. “You’d better fucking tell me what the hell is going on before I lose it.”

I make it a few steps toward him, clasping him on the shoulder. “I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you. But I had to be sure everything went smoothly.”

“Fuck,” he strains with gritted teeth. “You two have been planning this all along?” He snaps his feral gaze between Raph and me. “You didn’t trust me?”

“Of course we trust you.” I squeeze his shoulder, looking him hard in the eyes. “But I knew if we told you everything, you’d kill him.” I inhale a deep breath. “And I know once you’re like that, no one can stop you.”

He narrows a thoughtful glare. “The men that came for Sophia? That was him too?”

There’s bloodlust brewing in his eyes. I can taste it.

I nod, and he slowly turns his head at our father, who doesn’t even deny it.

“Why?” he roars. “Why would you do that?”

Shoving my hand away, he marches up to him. And with a grunt, he pounds a fist into our father’s jaw. Over and over, until there are too many to count.

“You’re fucking dead!” he roars. “Dead!”

It takes me, Raph, and two other men to grab him and tug him away, even as he fights it. My brother can be the most volatile if you give him a reason. And this is something that would make him snap. But he hasn’t heard the full extent yet.

“Relax,” I whisper in his ear. “Just relax.”

His body calms, and eventually he nods, letting us know he’s all right now.

We drop our arms off him.

“Tell me everything,” Gio demands. “Don’t keep a damn thing from me.”

I immediately stare back at our treacherous father.

“Okay.” I flip the gun in my hand, pacing around the room. “But I think Raph should be the one to tell you.”

Gio’s curious gaze is on Raph now.

“Let me tell you a story, brother,” he tells Gio. “Let me tell you how it all began.”

He circles my father, the gun clutched at his side. He’s the one who’s lost the most. He’s the one who gets to kill our father.

Gio stares intently.

See, I already know everything. A lot more than even Raph himself does. But I can’t tell him that. It will only hurt him more. My father has done enough.

“It all began when our father started fucking Bianca and wanted to cover up his secret at all costs.”

Gio stiffens, shuffling back a step, outrage riddling every inch of his face. But instead of looking ashamed, our father gives Gio a smug look.

“Fuck...” Gio’s face goes ashen. “How do you know?”

“Because...Nicolette heard it all while she hid in the closet,” Raph explains. “She saw their fight. She heard him kill her.”

“He’s the one who killed her? You’re sure?”

Raph nods.

Gio stalks up to our father and balls his shirt in his fist. “Deny it. Tell me this is a damn lie.”

“Son, they’ve already made up their minds.” He shrugs nonchalantly. “They’re crazy. Don’t believe it.”

“You goddamn liar!” Raph rushes for him, punching him straight in the nose. “Crazy? I’ll show you crazy!” he grits, pummeling another fist to his jaw.

My father’s laughter is diabolical, and that has Raph pointing his gun to his temple.

“This ends now. Everything you’ve done...” Raph struggles to breathe. “It’s unforgivable.”

Gio mutters a curse. “So, he was involved in everything?”

He rubs his palm over his face, shaking his head.

“The hit on you?” he asks me, balling and unballing his fists.

“Yeah, it was all him,” I explain. “Do you remember when all these things with our business started going wrong, Dad blamed Raph for it all?”

Gio slowly nods, his expression darkening.

“It was never Raph. I knew that already. I also caught one of the men who tried to kill me, and he talked. They all eventually talk.” I tilt a look to my father, the corner of my mouth curling. “And when the Irish wanted blood for

the war that got Patrick's nephew killed, I did all I could to convince him that our father's death would serve that purpose. That he was the root of this evil. He caused Raph to go that far. And Patrick eventually agreed."

"That fucking Irish bastard!" our father hollers. "This is payback, isn't it? He wants me gone!"

Payback for what? I wonder.

But instead of asking, I choose to ignore him, my eyes on Gio. "Our father's death was the second clause to our deal with him. Your marriage to Eriu was the first, and I'll make sure we deliver."

Gio paces, his fists ready for war. "God damn it. I want to kill him right now."

Hatred fills my heart while I study our father closely, wondering how he became this man.

Or was he always this way?

Cheating on Mom is one thing. Trying to kill your own sons is a whole other ball game.

"He thought he could push me to kill Raph by hurting my wife and Sophia," I continue. "And he was right. But he got one thing wrong: he'll be the one dying today."

My chest rises and falls steadily, even though inside, I'm buzzing, like every cell is ready to explode.

"He tried coming after Raph and Nicolette too. He hired some guns who ended up getting themselves killed."

"Those fucking pussies," our father chuckles. "Knew they couldn't handle it, but they insisted they could."

My father may not be in charge anymore, but I'm not stupid enough not to know that he still has plenty of loyal soldiers who'd do anything for him.

"I fucking knew it." Raph blows toward him again, bathing in undulated rage. "Nicolette almost died because of you!"

Before he can hit him again, Gio and I hold him back, arms tightening around him.

I want him dead just as much. Whenever I see Sophia's grief-stricken face or hear Elsie wincing in pain from the bullet wound she got because of him, the desire to kill him comes surging.

"Not yet," I whisper into his ear. "We have to find out if there's anything else he's hiding."

It takes him a few seconds to calm down, but when the adrenaline

mellows, we let him go.

“Where’s Nicolette now?” Gio asks Raph. “I thought she left town after Bianca died.”

“She’s been on the run for the past year,” Raph explains. “She knew the house had surveillance, and she knew that if he saw it, he’d realize she was in the house, so she hid. Not long ago, one of the men he sent after her found her and shot her. That’s when she came to stay with me.”

“Fucking hell.” Gio clamps the back of his neck.

“One of the cops loyal to Michael found her and called him up. As soon as he saw the name on her license, he knew who she was,” Raph clarifies some more, then narrows a gaze at our father. “He wiped the surveillance after he killed Bianca, so he definitely saw Nicolette arriving to the house shortly before he did. He’s been after her, hoping she doesn’t find me and tell me what she saw. He knew how close we were. He knew I’d believe her. He knew she could ruin him and his reputation.”

He paces around our father, whose eye is swollen shut, blood leaking from his mouth. Raph aims the weapon to the back of my father’s head, his thumb on the trigger.

“Once I took over, some of the men told me our father had been telling them I wanted Raph dead,” I say now. “That he was coming after me to take his rightful place away, but that I wasn’t allowing it to happen. He painted us as two brothers at war. He figured if I got killed, he’d have the whole Cosa Nostra coming after Raph, and if I killed Raph...well, there went his problem.”

I find my father’s mouth twisting.

“Isn’t that right, *Dad*?” I’m ready to end him and be done.

He inclines his chin with a leer. “It was easier if everyone assumed Raph killed you. Less questions.” He coughs up blood. “But it didn’t quite work out that way, d-did it?”

“Jesus Christ,” Gio mutters, dropping his palms to his knees.

“Let’s get this over with. There’s nothing else he can say that we need to hear.” Raph zeroes the muzzle right into our father’s chest.

Dad scoffs. “You may want to hold off on that, son. I’m not done telling you the best part yet.”

