



CORSICAN CRIME LORD

Tears Like
ACID

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHARMAINE PAULS



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CORSICAN CRIME LORD, BOOK THREE

CHARMAINE PAULS

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FOREWORD

Tears Like Acid is the third book in the **Corsican Crime Lord** series. You must read **Love Like Poison** (Book One) and **Hate Like Honey** (Book Two) first. Sabella and Angelo's story concludes in **Kisses Like Rain** (Book Four). The story includes violence, a hate relationship, an unredeemable alpha-hole, and scenes not recommended for sensitive readers. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

Trigger Warnings

Triggers include but are not limited to abuse, torture, assault, blood (gore), death, guns, graphic violence, graphic sexual scenes, punishment, spanking, branding, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, kidnapping, substance abuse, non-con/dubcon.

Read [Love Like Poison](#) Now

Read [Hate Like Honey](#) Now

PREVIOUSLY IN HATE LIKE HONEY

CORSICAN CRIME LORD, BOOK TWO

After the tragic car accident that claimed the lives of Angelo's mother and sister, Angelo learns that Benjamin Edwards, Sabella's father, paid their mechanic to cut the brake cables. Ben's target was Angelo and his father, Santino. Santino and Angelo swear revenge.

Roch, the bodyguard Angelo employed to protect Sabella, shares the shocking news of the tragic deaths of Angelo's family with Sabella. When she asks her brother, Ryan, about it, he tells her to mind her own business.

Growing increasingly concerned about her father's withdrawal and absent-minded behavior, Sabella pays him a surprise visit at the office, only to walk in on a gruesome scene. Santino Russo stands over the body of her father, and Angelo is crouched next to him, holding a gun in his gloved hand.

After rendering her unconscious, Angelo informs Ryan of the turn of events. Sabella wakes up to find Ryan on the murder scene. When she urges him to call the authorities, he tells her that they can't involve the police. Their father commissioned the hit on Santino and Angelo, which by an unforeseen turn of events claimed the lives of the mother and sister. They have to stage their father's death as a suicide.

Sabella faints as a result of the shock. During the next two days, Ryan bribes a doctor to keep her in an induced coma for her body and brain to recover from the trauma. Santino returns to Corsica, but Angelo remains in South Africa in case damage control is necessary. When he learns that Sabella has been admitted to hospital, he slips into her room at night.

Angelo's visits to take care of Sabella manifests in her dreams. When she wakes up, her family is present. Ryan confesses the true nature of their illegal business. Unable to share the terrible truth with anyone, the burden and guilt weigh her down. In an effort to expel the emotions torturing her, she swims out far to sea.

Roch saves her from almost drowning. In a fight that ensues, Angelo orders Roch to return to Corsica for verbally assaulting and pushing Sabella. The confrontation between Sabella and Angelo turns violent, and in the heated argument that follows, their passion gets out of hand.

Sabella hates herself for succumbing to her desire for Angelo again, especially after what had happened. While her family is arranging the funeral, they learn more devastating news. Sabella's father had a second family that he kept secret from them. At the reading of his will, they meet his mistress and their half-sister. The betrayal cuts Sabella deep. She starts doubting her relationship with her father, not sure what was real.

Concern about Sabella's near-drowning drives Angelo to seek her doctor's advice. Could the incident be seen as an attempted suicide? The doctor advises Angelo not to submit Sabella to more stress. He declares that it won't be conducive to her mental state to move her to Corsica so soon. Eager to finally claim his betrothed and marry her, Angelo is faced with a dilemma. In the midst of having to make a decision, his uncle calls with bad news. Santino had a heart attack. Angelo returns home, leaving Sabella behind once more.

Ryan takes over the business in George. He moves back into the big house with Celeste, his wife, and their son, Brad, to be close to his mother after the ordeal. As Sabella can no

longer board with Ryan and Celeste while attending university in Cape Town, Ryan rents her a beautiful villa in Camps Bay.

In the meantime, Angelo is slowly unraveling. At his father's funeral, he fires Roch for assaulting his future bride. The construction of the new house on his property is complete. He makes arrangements to have his late mother's poor family moved into the luxurious dwelling. While biding his time to bring Sabella home, he ruthlessly grows the business into a global empire.

The closer her nineteenth birthday gets, the increasingly anxious Sabella grows. On the dreaded day, she locks herself in her secure villa, only to discover Angelo in her bedroom. When she confronts him, he confesses that he not only pays for her rent but also for her studies and living expenses. He puts a ring on her finger and gives her a day to come to terms with their pending marriage and her move to Corsica.

Devastated, Sabella drives to Great Brak River to confront her family. Ryan admits the truth, for the first time coming clean about the marriage contract their father made with the Russo family but refused to honor. Sabella finally understands why Angelo stole incriminating evidence to blackmail her father to sign over his business. Angelo's end-goal was forcing her father to honor the marriage contract.

In a desperate attempt to escape, Sabella plots to marry her best friend, Colin. Angelo is furious when the security company staff he hired to follow Sabella and her family inform him that the Edwards family disappeared without a trace. With the help of street surveillance cameras, Angelo locates them at a church.

Just as Sabella and Colin are about to get married, Angelo and an army of men burst through the doors. After marrying

Sabella at gunpoint, Angelo whisks her off to France in a private plane.

The start of their marriage is turbulent. Angelo punishes her for her betrayal. In the confrontation that follows, Sabella points a gun at him, earning yet another punishment when they board Angelo's yacht in France.

Before Angelo can depart for Corsica, Lieutenant Lavigne from the French gendarmerie boards the yacht under the pretense of investigating a domestic disturbance complaint. Instead, he plants drugs on Sabella and arrests her. Angelo watches helplessly as the armed men who outnumber him drive his wife to the police station.

A furious Angelo calls his lawyer to arrange for bail. In the meantime, Lieutenant Lavigne submits Sabella to a humiliating full-body search and uncomfortable conditions to try and break her before offering her a deal. He promises her freedom in exchange for information and evidence that will enable him to put Angelo behind bars.

After the lieutenant drops the charges against Sabella, Angelo takes her to a hotel for the night. At first light, they leave for Corsica. He contacts his informant in the bureau to get a copy of the video recording of Sabella's interrogation. To his dismay, he learns that the tape has been wiped clean. It can only mean one thing. Lavigne offered Sabella a deal. Angelo knows that he can't trust his new wife.

Things only get more complicated when the newlyweds are met by Angelo's uncles and cousins in Corsica. Uncle Nico and Enzo urge Angelo to kill Sabella, not only because she's a threat to their family, most likely working with the police, but also to honor his father's dying wish.

When the housekeeper, Heidi, shows Sabella the wedding dress Angelo's mother had made for her, Angelo walks in on the scene. The dress triggers his grief and vengeance. Even though he doesn't hold Sabella accountable for her father's sins, he blames her for everything that happened. Everything that transpired was because of her. For her. His grief compels him to punish Sabella, who stubbornly refuses to beg for the very air she breathes.

Unable to sleep, Sabella sneaks to the kitchen and makes a cup of tea. On her way back to her room, a strange pull draws her to Angelo's late family's quarters. Angelo discovers her in his sister's room. In her fright, Sabella accidentally knocks down his sister's jewelry box and breaks both the box and a Venetian glass bead necklace.

Believing that she was looking for evidence to use against him, Angelo is consumed with rage. Making good on his promise to whip her, he drags her to the cellar, but finds himself unable to go through with it. Instead, he banishes Sabella from his house, driving her in the middle of the night to an unknown destination.

TEARS LIKE ACID

CHAPTER ONE

Sabella

Newlyweds.

We tied the knot not a day ago.

And my husband already banished me.

He hates me so much that he dragged me into the cellar and took a whip from the wall after he found me trespassing in his late sister's room.

I suppose it's something that he didn't bring that whip down on my back. My feet are cut, my knees are bleeding, and in the late hour of the winter night, wearing nothing but his shirt, I'm freezing. Yet it could've been worse. As well as I came to know him, it could've been a *lot* worse.

We're speeding in his car over a gravel road in the middle of nowhere. After his violent explosion of anger, we're quiet, each of us digesting our thoughts. I'm huddled in my corner, trying to get my fear under control.

We've been driving for at least twenty minutes. Nothing except darkness and a deserted landscape stretch out around us. The road is in bad shape. I'm jostled in my seat, my hip bumping against the door.

My anxiety flares when he slows the car down. Up ahead in the distance, a house rises in the light of the moon. The dwelling is smaller than the castle in which Angelo lives. At a glance, it looks to be built from the same yellow stone. As we near, the headlights of the car illuminate a handsome, modern structure with big windows.

I hold my breath as he cuts the engine but leaves the lights on. Not giving him time to come around and pull me from the car, I jump out when he opens his door. In the stark lights that cut two broad paths across the yard, I spot destruction. Broken flowerpots litter the path. Pieces of debris are planted in the soil.

Locking his fingers around my bicep, he drags me across the muddy yard to the house. On the veranda, he pauses to take a key from underneath a broken terracotta pot. He unlocks the door and shoves me inside. I stumble, catching myself before I go down.

A light flicks on. The spacious room is unfurnished. The floor is swept, but it's dirty. Smells of rot and mold hang in the air. A large window reflects the overhead light. The view beyond is obscured. Instead, the glass mirrors the inside, projecting an image of Angelo and me standing apart on the wooden floor with me in his shirt and him dressed in nothing but pajama bottoms. The cold doesn't seem to bother him, but the disks of his nipples are contracted into flat, hard circles. The muscles in his chest bunch as he flexes his fingers.

“This is your new home,” he says to my back, addressing my reflection in the glass. “This is where you'll stay from now on. You'll present yourself to me if I grace you with my presence, naked and on your knees. Do you have a problem

with that? Or must I remind you the only reason your family eat and has a roof over their heads is because I allow it?”

“No,” I bite out, hugging myself. “I don’t need reminding.”

He smiles. So cold. So detached. So inhumane. “Good.”

He turns and slams the door behind him.

I stand frozen to the spot, not only unable to move but also uncertain about what to do. The lights sweep over the room as he turns the car around, and then I’m buried beneath a dark night. The crunch of the tires on the gravel fades with the hum of the engine until silence cloaks me too.

I’m somewhere unknown, miles away from the main house in a foreign country. But I’m alive. My knees buckle under the weight of the relief. It’s not until now that I realize how certain I was of dying tonight. It only hits me when the crash after the adrenaline high leaves me weak and covered in a cold sweat.

I take a moment to gather myself before walking on shaky legs to the windows to find my bearings. In the far distance, lights flicker at the bottom of a valley. It must be a small village no more than ten kilometers away. Automatically, I categorize the information. However, my priority is getting warm. I’m shivering uncontrollably.

The house looks empty. I walk from the spacious room through the adjoining door into a kitchen, leaving bloody footprints in the film of sticky dirt covering the floor. I open a few cupboards. Save for plastic utensils, the shelves are empty. So are the drawers. I turn on the tap and am relieved when the water runs warm.

Switching on lights as I go, I make my way upstairs in search of a bathroom. There are five bedrooms upstairs, each

with an en-suite bathroom. Like the rest of the house, the rooms are devoid of furniture, except for a king-size mattress that lies on the floor of the biggest room.

Choosing that bathroom, I turn on the shower and let the warm water cascade over me. Blood and mud run in rivulets over the mosaic floor, disappearing with a swirl down the drain. When the water runs clear, I turn off the tap.

Angelo's shirt serves as a towel, but that leaves the garment wet and me completely naked in the icy coldness of the house. Now that I can more or less function again, I search for the central heating control and find a panel against the wall. When I turn on the thermostat, the red light comes on. Thank goodness. At least the heating works.

With nothing else to do, I sit on the mattress and inspect my feet. The soles are cut but not too deeply. My knee is bleeding again. I press the wet shirt on the wound and eventually settle for tying the shirt around my knee like a bandage. Then I curl into a ball on the mattress and close my eyes, imagining that I'm somewhere else, somewhere warm and happy, anywhere but here.

CHAPTER TWO

Angelo

I'm so furious I can't think straight. That's what she does to me.

Sabella.

My wife.

I swear to God, she's the only person who can drive me to such volatile violence. When I deal with any other enemy, I'm controlled. The fury is a weapon I use to fuel me. With her, it's the reverse. The fury controls me. Yet the beast inside me that makes me more animal than man wouldn't allow me to whip her. The monster that lives under my skin wanted to protect her. It wanted to save her from its own savage anger.

If I'd been rational and in control of myself, I would've punished her. I would've beaten the truth out of her, because if I had any doubts before, I now know without question that she's untrustworthy. Why else would she snoop around my house in the dark, risking my wrath? Perhaps that's why I'm pushing myself so hard to be unfeeling toward her. It's the only way to protect myself. No matter how much I lie to myself, her betrayal will disappoint me. No, it'll slay me.

I know what my uncles will say. That I should kill her. That I should shackle her in the basement and torture her. It's only fair. That's how we deal with traitors.

Yet the beast who likes his new possession a little too much won't let me. The man who fought wars to own her can't destroy her. We came too far. I sacrificed too much.

The tires kick up gravel as I bring the car to a screeching halt in front of the main house that belongs to me now. I inherited it because I'm the sole survivor. I'm the only person left in this family. My vision darkens at the thought, my fingers tightening around the wheel with a force that hurts.

The front door opens. Light spills out. Heidi stands in the yellow glow, wearing a tracksuit instead of her usual uniform. Her features are pulled into a mask of concern. Disappointment, maybe.

"Angelo," she exclaims when I get out of the car.

She's been with my family since before I was born. She doesn't often use my first name. Only when someone is about to die or something serious is happening.

"Angelo," she says again when I shove past her.

She runs after me and blocks my way, her gaze fixing on my naked torso. "You'll catch your death going out in the cold like that."

"I'm alive," I grumble, making to go around her, but she prevents me with a step to the side.

"Where is she?" Her manner is strained. "Where did you take her?"

Her eyes plead with me, begging me to tell her I didn't beat my wife to death and bury her in a shallow grave.

“At the new house,” I say, the suppressed violence and anger turning my voice gruff. “Where she’ll live from now on.”

“She’ll catch her death too.” Her tone becomes softer, more cajoling. “Let me take her some clothes and food. A blanket, at least.”

That stops me—the realization of what I did, dragging Sabella away with no protection, not even the thin layer of a blanket. It doesn’t surprise me that Heidi knows what happened. Little goes on in the house that escapes her. Besides, I wasn’t discreet when I hauled Sabella into the night with nothing but my shirt on her body.

The notion tightens my gut. The taste in my mouth turns bitter. I liked that look on her. It woke something protective inside me. Why the fuck did she have to go snooping? I haven’t been in Adeline’s room since the accident. Going in there did something to me. Seeing her things around Sabella’s feet, broken and cracked, cut open a wound that hasn’t healed. That jewelry box was Adeline’s favorite possession. I gave it to her when we turned six. She kept all her treasures inside it. And then Sabella threw all those memories on the floor, exposing them to eyes that were never meant to see them.

“Angelo,” Heidi says, pulling me back to the present with a gentle but insistent reprimand.

“Fine.” I grip her shoulders and set her aside. “Take clothes and food. But do not speak her name in my presence again. Are we clear?”

Her lined face collapses with something akin to pity, but she knows better than to argue.

I leave her to her pity and stalk upstairs. With every step I take, I punish myself, fighting the urge to turn around and take those things to Sabella myself.

On the landing, I pause. Hesitate. Wrestle some more with myself. But no. I can't grow soft. Not for a woman. Not for a traitor. What did I expect? I always knew Sabella was strong-willed. She never liked me to tell her what to do or how to behave. When she chooses a man, she's all sweetness and soft consideration, a warm body and an even warmer smile. I can never forget those stolen moments when I was the man she'd chosen. I miss them more than I care to admit.

Yet I'll commit the same sins if it means I get to keep her. Even if the price is banishing her to a place where she can't gather evidence against me. If given another chance, I'd steal that book with the incriminating evidence from her father again.

I push myself to walk away. It takes tremendous effort. My feet slap the floor hard when I enter my bedroom. Why does she have to fight me so persistently? If only she'd gone down on her knees, she could've slept in my bed tucked against my side. If only she'd asked nicely for once, she could've had a warm shower and wake up to breakfast in bed. Instead, she's locked away in a tower, in a house that my mother's family rejected and deserted, and I'm here wishing things were different.

Maybe that's the problem. Wishful thinking and facts aren't the same. I should've known right from the start this was how we'd end up, with her rebelling and me deflecting.

I reach for the decanter of Scotch on the table. On second thought, I retract my hand. Drinking only makes me more

volatile. I looked down the bottom of a bottle far too often during the last few months.

Going back to sleep isn't an option. I get my phone and send an instruction to the guardhouse to dispatch a man to watch the house at the far end of the property, not only to keep my wife safe but also to make sure she doesn't run. Not that she'll get far. There's nothing for miles around. The village is down in the valley. Anyway, I don't expect her to escape. She's cleverer than that.

With the task out of the way, I send a message to my uncles, calling them in for a meeting first thing in the morning. It's time to put them back in their place.

CHAPTER THREE

Sabella

Sleep refuses to come. The relief of oblivion evades me. I'm too cold, too scared, and too lonely curled up on the dirty mattress.

I wrinkle my nose at the smell of old sweat. It's disgusting, but I'll catch a cold or worse on the floor. Like in Angelo's house, the flagstone floors in the bedrooms have uneven surfaces. It creates an interesting pattern and depth that are pleasing to the eye, but it's not practical for camping out on.

My teeth start chattering again. I'm about to turn on my other side when two spotlights are projected on the wall above me. I jerk upright, my body tensing. I left the lights on downstairs, but I switched them off in the bedroom in the hope of catching some sleep. The dark allows me to make out the headlights of a car that slide toward the ceiling as the vehicle rolls up the hill. Jumping to my feet, I hobble to the window. It's definitely a car, but it's not Angelo's Jaguar.

Shit.

I look around for a weapon, my breathing turning shallow as I remember there's nothing but plastic knives and forks in

the kitchen. The cutlery is disposable, meant to be discarded after one use. A knife will crack in two with the slightest pressure. Maybe I should hide, but the lights are a dead giveaway that someone is home. What if it's one of Angelo's many enemies? Or the lieutenant who said he'd be back for me?

The car comes to a stop in front of the yard. A woman gets out. The air rushes from my lungs in a sigh of relief when I recognize Heidi's long braid and sturdy frame in the lights of the car. She takes a bag and a suitcase from the trunk, her body dipping on the side of the bag as she carries her charge to the veranda.

The door squeaks open.

Her voice echoes in the empty space. "Sabella? Mrs. Russo?"

Making quick work of loosening the shirt around my knee, I pull it on and button it up even though it's wet and stained with blood. I smooth down my hair and try to scavenge a morsel of pride as I walk to the top of the stairs.