“Oh yeah?” Raph pops a brow. “What’s that?”

“Well...” He sighs. “If you kill me, you’ll never get her back.”

“Get who back?” Raph squints down at him.

“That pretty little Nicolette. You’ve been shacking up with her, haven’t you?” He groans. “Who could blame you? The set of tits on that girl.”

Raph’s bicep muscle twitches, and in an instant, he grabs my father’s throat and squeezes. “You say one more thing about her and I’ll kill you. Slow. So fucking slow, you’ll wish for death.”

“She’ll...d-d-die t...too,” he chokes out.

“Nicolette is safe,” he challenges with a rough voice. “You can’t touch her.”

He removes his hand and stands straighter, trying to steady his aggression.

My father tries to speak, but all he does is hack with a coughing fit.

When he’s done, he says, “You sure about that, son?”

He chuckles arrogantly. Always so fucking smug.

Raph stumbles back a few steps, the pistol collapsing on the floor with a deafening clank.

“You’re fucking lying,” he breathes, his chest clattering.

“Am I? Why don’t you call her and see if she answers?”

Raph clenches his jaw, searing a hateful stare into our father’s eyes before he reaches into his pocket and takes out his burner.

Once he dials, he locks his gaze at me, shaking his head. He tries again, then again.

“Fuuuuck!” He throws the cell, and it lands hard against the wall, the glass shattering. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” He slams a fist into the mirror with a roar.

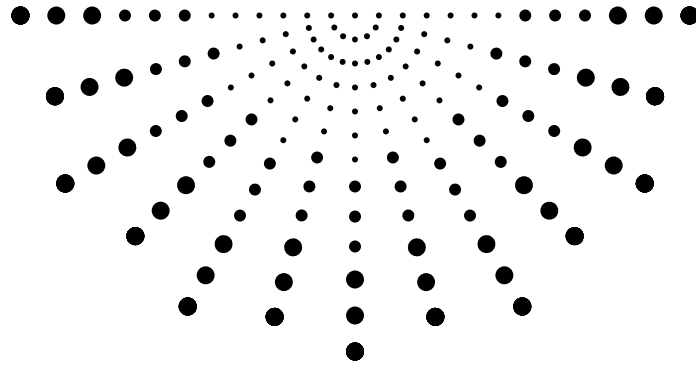
I stalk toward my father and grab a fistful of his shirt. “Tell me where she is. Now.”

“Gotta let me go first.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

And when Raph lunges at him with a roar and lets his demons loose, I let him. He deserves that and more.

CHAPTER FORTY



ELSIE THREE DAYS LATER

I should be happy being back with my parents. In my childhood home. In my room. Yet any sense of joy vanished the moment he left me.

He called my father and apparently explained that we had a break-in and he doesn't feel I'm safe there. That it's better if I live with them.

That's what my father said, at least. But all I know is, he didn't want me. He didn't want to fight for us. He chose fear. He chose the easy way out.

While I was willing to risk it all for him. My life. My safety. My fucking heart. But he threw it all away.

Being without him in these past couple of days has felt like a lifetime. My heart is literally breaking, pieces of it fluttering away like ashes from a fiery blaze. Never to be found again.

I close my eyes and picture his rugged smile, missing it so much. I miss those big hands cupping my face, those knuckles stroking down my cheek. But most of all, I miss the way I felt when we were simply in each other's presence. That shivery feeling in my stomach, that inexplicable need to be where he was.

This man – this dangerous, crazy man – has stolen all my reasons for never trusting a man again and showed me that he's more. That even little girls who've grown into broken women can once again dream the kinds of dreams they once had. Ones of love. A life filled with tomorrows. And I

thought those tomorrows would be with him.

Sitting in my room like I do every day and every night, I stare out the window, watching the cars whizz by, wishing I'd see his, that he'd stop being stubborn and come back for me.

But he hasn't. He hasn't even called.

I've picked up the phone he gave me a dozen times. Waiting. Hoping. But I won't beg him to take me back. He's going to have to want it himself.

With a soft knock, my door opens, and Mom comes inside. They both took off work to be with me. And I need them more than I've let them know.

"Hi, sweetie..." Mom's eyes glisten with emotion as her lips form a thin line. "Daddy made your favorite chocolate chip waffles. Would you like some?"

She continues to assess me from the doorway, and I force a smile. But instantly, it feels like a betrayal to my own misery. I return to staring out the window.

"Maybe later. Thanks, Mom."

The idea of eating right now – even something I once loved, something I've missed with my whole heart – doesn't appeal to me. It's as though everything inside me is bland and colorless.

"You have to eat, Elsie. I know you're upset and you love him, but you have to eat."

Love? Is that what this is?

Does it even matter? Why do feelings need a title? All I know, all I ache with, is this knowledge that I miss him with everything I am.

I miss Sophia too. God, do I miss her. I miss the family we could've been. Isn't that enough?

"I'm sorry, Mom." I swivel my gaze to hers, hunching over. "I'm sorry that you got me back and I'm this way. Broken." I shrug my shoulders. "You guys deserve more than that."

An ache throbs in the back of my throat.

"No!" She shakes her head, her brows knitting, her feet moving quickly. She places the plate full of waffles on the bed and takes my hand in hers. "You're not broken. You're my daughter. My beautiful, talented, smart daughter, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

I sniffle back the tears forming in my eyes, and when I stand, my arms are around her as I cry, laying my cheek on her chest, just like I did when I was little.

“He’ll come around.” She shushes me, her palm running up and down my back.

“I don’t think he will, Mom.” I draw back. “He’s stubborn.”

“That’s men.” She lets out a small laugh. “Give him time and you’ll see. I bet he’s hurting just like you are. I bet he wants you back. I know your marriage wasn’t for love, sweetheart, not at first. But sometimes we fall anyway, and there’s nothing we can do about it.” She pushes off, swiping her thumbs under my eyes. “And that man is head over heels in love with you. It was easy to see it in his eyes.”

I remain unconvinced. He was certain breaking things off was the right thing to do. There’s no way he’ll ever change his mind.

After I ate a little, I returned to staring out the window. It seems that’s all I can manage.

A car zooms past, and it almost looks like Michael’s blue SUV.

I huff out a breath, reaching for my cell, and it suddenly rings. My pulse jumps in my throat and I immediately look at the screen and see Michael’s name.

Oh my God! Maybe Mom was right. He realized what a damn stubborn mule he was and now he’s calling to beg for my forgiveness. I can’t wait to give him hell.

I steady the panic set deep in my stomach, trying to control my labored breaths before my trembling finger hits the button.

“H-hello?”

“Elsie!” Sophia’s voice vibrates through the line. “When are you coming back?”

I can hear the shudder in her voice, like she’s trying hard not to cry.

“Hi, sweetie. I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too,” she whimpers. “Please come back. Daddy misses you too.” Her panting grows heavier. “He gets so sad when I ask about you, but he said you had to go live with your parents for a while. But I want you to come back. Pleaaase!”

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink rapidly to push them away. Hearing her

cry, it's destroying me.

"I wish I could. But right now, I have to stay here for a little while."

"D-did I do something? Do you not love me anymore?"

I fasten a hand over my mouth to stop the sobbing wrenching in my soul. I want to get on a damn plane and rush right over there and take that little girl in my arms.

"Of course I love you, Sophia. I will never stop loving you."

"Then why?" she cries uncontrollably. "Why can't you be with Daddy and me? Did he hurt your feelings?"

"No." I sigh. "He's a good man. You're a very lucky girl to have such a wonderful daddy."

Even though he's an idiot who doesn't realize what he's missing.

"This is not fair!" she shouts with a snivel. "You promised! You promised to be my mommy. Mommies don't leave their kids. Not good ones, anyway."

Fresh tears crash down my face, my chest tightening, those words stabbing me right in the heart.

"Sophia?" Michael bellows, and I gasp, my heartbeats quickening in my chest. "Did you take my phone? Who are you calling?"

"I called Elsie! Because you won't make her come back and..."

She shrieks, and big fat tears roll down my cheeks.

"I thought if I called..." she weeps. "That she'd want me and she'd come back."

"Oh, baby."

I can just see him holding her in his arms.

"I'm sorry, Elsie," he whispers into the phone.

All the air stills in my lungs, my body breaking out in hives.

"She shouldn't have done that."

"Michael..." I whisper. That's all I can manage.

I miss you. I miss her. I miss us.

Those words, they never make it out.

I can hear the swell of his heavy breathing, and for a moment, it sounds like he's about to say something else. But instead, the line goes dead, and my heart dies along with it.

Moments later, Mom's at my door once more, her cell phone in hand. "Hey, sweetie, Kayla and Jade are on the phone again. Can you maybe talk to them this time? Maybe for a few minutes? They're really worried."

I nod, and she purses her lips, bringing the phone over to me. Once she walks back out, I place the receiver against my ear.

“H-hello?” I cry.

“Oh, Elsie,” Kayla sniffles. “You really went and fell for a Mafia dude, didn’t you?”

I burst into a pathetic, blubbering laugh.

“Yeah, I really did. But he doesn’t want me anymore...” I silently cry.

“Hey,” Jade says. “You don’t have to be sad alone. We’re here now. Okay? You can cry, scream...we can even make mean songs about him. I’ll play the piano while you sing.”

“And what will I do?” Kayla asks with amusement.

“You write all the lyrics,” I say. “And make sure they’re really awful.”

MICHAEL

I can’t believe Sophia stole my phone and managed to call Elsie. Not that I’m surprised. She’s been pretty devastated since Elsie’s been gone. And it’s difficult to explain to a child that what I did was for Elsie’s benefit.

But it doesn’t erase the emptiness that consumes me when I’m alone in bed, with thoughts of my wife and how badly both my heart and my body still want her. She was a perfect embodiment of everything I could ever ask for in a woman. And yet...I let her go.

Fucking fool. I should’ve been selfish. I should’ve listened to my heart and not my head. But my head won.

There’s not a moment since I sent her away that I don’t want to throw her over my shoulder and bring her back where she belongs. I ache everywhere without her.

But I can’t do that. I refuse to be selfish. Not with her. Nothing has changed since I let her go. This family...just knowing us is dangerous. And she deserves to be safe after everything she’s been through. There are people out there who wouldn’t hesitate to hurt her just to get to me.

Raph’s been staying with me while we try to get our father to talk. But he refuses, no matter what we’ve done to him. And we’ve done everything

except kill him.

“Has that son of a bitch said anything?” Mom asks with a grimace, as though hearing my thoughts.

She sips on her iced tea, while Sophia left with Raph and Gio to get ice cream. They were trying to lift her spirits, and I think Gio needed that too.

“No.” I drag a chair and settle in the kitchen. “He won’t talk.”

“It’s too bad you can’t set him on fire.” Her face turns with rage.

“Once we find her, I’ll hand you a match while Raph pours the gasoline.”

She shakes her head in disgust at the man she calls a husband.

I hate to see her this way. I know she knows he was having affairs, but knowing that one of the women was her daughter-in-law has had her distraught.

Yet having Raph back has been the only light in her world in these past few days. In Sophia’s too. All my daughter wants is him. That is, when she’s not wanting Elsie. I’m currently the last person she tolerates. She blames Elsie’s departure on me, and she wouldn’t be wrong.

“Have you spoken to Elsie?” Mom drags in a slow sip, taking a seat beside me. “Are you ready to tell her that you’ve made the biggest mistake of your life?”

Instead of answering, I give her a look that says I have no desire to talk about it.

“Son...” She places the glass onto the counter. “What are you doing?”

I drag in a long breath. “Saving her.”

“From what, exactly?”

“From me.”

She releases an exacerbated sigh. “When are you going to stop punishing yourself for the life we live?”

I prop my elbows onto my outstretched thighs, staring onto the floor. Our father still has men loyal to him. What if they come for her? What if, this time, she doesn’t make it out alive?

“It’s who we are, Michael. Who we’ve always been,” Mom goes on. “She knows that, and she still chose you. It’s time you let yourself be loved, Michael.” She places a palm on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “Bring her home. Let her love you.”

The phone rings and rings until I hear a voice.

“Hello?”

“Hello, sir,” I say. “It’s Michael.”

“Michael,” he addresses me sternly. “What can I do for you?”

“I apologize for calling. But I wanted to see how Elsie was doing. How is she?”

“Are you asking about her arm or her heart?”

Fuck. Maybe this was a mistake. He’s right to be angry.

I press my eyes shut.

“Both.” My voice is that of a dying man, dying without the woman who made him live again.

“Well, her arm is doing well. The doctor you set her up with here has said it’s healing great. But...” He pauses. “But she’s not doing well. It seems my daughter went and fell in love with you. The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

That response has my pulse slamming rapidly in my ears. I didn’t expect him to say any of that. I thought he’d be happy I gave him his daughter back, that she’s safe with him. Yet it doesn’t appear that way.

“Sir, I care deeply for her. I swear I do.” A breath stills in my lungs. “But I’m not right for her. I won’t lie to you and say I am. I’m not a safe choice for your daughter.”

He scoffs. “I gathered that when she got shot while on your watch. I’m not stupid, Michael. I know who you are.”

Another pause, and I’ve never been more nervous for someone to know what I actually do.

“But nevertheless, you’re still the one she loves. And a bad man wouldn’t have set aside his own needs to protect my daughter. So the next question is, what are you going to do to become the man you say you’re not?”

For the first time in my life, I’m rendered speechless.

“I can sit here and tell you my daughter could do better than you. But in the end, none of that matters if all she wants is you. She’s not a child anymore.” His breath hitches. “I can’t make her do what I want. She’s gone through hell. Those monsters...they took everything from her. Who am I to

take this one thing from her too? What kind of father would do that?" His voice cracks. "I'd give anything just to see that girl smile. And you, Michael...you make my daughter smile."

Emotions punch me right in the gut.

My little dove. I miss you.

"You get on that plane, and you tell my daughter you made the biggest mistake of your goddamn life."