"There you are," she says with obvious relief, as if she expected to find a dead body. She drops the bags and closes the door. "I brought you a few things." Making her way to the bottom of the stairs, she scrutinizes me, her attention fixing on the cut on my knee. "Your clothes and food." She motions at the maxi shopping bag. "Bedding and linen too."

Too ashamed to hold her gaze, I lower mine. "Thank you." I go down the stairs, wincing as I put my weight on my feet. "That's very kind. I'm sorry you had to drive out in the night on such a dangerous road."

“Are you kidding?” she exclaims. Clicking her tongue, she continues, “Look at you, standing there thanking me so politely when you’re the one who’s been wronged.”

Her kindness breaks something inside me. The tears I haven’t given Angelo roll over my cheeks.

“Here now.” She pulls me in for a hug, her arms just as strong and comforting as our housekeeper, Doris’s, used to be.

My tears spill faster. My mom never gave me hugs like these, not until after Angelo bulldozed into my world and destroyed my family’s lives. That’s why Doris always stood in, giving me comfort when I needed it from a woman. I assume my mom’s bitterness and inability to show me affection had a lot to do with the grudge she carried toward me for being my dad’s favorite. He often chose me above the rest of the family, even above her, and I only understood how much that hurt when I grew older.

“There,” Heidi says, patting my back.

Sniffing, I swallow my tears and pull back. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for needing a little solace. It’s perfectly normal.” She goes to the suitcase and flicks it open. “Come. Let’s get you something warm and dry to wear.”

My protest is weak. “I can do that.”

“It’s all right.” She smiles up at me. “I’m happy to do it, and you should never be shy of taking assistance when it’s offered.” She adds with a note of wisdom, “Or to ask for help when you need it.”

She retrieves a set of underwear and socks. I take the items from her and look around, feeling a little lost.

“There’s a guest bathroom next to the kitchen,” she says, handing me a sweater and yoga pants.

“Thank you, Heidi,” I say, realizing that Angelo never introduced us. I just picked up her name during dinner.

When I come out of the bathroom, feeling much warmer in my own clothes, I find her in the kitchen, pouring steaming liquid from a flask into a plastic cup.

“Don’t burn yourself.” She pushes the cup over the counter. “I’m afraid there isn’t a proper mug with an ear. If I’d known the kitchen cupboards were empty, I would’ve brought crockery and cutlery.”

I pull the cup closer. It smells like tea. “This is perfect.”

“I stocked the cupboards with non-perishable foods. I’ll be back with proper groceries tomorrow.”

Worry knots my stomach. “Is it okay? I mean you coming here and bringing these things? I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

She busies herself with wiping sugar grains off the counter into her palm, avoiding my eyes. Her tone hardens a bit when she mentions *his* name. “Mr. Russo is aware that I’m here.”

“All right,” I say, biting my lip.

She brushes her hands off in the sink and walks to me with a sigh. “Give it time. It’s tough for him, having lost them both on the same day. He was very close to his sister. You just opened old wounds going in there.” Her smile is reassuring. “That’s all.”

No, that’s not all. That’s not only why he hates me, not by a long shot, but I can’t tell her that.

She takes my shoulders and gives a squeeze. “Why don’t you drink your tea while I get your bed ready? I added sugar. My mother always said a warm cup of tea with lots of sugar is the best medicine for nerves and fatigue.”

“Oh, no,” I say quickly. “I can make the bed.”

“I’ll be happy to.” She waves a hand. “It’ll only take me a minute.” Her gaze drifts to my knee again. “I’ll bring disinfectant and band-aids tomorrow. You’ll be back to normal in no time.”

Looking pleased with herself, she marches up the stairs.

I don’t correct her. I don’t tell her that nothing will be normal again. I don’t tell her that this is my punishment, and that I’m frightened to death of what my new future holds.

CHAPTER FOUR

Angelo

At first light, my uncles pull up in front of the house. I instruct Heidi to greet them at the door and show them to the dining room where I'm having breakfast. The table is set with a selection of pastries. A pot of fresh coffee stands at my elbow.

A pang of nostalgia hits me straight in the chest as a memory of my father protesting his breakfast menu flashes through my mind. All he ever wanted was his damn pastries and his cigarillos. He was right. We shouldn't have kept those small pleasures from him. In the end, he died much too young.

Uncles Enzo and Nico file into the room, dressed in their signature dark suits. Identical in their features, they bear a strong resemblance to my father, which makes what I have to do more difficult than it already is.

"Angelo," Uncle Nico says in his gravelly voice. "Isn't your wife taking breakfast with you?"

The comment is a little too smug for my liking. "My wife is none of your business."

He gives a start, obviously not having expected the rebuke.

Uncle Enzo clears his throat. “Why are we here? It’s early.” He adds in a grumpy tone, “I don’t like to leave the house before I had my second breakfast.”

“Get used to it,” I say, pouring a cup of coffee.

They eye the coffee before scanning my face, no doubt wondering why I don’t invite them to sit or offer them a cup.

My explanation is simple. “Kneel.”

Their mouths drop open. They stand motionless, staring at me.

“You heard me,” I say, giving them my cruel, polished smile as I bring the porcelain cup to my lips. “On your knees.”

“Angelo,” Uncle Nico says, splaying his palms as he takes a step forward. “What has gotten into you? What’s the meaning of this?”

“Swear your alliance to me.” I lean back in my chair. “That’s how it works when it’s done officially, isn’t it?”

The ruddiness the early morning cold left on Uncle Enzo’s cheeks vanishes. They turn paler than the milk on the table. “We’re loyal to you. You know that.”

“Do I?” I sip my coffee. “I got a different impression last night.”

“I can assure you—” Uncle Nico starts.

“Then do so.” I put my cup down in the saucer harder than necessary. “Bow down and prove it.”

They glance at each other.

Uncle Nico takes the lead. He supports his weight with a palm on the edge of the table as he goes onto his knees with a groan.

I hold out my right hand. He takes it between both of his, faltering for a second, but then he presses his lips on my family ring. “I swear my allegiance to you, Angelo Russo.”

It takes him even more effort to straighten.

The expression on Uncle Enzo’s face is crestfallen as his turn follows. Like his brother, he kisses my ring and promises to obey me. I don’t help him to his feet. I let him struggle, let the message sink in. One hand washes the other. As long as they watch out for me, I’ll watch out for them. However, I won’t hesitate to chop off a hand that goes astray.

They stand with their arms folded behind their backs, watching me like reprimanded schoolboys.

“Let’s get one thing straight.” I push to my feet. “No one questions my decisions or motives, least of all when they concern my wife.”

They exchange another look.

“Are we clear?” I ask loud enough to make them jump.

“Yes, Angelo,” Uncle Enzo says, sounding wounded.

Uncle Nico adds his two cents’ worth. “We were just trying to help.”

I get into their faces, making them cower. “From now on, just do as I say.”

Uncle Enzo flinches. “What do you want us to do?”

“Send Toma and Gianni to watch the new house. They’re to stand guard twenty-four-seven. If they can’t be there, I trust you to personally step in.”

It’s a low blow, a dishonorable demotion, but putting them on guard duty is part of the lesson they have to learn.

“Guard the house?” Uncle Nico exclaims. “I thought your mother’s family moved out.”

I clench my jaw both at the reminder of my mother as well as how spectacularly I failed not only her but also her family. My father tried to warn me, but I thought I could civilize them with running water and electricity.

“It’s not for them,” I say. “It’s for Sabella.”

Uncle Nico blinks.

“She’s staying there now?” Uncle Enzo asks.

I turn my back on them, pick up my cup, and carry it to the window, hiding my expression lest they see something in my face they shouldn’t. The smallest sliver of doubt. “Yes.”

Uncle Enzo’s bafflement carries in his voice. “For how long?”

I grind out the word. “Indefinitely.”

Schooling my features, I turn around. “Do you have a problem with that order?”

“No.” Uncle Enzo pinches his eyebrows together. “Of course not.”

Right answer. “Nobody goes near her but me. Nobody lays a finger on her or that man is dead. If anything happens to her, I’ll hold you responsible. I’ll punish you personally. Is there any part of that instruction you don’t understand?”

They shake their heads in unison.

“Good.” I finish my coffee and leave the cup on the table. “Then you can go back to your second breakfasts. I want daily reports.”

They nod their agreement as they backtrack out of the room as fast as they can. Who can blame them? They've seen firsthand who I am. Even though I'm family, blood of their blood, they can't hide the spark of disgust that always lurks too shallowly in their eyes. It's the same way they used to look at my mother, the same way everyone looks at me. Except for Sabella. There was a time—very, very long ago—when she looked at me differently. But that ship has sailed, and there's only one course left now. Full sail ahead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sabella

I wake up with an itchy scalp. I tell myself it's because I didn't wash my hair with shampoo last night, but as the morning wears on, even after I wash my hair properly, the itching gets worse.

Fishing the mirror from my make-up bag, I balance it on the bathroom windowsill in the light. When I part my hair down the middle with my comb, I utter a yelp.

No.

No way.

Shuddering, I drop the comb.

I have lice.

Son of a bitch.

I glance at the dirty mattress, my makeshift bed already made.

The knowledge that Angelo knowingly exposed me to such a pest burns with mortification in my stomach. I can only hope Heidi will return before tonight as she promised. That's

to say if Angelo lets her. She brought enough food for a week. There's no rush for her to come back.

Panic tightens my stomach as I go through the house in the daylight and confirm that it's empty. There are no cleaning products, not even a mop or a bucket I can use. The house is beautiful, the finishings modern and luxurious, but it's filthy. Someone swept the floors and wiped down the counters, and that's the extent of the cleaning effort that was made.

I go to the window in the bedroom that faces the back of the house. In the dark, I didn't see much on that side. When I peer through the glass, I suck in a breath. The house balances on the edge of a cliff. The rock is yellow like the color of the stone bricks of the house, the sun giving it a golden tint. A small white beach hugs a turquoise ocean below. The view is breathtaking. I appreciate the sight until the persistent itching makes it impossible to focus on anything else.

After ripping the bedding off the mattress, I throw everything outside on the veranda. I need to boil the pillow and the sheets or wash them in very hot water, but there are no pots in the kitchen, and I don't find a washing machine in the scullery. The place was obviously lived in, but all signs of habitation were removed, including the furniture and appliances.

I feel revolting when I have a breakfast of crackers and peanut butter in the kitchen, standing by the counter. The sun streams through the window, warming the room. My breath makes vapor against the glass as I lean closer for a better look. The day is cold, but the sky is clear.

In the daylight, the village at the bottom of the valley is an untidy arrangement of houses with ochre roofs around a river. They blend almost completely into the landscape, the roofs the

same color as the soil. It's more difficult to spot the village during the day. If I didn't notice the lights last night, I wouldn't have known to look for it.

The coat Angelo gave me in Marseille is at the bottom of the bag in which Heidi brought the linen. I pull it on and wind a scarf around my neck before stepping outside. The destruction of the yard is even more disturbing in the bright sunlight.

"Hello?" I call, my voice echoing in the valley. "Is anyone there?"

No answer.

Why did I even try? No one is around. I saw for myself how far this house is from the main dwelling. I'm alone here. In front of me, the gravel road is a thin line that runs into the distance before disappearing over the hill. The landscape is rocky and wild. Mountains loom far beyond the village, snow capping their peaks.

Like inside, the veranda was swept, but dried mud and something smelling like manure cling to the terracotta tiles. It looks as if someone used the veranda as an animal shed. I walk to the end. The veranda wraps around the house, allowing outdoor views from all sides. At the back where a door leads to the kitchen, I pause for a better look at the view.

Is there a path going down to the beach? I'd like to explore that, but I don't want to miss Heidi if she returns. I need to ask her for a special shampoo and cleaning products. It doesn't help that I don't have a phone. Without a line of communication with the outside world, my isolation is complete. Is that part of my punishment? Or is Angelo just making sure I can't share information with the police who arrested me?

I pace around for the rest of the morning, watching the road. By noon, the itching is so bad I'm going out of my mind. I broke the skin on my scalp with my nails from all my scratching. I can't stay here in the feeble hope that Heidi will save me.

Making up my mind, I go back inside and put on my thickest jeans and another pair of socks to cushion my soles before tying my sneakers. Armed with sandwiches and a bottle of water, I go out the back, staying well out of sight of the road just in case, and set out toward the village. It's my only option, much closer than the main house.

The walk is difficult. I have to maneuver over rocks and around bushes as there isn't a road or a path. On a flat road, the walk would've taken me one and a half hours. If I jogged, even less. At home, I often jogged from Great Brak River to the neighboring towns along the beach, easily covering ten kilometers in less than an hour.

The thought jostles me. Great Brak River isn't home any longer. That life feels not only miles away but also ages ago. Brushing the unsettling notion away, I force myself to focus on nothing but my steps. I only concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other.

I don't reach the village until two strenuous hours later. My relief is so great I forget about my aching soles as I stumble down the first road.

It's quiet. What day of the week is it? My sense of time got muddled between the wedding and Angelo bringing me here.

I do a quick calculation. It's Tuesday. People must be at work and children at school.

At the first house where a woman waters the flowers outside, I stop.

“Hi,” I say, waving from the fence.

She comes closer, her face drawn with suspicion.

This part, I haven't thought through yet. I don't have money. As much as it irks me, I don't have a choice but to ask Angelo for some. And I don't even know his phone number. During that first year when we communicated regularly, his number was always masked. It must be a necessary precaution when you're a wanted criminal. How young and stupidly naïve I was not to have questioned it then. I can only hope the house number is listed.

“I'm sorry to bother you,” I say, offering her a friendly smile. “Do you have a phone I can use? It's an emergency.” When she starts shaking her head, I continue quickly, “I'll be grateful if you could just call...” I can't say *my husband*. Instead, I settle for, “Angelo Russo.” I point toward the hill. “He lives there, on the big property.”

A mask drops in front of her face.

Surely, they know him in the village?

“Angelo,” I repeat slowly. “Russo.”

She crosses herself, says something under her breath, and scurries away.

My shoulders drop with dejection. Setting on my course again, I try at a small park where a few elderly people sit on benches, but I get the same reaction. The moment I utter my husband's name, they make the sign of the cross and turn away.

Clearly, my strategy of calling Angelo and begging him for money isn't going to work.

I wander deeper into the village, crossing a maze of cobblestone streets until I reach a square with a fountain in the heart of the tiny settlement. A few shops are situated around the square. When I spot a green cross flashing on a sign above a door, I blow out a sigh of relief.

Peering through the glass door confirms that the pharmacy is devoid of customers. Just as well. I don't want to contaminate anyone, not to mention that I'd hate for someone to witness my embarrassment.

The bell chimes when I push the door open. It's warm inside. A smell of eucalyptus perfumes the air.

A woman with short brown hair and black-rimmed glasses enters from a room at the back. Her eyes are lined with kohl, and her lips are painted red. I judge her to be in her late fifties. The white tunic she wears over a rollneck sweater tells me she's either the pharmacist or the shop assistant.

"Can I help you?" she asks with a frown, scrutinizing me where I'm hovering in the door.

"You speak English," I say with a pathetic gush of air that leaves my lungs in another bout of relief.

"Of course I do." She looks down her nose at me. "Everyone does. Just because we live in a small village doesn't mean we're uneducated."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just happy to find someone I can communicate with. I don't speak French or Italian, so thank you for making the effort."

Her haughty tone remains intact. "We speak a Corsican dialect here."

“Oh.” I fumble with the doorknob. “I’ve only been here for a day.”

“Either come in and shut the door or stay outside. You’re letting the cold in. The central heating is on. You’re wasting energy.”

“Sorry.” I make a face. “I’m afraid I can’t come in. I have a problem, you see.”

The long breath she inhales puffs out her chest, making her seem to grow taller. “What do you need?”

“A shampoo for lice,” I admit, shame heating my cheeks. “As well as a spray for the house.”

She studies me from over the rim of her glasses, not hiding the judgment on her face. “Wait outside.” Her lip curls with obvious distaste. “I’ll be a moment.”

My muttered, “Thank you,” is lost on her as she reenters the backroom.

A moment later, she exits with two small boxes. “The shampoo comes with a comb and a special oil. You’ll have to spray the room and leave it closed for thirty minutes before airing it well.”

I wring my hands together. “The thing is, I don’t have money on me, but my husband—”

She snatches her hands away, all but hiding the boxes behind her back. “Why didn’t you say so from the start instead of wasting my time?” She juts her chin toward the mountains. “You can go to the public clinic in Bastia. They’ll treat you for free.”

“Please,” I say when she turns on her heel, suppressing the urge to hold her back with a hand on her arm. “I don’t have a

car. I can't get to Bastia."

The corners of her mouth turn down as she drags a gaze over me. "I don't run a charity."

"I don't want it for free. My husband will pay." At least, I hope he will.

She narrows her eyes. "Where are you staying?"

Throwing a thumb over my shoulder, I indicate the seaside. "In the house on the cliff."

She goes stiff, suspicion thick in her voice. "Who did you say your husband is?"

I swallow before I can utter the name again, but the sound comes out scratchy. "Angelo." I clear my throat. "Angelo Russo."

At the mention of his name, the change that comes over her is so remarkable I'm too dumbstruck to move. Shock bleeds into her eyes and contempt thins her mouth before she manages to school her features.

Adopting an expressionless mask, she squares her shoulders and says in a hostile tone, "I don't want his money."

Her reaction baffles me so much that I'm at a loss for words. I only jump back into action when she opens the door.

I touch her shoulder. "Wait, please." When she arches away from the touch as if I'm contagious, which I am right now, I pull my hand away. "I'm not asking for charity. If you won't take his money, I'll work for it." I cast a desperate glance at the store. "I'll dust or clean." I add with rushed enthusiasm, "I can do a new window display for you, something that will attract more customers."

That was the wrong thing to say.

Her back turns even more rigid. “My display is perfectly efficient.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I’m becoming more desperate by the second. I can’t stand this itching for another minute. “Please, I can do anything you need, any help that’s necessary.”

She wrinkles her nose. “If you don’t have a car, how did you get here?”

“I walked.”

She raises her eyebrows. “You walked? All the way from that house?”

Trying to hide my embarrassment at having been banished to a lice-ridden house, I shrug. “It’s not that far.”

A moment ticks by in which I wish the earth would open up and swallow me. I never thought I’d be reduced to begging for a treatment from a stranger. My shoulders droop. What was I thinking? She doesn’t know me. No one here owes me anything.

“You know what?” I utter an uncomfortable laugh. “Forget it. I shouldn’t have asked. Thank you anyway.” I tuck a lock of hair behind my ear, not looking her in the eyes. “Thanks for making an effort with the English.”

“Wait,” she says as I turn toward the street.

Sighing, she thrusts the products at me. “You don’t need to work for it.”

Now I’m even more uncomfortable. “No, please. I don’t expect you to give me these for free.”

“Just take them,” she says, shaking the items in my face.

I die a hundred deaths as I take the boxes. “Thank you.”