Fuck. Well, my mother would definitely agree with you.

I fist a hand, pressing it in between my eyes. My heart damn near weeps to be with her again. To hear her laughter, to see her smile, to kiss her like I've been longing to since the moment she opened that smart mouth and made me hers.

What have I done?

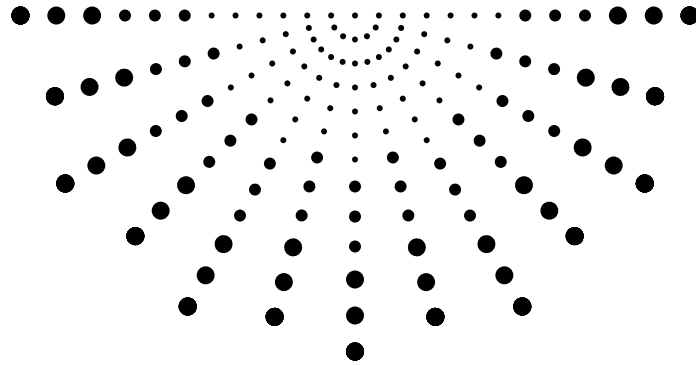
A burn hits my eyes. These damn feelings I have for my wife, they all come crashing to the surface.

And my feet? They're moving before I can even respond.

"Tell her I'm coming." The words swell with an ache.

"You tell her when you get here. Now come get my daughter."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



ELSIE

The day swings into night, and stars bathe the sky in embers. Seeing the sky like that...it makes us so insignificant in the grand scheme of things. I've gotten used to being insignificant, but with Michael, it was the one time I felt anything but.

There's a knock at my door, and my defenses immediately go up.

"I'm not hungry, Mom," I say, knowing it's her again, probably with a plate in hand to force-feed me dinner if she has to.

But instead of leaving, the door starts to creak. I don't have to look at it to know that it's her.

"Mom, it's okay..."

I sharply turn toward her, but the words immediately die, because the person who's standing at the threshold isn't my mother.

"Michael?" I gasp, a hand flying to my chest. "Wha...what are you doing here?" The words stumble out, my heartbeats thrashing and slamming within.

I want to jump into his arms and hold on, but instead I stay where I am, because he left me.

I fling strands of hair off my face, trying to make my appearance a little less disheveled.

Did I even shower today? Oh my God, I probably smell, and my parents were too kind to tell me.

He lets out a low chuckle. The corners of his mouth rise up into a

breathtakingly beautiful smile. “Hi, my beautiful little dove. I’ve missed you.”

It’s funny how a few simple little words can clasp on to your heart and make it sing again.

The more his towering shape stalks toward me, the more my stomach dips. A lopsided grin reaches the far end of his mouth, and my pulse does a funny dance in my throat.

“What are you doing here, Michael?” My tone is clipped. “Last time I checked, you and I were done.”

I incline my chin, pretending I’m strong. Brave. That I don’t need him after what he did. But inside, everything unravels. The want, that affection... it blooms. It soars. It wants inside his heart. It wants to love him.

“I’m here to bring you home.” He steps closer, the white button-down he wears straining against the taut, rippling muscles of his biceps.

He wants me back? Since when?

Confusion and desire pulse inside me.

“And who says I’d go with you now?” I pop a brow. “Who says you deserve it?”

He chuckles. But it’s a sad kind of laugh, and it makes my heart leap. I don’t want to see him hurting.

“I *don’t* deserve it,” he confesses. “I never deserved you, Elsie.”

His chest widens with a frayed breath.

“But I want you...because...I don’t know how to exist without you.” The tenor of his tone pulses with despair. “Every day since you’ve been gone has felt like a damn eternity. There’s been a hollowness in my chest.” He slams a fist into his heart. “I never understood what it meant to miss a person, to care for someone so much. But I hurt everywhere, little dove. In my head. In my heart. Fuck, baby, even my damn bones hurt without you.” His brows dip. “It’s like I’m breaking down.”

“What else?” I roll my arms over my chest, blinking back tears, wanting every bit of his groveling.

Because even though he thought he left me for my own good, he broke me.

When his lips twitch, I know he can tell I’m trying to torture him while almost bursting into tears.

“I miss the way you sing. The way you kiss me.” He walks another step. “The way your fingers touch that part of me that felt like the ugliest thing

about me.”

His fingers extend toward his scar, hovering there, and my guard drops, grief prickling my eyes.

He moves even closer. If he reaches a hand for mine, he’ll feel it shaking.

“I miss the way you look into my eyes and tell me I’m enough. That I deserve you. Deserve love. Even when I’ve spent my entire life believing I didn’t.”

I let out a quiet sob, tears swimming in my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Elsie.” His voice cracks and washes away all the hurt I’ve been carrying in the days we’ve been apart.

“For what?” I fit him with a pout while my heart flutters.

“For being scared. For hurting you. For loving you so much I had to let you go.”

Did he just say...

Without hesitation, without a bated breath, he snakes his hand to the back of my neck and pins his eyes to mine. “But I’m ready to be selfish now. I’m ready to take you home. I’m ready to love you with everything I have.”

My mouth parts, and I let myself feel the words pouring out of him, eyes awash with heartbreak and truth and all things human.

“I’ve spent my life knowing I wasn’t a good man,” he adds. “That I wasn’t what a woman needed. But the problem is, baby, I can’t exist without you. I don’t know who I was before I met you, and I’ll be nothing if you’re not by my side.”

Emotions clutch his every fiber, and I feel them – those words, the aching of his soul as he gives it all to me. Freely. Unequivocally.

“You’re my home now, my little dove.” His other hand cups my cheek, his thumb rolling away a tear as he darts his head back just a fraction. “You’re the woman I once only dreamed about. But now that I’ve known what it feels like to love you, I can’t go back and pretend you never existed.”

“Michael...” I pant, my vision blurred.

“I once told you that love was our greatest weakness.” He drops his lips to my forehead and kisses me gently, leaving me utterly breathless. “But I was wrong. Because it’s also our biggest strength.”

My stomach flips as he aligns his eyes to mine, and everything within me surges and crashes all at once.

“Loving you has been my greatest honor, Elsie Marino, and I plan to love you until the day that I die.”

“You—you love me?” My brows snap as I stammer. “Like, really love me?”

“I know. It came as a shock to me too.” He chuckles all deep and raspy as he draws his mouth closer to mine.

I can feel the heat of his lips, wanting them badly. My mouth tingles, every inch of my skin casted in fire.

“It was your father who made me realize I did,” he whispers. “Because what I feel for you...God, Elsie...” He sighs. “I live and breathe for you. These days without you have been agony. And if you were to ever leave me, you might as well just kill me, because I’d already be dead. So yes, my little dove, I love you. Like, really fucking love you.”

He picks up one of my hands and places my palm against his heart. It beats in a crescendo, growing rapid, urgent.

“It beats for you. It hasn’t stopped beating from the moment you walked into my life. And it’ll beat even after I die. It’ll beat for you through the pits of hell I’m surely going to.”

I back up, staring at him with overflowing affection, and in a flash, I’m flinging my arms around him.