Without another word, she goes back inside.

Keeping my head low, I slink out of the village. I don't miss the curtains being pulled aside in front of windows as I make my way through the streets toward the river.

By the time I reach the house, the sun is dipping below the mountain. I take a moment to rub my aching feet. The cuts on my soles pulled open from the walking.

After switching on the vanity light in the bathroom, I set the products out on the counter and get to work. The front and sides of my head are manageable, but combing the oil through the back is near impossible.

I do the best I can and wash my hair with the special shampoo. As there is no hairdryer, I leave the thick, heavy strands loose to dry. If I didn't manage to catch all the lice and nits, I may have to cut my hair.

With the laborious task of delousing my hair done, I spray the mattress and the room and close the door. For good measure, I spray the bathroom, kitchen, and lounge until the canister is empty.

I have no way of telling the time, but I'm guessing the sun sets around five or six. It's been dark for a long time before headlights creep over the hill and fall on the house.

I wait on the threshold as Heidi gets out of the car and takes a shopping bag from the back.

Her broad smile slips as she nears. “What's wrong?”

“You better not come inside.”

She drops the bag on the veranda step. “Did something happen?”

“Lice.”

“What?” she asks with a shriek.

“Yep. I got products to wash my hair and spray the mattress, but I have to boil the bedding.”

“Oh my God.” She clasps a hand over her mouth. “This is terrible. Wait.” She lowers her hand. “Where did you get products?”

“At the pharmacy in the village.”

Her mouth falls open. “You walked there?”

“It’s not that far.”

“But...” She shakes her head. “How did you pay?”

“I didn’t.” I bite my lip. “I offered to pay with a service, but the lady ended up giving me the products for free. She wasn’t very happy about that though. I should probably go back and give her the money.”

Her lips flatten. “Did she wear ugly black glasses and too much make-up?”

“That sounds like her.”

“Helene Campana, the local pharmacist.” She adds with disdain, “The woman has always been tight-fisted.”

“Well, it wasn’t her duty to give me the treatment for free.”

She locks her jaw as she picks up the bag and charges up the steps. “A bit of charity won’t do her any harm. It may even win her a little grace in the eyes of the Almighty.”

“What are you doing?” I ask with alarm as she moves around me.

Putting the bag down, she snorts. “Do you think I’m scared of a few lice?”

“You should be.”

She shuts the door and turns to me with a chuckle. “I’ve dealt with worse. Let me see.” She grips my shoulders and spins me around. “Did you do the back of your head?”

“I tried my best.”

She parts my hair with her fingers. “I don’t see anything, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re all gone. We better make sure, just to be on the safe side.”

“Maybe we should cut my hair.”

“Nonsense.” She releases me. “There’s no need to be so radical. We’ll get those rascals, don’t you worry.” She shrugs off her coat, all efficiency and determination. “Bring me those products.”

“Thank you, Heidi.” And I don’t only mean for helping me. She doesn’t know how much I need her kindness.

“Don’t mention it,” she says, waving my gratitude away.

A short while later, I’m sitting on the floor in the kitchen while she combs the oil through my hair.

“Who lived here?” I ask, unable to squash my curiosity.

She sighs. “The late Mrs. Russo’s family.”

I glance at her from over my shoulder. “Angelo’s mother’s family?”

“They’re a different lot.” Focusing on the task at hand, she briefly meets my gaze. “Not from good stock.”

A memory of what my sister said about Angelo’s family enters my mind. She told me they were bad people, and she

didn't mean only in the moral sense. She compared them to a kid in my class who always had a ring of dirt on his neck. Poor Isaac. It wasn't his fault his parents didn't keep him clean. He was a bright, kind-hearted boy.

“Where are they now?” I ask.

Disdain fills her voice. “They moved back to their tents and shacks in that dump they call a camp.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Who knows? Some people are too set in their ways to change. Angelo had this house built especially for them. You'd think they'd be grateful.” She adds with a scoff, “All they did was steal everything and ruin the place.” Then, muttering to herself, “Who keeps goats on a veranda?”

That explains the lack of appliances and furniture as well as the manure encrusted on the tiles outside.

“The people in the village detest them,” she continues. “They're probably glad the scoundrels left. The only one who was happy about having them here was Angelo.”

“What about his mother? How did she feel about all of this?”

“Poor woman.” Heidi crosses herself. “Bless her soul. She never knew. Angelo didn't have a chance to tell her. Before he could, the accident happened.”

My heart constricts, its beats falling painfully in my ribcage.

No, not an accident.

Feeling bad for deceiving Heidi, I remain quiet. I truly am the traitor Angelo accused me of being.

“We better not say anything about your visit to the village,” she says. “Mr. Russo won’t be happy.”

I thought as much. Not that he left me a choice. “Will you be able to bring me a phone? And some money? In case something happens again.”

Her hand stills in my hair. “You’ll have to ask Mr. Russo about that.”

“Of course.”

I drop the subject, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

While she works, I reflect on the information she shared. Thanks to her revelation, I’m two things wiser. The first is that Angelo is obviously despised in the village for more than his brutal reputation. His family on his mother’s side brought him shame. The second realization is the one that hits me the hardest. He built a house for them—a stunning, enormous, sea-facing house.

That’s huge. Did he do it for them or for himself? Did he do it to better their circumstances or to eradicate his shame? I’m leaning toward the latter. As much as I hate him, I can’t help the compassion that flutters in my chest.

“I think we got them all,” Heidi says, carrying the comb to the sink.

I push to my feet. “Thank you, Heidi. You have no idea how much I appreciate this.” Because she didn’t have to help me.

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Russo,” she replies with a warm smile.

“You can call me Sabella. Mrs. Russo is so formal.”

“Mr. Russo won’t like that.”

“He isn’t here, is he?”

She nods. “Fine, Sabella. If that’s what you prefer.”

After she washes her hands, she disinfects my knee and my feet before applying band-aids despite my protest.

When she’s finished tending to me, I walk her to the door. “Do you think I can have some cleaning products and the use of a washing machine?”

“I can take the sheets with me now.”

“I don’t want to risk spreading this horrible pest. We should seal them in an airtight bag before you transport them.”

“Don’t worry.” She pats my shoulder and says on her way out, “I’ll take care of it.”

I thank her again and close the door. The engine of her car starts up. I walk to the window and watch until the taillights disappear. Silence descends on the house. Clouds obscure the moon. The night seems darker. An owl hoots somewhere.

A shiver crawls through me. I feel too exposed, too alone. With no curtains or blinds in front of the windows, anyone can look in when the lights are on. Angelo took the key he used to unlock the door with him last night. I make a mental note to ask him to make me a copy so that I can at least lock myself in. That’s to say if he gives a damn about my safety. Or if I’ll see him anytime soon. He’ll probably laugh at me, telling me no one but Heidi is going to drive up here. And him. When he needs a fuck.

Unable to shake the feeling that I’m being watched, I switch off the lights and make my way upstairs in the dark. I don’t lie down on the mattress. I sit in the corner with my knees pulled up to my chin. It will be challenging to sleep like

this, but I refuse to crawl back onto the infested mattress. I have no way of knowing that the spray was effective.

After a while, the exhaustion of the day wins out and my eyes draw closed. My head nods between my shoulders, jerking me awake. I slide down, trying to make myself more comfortable. That's when I hear it, the creaking of the door as someone pushes it open. My heart pounds as I prick up my ears, but there's nothing but silence.

Was it my imagination? Did I dream it? Pushing to my feet, I tiptoe to the door. A click comes from downstairs. My pulse spikes. There's definitely someone in the house. I dare a peek around the doorframe. In the moonlight that falls through the windows, I can make out the deserted lounge and the front door that stands open.

My heartbeat triples. Whoever slipped into the house must be in the kitchen. What shall I do? How do I defend myself? No one will hear me if I scream for help. I don't have a weapon. Do I hide in the bedroom and hope the intruder doesn't come upstairs?

I'm still considering my limited options when a shadow falls over the threshold of the kitchen door. A small, thin child no older than six or seven creeps into the lounge, clutching something under each arm. He looks left and right before sneaking toward the open door.

I'm speechless with surprise. He's in the middle of the floor before I find my voice.

“Wait. Stop.”

The boy freezes and jerks his face in my direction. For a moment, we only stare at each other, both of us caught off guard. His face is so dirty I can make out the streaks on his

cheeks in the pale light of the moon. The objects he carries turn out to be a box of cereal and a carton of milk.

The boy comes to his sense first. He turns on his heel, sprinting for the door.

“No,” I call after him, rushing down the stairs. “Please, wait.”

He charges through the door just as I make it to the bottom of the staircase. By the time I reach the door, he’s already vanished into the night.

CHAPTER SIX

Angelo

A knock falls on my study door. Heidi enters without waiting for my reply.

My irritation flares. I haven't done a stitch of work tonight. Why? Because I can't focus my mind on anything other than the woman I locked up in an abandoned house. I can't help but question that decision now that my fury has abated enough to allow rational thoughts. I can't stop thinking that the isolation can't be healthy in the long run. The worst by far, however, is how close I am to asking Heidi for news about my wife.

My housekeeper has just been there.

I know.

Perhaps the plan of banishing Sabella will work in my favor. Maybe she'll break quicker after a few weeks of living like a hermit. I'm not even sure she'll last days before admitting what she and Lavigne are scheming.

Heidi marches to my desk.

I take my frustration out on her. "What is it?"

Her voice is uncharacteristically stern. "Angelo."

I look up from my laptop, caught off guard by a tone she never uses with me.

“There’s a problem at the new house,” she continues.

Every muscle in my body tenses. “What problem?”

Propping her hands on her hips, she says, “Lice.”

I blink. “What?”

“You heard me. Sabella caught lice. You can fire me for speaking her name, but you must do something about it.”

Motherfucker. “I thought Toma took care of cleaning the place.”

“The men swept it, but it needs a good scrubbing and a proper fumigation.”

Leaning back in my chair, I steeple my fingers. “Consider it done. In the meantime, you better bring her back here.”

Her blue eyes light up with approval. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll send someone to the twenty-four-hour pharmacy in Bastia for a treatment.”

“I already took care of that.”

“Good. Do you want one of the men to drive you?” I add with a wry smile, “I would’ve gone myself, but I have important business to finish before tonight’s dinner.”

The truth is that I could’ve instructed Gianni to bring Sabella. He’s already there anyway. But I don’t want her to know I’m having her watched. If she’s going to step out of line, it’s better that I give her some rope.

Heidi lifts her chin. “I’m a good driver. I’ll be fine.”

That statement pierces something in my chest. My memory drifts to my mother. I remind myself with effort that this isn't that day, that since the accident we have the cars checked on a daily basis. "Call me if there's a problem."

"What about your guests?"

"They're not due for another forty-five minutes. The dinner doesn't have to be served until you return."

She heads for the door with a bob of her head.

"And Heidi?"

She turns, waiting.

"Lock her in her room. She's not to wander around in the house, especially not when my guests are here."

The lines around her mouth tighten, but she doesn't contest the order.

When she's gone, I dial Toma.

"Angelo," he says, sounding uncertain.

His father no doubt brought him up to speed with how our morning meeting panned out. He must hate being on babysitting duty. "I thought you took care of the new house."

"I did. I mean the guys cleaned up and cleared out the rubble."

"Didn't you get a company to do a deep cleaning?"

"Um, no. What would've been the point? It wasn't as if anyone was going to live—" He bites off the rest of the remark. I imagine he belatedly realizes that someone is indeed living there again, someone he's supposed to keep an eye on.

"Who's on duty there?"

A small pause passes before he answers. “Gianni.” He clears his throat. “I think.”

I clench the phone in my palm. “You fucking think?”

“I know,” he says quickly. “I mean I know.”

He’s young, but let’s face it. Toma isn’t the brightest light on the Christmas tree. That’s why I need an heir to take over the business. I can’t rely on my cousins to do a good job. We worked too hard to get to the top. There’s no way I’m letting the business dwindle because my cousins don’t have enough brain cells. No. Sabella may not be a wife to me other than in name, but she will do her duty by giving me an heir.

“Do you want me to arrange something?” he asks in a too-thin voice. “A cleaning service?”

“No,” I bite out. “I’ll do it myself.”

Ending the call, I throw the phone on the desk and massage my temples where a headache is building. If I ever lay my hands on that old man who calls himself my grandfather again, I’ll strangle him.

Prioritizing the task over the business that needs my attention, I summon a fumigation and cleaning service. Then I email my personal shopper with instructions to refurbish the place. I wasn’t planning on making it comfortable for Sabella, but my impulsive decision is driven by guilt, the same age-old guilt about who I am and where I come from.

Little over fifty minutes later, a car engine sounds outside. I can’t deny the spark of anticipation that zings through my gut as I get up and exit my study. Just as I walk down the hallway, the front door opens. Heidi glances at me with a stony expression when I stop a few paces away. She pushes the door

wide open and bends to pick up a large vacuum-sealed storage bag that lies at her feet. The contaminated linen, I'm guessing.

"You go right upstairs," she says, her warm tone insinuating she's not addressing me. "I'll take care of this."

She meets my eyes briefly as she hurries down the hallway, leaving Sabella and me alone by sly design. My wife stands on the threshold wearing the coat I gave her over a sweater and jeans. She carries an overnight bag in her hand. Her dark, glossy hair falls in damp tresses around her shoulders. I hope my shopper will remember to include a hairdryer.

Our gazes lock in a stare-off, her dark eyes piercing mine before she reaches behind her and closes the door. Her nearness does something to me. Under my clothes, my body hardens. The smell of her skin is different. Clean. It's not the cherry blossom fragrance of her usual products I got used to.

I shove my hands in my pockets to hide the way my cock responds to her. "How are you doing?"

She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Do you care?"

"Your health is my responsibility."

"Oh." Her smile is sarcastic. "If you're taking my health so seriously, you must've decided to keep me alive."

"For now." I return her animosity with a dose of my own. "You won't serve me if you're dead."

Anger makes her eyes glimmer like gemstones, reflecting the effort it takes her to keep her mouth shut.

Her silence throws me off balance. I expected her to take the bait, to start the fight I need to blow off steam.

Surprising myself, I give her a piece of honesty. “I’m sorry about the discomfort you suffered.” I can’t quite bring myself to say the word *lice*. It’s too much of a concrete confirmation of something I don’t want to admit.

Her answer surprises me even more. “I need keys for the doors.”

“Keys for the doors?”

She bites her lip. A moment passes before she opens her mouth, but then she seems to check herself. Tipping her chin up, she says, “To lock myself in.”

I study her carefully. “Did something happen?”

“No,” she says quickly. “But prevention is better than cure.”

“Fine.” It’s not like she can lock me out. “If it’ll make you sleep better.”

“And I want a phone.”

“To do what with?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She glares at me even as she gives me another saccharine smile. “To maybe call Heidi when I discover lice on my head?”

That statement instantly fucks with me. It’s not just the *lice*. It’s the fact that she’ll turn to Heidi instead of to me. Unjustified jealousy burns in my stomach. It only irritates me further. God only knows why. I don’t want her to need me. But even as I tell myself that, I recognize the lie.

My answer is flat. “No.”

She clenches her hands at her sides. “Because you don’t trust me.”

“Exactly.”

“What if something happens to me out there?”

I advance on her. “Nothing is going to happen to you.”

She keeps her eyes trained on my face, tilting back her head to hold my gaze when I stop flush against her. “You don’t know that.”

I chuckle. “Don’t be so dramatic. Stay in the house like a good girl, and everything will be fine.”

“And present myself naked on my knees when you grace me with a visit,” she snaps.

“You’re a fast learner.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m afraid not yet.”

“What’s the matter?” she asks with taunting spite. “Scared you’ll catch lice?”

Taking a lock of her hair, I rub the silky strands. “The price will be a small one to pay. I’ll make the fuck worth it. Of that you can be sure.”

She steps away, her hair slipping through my fingers as she escapes the touch. “Then what are you waiting for?”

I lean a shoulder on the wall. “Is this your way of begging me?”

“In your dreams,” she says through thin lips.

“Sorry to disappoint you, *cara*, but I already have plans for tonight.”

She balls her hands tighter, pressing her arms stiffly at her sides. “What makes you think that will disappoint me?”

“How hard I’ll make you come if you beg me.”

Her nostrils flare. “Here’s a newsflash, Mr. Russo. I don’t need you to get me off.”

I click my tongue. “So feisty. I’m glad you didn’t lose all that fire burning in your deceitful heart.”

Her laugh is ugly. “Is the pot calling the kettle black?”

As much as I enjoy this exchange, my guests will arrive soon. Heidi is staying away longer than necessary. I’ve never done laundry, but I know for a fact it doesn’t take this much time to get a load of washing started.

“Have you eaten?” I ask.

Sabella blinks. “What?”

“Did you have dinner?”

“I had a sandwich.”

“If you’d like a snack, now’s the time to grab it.” I check my watch. “You need to be in your room in five minutes.”

Her tone is mock-sweet. “Why, are you grounding me?”

“I’ll remind you that you’re a guest in my house who’ll do as I say.”

“A prisoner, you mean.”

“Five minutes, Sabella. After that, you’ll only have the tap water in your bathroom to drink.”

“Go to hell,” she says, spinning on her heel and stalking toward the stairs.

“I’m glad you didn’t have to cut it,” I call after her.

She stops and looks at me.

“It would’ve been a pity.” I mean that sincerely. “I like your hair long.”

A spiteful glee invades her eyes. “Then maybe I’ll cut it.”

“It’s your choice, but it’ll still be a pity.”

She’s about to mount the first step when the doorbell rings. She distracted me so completely that I failed to hear the cars arrive. Heidi is still nowhere in sight. She better be setting the starters on the table, or she’ll hear from me tonight.

“Go to your room, Sabella.”

Giving her my back, I pull my spine straight and school my features. My friendly expression is intact when I open the door wide to reveal a small party of people on the porch rubbing their hands in the cold.

“Right on time,” I say, stepping aside to let them in.

They file through the door, their banter loud as they comment on the welcome warmth of the house.

Gripping the shoulder of the man who leads the group, I shake his hand before greeting his wife. “Welcome to my home.”

He hands me a bottle of Scotch. “Here’s a little something for you. I believe it’s your favorite brand.”

I accept the gift with a gracious, “Thank you,” and leave it on the entrance table to greet the rest of them while they shrug off their coats and hang them on the stand.

My guests are business alliances, and it’s not ideal that Sabella sees their faces, but she stands rooted to the spot at the bottom of the stairs like a deer caught in headlights.

“Oh,” one of the wives says, giving a start when her gaze falls on Sabella. “I heard you got married.” She frowns as she takes in Sabella’s attire but then adds good-naturedly, “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“My wife had a small mishap. She won’t be joining us tonight.” I direct the next part at Sabella, saying with meaning, “If you’ll excuse her, she’d rather retire now.”

“Oh,” the woman says again, laying a hand on her neck.

“Excuse me,” Sabella mumbles, managing a smile before she flees up the stairs.

“Is she all right?” another wife asks.

“Perfectly fine.” I give them my most charming smile before indicating the dining room. “Shall we? My housekeeper outdid herself with the menu tonight.”

They glance at the top of the staircase as they pass me, but when we enter the dining room where pink caviar mousse and champagne are set out for starters, my wife is forgotten to everyone but me.

As the night drags on, it becomes increasingly difficult to pay attention to the conversation. My carefully cultivated charm is a useless weapon, my usual magic ineffective, because my thoughts are elsewhere, hijacked by an obstinate woman who bears my name. One who should soon bear my children. The more I fail to navigate the discussion, the more I blame her. The more I think about planting my seed inside her, the more I wish this dinner is over already.

I have a heavy hand with the wine and an even heavier one with the Scotch. It’s not before the bottle is empty that my guests summon their drivers who are waiting in the kitchen where it’s warm.

It's well after two in the morning when I finally make my way upstairs. It's too late to stop in front of Sabella's bedroom door. I have too much alcohol in my blood to turn the key and push the handle down. Yet those reasons don't stop me from entering and closing the door behind me. When I've locked the door again, I slip the key in my pocket.

The room is dark except for a sliver of moonlight that falls over the bed, illuminating the small shape under the covers. Of course she'd defy me, sneaking into the bed when I explicitly told her that luxury is reserved for dirty girls who beg on their knees.

The need to push her down and pin her underneath me isn't just to punish her for her defiance. A part of that depraved urge is born from an anger that won't let me go, an anger she ignited when she thought she could get away by marrying another man. By selling me out to Lavigne. It's the worst kind of anger, a cold and bitter resentment for which there's no medicine. It's a poison that fills my veins. It's a deadly creeper that winds around my chest and squeezes until there's no air left in my lungs, until I'm clawing for oxygen and each breath is like inhaling fire. Until living is hell. And she will pay.

Gripping the covers, I yank them off her body. She jerks awake, shooting upright with her hair wild around her face. How dare she lie there, so warm and soft and comfortable, sleeping soundly like a princess when she thrust me into an inferno where the flames are my own jealousy?

"Get up," I say, my voice sounding more animalistic than human.

She catches her weight on her arms behind her. "Ange—"

"I told you not to say my name. Get up."

“What’s wrong?”

I can’t see her face to read her expression, and I’m too drunk to figure out the nuances of her tone. “Switch on the light.”

She stretches over the nightstand. The lamp flicks on. The picture of her sitting naked in bed turns clear. Her long, toned legs are stretched out in front of her. They’re pressed together, the softness between them hidden from my view, but my mark is visible above the small triangle of womanly hair. Her breasts are pert, her pretty apricot-colored nipples contracted from being so abruptly exposed after the warm cocoon of her bed.

Too tired to explain or command, I lock my fingers around her ankles and yank her to the edge of the bed. Her arms flail behind her, her back hitting the mattress. Twisting my hand in her long, silky locks of hair, I pull her into a sitting position before pushing her onto the floor on her knees. I use my free hand to unzip while holding her in place, keeping her face inches away from the bulge in my pants.

She stares at me with big, defiant eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

I free my cock through the open zipper, not bothering to get rid of the pants. “You know why.”

“Because I dared to get into bed?” she asks with a scowl. “After last night, you can cut me some slack.”

“If you want me to cut you slack, you know what to do.”

She purses her lips.

Fine. Releasing her hair, I grip her jaw hard enough to force her mouth open. Before she can draw a breath, I slide through her lips. The scraping of her teeth over my rock-hard

cock tightens my balls. I settle deep in the searing heat of her mouth, loving the way her pink lips stretch around me.

When she tries to pull away, I shift my grip back to her hair, twisting it like a rope around my fist. I hold her head secure as I use her beautiful mouth, deep-throating her for my selfish pleasure. Her tongue is hot and wet. There's not enough space for everything in her mouth, not enough stretch in her jaw. Her teeth graze the base of my cock, almost setting off my release. My dick is already pulsing with the need to come, but not yet.

She slams her palms on my thighs, trying to push me away. A mixture of tears and saliva spill over her face. It's so damn hot I'm tempted to make her swallow my balls too, but when I pull out to let her breathe, she shakes her head and holds up a hand.

"What is it, Sabella?" I taunt. "Do you want to ask me something? Are you ready to beg?"

It takes her a moment to get her sloppy breathing under control. "Not like this." Her voice is hoarse. "Let me do it my way."

"Your way?" Those words spark something ugly in my chest. More venomous jealousy pumps through my veins. "You've done this before?" Because I sure as hell haven't. Not with anyone but her.

"No, but I want to try."

Just like that, the ugly green color that tints my vision fades. Her answer is like a balm on a nasty burn. The envy fizzles out, making space for curiosity. "Why?"

Her gaze is level. Without pretenses. No games. Just the simple truth. "I want to know if I can like it."

Her answer takes the wind out of my sails. It does something to me, both the fact that she didn't like sucking my cock and the fact that she could. What catches me most off guard is how much I want her to like it. No, to love it.

The desire leaves me vulnerable. It opens a big fucking hole in my defenses, but I'm too curious to deny her and too desperate for her enjoyment not to grant her control.

Easing my hand from her hair, I give her silent permission. She shifts closer, so close that I have to spread my legs wider to accommodate her knees. Her grip is tentative when she wraps her fingers around my cock. She tests the feel, squeezing a little.

The air that hisses through my teeth makes her bolder. She tightens her grip and strokes my length. Her hand is like a branding iron. I grind my molars together as I try to hold back, because this is the most important test anyone has taken for me. It can't be over too soon. Not before I know on which side the coin is going to fall.

She repeats the action of gliding her hand up and down, watching curiously as my cock twitches in her palm. My dick grows painfully hard when she uses both hands to rub me.

"Enough," I say in a voice distorted with lust, locking my fingers around her wrist to stop her from jerking me off.

She obliges only to press a kiss on the crest. The caress is tender. Odd. Not what I expected. The tickle of her tongue as she traces the tip is too light. Yet it stirs a different kind of need in me, a need for the softness I glimpsed during that first year. When she laps up the drop of pre-cum my dick spills for her, she hums her approval, and fuck me if it's not the dirtiest, hottest sound I ever heard. It makes me want more, too much,

but I wait patiently, nearly combusting as she traces the thick veins that run under the taut skin with her tongue.

I stand dead quiet, not daring to breathe as she slowly sucks me deeper. This is a first for me too, and I'm already addicted to her mouth. I already want it more than I should, enough to want to fuck her mouth hard, but I'm fascinated by the way she stretches her lips around me and anxious to know if she's turned on or repulsed.

She takes me all the way to the back of her throat. A groan reverberates in my chest. She moans in answer, almost making me shoot my load. She's so hot when she's kneeling between my legs and swallowing me. The notion that she may enjoy it only makes me harder.

Watching her come into her own power and seeing that knowledge burn in her eyes while she masters my pleasure is a sight to behold. She slides me out slowly over her curled tongue. The rhythmic arching of my hips is automatic. Every cell in my body is screaming for me to come down her throat, to pin her down and finish this slow torture, but I'm too caught up in the moment, hanging on to her every move.

I reach down and grope her breast, greedily squashing it in my palm. Her whimper is fuel on my fire.

Fuck.

I need this. Need her. Need her to want this. Me.

I'm close. Too close.

I want her harder.

Deeper.

Forever.

I thread my fingers through her hair. Instead of roping her in, I cup the back of her skull, letting her set the pace. She opens her throat to me. Swallows me. I lose myself in her, my resistance crumbling as she gives me this gift. Her enjoyment. I've never been more turned on in my life. It has less to do with the picture of my cock stuffed down her throat and more with the hand she slips between her legs.

Because she likes this.

Sucking me off turns her on.

The onset of my release tightens my balls. I don't want to come yet but when she lets me go with a pop to suck my sac into her scorching hot mouth, I can't hold back any longer. Gripping the base of my cock, I paint her chin and breasts with my cum. I pump until I'm dry, layering ribbons of release on the perfect canvas of her body.

I don't even take the time to tuck my cock back into my pants. I drag her up with my hands under her armpits and shove her with my palm between her breasts. Her legs fold against the edge of the bed. She goes down onto her back, her body bouncing on the mattress.

I'm on top of her in a second, mounting her like a crazed animal and catching her thighs between mine. I stare into her eyes as I rub my release over her breasts. She doesn't hide her reaction from me. She likes this too. She arches her back when I smear the cum over her stomach. I want to soak her in my seed and cover her with my smell so that she and everyone else knows to whom she belongs.

Gathering more of my release on my fingers, I trace my mark above her pussy, outlining the seal of my ownership in cum. I coat her clit with the slickness. Her breath catches when

I rub. Still, it's not enough. I soak my fingers with my seed and slide two inside her pussy.

She gasps, her inner muscles locking down on the intrusion. When I thrust, she cries out. Sealing my lips over hers, I steal her sounds and her air. I make her mine, letting her live on my breaths.

“You're mine, *bella*,” I say with a growl into the kiss. “All your firsts.”

Her eyes go hazy as I cup her sex while keeping my fingers inside her. She's a stunning mess between her legs, slick and hot and close to coming. She moans when I pull my fingers out. I'm hard again, already inside her before she can exhale. I push up on one arm and slide a hand between us, using my cum as lubrication to rub her clit.

She wraps her arms around my neck and locks her ankles behind my ass, holding on as I pump and rub and goddamn, I'm going to shoot a dry load but I'm going to come with her again.

She makes me do things. Things I can't take back. Things I refuse to regret.

Breaking my own rule, I give her a hoarse command. “Say it. Say my name.”

She doesn't scream it in pleasure. When her pussy spasms around my cock, she cups my cheek and utters the word I want to hear most on her lips with a soft sigh. “Angelo.”

If the moan she uttered with her mouth full of my dick was hot, then saying my name when she comes is perfect.

I let her come undone, let her ride out the aftershocks on my hard cock until her thighs fall open and her head drops back. I must be pumping her raw, but I can't stop. I chase my

release until it aches, until I come dry with painful spurts of nothingness, wrenching torturous pleasure from my spent body.

Only she can do this to me.

Exhaustion steals over my intoxicated senses. It's not just the alcohol. It's her. She's like a drug to my senses. An addiction to my body.

Resting our foreheads together, I take a moment to catch my breath before I pull out. I'm still fully dressed. I haven't even taken off my shoes.

I push to my feet like a drunken man, taking in the sight before me. She's spread out naked, the skin of her belly and thighs scraped red from the buttons of my waistcoat and the teeth of my zipper. My cum is smeared over her. Inside her. Over my clothes.

My gaze dips to her flat belly, to how it caves slightly inward. She's lost weight. It won't do. Not for what I'm planning.

Leaning over her, I cup her stomach beneath my palm. My touch is both reverent and protective as I imagine that secret place of a woman where life grows. "I need to put a baby inside you, Sabella."

My words have the effect of a glacier that crashes into a warm, tropical sea. Her eyes go wide. Wild. She pushes up on her elbows and closes her legs. Closes herself off to me. "You can't be serious."

She sits up and shoves me away.

The rejection is like a slap in the face. It stings, but I don't give her the satisfaction of showing her how much that bothers me.

My actions are casual as I unbutton my waistcoat and slip the garment over my arms. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You want to bring a child into this?” She waves between us. “Whatever you call this agreement you’re parading to everyone as a marriage?”

I kick off my shoes and strip my socks. “I need an heir.” My pants and briefs follow next. “My father had a contract drawn up for this purpose.” Then my shirt. “You would’ve been familiar with the contents if your father hadn’t hidden it from you.”

“Do not bring my dad into this.” Her nostrils quiver. “Not now.”

“You can look it over. You’ll find it makes adequate provision for you and any children you’ll bear me. In fact, you’ll find me more than generous, but you’re welcome to add your own demands.”

“Do you hear yourself?” She studies me with a pitying look. “You’re talking about a human being, not an object whose life you can neatly project with a formal contract. A child needs a loving and safe environment.”

“Which he’ll have.”

“A child needs parents who love and respect each other, not a fucked-up business deal.”

“Your father didn’t do a great job of respecting your mother, and you turned out well enough.”

Hurt flashes through her eyes, making an expressive portrait of pain. It’s too raw to hide. I don’t like it. I don’t like that I did that to her with my words. “Sabella.”

She jumps up and heads toward the bathroom. “The answer is no, Angelo.”

Agitation pours into my veins. If she thinks she can shun me and have the last word, I have news for her. This is the bargain she struck on her knees before God. This is what she owes me. My father was good to me. I’ll be a good father too. I don’t give a fuck what she believes or thinks about me.

I catch her wrist. “I didn’t give you permission to speak my name.”

She looks back at me, her mouth dropping open. “So, I’m only to utter your holy name on command.”

Her spite is getting to me. I’ve got her too deeply under my skin. She affects me too much. “Correct. But you may use it freely when you come.”

“In that case,” she says with a stiff little smirk, “the answer is no, *Mr. Russo*.”

I lean closer, simultaneously pulling her hard enough to me to make our bodies collide. My armor is cruelty, my defense for her repeated rejection the power I hold over her.

My words are soft, but my smile is cold. “You’re making the mistake of thinking you have a choice.”

Her beautiful face pales as she stares up at me. Her shock is evident in her breathless reply. “You can’t.”

“I can, wife.” I rub my thumb over the delicate skin of her wrist. “And I will.”

She knows it’s true. The vein that throbs in her delicate neck tells me so.

I let her go. “You can have a shower and sleep in your bed.” Walking to the door, I add, “You earned it.”

“You’re a monster,” she says to my back.

I chuckle. “I’m glad you’re finally figuring me out.”

Her frustrated cry reaches my ears as I shut the door between our rooms and turn the key. When I walk to my shower, I should feel victory. As it turns out, winning this round brings me no joy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sabella

Long after my shower, I still lie on my back and stare at the ceiling while playing the last few hours over in my mind. So much happened since yesterday—catching lice, discovering a boy who slipped into the house, and now Angelo’s irrational talk about wanting a baby.

I don’t know why I didn’t tell him about the boy who helped himself to cereal and milk. Some deeper instinct prevented me. I didn’t want him to go after the child and punish or scare him. I’m not sure what to do about the situation. I want to help the boy without getting him into trouble. My heart softens anew when I recall what that poor child had chosen. Of all the things he could’ve taken, he’d settled on a box of honey-glazed rice puffs. It’s not the most nutritious breakfast in the world, but it’s such a typical choice for a child.

I toss and turn as troubled thoughts keep me awake. At the center of that turmoil is one man—my husband.

When Heidi locked me in the bedroom with an embarrassed apology, the animated sounds of the dinner party that reached me through the door kept me up. I lay on the bed,

hearing every happy giggle and boisterous laugh. Through it all, I heard his voice—each inclination and rumble of that baritone timbre. I couldn't make out the words, but I understood their meaning, the appreciation and happiness he expressed for other people, anyone but me.

I tried not to listen, but my ears were tuned to his voice and my mind subconsciously searching for it. Like a golden thread that held the conversation together, his voice rose and dipped, sometimes disappearing only to resurface with a soft murmur or a delighted chuckle. It was always there, even when it faded for a few seconds, both disturbing and hurtful but a constant no less. At least to me. A constant in my life now. Yet I'll never be graced with his blessing or experience the warmth of his pride. I'll never know what it feels like to make my husband happy. I'll never be the recipient of his approval or the lucky woman who evokes his laughter at a dinner party.

That's not my fate.

My destiny is his wrath. It's the price I'm paying for my family's sins. It's the price Angelo has to extract for his losses. Maybe tormenting me makes dealing with his pain easier. Heaven knows, he's perfected the art of torture. He's a master at it. He doesn't even need a whip.

Hearing Angelo entertain his friends while I was closed in here left my heart aching. It inexplicably hurt when I noticed his fancy dress pants and waistcoat as he stood so tall and proud in the hallway. It was impossible to miss how well the tailored clothes hugged his strong frame and how handsome he looked. The pain that throbbed in the hollow of my ribcage couldn't have been a product of envy. I have no desire to sit at Angelo's dinner table or meet his friends. Angelo's action only

burned like a red-hot spear through my stomach because he humiliated me when he dismissed me in front of his friends. As I was forced to listen to them laughing and having fun until the early hours of the morning, that ache bled inside me until my chest felt like one big bruise.

I thought that was bad.

What he did after hurts even worse.

What he said and how he behaved, I can't forgive him for that.

Angelo made it clear he doesn't trust me. He doesn't believe me, so there's no point in trying to convince him of the truth. He'll always question my motives. Let him believe I'm looking for information to get him arrested. He can think what he wants. I don't care. However, I don't have the luxury of not caring about falling pregnant. I can't not take to heart the threat he made after fucking me and leaving me cold. Because I can't have his baby. I refuse to bring an innocent life into this mess.

No child deserves this.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I take a shaky breath. I'm on birth control. The pills were in my toilet bag that Heidi brought to the empty house. I'll keep on taking them. If Angelo is evil enough to confiscate them, I'll buy some at the pharmacy, but for that, I'll need money. I have to figure out a way of earning a few euros without my husband's knowledge.

I work myself up about finding solutions, but it's no use. Everything feels hopeless. There's no point in tiring myself in the hamster wheel of my mind. I'm just mashing my brain by regurgitating the same problems. It will be wiser to save my

energy. I'll take my uncertain and scary future one day at a time. It's the only way to survive.

A sound next-door pierces my turbulent thoughts. The creaking of bedsprings? Unable to help myself, I get out of bed and tiptoe to the adjoining door. I put my ear against the wood and listen, but not another chirp comes from his room. He's probably sleeping a sound, drunken sleep after using my body to sate his needs. I smelled the alcohol on his breath.

What am I doing anyway, listening at his door? What am I hoping to discover? That his guilty conscience is keeping him awake?

I scoff and crawl back under the warm covers. For the remainder of the night, I drift in and out of sleep. By sunrise, I'm awake. After taking care of my grooming, I dress in a warm sweater, a pair of jeans, and sneakers. Before going out onto the balcony, I pull on my coat.

It's a sunny but cold day. The air is fresh with a hint of saltiness drifting in from the sea. The view is just as spectacular as the one at the other house, but with the cultivated garden that frames the cliff, it's tamer. The nature is wilder at the abandoned house. The beach is wider and longer here. The cliffs form a half moon that embraces the jetty in the center.

The sliding door on Angelo's side of the balcony opens. I turn my face away from the view. My back goes stiff when he walks out, dressed in dark jeans that hug his lean hips and a black rollneck cashmere sweater that stretches over his broad chest. His thick hair is damp. Stubble darkens his jaw. He showered, but he didn't shave.

He carries two steaming mugs and half a smile to my side of the balcony. The deliciously spicy and woody smell of his

cologne reaches me before the rich aroma of the coffee.