“Thank God,” he whispers before he lifts me up, palms tucked under my ass as he drags me against his body.

I wrap my legs around his hips and cry against his shoulder, letting those tears soak up his shirt. This man, the enormity of our feelings...it’s overwhelming. His fingers sweep up my spine until he curls them through my hair. He drags me back, his eyes glazing.

“Does that mean you’ll come home to us?” His voice wavers, his eyes glazed as though he’s not sure what my answer will be.

“And if I say no?” I lift a single brow.

“Then I’ll take you back kicking and screaming, baby. Because I’m never letting you go again.”

I nip my lower lip, throwing my arms over his shoulders, a huge grin fighting my face. “That’s the spirit, Mr. Marino.”

He laughs – really laughs – and that sound...

Is this love? Can I be in love with him already? Does it matter if that’s what I feel in this very moment?

Stop analyzing, Elsie, and tell him how you really feel.

We don’t always have time to second-guess and overthink. Sometimes we just have to do. Right now. Right in this moment. Because not all of us get a

second chance to do what could've been done. It's in us to take that leap.

And I want to leap. To him. To us. To a love that I once only dreamed about. Because little girls turn into women who find men that prove to them dreams are simply another version of reality.

I cup his face with both palms and gaze intently into those striking brown eyes. "I love you too, Michael. You're the only man I've ever loved. The only man I ever want to love."

He grinds his jaw, his eyes fluttering shut for a mere moment before they open.

"I don't deserve you." He clenches his jaw.

"We kind of already established that." I roll my eyes playfully.

"What did I tell you about rolling those eyes at me?" He tilts my chin up with a finger, that gaze possessive and heavy-lidded. Just the way I like him.

My body grows tight with lustful desire. "I guess a punishment is in order."

He smirks. "It's been a while since I've had you over my knee, little dove."

My breath hitches, my nipples already tight and ready for him.

He brushes his lips with mine. "You have to know staying with me means accepting this life. And if you can't accept that, I won't make you stay. It has to be your choice." He pitches back, holding my face in his loving hands. "But if you can, if you can love me despite it all – a man with all his imperfections – then you'll never know a day without my love beating through my chest for only you."

A huge smile adorns my lips even as my tears run free.

"I want you," I tell him without an ounce of uncertainty. "I want us, and I'd never give that up for anything in the world."

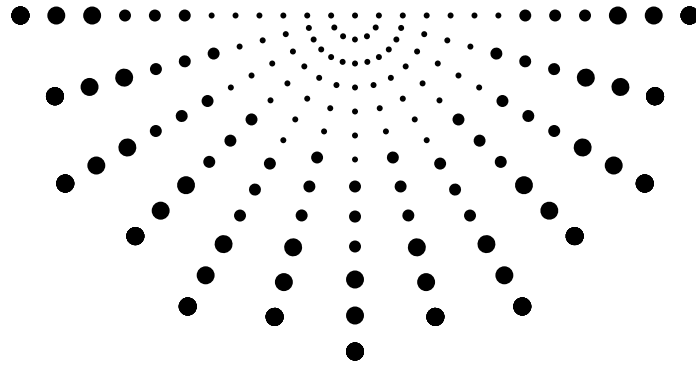
I drop my lips to his and kiss him once, and he hums a growl.

"You have me," I promise. "All of me. My heart and soul...it's yours, Michael Marino. Forever."

His chest heaves, and suddenly there's nothing gentle about him. He takes me on a groan, throwing my body up against the wall.

And he does to my mouth what he's been doing to my heart all along: ruining it for every man who'll never get a chance to love me.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



MICHAEL

“Elsie!” Sophia rushes for her as soon as the door swings. “You came back!”

Elsie grins as she kneels and opens her arms for my daughter to run into.

“I missed you!”

“I’ve missed you more.” Elsie tugs her against her chest with a palm to the side of her face.

I’ve never known a feeling like this, how two strangers could mean the world to me. Yet here they are, meaning the world to each other too.

My mother stands across the room, her smile wide, her gaze on me, and she nods once.

This is family. This is everything that matters. And I will protect it like my father never could.

She’s in my bed, in my arms, where she’s always meant to be. I stroke my knuckles down her delicate cheek, my cock thick and throbbing as it slowly thrusts inside her. I want to savor this moment, feel every movement, watch her eyes boring into mine as they brim with desire.

“You’re so beautiful. So mine,” I whisper as I pick up one of her legs and

spread her open for me, slamming myself deeper.

She groans, arching up her hips and she purrs a little moan. “Yours... always.”

Her eyes grow heavy-lidded, her pussy drenched as I pick up the pace, lowering my thumb to rub her clit.

Her nails claw into my back, and the more I touch her, the more they delve deeper into my skin, like she wants inside all of me. And I wouldn't resist.

“Harder,” she cries, hands lowering to my ass, pushing me into her.

“Greedy little wife.” I pound into her faster, lips marking her throat, coasting up her ear, my tongue swirling around her lobe.

“Yeah, that's it.” She swallows her bottom lip, her brows bending in wanton passion.

I rise to my knees, taking her leg straight up across my chest and over my shoulders, slamming my hips harder. Her tits bounce, her hands slipping into her hair.

“I'm taking it easy on you, baby,” I tease, finding her clit and bringing her to the brink before slowing down. “I'm going to make this pussy squirt, then flip you over and fuck you spread open on all fours while you beg for it.”

“Yesss....” Her heavy, erratic moans drown out my voice, and her core clenches, her eyes rolling back.

“I know exactly what my wife likes.” I use two fingers, stroking her clit.

Her toes curl, and I take them into my mouth, sucking and flicking them to the tempo of my fingers, ramming myself deeper.

“Michael...yes...” She meets my hips, gyrating around my dick.

Fuck, she's damn perfect.

“Look at me.”

And she does, meeting my penetrating gaze as she takes every punishing stroke, screaming my name.

“That's it, baby. Louder. Show me how fucking filthy you are, taking my cock so good.”

Her eyes start to roll again.

“You look at me or I stop.” And I slow my rhythm to hone in my point.

Her hands fist the sheets, her large tits rocking, those rosy nipples hard and tempting.

“Please...” she whimpers, her body quivering like she's ready to come.

But I go slower and she mutters in frustration.

“More...”

“Let me hear you say it. Let me hear you beg for your husband’s cock.”

The span of my hand wraps around her pretty throat. Clenching it, I slam harder, my gaze deepening into hers.

“Please, Michael...fuck me faster. Don’t hold back.” She gasps as my thigh rubs against her clit in this position.

I can’t look away from those stunning eyes as I fuck her until she’s almost there, feeling little shudders of her pussy around my cock.

“My beautiful wife. The one I’ve been waiting for,” I tell her as she trembles and screams out my name.

“Oh, God, Michael. I’m coming...” she groans.

I capture her mouth with mine, swallowing the echoes of our love and wanting it to last forever. And when I come, I give it all to her. Because everything I am is hers.

Her body stills beneath me, both of us utterly breathless.