“Morning,” he says, placing a mug in my hand. “I thought you could do with some caffeine. I made it the way you like it.” He sips his coffee, studying me from over the rim. “One sugar and lots of cream.”

I eye him with suspicion, inhaling the welcome aroma of the brew.

His lips quirk when he lowers his mug. “Don’t worry. It’s not poisoned.”

“Do you expect me to take your word for that?”

“No,” he drawls, not breaking our eye contact as he takes the mug from me.

Our fingers brush. The light touch contracts my skin. I try to hide my reaction, but he’s too perceptive. Too clever. He smirks, letting me know he’s aware of how he affects me. He watches me as he drinks from my mug before putting it in my hand again. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve said the light in his dark gaze is teasing. He’s probably just mocking me.

Two can play this game. Turning the mug, I place my lips exactly on the spot where his have been as I sip the strong, creamy brew. It’s a subtle act, easy to miss, but the way in which his eyes heat and his jaw flexes gives him away. He noticed. He’s not unaffected either. I suppose that’s something. We may hate each other, but our chemistry has always been strong.

He surprises me by hooking my hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering there in a tender caress.

“You’re very beautiful, Sabella,” he says in a deep, soft voice, staring down at me.

I'm not sure what to say. What do I make of this sudden change from last night?

My mind drifts back to when Heidi and I arrived, to when Angelo stood formidably at the end of the hallway in his classy suit. When he walked toward me, he looked proud and arrogant. But when he apologized for my discomfort, I could've sworn there was genuine remorse in his expression. As if he truly regretted it. As if he had a heart.

Spearing his fingers through my hair, he cups my head. "I have to go away for business." He brushes his thumb over my jaw. "A week at the most." Up, down. "I need to take care of things in Marseille." Up, down. "If there's something you need to tell me, now's your chance."

My stomach draws tight. "*Take care of things?* What does that mean?"

"Let me worry about the details."

"Are you going to kill someone?" I ask, hating how my voice trembles. "That lieutenant?"

"Why? Are you worried I'll eliminate your ally?"

A sigh catches in my throat. "Are we back to that again? I told you the truth."

His gaze drills into mine. "Are you sure about that?"

"I don't know why you even bother to ask. You're just going to believe what you want to."

He drops his hand, disappointment creeping into his features. I don't know why that makes me so angry. So sad. Whether he believes me or not shouldn't matter.

"This is how it's going to be," he says, his manner resigned.

I swallow. “Like what?”

He stares at me for a beat before he delivers his verdict. “We’ll never be on the same side.”

I also don’t know why that hits me so hard, why I feel like he’s stolen my breath when he turns around and walks away.

For a week.

For however long he chooses.

And there’s nothing I can do about anything.

He goes inside and closes the door behind him, leaving me in the brilliant, cold sun, letting me stand here alone and wish for something I can’t name, only knowing I feel like crying.

Yes, I suppose we are who we are. No matter what I say or do, he’ll never be able to look at me and not hate me. I’ll never be able to look at him and not see my dad’s killer.

It’s that damn hamster wheel again.

Turning my back to the doors, I catch the tears that slip free with my fingers. I swallow them with my morning coffee, pushing everything down and locking my feelings away with the storms in my chest. It’s a coping mechanism, the only way I know how to exist.

When my mug is empty and I go back inside, my features are schooled, and my back is straight. Not a trace of the turmoil inside me is visible on my face. I keep that part to myself, because I won’t give Angelo my pain. Monsters feed on pain. It only makes them stronger. Happier.

Heidi enters with a tray just as I’m taking off my coat.

“Good morning.” She places the tray on the coffee table and offloads a plate heaped with bacon and eggs. “I made you

an English breakfast. You can do with the protein.”

“Thank you, but you shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble. Croissants would’ve been fine.”

“It’s no trouble at all.” She sets a glass of orange juice and a basket of toast on the coffee table. “Come sit down. Eat before it gets cold.”

Grateful for her effort, I sit down in the chair she pulls out.

“Do you feel like anything special for lunch?” she asks, leaving the tray on the mantelpiece.

“No, thank you.”

She sighs. “Your appetite will return.” Fluffing out one of the sofa cushions, she continues, “Traveling always messes up the metabolism. If you have any cravings, you just have to shout.”

“Thanks,” I say again. “I appreciate that.” Picking up the fork, I ask carefully, “Has he left?”

“Yes.” Her smile is soft. “Don’t worry. He’ll be back as soon as he can. The business is always demanding.”

I want to say I didn’t ask because I’ll miss him, but I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. She knows how things are between us. There’s no point in reminding her.

Popping a piece of bacon into my mouth, I enjoy the crispy texture and salty taste. After the sandwiches in the house that lacks a stove or microwave, a warm meal on such a cold morning is welcome. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I took the first bite.

Heidi rearranges the cushions, not seeming in a hurry to leave. I welcome her presence, but I don’t want to keep her from her work.

I load my fork with the fluffy eggs. “I appreciate the company, but you don’t have to worry about me. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

She shifts her weight. “That’s all right. I’ll wait. That way, I can take the tray back when you’re done.”

Her discomfort gives me pause. Then it clicks. She’s not hanging around to make conversation or to take back the empty tray.

The delicious food turns sour in my stomach. “Did he tell you to check that I eat?”

A flush works its way up her neck. “Mr. Russo is just worried about your health. He wants to make sure you eat enough to sustain you.” She doesn’t meet my eyes when she adds, “These last few days have been strenuous. He’s worried you’re losing weight.”

He’s no doubt only worried that the breeding machine won’t be effective.

Having lost my appetite, I put down the fork.

“Sabella,” she says in a beseeching tone, sitting opposite me. “Don’t let that spoil your hunger. You need your strength. His intentions are good.”

If only she knew.

“I can’t leave until you’ve eaten at least half of that,” she says, waving at my plate. “So, please try.”

“I’m sorry.” I push the plate away. “If I eat another bite, I’ll vomit what I’ve already eaten. You can just scrape it in the trashcan and say I cleaned my plate.”

“I’m not going to lie about something that impacts your health. It’s not in your best interest. At least try to drink the

juice. Stress lowers the immune system. You need to boost your vitamin C intake.”

To appease her, I pick up the glass. “You’re very loyal to him.” And I can’t figure out why. Why would anyone be faithful to such a monster?

“I’ve been working for his family for a long time.”

“How long?”

She says with a note of pride, “The late Mr. Russo employed me when he married Mrs. Russo.”

“That’s a long time indeed. You must be happy here if you’re still staying on.”

“I like the job.” She folds her hands in her lap and shrugs. “I like taking care of people. Plus, the salary and fringe benefits are excellent. I won’t earn the same money elsewhere, not even if I decided to become a heart surgeon.”

“Did you want to? Become a heart surgeon?”

“Oh, no.” She laughs. “But the idea of a general practitioner did appeal to me when I was younger.”

I think about Mom, about what she said that day at my sister, Mattie’s, house about wanting to be a doctor, and my heart squeezes. I miss them so much—Mom, Mattie, my little nephew on my brother’s side, Brad, and my best friend, Colin. And Benjamin, Mattie’s and Jared’s baby, whose face I’ve never seen. Everyone.

Heidi takes her phone from her pocket, swipes across the screen, and shows me a photo of a stunning three-story mansion with Greek columns carved in pink marble. “With the money I earn here, I could buy my dream house.”

I gasp. “Heidi, it’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she says with a tilt of her chin. “I just had it remodeled.”

“Where is it?”

“Saint-Tropez. That’s where I plan to retire.” She winks. “A famous movie star wanted to buy the house, but my offer was higher.”

“Good for you,” I say with a laugh. “Is the plan to live there alone, or do you have a secret family stashed away somewhere?”

She irons out her skirt. “It’s just me.”

“By choice or because your job keeps you too busy?” I add quickly, “If you don’t mind me asking such a personal question.”

“Not at all. It’s no secret that my job has disadvantages, but I don’t mind. I never saw myself married. How am I going to have fun with all the wealthy widowers on their yachts if I’m shackled to one man?”

She says it jokingly, but I can’t help the sharp sting of regret her statement invites. A free will and choices aren’t in the cards for me. I am very much shackled to one man, and he’s not kind or good.

Her smile slips as she seems to realize her mistake. “That didn’t come out right.”

“It’s all right. I know what you mean.”

She blackens the screen of her phone and makes to put it away. I stare at the iPhone with longing, my heart shrinking as it disappears in her pocket. I can’t not try.

“Um, Heidi, do you think I can call my family?” I continue hastily, “Just to make sure they’re all right.”

“I’m sorry, dear.” Her expression is regretful. “You should ask Mr. Russo. I’m sure he’ll arrange that for you when he gets back.”

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. I just saw your phone and...” I force a smile. “Anyway, tell me more about working here.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Were they happy, his parents?”

She seems surprised. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m just trying to get a better understanding of his family dynamic.” I admit with some embarrassment, “He doesn’t tell me much.” Angelo will never discuss his family with me, but like so many other things, I can’t tell her that either.

She ponders the question before saying after a while, “They were happy in their way, but I think Mr. Russo loved Mrs. Russo more than she loved him. It was an arranged marriage, you see, and she was very young when they got married.”

I take a tiny sip of the juice. “How young?”

“Sixteen.”

“Wow.” I can’t imagine being married at that age. “Why did her father agree?”

“It wasn’t uncommon to be married so young back then. There was an agreement between the families, something to do with land, and I’m guessing a lot with the dowry Mr. Russo paid.”

“He paid a dowry to marry her?”

“Her father has always been a greedy old man. If you ask me, she was better off with Mr. Russo. I’d just signed my employment contract when he brought his bride home. He wanted everything to be in place when he moved her into his house. Of course, it wasn’t this one. It was a much humbler house in the city. He only bought this mansion years later.”

“Was she okay with that? With marrying him?”

“It was very difficult to know what Teresa Russo thought or felt. She was kind and generous to the staff, but she kept to herself. She never said anything. Just did as Mr. Russo told her to do.” Her voice turns wistful. “I think it was her obedience that made the late Mr. Russo fall so deeply in love with her. She never contested him. Always treated him with consideration and respect. That’s how she wore him down and softened his rough edges. In the end, he did everything he did for her. He bought her this house and had it restored at great pains and costs. He showered her with clothes and jewelry and anything her heart could ever desire even though she never asked for anything.”

I grow quiet while listening to the story, trying to imagine how it must’ve been for Teresa to be an obedient wife who bent the knee to her husband. Did she feel victory at being rewarded with his love and wealth? Did she want the affection and gifts? Or did she have different dreams? Did those dreams fade? Did her hopes and plans fizzle out over the years like my mom’s until the house and her family became her ambition?

Heidi slaps her hands on her thighs. “Look at the time.” She pushes to her feet with another sigh. “I better get the laundry done. Are you sure you won’t eat a little more?”

“No, thank you,” I say, offering her a weak smile. I would’ve offered to help, but Heidi has her instructions. She

needs to make sure I stay locked up in this room.

“Can I get you something from the library to read?” she asks, collecting the tray.

“That will be kind, thank you.”

She stacks the dishes and the untouched toast on the tray. “What kind of reading material do you prefer?”

“Can you get me some recipe books?”

She does a double take.

“I know.” I laugh. “Seeing that I’m going to live alone, I better learn.”

Her face falls as I so bluntly state the truth, but there’s no denying it. Mr. Angelo Russo isn’t going to fall in love with me and give me everything my heart desires. This time round, the union isn’t going to turn into a fairytale, neither a wanted nor an unwanted one.

“I’ll bring you a few books,” she says, averting her gaze as she crosses the floor. She closes the door on my, “Thank you.”

Long after she’s gone, I still consider the story of Teresa and Santino. Was Teresa unspirited for not fighting back, or did she just fight cleverly? Or maybe she wanted to marry Santino. From what Heidi told me about Teresa’s family, she could’ve been happy to escape her circumstances. Whatever the case, her silent obedience won her favors. It won her the heart of her husband. Is that a lesson I could learn? Is that a strategy I should consider? Seeing that I can’t change my situation, I may as well stop fighting. It will be so much less tiring. To simply not care. To keep to myself. To give Angelo his due and hide the rest deep down inside me. Because one thing is for sure, if I keep on expending energy on battles I can’t win, there will be nothing left of me in the end. Nothing

for me. He wants to reduce me to less than the dirt under his shoes. He made that clear when he banished me and told me with a cruel smile on his sensual lips that I'm not worthy of uttering his name. Unless he commands me to say it. Unless I come.

So, I make a decision.

I'll give him obedience. I'll give him my body.

I'll pay that price.

But I'll never give him my heart or a child.

And for as long as I live, I'll never speak his name again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Angelo

The cliffs that carry the big house with its towers and ramparts like a model castle on a pedestal grow smaller in the distance as the yacht speeds across the sea. I stand on the deck in the glacier wind, imagining the cliffs on the other side of the property, the ones that aren't visible from here. The ones that are now the official home of my wife.

Unable to resist the urge, I check my phone again. Except for Heidi's message to say Sabella didn't eat much at breakfast, there's nothing new. Locked in her room, my wife's activities are limited. Reading or watching television are the extent of her entertainment.

My mother would've been appalled. I'm glad she's not here to see how I'm forced to treat my wife. Sabella only has herself to blame for the unfortunate need to keep her behind lock and key. There are too many documents and files in my study, too much she can get her hands on. The most sensitive information is locked in the vault, but it's impossible to move everything into the fireproof room. Besides, I'm not going to rearrange my whole house and the way I work just because my wife can't be trusted.

When only blue water stretches around the yacht, I go inside. Uncle Enzo and Gianni are in the lounge. Both are on their phones, my uncle reading something and Gianni playing one or the other idiotic game. They look up when I close the door but say nothing as I go to the sideboard where refreshments are set out.

Needing the caffeine, I pour a big mug of coffee. Black, no sugar. Not like Sabella. I smile when I recall her stunt of this morning, how she provoked me by planting her luscious lips on the rim of her mug on the exact spot I touched with my mouth. The act was suggestive and intimate, a daring tease that hardened my cock instantly. I have to be careful. She can't know how much she affects me. I can't afford to give her that much power.

My smile is gone before I face my family. They watch me with wary expressions, waiting.

I comb my fingers through my hair to tame the windblown strands. "What's the status on yesterday, Gianni?"

He puts his phone down. "Nothing happened." He glances at his father before continuing. "Nothing noteworthy."

I study him. "Sabella didn't leave the house?"

"No." He digs a finger in the collar of his rollneck sweater and pulls it away from his throat. "She just hung around inside."

"The whole day?"

I find that hard to believe. It's not like my feisty wife not to get up to mischief.

Gianni shifts forward on his seat and leans his elbows on his knees. "She did walk around the house in the afternoon and

checked out the view but not for long.” He shrugs. “It was cold.”

“That’s it?” I drink the strong coffee, enjoying the welcome warmth that settles in my stomach.

“Yes.” He frowns. “Where would she go without a car? It’s not like there’s a neighbor she can visit.”

“Fine,” I say. “From now on, I want hourly reports. Daily ones won’t cut it.”

His shoulders slouch. “Every hour?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Are you serious?”

I give him a hard look. “Would I be joking?”

Uncle Enzo slides a gaze in Gianni’s direction with an unspoken message in his eyes. “He’ll be happy to do it.” His voice is hard. “Won’t you, Gianni?”

“Yes, of course,” my cousin says, the pleat between his eyebrows deepening.

When I fix him with a glare, he stares at his hands.

I turn to my uncle. “This contact of yours, how trustworthy is he?”

“Very,” Uncle Enzo says. “He’s one of our best informants in the force.”

I finish my coffee and put the mug aside. “Who recruited him?”

“Nico.”

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I consider that. “How did they meet?”

“Someone on the street got word that a crooked cop was taking bribes.”

“How can you be sure he’s not double-crossing us?”

“I questioned him myself.” Uncle Enzo stands and looks me in the eyes. “He doesn’t have a conscience, that one. He’s frustrated with the low pay and less than desirable working conditions. You know how tough it is to be a cop on the drug beat in Marseille these days.”

“Is he a junkie?”

“No.” Uncle Enzo goes to the espresso machine and pushes the button to wake it up. “We checked for signs of use.”

“Good. Addicts are unreliable. They’re driven by their addiction, not by their brains. We don’t want to get caught up in that mess.”

“Right,” he says, riding on the balls of his feet as he waits for the water to heat.

“Where are we meeting him?” I ask.

“At the old harbor. A small café. The owner is one of ours.”

I nod. “Get our men lined up. I want five in the café and ten in the street. Armed. Let the café owner know I want the security recording after the meeting. You never know when it’ll come in handy. It’s always good insurance in case our contact grows a conscience and decides to talk.”

“Or if another party offers him more money,” Uncle Enzo says.

“Exactly. Do a proper scouting of the area before we arrive. Make sure it’s clean.”

“I’ll have the café swept for bugs before we enter.” He adds in a low rumble, “Can’t be too sure with these pigs.”

“Gianni.”

My cousin lifts his head and sits up straighter.

“Make sure we’re not followed.”

“Do you think it’s a trap?” my cousin asks.

“No, but it doesn’t hurt to be prepared.” I ruffle his hair as I walk past him, roughing him up a little like I used to do when we were kids. It’s my way of telling him our tense moment is over, and that we’re good. “Never forget we have many enemies. They’re all watching. Waiting. Biding their time for us to screw up, for a weakness they can exploit. Remember what my father always said. It takes hard work to get to the top, but it takes blood, sweat, and tears to stay there.”

He watches me through the fringe of hair that falls over his eyes. “What’s our weakness?”

I consider that. I want to say nothing, but that will be arrogant, and arrogance is a weakness that can cost a man his life.

“Our strength is our weakness,” I say. “Being at the top of the food chain makes us a dangerous threat for many people.”

“Not Sabella?” he asks.

My body tenses. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The fact that she may be working with the cops,” he says, leaning away from me as if he expects me to backhand him.

Fuck. I do feel like slamming my fist in his face, but he’s right. That is one big ugly fucking weakness. I know what they want. My family wants me to eliminate that risk, to slit her

throat and dump her body in the sea. To leave her funeral to the sharks. And I should. If I were wise, I would. But I can't. Because of what I sacrificed. Because she's mine.

"You don't have to worry about her," I say with something close to a growl. "Not while she's living in isolation. Is that clear?"

He swallows. "Yes, Angelo."

"We'll find out what I want to know, and then it'll become our strength. Lavigne won't even see us coming."

Uncle Enzo walks over and lays a hand on his son's shoulder before giving a squeeze. The gesture is subtle, but I don't miss the warning aimed at shutting Gianni up.

For the rest of the trip, I try to work in my cabin, but memories of the night I spent here with Sabella and how I punished her assault me. I don't know what's worse—how much I hated her for making me do that to her or that a deviant part of me enjoyed putting marks on her flawless skin. I guess I am the sadist she accused me of being.