I don’t want to, but I slip out of her and lift her up against my chest. Minutes drift in silence and when she finally looks up at me, she grins.

“Wow.”

“Better be wow.” I grip her jaw and kiss her hard.

She makes those cute little sounds, and I want inside her all over again.

Her cheek presses into my chest, and she lazily draws circles there, while my palms conveniently rest on her ass.

“Are you sure Sophia will be okay after everything that happened?” There’s concern etched in her tone. “I can’t believe your father did that to her, to his own sons...”

She gazes up, staring incredulously at me.

“To you too,” I say. “You mean just as much to me, baby.”

She tucks her hands under her chin and smiles, making me damn near insane.

“When I got that call from you...” My nostrils flare. “Fuck. It took everything in me not to kill him when I found out what he’d done. I never thought he’d go that far. Not with Sophia. But it was then I realized that protecting his secret was the only thing that mattered to him. He wanted to preserve his reputation, his life. And sleeping with his daughter-in-law would not only have gotten him killed, but it would have stripped him of all the respect he’d built.”

The back of her hand feathers down the scar on my cheek, her features fitting with emotion. “What are you going to do to him?”

“We have people looking for Nicolette. Once they find her, we’ll kill him and throw him in the ocean where he’s thrown countless of men.”

She sighs, her mouth tight.

“I know. This is a lot.”

I’ve told her everything that transpired, not wanting any secrets between us. She has to know what she’s really getting herself into.

I grasp her nape and stare at her with devotion tethered to my heart. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” A tiny grin slips to her mouth, and it radiates through her eyes. “I love you, Michael. All the other stuff? I can live with that.”

Relief washes over me every time she tells me she’s willing to stay. To have me. I’ve been living under the weight of fear that she’ll up and leave. And sure, I could make her come back by force, but I’d rather her want a life with me instead.

“I want to marry you all over again,” I tell her.

“What?” Shock treads in her raspy tone.

“I want your parents to be there. They deserve that.”

Tears gather in her eyes like a quiet storm. “You’re the sweetest man alive...”

She throws her arms tight around me and practically suffocates me, but fuck, I love every damn second of it.

“Even when you’re a little crazy,” she adds.

“A little?” I tickle her side, and she giggles.

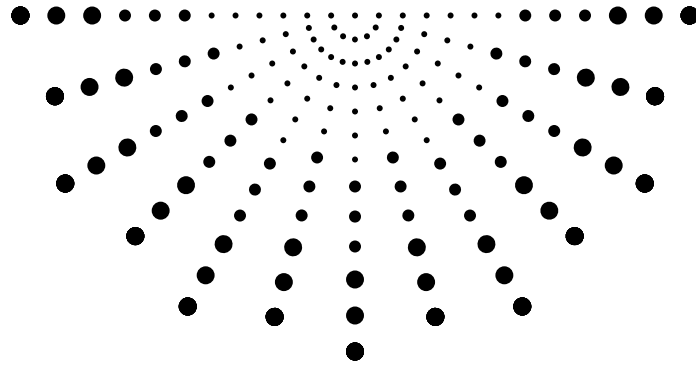
“Fine! Fine...” She tries to push my hand off her ribs, but she’s quite unsuccessful. “You’re a lot crazy. Okay?”

Her laughter is full and free and all things beautiful.

“That’s more like it.” I smash my mouth to hers even as she laughs.

And then I’m laughing too, flipping on top of her, pinning her to my body and molding it to mine, like the half of my heart I’ve been missing.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



MICHAEL

The following day, we return to Raph's house, where my father remains prisoner.

Gio rushes toward him, his chest howling with breaths, and he throws a fist into his nose. "You fucking tell us where Nicolette is, or I swear, I will torch your damn body bit by bit."

Our father shakes his head in mockery, spitting up blood. He's barely recognizable, contusions and swelling distorting his face.

He's strong, I've gotta give him that. But we'll break him. He *will* talk.

"What a disappointment you are, Gio." He still manages to laugh. "But then again, you always were stupid and pathetic." He scoffs. "It's no wonder you're still alone. No woman wants a loser for a husband."

Gio growls, whipping out his semi-automatic and digging it into our father's chest. "Say another goddamn word and I'll put a hole in you right now."

Raph pushes past Gio, gripping the collar of our father's shirt. He's barely been holding on to his sanity in these last few days. He may not say it, but I suspect he's grown a little too fond of Nicolette in their time together.

"I'm done playing games," he snaps. "Talk or I kill you!"

"I can talk all day, son." Our father grins. "Your wife was some piece of ass."

He groans, and Raph grits his teeth.

“And all this time, you couldn’t put a baby in her...so I did the job for you.”

My breaths lock in my chest.

He can’t...

“What baby?” he strangles, his face instantly going white as he releases the grip on our father.

Fuck. No. He can’t know. This will gut him.

“Don’t,” I warn.

That has Raph zipping his hard gaze to mine. And in his eyes, I see a man who’s been hurt too many times. Who never deserved the betrayal that was laid at his feet. Raph was always too good for that, yet life fucked him anyway.

He continues to stare, as though daring me to speak. To tell him what he must already suspect.

Gio has been silent this whole time, but now his features hover with rage, nostrils widening as he flexes his fists at his sides.

“I’m sorry,” our father says. “I must’ve forgotten to tell you the best part.”

“What is he talking about, Michael?” Raph’s voice twines with both rage and anguish.

“Just tell him, Michael. Take him out of his misery.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I quicken my pace and slam a fist into my father’s mouth.

Crimson trickles down onto his lap.

“Why should I? I met her first. She was more mine than she was his.” He turns to Raph. “And that was my baby she was carrying. Your baby brother.” He snickers. “Or sister.”

Raph inhales sharply, his face contorting with too many emotions – pain, betrayal...it’s all there. I can only imagine how much this hurts him. If my little dove did to me what Bianca did to him.... Fuck.

She betrayed his loyalty in the most horrific way. And she created a baby out of that betrayal.

I never dared to ask why they didn’t have kids, but I now suspect it may have been because they couldn’t. It would make sense. Both of them wanted children. They both told Mom that. And even with Bianca working toward becoming a nurse practitioner, she said she wanted kids.

He looks at me then. Broken. Ripped apart seam by seam.

“How could you not tell me?” His words thicken with incredulity and agony.

I run a hand through my hair. “I didn’t want this to hurt you.”

He grits his teeth and takes a single long breath. “Fuck Bianca. I just need to find her.”

“Her?” Our father chuckles, the sound grating up the walls. “Which one, exactly?”

Raph’s expression instantly hardens. “What the hell do you mean, which one?” He drags his face to our father’s until there’s barely anything separating them. “Nicolette! Where is she?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, son.” He purses his mouth, looking proud. “I thought you meant Bianca.”

ELSIE

“Do you need anything?” I ask Raph, getting water from the fridge before heading upstairs to go to bed with Michael.

It still feels weird to be here in Michael’s home, though he much prefers me to call it ours. This life with him is mine, and Raph...he’s my family now, and I worry about him. It breaks my heart to watch him hurting, being without the woman he’s clearly in love with.