I check my phone again for a message from Heidi. Sabella ate her lunch. She spent the morning reading.

I type a reply and hit send. *Which book?*

Heidi's answer comes a second later. *Recipe books.*

I frown. Recipe books? Sabella can't boil an egg. She always had staff to cook for her. When she lived in the villa in Camps Bay, she bought ready-made meals from an upmarket organic health store. The sudden interest in cooking can only be attributed to the fact that at the new house, she has to prepare her own meals. I make a mental note to employ a cook.

The captain knocks on the door to tell me we're approaching Marseille. I thank him and put my phone away. Then I get ready, tucking my gun into the back of my waistband before donning my jacket and coat.

Our men wait on the marina. A party of armed guards dressed in casual clothes escort us in cars to the café. The owner cleared out the place. He greets us respectfully.

Not relying on my uncle alone, I call one of my men over and double-check that my instructions were followed. He ensures me the place is free of bugs and that no one followed us.

We take our seats around the table while the owner serves beer. At one minute before the agreed time, Uncle Enzo's contact walks through the door. He looks jumpy. A sheen of perspiration shines on his forehead, and the armpits of his jacket are dark with sweat.

He comes over with a cocky smile, trying to appear brave.

"Sit," I say, pointing at the seat opposite me.

He sits. Crosses his legs. Uncrosses them again.

"Drink?" I ask, scrutinizing him.

"Whisky." He drums his fingers on the table, looking around. "Please."

He has thin blond hair brushed over a balding head. Blue, beady eyes are set in a round, puffy face. His cheeks are marred with red veins, a sign of a heavy drinker.

The owner puts a tumbler of whisky and a glass of water in front of him.

He downs the whisky and then sips the water.

“A little bird told me you can get access to information I may find helpful,” I say.

“Yeah.” He glances at Uncle Enzo. “About the lieutenant.”

“Yes.” I take in the nervous bouncing of his leg. “Of what he said to my wife when he arrested her.”

“The tape was wiped out,” he says, confirming what my informant already told me.

“Was anyone with him in the room?” I ask.

“Nope.” The guy sniffs and eyes his empty whisky glass. “He was alone in there. Impossible to know what transpired.”

I lean closer. “Why would he wipe out the tape?” I tense to breaking point at the next question. “What did he do to her?”

“Nothing indecent. That’s not his style. He probably would’ve cut her a deal.”

Violence boils up inside me. I remind myself it’s the lieutenant’s fault for dangling a carrot in front of my wife’s nose. Sabella isn’t to blame that he tempted her with the one thing she wants most. Her freedom. I’ll hold him accountable for leading her astray. That way, I only have to feed one body to the sharks.

“How close are the two of you?” I ask the guy.

“The lieutenant and me? Not that much. But I can get close if that’s what you want.”

“How close?”

“Close enough. He’s not a big drinker, not a pub kind of guy if you know what I mean, but I can get myself invited to his house. Barbecues. Family lunches. Cricket in the park. That sort of thing.”

I sit back, rubbing my thumb over my chin. “You’ll manage?”

“He’s a buddy kind of guy. Likes to watch rugby matches with his friends. Play cards. It’s not hard to get into that kind of circle.”

“All right,” I say slowly. “Name your price.”

Smiling, he takes a piece of paper from his pocket and slides it over the table. I lean over to read the figure.

A single nod seals the deal.

He grins wider. Stands. “Thank you.” He adjusts his jacket. “I’ll need twenty percent upfront. For expenses and such.”

“You’ll have it.” I pin him with a stare. “But you do realize that once I’ve paid you, you owe me, and I will insist on getting my money’s worth.”

“You’ll get it.” He looks pleased with himself. “It’s nice doing business with you.”

“How soon can you give me something?”

“Not easy to say. I’ll need at least four or five weeks to do that buddy thing. I have to win his trust before he’ll confide in me and tell me what he’s planning.” He looks at Uncle Enzo. “Can I go?”

Uncle Enzo raises a brow at me. I lift an index finger, giving the green light.

My uncle hands him a brown envelope with the down payment, which he shoves into his inside jacket pocket.

“You know how to contact me when you have something for us,” Uncle Enzo says.

The man slicks his hair over his head with a palm and turns for the door.

“Hugo,” Uncle Enzo says.

Our informant stops, not looking back.

“If you don’t have information for me in four weeks, I’m going to come after you.”

The man stands quietly, letting the threat sink in, and then he leaves.

The door shuts behind him, the bell ringing out its chime.

My uncle turns to me. “What do you think?”

I don’t like the guy. He’s slimy, but he’s intelligent too, more than he’d like to give on. “Watch him.”

“Done,” Gianni says.

I get to my feet. “Let’s get out of here.”

I have meetings set up for the rest of the day, making use of the opportunity while we’re in Marseille to see a handful of suppliers and put a few who are starting to step out of line back in their place. After that, I have negotiations scheduled with new players in Paris. Now that I married into the Edwards bloodline, they’ll not only open those doors they kept shut in my face, but they’ll also kiss my ass to walk through said doors.

“Shall we come with you?” Gianni asks with a hopeful air.

“No,” I say. “You need to get back to Corsica to relieve Toma of babysitting duty.”

“Surely, she’s safe in your house?” he asks, sulking like a child.

“It doesn’t matter where she is. You will watch her.”

He looks as if he's about to argue, but Uncle Enzo grips his shoulder and pulls him back, clearing a path for me. "Safe travels, Angelo. You can trust us to keep the fort at home."

"Don't forget my updates," I say as I button up my jacket in the passing, enjoying the scowl on my cousin's face.

The door opens just as I reach for it. A woman wearing a trench coat that ends mid-thigh enters. Under the coat, long stocking-clad legs are exposed. In her heels, she's the same height as Sabella. Same toned dancers' legs. Same dark hair and eyes.

She must be with the owner. None of my men would let a woman close to the café, not until we're a good ten minutes gone.

"Excuse me," I say, standing aside for her to enter.

"Mr. Russo?" she asks, tilting her head up to study me. "Angelo?"

How the fuck does she know my name? My senses go on high alert. "Can I help you?"

Her smile is shy. "I'm the entertainment for the rest of the week."

I raise a brow. "Entertainment?"

"Yours." She glances over my shoulder at my uncle. "Courtesy of Mr. Enzo Russo."

CHAPTER NINE

Sabella

Before I know it, a week has passed. The only news I have from my husband are the bits and pieces Heidi shares with me when she delivers my meals.

He arrived in Marseille.

He's safely in Paris.

He's returning via the south of France.

He's asking about you.

She's trying to put Angelo in my good books by pretending he cares about me, and I don't have the heart to tell her it's pointless. She can't reconcile something that can't be fixed. My husband doesn't give a damn about how long my hours in the confines of my bedroom are or how close I am to going out of my mind. He has no idea what it feels like to be locked in the same space for days on end. If he did, he'd never do it to another human being, not even to his most despised enemy—me.

So, when Heidi announces it's time to return to my confinement on the other side of the property, I'm more than relieved. I'm ecstatic to get out of this room.

She takes care of my laundry and packing before walking me to the car. It's a sunny afternoon. I'm pathetically giddy about leaving the house. Going outside has never felt like such a privilege. The expanse around me is a precious gift. The endless stretch of mountains, sea, and land is just a different kind of imprisonment, but on the other side of the property, I can move around freely.

When we arrive at the new house, I get out of the car and take in the surroundings. The difference leaves me gobsmacked. The yard is clear of the junk. New pots replace the broken ones, and the discarded plants are transplanted. Shrubs and herbs dot the dove-grey gravel that covers the mud. The different greens of thyme, rosemary, and lavender compliment the blueish green leaves of an olive tree that stands in the center.

"How did this happen so fast?" I ask Heidi, gaping as I look around.

"I knew you'd like it." She closes the car door with a grin before getting my bag from the trunk. "Mr. Russo knows a landscaper."

"I bet he does," I say under my breath as we make our way on the brand-new path to the veranda. I'm sure he knows lots of people who jump when he clicks his fingers.

"We're lucky the weather permitted for the plants to be planted. Normally, this high up, we have frost at this time of the year. It must be the climate change."

I'm not going to thank the climate change for making a new garden in winter possible, no matter how beautiful it is.

The door opens before we reach it. A tall, slender man with unruly rose-gold curls matching the copper color of his

short-trimmed beard steps out. I pause, taking in his skinny dress pants and tweed jacket. As per the latest high fashion, the pants are tailored to end just above his ankles. The moccasins he wears without socks remind me so much of Colin that an untimely pang of longing stabs into my heart.

“Mrs. Russo,” he says, holding out his arms as he skips down the steps. “Welcome.” He swings a hand in my direction when he reaches me. “Fabien Pelletier at your service.”

I shake his proffered hand. “Are you the landscaper?”

He looks around as if noticing the garden for the first time. “Oh, no.” He laughs and then shivers as if landscaping horrifies him. “I’m Mr. Russo’s personal shopper. I was tasked with fitting out your new house.” He leans closer and adds with a conspiratorial wink, “I dare say you’re a far more beautiful gem than this stunning piece of property, definitely Mr. Russo’s most precious jewel.”

Hmm. I’m sure Angelo will disagree.

“Come.” He hooks his arm around mine and guides me up the steps. “Let me show you around your new domain.” He emphasizes the statement with a flick of his hand. “You’re going to *love* it, darling.”

Heidi makes big eyes from where she’s walking on the other side of Mr. Pelletier before shooting me a smile.

Mr. Pelletier leads me through the door and extends an arm. “Ta-da! What do you think?”

My mouth drops open. The house is handsomely furnished and decorated in neutral colors with touches of gold. The sofas and blinds are white, forming a contrast with the long-hair caramel-colored rug. Vases filled with white flower arrangements stand on the coffee table and mantelpiece. A

beautiful watercolor landscape hangs above the fireplace. A fire that burns with a soft crackle adds warmth and coziness to the interior. While the furniture is in good taste, the focus is on practicality and comfort. I have to admit, Mr. Pelletier has a talent for decorating.

On top of the fact that everything looks brand-new, the house is also squeaky clean. The windows are spotless, and the floors are polished to a shine. The walls were either repainted or scrubbed. I'm leaning toward the latter because the odor of fresh paint is absent. Instead, a smell of lavender hangs in the air.

"Well?" Mr. Pelletier prompts when I don't say anything. "Do you like it?"

Heidi goes upstairs with my bag without looking twice at the new environment. She must've already seen the changes.

"Come," he says, waving me closer.

He checks that I'm following before walking with long, crab-like steps to the kitchen where he opens a cupboard with a flourish of his hand. "If it's not to your taste, we can change anything you want. I can get different colors or styles."

Rows of dove-gray mugs and plates line the shelves. The crockery looks handcrafted. Mom would love it.

He continues to fling open cupboards, exposing crystal wine glasses, silver cutlery, and gourmet groceries. Modern appliances are arranged on the counters under cable lights that hang from the ceiling. A bottle of champagne and two flutes stand on the island counter.

He giggles. "You're making me nervous when you don't say anything."

“Oh.” I tear my gaze away from the new eye-level oven and double door fridge and freezer. “It’s beautiful. It’s just a bit overwhelming.”

He slams one palm over his heart and the other on the counter next to him, supporting his weight as if he’s about to faint. “Oh thank God. You have no idea how relieved I am. For a moment there, I thought you hated it.”

“You did a fantastic job, Mr. Pelletier.”

“Why, thank you.” He straightens and smiles with a tilted head. “I’m always at your service. But please, call me Fabien.” He makes a face. “Mr. Pelletier is so...” He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling as he seemingly searches for the right word. Finally, he settles on, “Brusque,” with a wiggle of his shoulders.

His dramatic airs make me smile. He twirls around the room, closing the cupboards as he goes. With his tall legs and elegant movements, he gives the impression that he’s waltzing instead of walking.

He grabs the champagne and loosens the cork. “It deserves a celebration, don’t you think?” Pouring two glasses, he continues, “Mr. Russo said no alcohol because...” he lowers his voice and continues with exaggerated shock, “...you’re trying for a baby, but I thought what the hell. A housewarming isn’t a housewarming without a glass of champagne.”

The mention of the baby makes me tense.

He carries the glasses to me and pushes one in my hand. “I say you deserve it.” He winks. “I won’t tell if you won’t.” After clinking his glass against mine, he tips it back and takes a generous sip. “Congratulations, Mrs. Russo. Here’s to your

new home. May you always toast with French champagne.” He smacks his lips. “God, this stuff is good.”

I can’t help but laugh. I already like him.

“Hmm.” He holds up a finger. “Before I forget...” He takes a business card from his pocket and hands it to me. “Here’s my number. Call me if anything needs changing or replacement or if you think about something you’d like to add.” He leans closer and says from the corner of his mouth, “Such as a new wardrobe. I took the liberty of going through yours, and shame on you, girl. Whatever are you going to wear?”

“My clothes haven’t arrived from South Africa yet but thank you. I’ll keep your kind offer in mind.”

He points a finger at me. “You do that.” He downs what’s left in his glass and puts the flute on the counter. “Especially if you need something formal for a gala dinner or a ball. Believe me, darling, the women who move in these high-class circles can be bitches. They’re going to pull apart what you wear right down to the brand of your...” he twirls a finger in the direction of my lower body, “...string.”

I grin. “I’ll remember that.”

“Well, then.” He rubs his hands. “I better get going if I want to get back to Bastia before dark.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Noooo. Dear God. I’m from Paris.” He pronounces it as Pa-ree. “I’m sleeping over in Bastia tonight before catching a flight home.”

Starved for company, I say on impulse, “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

His smile is sweet. “That’s kind of you, but I have a date.” He wags his eyebrows. “Definitely next time.” Finger-waving, he says, “Toodeloo. Be good. And enjoy.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Bye, Heidi, darling,” he calls up the stairs as he makes his way to the door. “I’ll see myself out.”

Heidi comes down the stairs just as the door closes behind him. “Quite a character, that one. I have no idea where Mr. Russo found him. They have nothing in common.” She pauses. “Well, except for good taste.”

“This is a huge change.” I turn in a circle, taking everything in. “Why did Mr. Russo go to such expenses?”

“Why,” she exclaims, “because you’re his wife of course.”

I sigh inwardly, wishing I could change that fact. Change my circumstances. But one thing is for sure. I’d rather be on this isolated part of the island than locked in a room in my husband’s house.

“Here,” Heidi says, taking my hand and putting a bunch of keys on my palm. “These are for all the doors.”

I close my fingers around them. “Thank you.”

“I’ll check in as often as I can so that you don’t get too lonely.”

“Thank you, Heidi,” I say with a quiver in my voice, hugging her with the keys and the glass in my hands.

“Now, now.” She pats my back and pulls away. “Don’t get emotional. You’ll upset yourself, and that won’t do. I’m only a thirty-minute drive away.” She irons out her skirt with her palms. “I suppose I should let you settle in. I unpacked your

bag. Everything is in the closet in the main bedroom. Do you need me for anything else?”

“You’ve already done more than enough.”

“There’s fresh food for at least a week.” She averts her gaze. “Mr. Russo will be home tomorrow. I’ll be back as soon as he lets me.”

“Of course. I appreciate that.”

She blows out a drawn-out sigh. “Well, then. At least here you can go around freely.” Nodding to herself, she walks to the door. On the threshold, she stops. “You don’t have to worry, Sabella. You’ll be safe here. You can sleep soundly.”

My reply is weak. “Okay.”

The door closes on her smile. I stand on the spot, listening to the car door being shut before the engine starts up. The tires crunch on the gravel, and then the sound of the engine slowly fades.

Wanting to lock myself in has nothing to do with the child who’d snuck into the house. The poor little person with his dirt-streaked face only reminded me how easy it was to simply walk through the door.

I wanted keys because I can’t shake the feeling that I’m being watched, but I didn’t tell my husband that. If someone is watching me, he would’ve ordered it.

When silence wraps around me, I take a moment to process everything. Angelo’s generosity surprises me. I expected to be sent back to a fumigated but empty house. My husband has no reason to be kind or considerate to me. Sometimes, his behavior baffles me. In one moment, he drags me into a cellar and makes me believe he’s going to kill me

before banishing me to an abandoned house. In the next, he gets his personal shopper to furnish the place.

Remembering his sinister promise, I rush upstairs. The old mattress in the main bedroom is gone. A king-sized bed stands in its place. I dash to the bathroom and yank open the cupboard. My hand trembles when I take out my toilet bag. I zip it open and go through the contents with anxious impatience, only relaxing when I find my birth control pills.

I bite my lip as I look around for a hiding place. Using an elastic, I stretch it around the front of the cupboard drawer, making sure that the drawer still closes. Then I slip the packet of pills through the elastic on the bottom of the drawer. There. My pills are safe from Angelo. He'll never find them there.

Pushing away all thoughts of my husband, I finish my tour of the house. Every bedroom is fitted with furniture. The bathrooms are stocked with towels and luxury toiletries. I suppose Fabien didn't know no guest will ever set foot in here.

When I end up back in the main room after having done the full round, I go through the closet to find my clothes neatly folded on the shelves. The recipe books Heidi loaned me are stacked on a small bookshelf next to a writing desk.

I select the one with the dessert recipes and carry it downstairs. I'm eager to try my idea. Fortunately, Fabien stocked the food cupboards with a wide range of basic products. When I've stacked all the ingredients on the counter, I switch on the oven to warm and get to work.

Baking isn't as easy as it looks on paper. Despite the fact that I followed every step to the T, my cake comes out skew. I let it cool on the windowsill in front of the open window, lock the doors, and go upstairs to have a shower.

An hour later, when I return to tackle the frosting, the windowsill is empty, the cake gone.

CHAPTER TEN

Angelo

My uncle's trick still leaves a sour taste in my mouth when I enter the casino and spot the women in their glitzy dresses waiting next to my four o'clock appointment.

I know what he was doing. He was sending me a Sabella look-alike, someone he thought would satisfy my taste, an easy woman with a soft smile to make me forget about my rebellious spouse. Nothing sweetens the bitter taste of a wife's rejection like a willing woman's pussy. That's how it works in our circles. Men go out to work, kill, and fuck. The wives stay home to remain faithful and have our babies.

My father was the exception. He never looked at another woman for as long as I accompanied him on his business trips. I doubt he ever did, not even before he started taking me along. My uncles are a different matter. They have whores in every casino and a mistress in each town where they conduct business. They always had. The habit continued throughout my aunts' lives. My uncles told me so themselves.

The thought of another woman simply doesn't do it for me. There's only one pussy in which I want to bury my dick. My wife's. It's stamped with my insignia too. A man can't be

clearer than that. I hope Uncle Enzo suffered the humiliation of my rebuke. He overstepped his boundary by trying to soften me up with a whore. The woman looked embarrassed when I sent her away.

This man will learn too. The women who hang on his arms, batting their eyelashes and flaunting their tits as I approach, only repel me.

The high court judge sucks on his cigar, the end glowing red as he scrutinizes me through squinted eyes.

“Judge Fabre.” I offer him a hand. “Is there somewhere we can talk in private?”

He wraps his arms around the girls’ waists and palms their ass cheeks. “In my suite, you mean?” He slaps their asses. “Do you have a soft spot for one of these beauties, or do you prefer both?”

“Neither,” I say, my tone dry. “A private lounge will do.”

His face drops. “You’re no fun.”

My smile is cool. “All work and no play, I’m afraid.”

He grunts. “Go on, ladies.” He kisses each one’s cheek before groping their tits. “Go have some fun.”

They saunter off, throwing sultry looks at us from over their shoulders.

“Through here,” he says, indicating a door with a private sign to the left.

The casino owner set up the meeting. I trust him to keep the room clean of bugs, but I send one of my men ahead to check while I offer the judge a drink.

Once we placed our order for a bottle of Scotch, we take a seat on opposite sides of a roulette table. However, we're not here to gamble, at least not in the traditional sense.

"So," he says, spreading his arms across the back of his seat. "I hear you have a new supplier."

"Yes."

I remain quiet as a waitress enters with a bottle of Scotch and two tumblers. Fabre tilts his head to look up her short skirt as she bends to deposit her charge on a side table. She serves us, her lips curving into a strained smile as Fabre's hand finds its way between her legs.

"The waitresses are off limits," I say, narrowing my gaze.

The girl shoots me a grateful look mixed with something like fear. She doesn't want to suffer the consequences of refusing the judge's advances. He's not known for taking rejections gracefully.

Sighing, he pulls his hand away. "Like I said, you're no fun."

The girl hurries away.

When one of the men in my guard detail closes the door, I continue. "I have an opportunity to get regular shipments from the east."

"Destination?" he asks, picking up the glass and sniffing the liquor.

"Namibia."

"Which port?"

"Durban. That's already secured." Thanks to Edwards's old connections. "What I need is a safe passage across the

border.”

“Border control,” he muses. “Why not go in directly via Walvis Bay or Lüderitz?”

“Sea patrol,” I deadpan.

“Ah, yes.” He rests an ankle on his knee. “I heard they’re getting cranky about foreign boats fishing in their seas. Tightening the vise, they are.”

“So.” I take my glass. “Can you secure the passage or not?”

“Of course I can.” He grins. “That’s why you came to me. I have those puppets in my pocket.”

“How much?”

“Twenty percent.”

I raise a brow. “Ten percent. I have a monopoly in the market. You won’t get a similar offer from anyone else.”

The corners of his mouth pull down. He considers it, tracing the rim of his glass with a finger. It’s just for show though. When it comes to this particular stock, I pull the strings in Africa. The eastern supplier was the last one who sold their product to a competitor. They quickly transferred their business when I offered them a higher price, one my competitor will never be able to match.

“Fine,” Fabre says after a moment. “You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Russo.”

I stand. “Expect the first container to arrive in April. I’ll be in touch with the details.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I take it out. It’s Ryan, Sabella’s brother.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening,” I say, making my way to the door. Outside, I accept the call and put the phone against my ear. “Ryan?”

“I want to talk to my sister.”

“No, *good evening, how are you?*” I taunt.

“Fuck you, Russo. It’s been a week with no word from you.”

“Your sister is fine.” I walk to a quiet area with less people. “There’s no need for concern.”

“I want to speak to her.”

“She’s not with me.”

“Where are you?” he asks with disdain. “Are those slot machines I hear? Are you in a fucking casino?”

“You know what the business requires.”

“Where’s my sister?”

My tone is dry. “At this hour, she’s sleeping cozily in her bed.”

“Yeah, well, excuse me for not taking your word where my sister’s welfare is concerned. My mother is worried about her.” He adds after a pause, “So am I.”

“I’ll be home tomorrow night. I’ll let you speak to her then.”

“Why can’t I call her now?”

“Goodbye, Ryan,” I say, disconnecting the call.

Pocketing my phone, I continue to the exit. It’s a pity Ryan and I are enemies. In different circumstances, I would’ve respected him. Liked him even. He’s reliable and discreet, and

he gets the job done. He's got that classy vibe going, a certain panache that well-educated men of his status possess. Not rough around the edges and uncivilized like me. The logical side of me can't blame Benjamin Edwards for never wanting his precious daughter to marry me. Even I hate myself most of the time. It's difficult to like someone who has no redeeming qualities.

Outside in the crisp, cold air, I dial Heidi. "How did it go?"

"She's safely in the new house."

I hesitate, not sure how to phrase the question and not sure why I care. "Did she like it?"

"She loved it. As always, Fabien did a great job. I think he's a little smitten with Sabella."

Even though I know he prefers men, that phrase fucks with my head. "I think I'll fire him." Or better yet, kill him.

She laughs. "Then you'll have to fire me too."

Not sure what to make of that, I scoff. "Don't make my wife out to be an angel. Fabien just loves anything that's beautiful. Correction—Fabien *only* loves beautiful things."

"Yes, well," she says with a haughty tone, "some people are blessed with external as well as internal beauty."

Not in the mood for a lecture, I tell her in a gruff voice, "I'll be home late tomorrow. You don't have to prepare dinner."

"Yes, sir."

I end the call.

It strikes me then how much I'm looking forward to going home. I've never felt the pull this strongly, not when my

family was alive and even less after their deaths.

It must be the prospect of laying claim to my wife's sweet pussy. Of wanking off in her perfect body. Of using her for only as long as my cock stays hard. It can't be wanting to spend time with her. I resent her way too much to crave the pleasure of her company.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sabella

The following morning, I bake another chocolate cake. The second attempt isn't much better than the first. The cake slopes toward one side, the crust blackened on that end.

It will have to do. I don't have time to bake another, and I'm not sure I'll ever get it right. This time, I close the window and let the cake cool on the table.

After eating a breakfast of oatmeal and honey, I dress in my warmest clothes, put on my coat, and wrap the cake up in a clean dishcloth. Armed with the cake, I set out to the village. Like the previous time, I use the backdoor in case someone is watching the house. No one can see me leave via the cliffside. I'm careful to keep to the bushes until I'm a good distance away.

During the week I was locked in my husband's house, the cuts on my knee and my soles healed. My feet don't ache when I put my weight on them any longer, so this time round, I appreciate the view during the two-hour long hike.

The small village is bustling with activity when I arrive. The reason is the market that's set up in the square. I greet the

vendors as I browse their produce. They reply with friendly smiles and curious expressions.

When I reach the pharmacy, I peer through the window. Mrs. Campana is inside, serving a customer.

I enter into the welcome warmth of the store, the familiar scent of eucalyptus wrapping around me, and wait for Mrs. Campana to finish with the customer. When the elderly lady leaves, I open the door for her.

“Thank you, dear,” she says in a croaky voice, leaning on her cane.

“Here.” I offer her an arm to help her down the step. “Careful.”

She flashes me a grateful smile and continues on her way.

“Well.” Mrs. Campana lifts her chin. “Look what the cat dragged in.” She waves a hand toward my head. “How’s your problem?”

“Gone.” I grin, turning this way and that to show her my hair. “That’s why I came, to say thank you. You saved my life.”

She folds her hands in front of her. “That’s a gross exaggeration, but I’m happy if I helped.”

“I can’t repay you yet.” I put the cake on the counter. “I brought something to thank you for your patience.”

Balancing her weight on her toes, she leans forward to study the object. “That wasn’t necessary.” She scrunches up her nose. “What is it?”

A little embarrassed, I unwrap the dishcloth. “I’m afraid it’s only my second attempt.” I suck air through my teeth. “It’s supposed to be a cake. Chocolate.”

She pulls a face. “Hmm.”

“I thought it could be nice for your teatime break.”

“Hmm,” she says again.

“Anyway, I just wanted to drop that off and say thank you.”

I’m about to turn when she says, “I’m not a great baker myself. That’s what the bakery is for. Each to his own, as I always tell my husband when he complains about my lack of skills in the pastry department.”

“Thanks for saying that.” I add jokingly, “My cake is eternally grateful for your lack of discrimination. It’s not a looker, but it’s a really nice cake on the inside.”

A smile plucks at her lips. “In any event, baking is overrated. Who has time for that?” She adds with a sly look, “Except for Mrs. Filippi who has nothing to do but gossip all day.” She leans closer and lowers her voice. “The secret is in buying the box mix.”

“The box mix?”

She winks. “From the grocery store. And use the oven fan. It distributes the heat more evenly. That way, the cake will come out round.”

“I didn’t think about that. It’s a new oven, so the oven and I are still getting acquainted.”

“Ah,” she says with an air of expertise. “It’s probably not worked in yet.”

“Yes, probably.” I laugh. “I hope so at least.”

“Are you staying permanently?” She nods toward the hill. “In that house?”

“It would seem like it.”

“What a curse.”

I couldn't agree more, but I don't want to put my misery on display for everyone to witness. “It's been cleaned and refurbished since I discovered the, um...” I whisper, “...lice. It really looks nice now.”

She narrows her eyes. “Did you walk again?”

“It's such a lovely day, I thought I'd get some exercise.”

“Hmm.” She looks from me to the cake. “I hope you didn't hike all the way down the mountain just to bring me a cake.”

“I wanted to use the opportunity to explore the village.”

“There's not much to see, I'm afraid. Won't you get lonely up there? It's such an isolated place.”

“I'll be fine,” I say with an uncomfortable smile.

“If you say so.” She adjusts her glasses. “Well, if you need anything, you just have to ask.”

“Actually, there is something.” I hook my hair behind my ear. “I need a job, something that will earn me a little money not only to pay you back but also for other commodities.”

She pulls her face into a scowl. “Why doesn't your filthy rich husband give you money? He sure has enough of it going around.” She mutters under her breath, “Not that anyone here wants his money.”

My cheeks heat. “It's complicated.”

She makes a non-committal sound.

“You don't happen to know of anything, do you?” I ask.

“It’s a small village.” She shrugs. “But Mrs. Paoli was taken ill with the flu. She has a small dog.” She wrinkles her nose. “One of those tiny things that yaps all day. She may appreciate some help with walking it while she’s sick.”

“I’ll ask,” I say, both grateful and hopeful. “Can you please direct me to her house?”

“It’s the house with the lilac shutters next to the clothing store on the main street. You can’t miss it. As you’re heading there, you may as well take the prescription her doctor emailed this morning. If you don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

She holds up a finger. “Give me a minute.”

Taking the cake, she goes to the back. A moment later, she returns with a pharmacy bag. “Here you go.” She hands me the bag. “The dosage instructions are on the prescription. You better make sure she takes the vitamins. She can be forgetful about that.”

“I will,” I say, waving as I make my way to the door. “Thanks again, Mrs. Campana. Have a nice day.”

“Wait,” she calls. “What about your dishcloth?”

“I’ll get it next time I’m in town,” I say, shutting the door behind me.

Like Mrs. Campana said, I locate the small house with the lilac shutters and the pink flowerpots on the porch step without any problem. A miniature Pinscher sits under a lace curtain on the windowsill. She goes into a barking frenzy when I knock on the door.

Shuffling sounds on the other side of the wood. An elderly lady with pink highlights in her gray hair opens the door. She’s

dressed in a cherry-pink robe and matching slippers.

“Yes?” she says in a nasal voice, pressing a tissue under her nose. “Can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m Sabella. I live in the house on the hill.” I hold out the pharmacy bag. “Mrs. Campana sent me with your medicine.”

“Oh, yes.” She pulls the belt of the robe tighter before taking the bag. “Do you mind coming in for a moment? I’d like to send her a cheque. Maybe you could deliver it for me on your way back?”

“Sure,” I say, stepping inside when she opens the door wider.

The dog barks in all earnest, obviously not liking my intrusion.

“Quiet, baby,” she says, but the little creature pays her no heed.

Going down on my haunches, I offer the dog my hand to sniff. “Hey, buddy. What’s your name?”

The dog stops barking and reluctantly comes closer. After sniffing me, she licks my hand.

“That’s Diva,” Mrs. Paoli says. “She likes you.”

“She’s cute.” I scratch Diva’s chin. “Mrs. Campana said you may need someone to walk her while you’re feeling under the weather. I’m looking for small jobs, so if you—”

“Done.”

I straighten. “Really?”

“It’s not often that Diva likes someone. I was considering paying one of the older kids to walk her, but you never know

what mischief those boys get up to. The last time, they dressed my Diva in a doll's dress and put a frilly hat on her head. The poor thing was miserable. Imagine. A frilly hat," she exclaims. "I prefer that an adult takes care of her."

I smile. "I have nothing planned. I can take her out today."

"Diva will like that. Come on in," she says, going down the hallway. "Come sit in the kitchen while I write the cheque. You can walk Diva to the pharmacy and back. It's a walk she knows well, and she likes to sniff the lampposts on the way."

She leads me to a small kitchen with pink cupboards and a small table with a pink cherry motive tablecloth. Diva follows on our heels, her nails clacking on the wooden floors.

"Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?" she asks. "I can do with one. It'll drive this nasty chill from my bones."

"Why don't I make the tea while you write the cheque?"

"Are you sure?" She clutches the ends of her robe together. "I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Not at all. Just show me where everything is."

"All right then." She sniffs. "If you insist."

She opens a cupboard filled with pink crockery and takes down a hot-pink tea pot. "The cups are here." She points at a pantry door. "The tea is in there. Sugar too." She shuffles toward the door. "Or honey if you prefer." Her voice drifts down the hallway as she disappears through the doorframe. "I'll be back in a sec."

While she gets her cheque book, I wash my hands with the rose-perfumed soap at the sink and dry them on the baby-pink towel that hangs on a hook on the wall. After filling a pink vintage kettle with water, I switch it on for the water to boil.

I'm not surprised that the tea in the pink tin decorated with ballerinas is a pink hibiscus and raspberry mixture. Even the drawer from which I take a teaspoon is lined with pink polka dot kitchen paper.

When Mrs. Paoli returns and sits down at the table, I pour two cups of the fragrant infusion. I take the chair opposite her and frame the paper-thin porcelain teacup with the roses painted around the rim between my palms, enjoying the warmth that seeps into my skin.

"You said you live in the house on the hill," she says, stealing a glance at me as she signs her name on the cheque.

"That's right." I blow on the tea before taking a sip. "This brew is divine."

"Thank you," she says with a lift of her chin. "It's not available in the store. I order it online from an organic producer." She puts the pen down. "Are you family of the Russos?"

"No." I clear my throat. "I mean yes. I suppose so." Flustered, I add, "I'm Mr. Russo's wife. I'm not used to the new surname yet."

Placing a hand over her heart, she says with round eyes, "You don't say."

I take the medicine from the bag and shake a vitamin from the bottle, which I leave in her saucer. "Mrs. Campana said this will help for your cold."

She leans across the table and asks in a hushed voice, "Is it true that the house is a pigsty?"

I flinch. "I can't deny that it was in a less than desirable state when I moved in, but you don't have to worry. It's been cleaned since."

“Oh.” Red blotches taint her cheeks. “I didn’t mean that you’re dirty. I can see you’re perfectly clean. I was just wondering. Word goes around. Toma mentioned something to a friend of a friend’s cousin.” Leaning closer still, she whispers, “Does he live there now? Your husband?” She crosses herself. “I suppose after what happened with the accident it must be difficult to live in the big house.”

Sighing, I give her the same answer I gave Mrs. Campana. “It’s complicated.”

“Ah.” She nods. “Arranged marriages always are. That family never believed in marrying for love. But to be married to the likes of Angelo Russo on top of that?” She pats my hand. “It can’t be easy.”

Diva barks, saving me from having to reply.

“I think she’s impatient to go out,” Mrs. Paoli says. “She hasn’t done her business yet.” She gets up and takes a plate covered with a napkin from the cupboard that she puts on the table before sitting down again. She removes the napkin to reveal pink finger biscuits. “Have a boudoir before you go.” Taking one from the plate, she breaks off the end and offers it to Diva who snatches the treat from her fingers. “They’re rose flavored.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking one of the cookies.

“Here.” She tears the cheque from the book. “This is for Mrs. Campana.”

Swallowing the stale cookie down with the last of my tea, I get up and carry our cups to the sink. “Thank you for the tea. It was delicious.”

“Don’t worry to rinse that,” she says when I open the tap. “The cups are dishwasher safe.” She pushes to her feet. “Let

me get you Diva's leash. She's very obedient. You won't have any problems with her."

After putting the cheque in my pocket, I follow her to the entrance.

"Will ten euros per hour do?" she asks. "That's the going rate around here."

"Perfect." Feeling bad for taking her money, I say, "But only if you can afford it."

"Of course I can." She hooks the pink leash onto Diva's diamond stud collar. "Otherwise I wouldn't have offered."

Thanking her again, I take the leash and lead the little dog down the street. "Come on, Diva. Let's get some exercise. It's a beautiful, sunny morning, a perfect day to stretch your legs."

The dog agrees with a yelp, trotting energetically beside me. Every few meters we stop for Diva to sniff the lampposts or to inspect a leaf on the pavement. I don't miss the lift of the curtains in the windows as we pass the houses that line the street, but I pretend not to notice.

I deliver the cheque to Mrs. Campana and return Diva home without incidents, collecting my payment that Mrs. Paoli slipped into an envelope.

"If you want," she says, "I can pay you at the end of the week. You can come every day, can't you?"

"Sure," I say. "I'm happy to do it for as long as you need me."

"Perfect." Holding Diva under one arm, she waves me off. "See you tomorrow around the same time."

The uphill hike home is more tiring, but I meant what I told Mrs. Campana. I'm enjoying the exercise, not to mention

getting out of the house. I keep vigilant as I near the property, watching for movement in the thicker vegetation on the riverbank or for footprints in the dust, but the surroundings are quiet.

When I reach the house, I do a quick walk around the veranda. The garden furniture is undisturbed, except for a dent in a cushion on one of the chairs. Someone sat here, and it wasn't me.

On the side of the kitchen, I check the window. A small handprint stains the glass. A shiver rolls through me when the sun dips below the mountain. The peak casts a long shadow over the house. The hair on my nape stands on end. That feeling of being watched creeps up on me again.

“Hello?” I call. “Is someone there?”

The only answer is the echo of my voice.

I unlock the backdoor, letting myself into the warm house. Making sure to lock the door behind me, I drop the key in an ornamental bowl on the counter.

The walk left me thirsty. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and down it on my way upstairs. It's not dark yet, but I pull the curtains in the bedroom closed before stripping and having a shower.

After dressing in a sweater, comfortable leggings, and fluffy socks, I go back downstairs to make dinner. The glow on the horizon has turned from gold to purple. I close the blinds downstairs and double-check that all the doors and windows are locked. Then I switch on the new fancy stereo sound system, select a lively playlist, and gather one of the recipe books.