Days have gone by, and still, Michael and his brothers can’t seem to find Nicolette. It’s been killing Raph. He doesn’t even hide it.

“No.” He shakes his head, face planted in his palms as a rush of a breath leaves his lungs. He looks up at me, the whites of his eyes streaked with red, a tight tug between his brows. “I appreciate it, though. Thank you.”

I force a small smile as I ready to head upstairs to be with my husband.

“Elsie?” he calls.

I turn, hoping he actually wants something from someone. Because my God, this poor man.

“Yes?”

“You’re good for my brother.” He runs a hand through his thick black hair. “I don’t remember ever seeing him this happy, not until you.”

My heart lurches in my chest. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Just being honest.” He shrugs with a heavy sigh, dropping his head into his palms once more.

I stay rooted in place, feeling helpless, knowing how he feels. When I was missing my friends, worrying about them, it was a dark place. And that’s where he is too.

“You’re going to find her,” I tell him, hoping to spark some light in the darkness.

But he peers back at me with no hope left. “I don’t know about that anymore. I don’t even know if she’s alive.”

“She is.” My head slants. “Just have faith. Don’t give up on her or on each other.”

His Adam’s apple bobs, emotions perching in his tired gaze. The man doesn’t even sleep or eat. I don’t know how he’s up after searching for her the way he has.

“You need rest,” I say, hoping to convince him.

“I’ll rest when she’s in my arms. When she’s safe. Not a moment before.”

He rests his back against the chair and stares up at the ceiling. And that’s when I decide to leave him alone, taking my cup of water with me and another for Michael as I head up, stairs creaking beneath my feet.

As soon as the door flings open, Michael’s sitting up. “How is he?”

“Looks like hell.”

He shakes his head as I hand him his water. “I can’t believe our fucking father still won’t tell us where she is.”

“Is Gio working with his friend on trying to find her?” Taking a few sips of the ice-cold liquid, I place the cup on the nightstand and slip in beside him.

Immediately, his big, strong arms wrap around me, and he kisses my temple from behind.

“Yeah. Grant Westfield is his name, and he owns Westfield Enterprises. He’s doing what he can.”

“Westfield, as in the company who makes those cell phones?”

I hadn’t realized that was who Gio meant when he said he had a tech guy helping them. Why am I even surprised? This family is so well connected, I’m shocked they don’t have a direct line to all the world leaders.

“Yeah, one and the same,” he whispers, his mouth coasting down my nape as my nipples bead in the wake of his languid touch. “They also make memory chips for phones and are heavily into artificial intelligence.”

That smooth baritone rouses my body awake with wicked thoughts.

“Wow,” I groan, feeling my arousal swell between my thighs.

“Yeah. He can hack anything, so a friend like that is good to have. He and Gio went to business school together.”

“How nice for them...” I’m trying hard to focus, but it’s becoming quite difficult.

Just keep doing whatever you’re doing.

“He thinks he may have something on Nicolette’s location already.” His lips line the shell of my ear, his tongue swirling around my lobe right before he takes it into his mouth.

“Oh, God,” I gasp as he sucks.

The sounds he makes from deep in his chest reverberate down my spine.

“I...that’s good news,” I whisper. My hand skates around, grabbing a fistful of his hair. “And is Gio still supposed to marry...what’s her name again?”

“Eriu. And yes, he is, or the Irish will sever our deal and kill Raph instead.”

“I feel bad for Gio,” I groan as my husband’s hand slips under the waistband of my leggings, an index finger rolling between my wet slit. “Knowing that he likes her sister instead.”

“I know. He’s crazy about her, it seems.”

“The way you are about me?”

He growls, and it does something to me to hear that possessive twinge in his voice. “No one is crazy about a woman the way I’m crazy about you.”

“Is that right?” My question comes on a pant as his thumb presses to my entrance, and I buck against it.

“That’s right.” His teeth mark my throat, grazing down to my collarbone. “I’m going to hate leaving you tomorrow. I may be out all day looking for Nicolette. Try not to miss me too much.”

Two fingers sink inside me, and my eyes instantly roll back, my behind thrusting into his thick, rigid length that I’m dying to feel stretching me. My body shivers as he strokes my clit between two fingers, and the pressure to my core has me needing to be filled.

“Just make sure you come home to us,” I warn with a breathy sigh. “Or I’ll be the one to kill you.”

His chuckle grates up the side of my neck. “Promise?”

“Yes,” I gasp as he drives those fingers deeper now, curling them,

slamming them faster, his thumb twirling around my sensitive spot.

He slinks his other hand up my abdomen, fingers feathering between my breasts until he grips his palm around my throat.

“Think I can put a baby in you before I go?” his voice husks out.

I gasp at the realization of what he just said.

“You want a baby?” I pant as my body climbs to the edge.

He doesn’t slow a moment. Instead, he fucks me faster, gripping my jaw in his relentless grasp.

Ravenously dark eyes meet mine.

“No,” he says. “Babies. I want *babies* with you, little dove.”

A heady moan slips from my lips, and then I surrender to the warm, tingling sensation flitting down my body. My limbs jerk, and he captures my mouth, quieting the brazen sounds spilling from my lips.

His tongue fills my mouth while he demands every drop of my arousal until I have nothing left to give. Gripping the back of his neck, I deepen the kiss, wanting it to last forever.

Slowly, my body stills, and he trails kisses down my jaw as he presses my body closer.

“So, what do you say, my little dove?” He flips on top of me, his eyes boring with such longing intensity, I feel it shooting down to my toes. “Want to expand our family?”

I hold his scarred cheek in my loving hand. “How can I say no to that?”

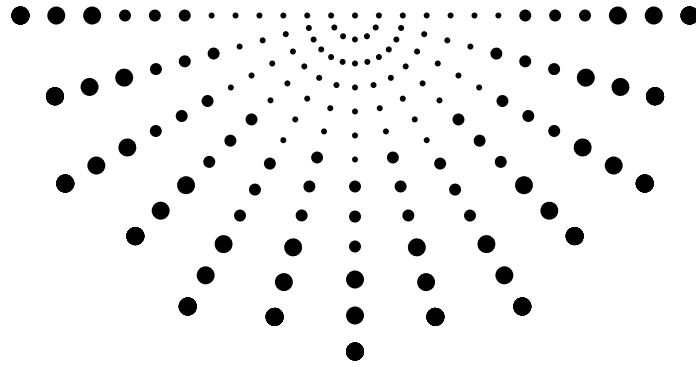
Emotions battle for space inside my chest, and in his gaze, I find love, acceptance, and a life I never thought I’d have.

But here we are, carving out a whole new beginning for the both of us.

A showstopping grin flashes across his face, and soon enough, he slips off my clothes and loses his own.

And together, we find love in one another, the way we never have before.

EPILOGUE



RAPH

She lowers onto the sofa and eyes me with a tight face. “There’s no way I’m staying in this tiny cabin with you.”

I snicker, matching the intensity of her gaze. “You are until Michael says it is safe. Until we can extinguish the threat.”

“You mean your father?” She bows a brow.

“That’s right.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Could be weeks...months.”

“Months!” She jolts, practically jumping to her feet. “I’m not staying with you for months.”

I take a step forward, a smirk lifting one side of my mouth, my heart pounding, wanting to erase that adorable expression off her face with my tongue.

She inhales sharply as her lips part, those eyes pinned to mine. I can feel the weight of them on me, like they own me. In the space between us, the intensity grows until it swallows us both.

“And where do you think you’ll be going, little one?”

“Somewhere you’re not.” She tries hard to keep a brave face, but she doesn’t stand a chance with me this close. She feels this just as much as I do.

And that’s trouble.

Her nostrils widen with a breath. Her chest expands. And fuck, that flush

in her cheeks when she rakes me down with her gaze has my dick doing what it's not allowed to do: getting hard.

Her desire for me is practically etched into every move she makes, every look she gives me. Even the ones she pretends are full of hate. It'd be easier if she truly despised me. It'd be easier to let my feelings die. But how can they when she looks at me that way?

It's a cruel existence to live in a world with someone you can't have. And sharing a small space with her day in and day out will be a form of cruel torture.

"And one more thing, Raphael," she adds, rising to her feet, her face grimacing.

I'm enraged all over again from the mere thought of her suffering. She nears me until we're almost chest to chest.

"If you want to cohabit peacefully for however long we're supposed to be stuck here..." She lifts a hand and digs her forefinger into my chest. "I suggest you stop calling me by that horrifying nickname."

She sears me with a venomous gaze, and I welcome the burn as long as she looks at me. The sheer thought of her not looking at me at all sends me completely over the edge.

If those eyes are all I get to have, I'll gladly have them until the day that I die. Because with her, the way she brings my heart to life – the way it beats for her – it's something I'll never feel with anyone else. I'm forever hers, even when she doesn't realize it. Even when it's wrong.

The emeralds of her eyes have my gaze running down the length of her, taking in her small frame hiding beneath that long cardigan she's tucking around herself.

Her long hair curls around both sides of her chest, and staring at her is like staring at a gift you're excited to unwrap.

"I'm not little, Raphael." Her breath hitches almost to a whisper; I watch her pretty pink mouth move. "If you'd like, I can take off my clothes and show you."

My dick is really enjoying that damn feisty mouth. It's heavy and throbbing and wanting her heart-shaped mouth around it. I can't get the image of her bare for me out of my damn head.

What would she feel like? Would she beg? Would she spread wide for me and take every inch? I bet she's tight.

"Fuck," I mutter, turning away sharply, giving her my back.

“What happened, Raphael?” Her fingertips slide down my shoulder blade, and I clench my jaw from the warmth that immediately glides up my arm. “Afraid to admit you might actually want to fuck me?”

Her touch continues to run up and down, and I slam my eyes shut, attempting to control myself. I’m this close to forgetting why it’d be wrong to rip off her clothes and take her bent over the sofa.

“Fucking Christ, Nicolette...” I sharply pivot and snatch her delicate throat in my palm, curling my fingers deeper.

This is her damn fault. I grind my molars, my breathing raving out of me as I stare intensely into those eyes I’ve come to love. My large hand practically engulfs her, and I squeeze a little at a time, giving her just enough room to breathe. I drop my face so close I can taste the wildness of her heaving exhales. I search her widened gaze, her panting growing unsteady as my lips hover right above hers.

“You don’t know what you’re doing, little one.” My tone is rough, filled with pent-up desire. “The things I could do to you...” I use the nickname on purpose, loving the lustful rage on her features. “If I wanted to fuck you, I’d have already done it by now. And every other bastard who’s been inside you would be instantly forgotten.”

KEEP READING RAPH AND NICOLETTE’S STORY [HERE](#).

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Sinful Vows*! Want more Michael and Elsie? [CLICK HERE](#) for a bonus scene!

Curious what happened to Elsie’s friend, Jade? Want to read more about the war between the Cavaleri brothers and the Bianchis? Grab

THE DEVIL'S DEAL today.

PLAYLIST

[Listen on Spotify!](#)

- “Poison in the Water” by Von Grey
- “Nothing Is As It Seems” by Hidden Citizens feat. Ruelle
- “Where Do We Go (No Escape)” by Klergy feat. Katie Garfield
- “The Devil Is a Gentleman” by Merci Raines
- “Take” by Wens
- “Somebody Else” by Ruelle
- “Hush” by Seibold feat. Garrison Starr
- “Super Villain” by Stileto feat. Silent Child and Kendyle Paige
- “I Am Fire” by J2 feat. Eivør
- “I Won’t Give Up” by Jason Mraz
- “Where Do We Go From Here” by Ruelle
- “Already Gone” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Monsters” by Ruelle
- “Who Do You Want” by Ex Habit
- “Wicked Game” by Jessie Villa
- “Black Magic” by Jaymes Young
- “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” by Taylor Swift
- “The World We Made” by Ruelle
- “Deep End” by Ruelle
- “Looking at the Devil” by Seibold feat. Neutopia and Leslie Powell
- “Sike” by Red Rosamond
- “Tomorrow We Fight” by Tommee Profitt feat. SVRCINA
- “In the Blood” by Red Rosamond
- “What Are We Waiting For” by Ruelle
- “Skin and Bones” by Ruelle
- “Fight for Survival” by Klergy
- “Bad Habits” by Mvnsin feat. Alex Iva and Sara of Isla
- “Until the Levee” by Joy Williams
- “In the Stars” by Benson Boone
- “Always Remember Us This Way” by Noelle Johnson

- “Fire on Fire” by Sam Smith
- “Without Fear” by Dermot Kennedy
- “Fall Into Me (Acoustic)” by Forest Blakk

ALSO BY LILIAN HARRIS

FRAGILE HEARTS SERIES

1. [*Fragile Scars*](#)
2. [*Fragile Lies*](#)
3. [*Fragile Truths*](#)
4. [*Fragile Pieces*](#)

CAVALERI BROTHERS SERIES

1. [*The Devil's Deal*](#)
2. [*The Devil's Pawn*](#)
3. [*The Devil's Secret*](#)
4. [*The Devil's Den*](#)
5. [*The Devil's Demise*](#)

MESSINA CRIME FAMILY SERIES

1. [*Sinful Vows*](#)
2. [*Cruel Lies*](#)
3. [*Twisted Promises*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For Lilian, a love of writing began with a love of books. From *Goosebumps* to romance novels with sexy men on the cover, she loved them all. It's no surprise that at the age of eight she started writing poetry and lyrics and hasn't stopped writing since.

She was born in Azerbaijan, and currently resides in Long Island, N.Y. with her husband, three kids, and a dog named Gatorade. Even though she has a law degree, she isn't currently practicing. When she isn't writing or reading, Lilian is baking or cooking up a storm. And once the kids are in bed, there's usually a glass of red in her hand. Can't just survive on coffee alone!

Join her readers group to get all the latest scoop, excerpts, or even discuss your favorite new show:

[Reader Group](#)

You can also connect with her here:

[Email](#)

[Signed Paperbacks](#)

[Website](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Goodreads](#)