Heidi highlighted a few simple, easy recipes. I hum to the music as I season chicken breasts with thyme and rosemary before popping them in the oven. While the chicken is grilling, I slice and salt aubergine. I leave the slices to sweat, using the time to tidy up. According to the recipe, sweating the aubergine removes the bitterness. When the aubergine is ready, I rinse off the salt, pat the slices dry, and arrange them on a baking tray. After dribbling over olive oil, I put the tray on the top level in the oven.

Fabien stocked the wine fridge with bottles of white and red. The fridge has two separate sections, which allows for the red and white wine to be stored at different temperatures. Grabbing the first red my hand falls on, I uncork the bottle and pour a little wine into a fat-bellied, long-stemmed glass. As I sip my wine, I set the table with the beautiful new crockery and cutlery and light a candle that I place in the center. The ambience is cozy. None of the pretty things or delicious-smelling food are mine, but I'm grateful for the luxuries. I'm especially thankful that I don't have to sleep on a dirty, louse-ridden mattress tonight.

Visiting the village and interacting with people other than Heidi lifted my spirits. For the first time since my wedding day, I experience a sense of peacefulness.

I'm about to sit down when, through the open door, I spot a light through the gaps of the blinds in the lounge. Maybe Heidi came to check on me. The thought makes me smile. The company is always welcome, and I'll be glad not to eat alone. She can judge my first cooking effort and give me tips for improvement.

I go to the lounge, leave my unfinished wine on the coffee table, and pull the blinds open a crack to peer through the

window. The car that stops in front of the house isn't the Land Rover Heidi drives. It's the Jaguar.

The peace that was within my grasp not a second ago vanishes. My stomach squeezes into a ball as my husband opens his door and folds his tall body double to get out of the car. Dressed in a black coat with the collar flicked up over a dark suit, he looks both dangerous and as if he just stepped out of a very normal, very civilized office meeting. He adjusts his lapels as he stares up at the house for a couple of beats before making his way along the path with long strides.

Dropping the blinds, I swallow. It's too soon and too long. I made my decision, but I'm not ready.

When the scraping of a key in the lock sounds in the space, announcing the end of my week-long reprieve, I strip my clothes and go down on my knees. It's time to fight again. This round, with compliance. Before he opens the door, I'm waiting like an obedient whore naked on the floor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Angelo

The sight that greets me isn't what I expected. Sabella on her knees. Naked. Thighs spread. Head bent. Her long dark hair falls like a curtain around her face.

For a moment, I'm frozen, mesmerized not only by the stunning depravity of the image but also by the obedience that's so unlike her.

She makes a striking picture. Raw. Dirty. And somehow sacred.

Aware of the cold I'm letting in on her, I'm quick to shut the door. It gives me a moment to muster control and find my bearings. The house looks different. It smells different. But I only register those changes vaguely in the back of my mind. My attention is fixed on my wife, a woman kneeling for me, and there's something so wrong with the portrait that I can't prevent myself from crossing the floor and stopping in front of her. I have no idea what I'm going to do until I offer her a hand.

My wife shouldn't be on her knees. She's a Russo now. I thought the punishment would please me. Instead, it angers me

for reasons I can't explain. Seeing her so degraded makes me clench my fist at my side. It takes every morsel of self-control I possess not to drag her up by her arm.

"Sabella," I say in a soft but firm tone when she doesn't react.

She lifts her head. Her gaze cuts to the hand I hold in front of her face.

"Get up."

I gave her the command several times since I married her, but this may be the only time I said it with kindness.

She frowns. She's confused. Yeah. So am I. I ordered her to present herself like an object or a fuck toy when I walk through the door. I'm contradicting myself. I should let her stay there while I remove my coat and tie and make myself comfortable. But I don't. I grip her fingers and pull her to her feet.

I don't give her an explanation because I don't have one. I don't let go of her hand because I don't want to. She shivers a little, her fingers trembling in mine. She must be cold. The discarded clothes on the ottoman and the glass of wine on the table catch my gaze.

Opening my arms, I pull her in for a hug. She's stiff in my embrace, probably even more confused by the gesture. Her body is warm against mine. The skin of her back is soft under my palms. Another quiver runs through her.

"Cold?" I ask, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

She clears her throat. "Your hands are freezing."

I rub her back to warm both her and my hands. "I should've worn gloves."

She pulls back a little. “What do you want me to do?”

The question catches me off guard. “Whatever I tell you to.”

She shrugs. “All right.”

“All right?” Just like that? No resistance? No fight?

“I’m not sure what you want from me.”

I consider that. What do I want from her? I want to bend her over the table and fuck her breathless. I want to spread her out on the floor and slam into her until I break my cock in two. I want to kiss her until the sun comes up and fall asleep with her in my arms. I must be turning into the weakling my uncles fear I’m becoming.

Instead, I let her go. “You can pour me a glass of wine.”

“Red or white?”

Taking off my coat, I study the stunning shape of her body, the pertness of her tits, and the nipples that sit hard on top of them. My mark between her legs. “I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

I slip off the coat as she turns. Fuck. I’ve never seen a prettier ass. So firm and perfectly rounded. The marks I put on those globes have long since faded.

“Wait,” I say for no other reason than to prolong the pleasure of the sight.

She looks at me from over her shoulder, waiting like I commanded.

I have no idea what to say. I can’t express what I want in words. My voice is gruff as I make up an excuse for delaying her. “Make that a Scotch.”

“I’m not sure there is any.”

“Fabien would’ve stocked up with some.”

“Oh.” The corner of her mouth lifts in a wry smile. “Of course he would’ve.”

My instruction is curt. “Check the liquor cupboard.”

I like her softness and agreeable nature when she’s obedient despite the fact that it’s just a show she puts on for me. As much as I love her sassy mouth, I’m not in the mood to spoil the moment, not when I only had a small taste of how it feels to be with a woman who doesn’t resist or openly detest my presence.

Removing my tie, I ogle her as she walks to the kitchen. I’m undoing the top two buttons of my shirt when she returns with a tumbler of Scotch.

“Thank you,” I say when she hands it to me, bending down to press my lips on her cheek.

She gives a start and blinks up at me.

Like my earlier behavior, I don’t explain this gesture either. Just as disobedience needs to be punished, obedience deserves to be rewarded.

I sit down on the sofa and leave my glass on the side table. She stands in front of me, her nakedness leaving her vulnerable and exposed. Her body is accessible, presented for my taking. There’s a million and one ways in which I want to grope her, and none of them is decent. Yet I don’t cup her breasts or bury my fingers between her legs. What holds me back isn’t my steely control. It’s how she stands there so quietly, waiting for my next command even though she doesn’t know what to expect.

I could order her to kneel and swallow my cock. I could instruct her to bend over and take me in her ass again. For all she knows, I could command her to lick my shoes clean. It's a simple transaction, a price she agreed to pay. Her acceptance of whatever fate I choose to dole out should please me too, but I don't find it half as enticing as her free will. The first two times we fucked were violent, but she was a spontaneous participant as sure as I was willing. My cock hardens at the thought of her sucking me off and liking it. I want more of that, more of her free will.

Taking her hand, I draw her between my legs. With a firm tug, I pull her onto my lap. Her ass on my groin feels good. It's a perfect fit. My arms around her feel natural. I like this husbandly duty—keeping her warm.

Brushing a strand of hair from her face, I search her beautiful dark eyes for the truth. “What happened while I was gone?”

“Nothing,” she says, tensing in my arms.

She's misinterpreting my question. My aim isn't to shatter the peace with threats of punishment for her wrongdoings. I know nothing happened. I know she was here, locked up in the house. I have the hourly reports from my cousins. I want to know what happened that made her so docile. It's what I wanted, isn't it? But now that I have it, I find I don't like it. I don't like it when it's not real. I prefer her just as herself—my feisty, proud girl. My unwilling wife.

And just like that, the bitter taste of old is back in my mouth.

Embarrassed almost, she says, “I'm learning to cook.” She blushes a little. “Well, trying to learn.” She shrugs. “That's all.”

Circling an arm around her waist, I place my palm over the seal I branded into her skin. “Is it working?”

She makes a face. “Not quite.”

I don’t know why I find that so endearing. “I’ll hire a full-time chef.”

“No,” she says quickly. “I want to try. Heidi gave me some recipes.”

I caress my mark with a thumb, tracing the outline of the circle that sits just above her pussy, remembering the night I put it on her. “What’s on the menu tonight?”

“Can’t you smell?” she asks with a ghost of a smile.

Chicken, yes. Rosemary and thyme. Yet those aren’t the fragrances I’m focused on. It’s the smell of the cherry blossom shampoo in her hair and the feminine perfume of her skin. It’s the memory of us, the smell of dirty, raw, insatiable sex hanging in the room.

Supporting her shoulders with one arm, I trail my hand up over her stomach. Her belly flutters under my palm. I study her face as I trace her cleavage with a fingertip before cupping her breast. For the briefest moment, her eyelashes flutter. The dilation of her pupils doesn’t lie. Neither does the way her nipple hardens beneath my touch. My hands turn her on.

Her lips part slightly as I weigh her breast before stroking the curve gently. My gaze is drawn to the beauty spot at the corner of her mouth. A memory of her pressing her lips on the rim of a mug rushes into my head. I want more of that too. I want her to tease me, to drive me out of my mind with need for her, because she’s always been an expert at that without even trying.

When I stop caressing her to pick up my glass, a barely audible sigh falls from her lips.

“Ever tried Scotch?” I ask.

“Yes, but I’m not a fan of hard liquor.”

“It’s an acquired taste.” Taking a small swallow, I savor the notes on my tongue. “Malty and buttery with a spicy finish.”

I take another sip and lower my head. Her eyes widen when she realizes my intention, but she doesn’t protest when I press my mouth on hers. She parts her lips and lets me feed her, accepting the alcohol and the kiss.

The taste of Scotch infuses our breaths. It lingers on her tongue as I suck it into my mouth, relishing her flavor as I prolong the kiss.

When I come up for air, she’s panting, her lips red and swollen already.

“Do you like it?” I ask, not sure if I mean the drink or the kiss.

The look in her eyes is both coy and uncertain as she peers at me through her dark, long lashes. “As you said, it’s an acquired taste.”

I raise a brow. “One you can get used to?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Not a yes or a no. But permission to go ahead. And I grab it with both hands.

She watches me as I tilt back the glass and fill my mouth with another sip of six-thousand-euro Scotch. She already parts her lips as I swoop down, but this time, her mouth isn’t my destination. I dip my arm, laying her over my lap with her

head on the armrest before locking my mouth around the tip of her breast. She gasps when the liquid bathes her nipple. The bud contracts, growing hard in my mouth. Both her feel and taste are addictive. I swallow, sucking her curve deep into my mouth. She moans and arches her back, encouraging me to take more.

I lick her nipple, enjoying the coldness of her flesh on the warmth of my tongue. I'm achingly aware that her pussy is only a hand's reach away. The urge to slip my fingers between her legs is huge, the pull almost irresistible, but I don't want her wet tightness on my fingertips. I want it on my tongue.

She studies me with a question in her eyes as I leave the glass on the side table, push a cushion under her head, and shift out from underneath her.

Standing, I loom over her naked body. "Bend your knees."

She holds my gaze as she complies.

"Good girl. Now spread them wide."

She does what I tell her to do without posing questions. This round, her obedience turns my cock harder than a steel rod because it's not just for show. She's wet. Her arousal glistens on the pink lips of her pussy. She wants this, whatever she thinks I'm going to give her.

Taking a long drink, I plant a knee on the sofa and go down between her legs. Her hips lift off the seat when I tease her clit with the liquid in my mouth. She gasps when I part her with my tongue. But when I drown her pussy in Scotch, she fists her fingers in my hair and offers herself like the most exquisite vessel for my drinking. And I do. I drink straight from her delicious cunt, sucking her dry, and when she's

writhing in the gentle clamp of my teeth around her clit, I eat her out.

She comes with a cry, her nails doing damage to my scalp. Beyond stopping, I can only carry on, wrenching aftershocks from her body until her shoulders collapse on the sofa and her arms fall at her sides. Until she begs me, “Stop, please. No more.”

I oblige, sitting back and spreading her pussy lips with my thumbs to look at my work. Her clit is red and swollen from my teeth and my lips. Arousal slickens her slit. The smooth skin of her inner thighs is scraped from my stubble. Her head is thrown back, her hair a wild mess around her face. Breathing hard, she watches me watching her. She’s a picture of perfect devastation, drunk on pleasure and wearing the perfume of Scotch.

There’s one sip left in the glass and nothing of my control. I take her hand and pull her into a sitting position. Cupping her head, I pick up the glass and bring it to her mouth. I turn the rim so that her lips are pressed on the same spot from where I drank. She drinks. Swallows. Her throat moves delicately with the action.

I have no idea how long I had my head buried between her legs. How long have I been here? An hour? Two?

She’s still watching me, measuring me, licking a drop of Scotch from her bottom lip while she stares up at my face. Urgency fuels my steps as I walk to the kitchen and switch off the oven. When I return to the lounge, she’s still sitting where I left her.

I go over and lift her into my arms. Nothing is said as I carry her upstairs. Words are redundant. Language is insufficient. Our bodies are enough. Lust is all we need to

communicate. It's perfectly clear when I push the main bedroom door open with a shoulder.

She clings to me as I carry her to the bed, and the strange act touches something inside me. It makes me want to hold her and tell her she's mine to protect, that I won't let her go.

I lay her down on the side of the bed, releasing her only long enough to take off my clothes. Naked, I crawl over her, covering every inch of her skin with mine. Her warmth and smell melt into my senses, warming me in places that have always been cold. Something clicks in place when I intertwine our fingers and stretch her arms above her head. She opens her legs for me, letting me in. My cock knows the way. It slips home easily, finding her wet and hot and tight and too much.

Fuck.

I grit my teeth, biting back the pleasure that climbs too fast.

When I rock my hips, she follows my lead. I close my fingers, squeezing hers. Squeeze my eyes shut. Only for a moment. Because I want to look at her. I lower my head and taste her lips. Hungry for the depth of her mouth, I sweep my tongue over hers. The kiss is unhurried and tender, our lovemaking slow.

And fuck.

Because I'm going to shoot my load.

I kiss a path down her neck, finding her breast, savoring her nipple. My actions are languid even if the urgency in my body is a breakable thing, a thing about to explode.

Because I don't want it to end.

Not before I take care of her pleasure.

Even as the intention enters my mind, my body gives out. I empty myself in her pussy, filling her up with my seed. Letting myself go and finding my pleasure inside her is so powerful that all thoughts except for one weakening need disappear.

Untangling our hands, I spear my fingers through her silky hair, cupping her face between my palms as I pump with a dry cock and grunt out, "Say it. Say my name."

Laying her hand on my nape, she pulls me in for a kiss. "Stop talking, Mr. Russo, and make me come."

That something that fitted so perfectly falls out of place. There's something wrong with those words, with the formal way in which she addresses me, but I'm too caught up in the moment to examine the notion. I'm too scared to look too closely and find something that will shatter the peace. So I kiss her. Deeply. Deeper than I care to look. And I slip a hand between our bodies and use my cum to lubricate her clit before I rub that little button the way she likes, the way that makes her lock her thighs around my hips before her inner muscles clench on my cock.

I kiss her through her orgasm, lapping up her pleasure, owning her breaths and her firsts. Owning everything, but not her heart.

It's a fucking bitter pill to swallow, and it tastes all the more acrid because of the sweetness of this moment.

It's unfair to expect something of her that can never be. It's downright dumb to want something I can never have. It's wrong to think of love when I'm still kissing her. Because it fucks with my head.

Yet I don't stop. I don't tear my lips from hers, and I don't stop thinking. That nasty little splinter has lodged into my

brain, and it's there to stay. To torment me. To fester like a thorn under the skin with a throbbing discomfort that won't be ignored.

"Air," she says, pushing on my shoulders.

I get off her, just enough to let her breathe. I must be crushing her beneath my weight. I got carried away.

She winces when I pull out.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, framing her cheek in my palm and drinking in her beautiful features.

"No." She smiles. "It just burns a little."

I kiss her forehead. "Stay, *cara*."

She turns her face and follows my progress to the bathroom with her gaze. Her quiet acceptance both pleases and worries me. There's something off about it. I can't accuse her of being disobedient or unaccommodating. I only know it's not right.

After wetting a washcloth with warm water, I return to the bed and wipe away the cum between her legs.

"Does that burn less?" I ask when I'm done.

"Not really." She bites her lip. "But it's not so bad."

"Come on." I offer her a hand. "I'll clean you in the shower."

She lets me pull her to her feet. Interlinking our fingers, I lead her to the bathroom. I only let her go to open the tap and set towels out on the bench. I like this marital duty too—taking care of her needs.

She says nothing while I wash her hair and our bodies. She doesn't comment when I massage her scalp. Neither does she

complain when I clean a little too thoroughly between her legs. She only speaks when I make quick work of rinsing myself.

“The tattoos.” She traces the head of the wolf with a finger, sending a ripple through my skin. “Why did you get them?”

I shrug. “It seemed fitting.”

She drags her hand lower. “Eternalizing your family emblem on your body?”

“It’s more than an emblem. Everyone in Corsica knows what it stands for.”

“Power?”

“I suppose.”

“And resilience?”

“That too,” I say, catching her hand before she reaches my cock. If she touches me now, I’m going to fuck her again, and she’s still raw from earlier.

“Am I intruding?” she asks with a coy smile that doesn’t mask her hurt.

I kiss her lips. “I’m not rejecting you, *cara*. I just don’t want to hurt you more.”

“I wasn’t making advances,” she says, flushing a little.

Sure. I smile. I like her like this. Greedy. Like how she was in the cave when she took everything she needed from me. Everything I owed her that day. The thought of the dark times that followed when she was in an induced coma in the hospital sobers me.

When we’re both wrapped in towels, I leave her to dry her hair while I go to the dressing room. As instructed, Fabien

stocked the closet with a few new outfits in my size. I select warm fleece pajamas for Sabella and a T-shirt and sweatpants for myself.

Once we're dressed, we go to the kitchen for dinner like a normal married couple. The only thing wrong with the picture is that the table is set for one.

"Sit," I say, pulling the chair out for her.

She lowers herself into the seat with an air of uncertainty, as if she doesn't know what to expect from me. There are many things wrong between us, things that can never be put right, but she tried tonight, and it's only fair that I try too. How little effort it takes to be kind surprises me. Even more surprising is how much I'm enjoying behaving in this normal way with her. For once, I don't have to deflect her jabs or animosity. When she doesn't resist me so hard, I don't have to treat her like the enemy she is.

My wife studies me from over the candle that's burned down to half its size as I get two glasses from the cupboard and fill them with wine from the open bottle that stands on the counter.

I sit down opposite her, studying her as intently as she's studying me, waiting for her to speak, to ask the question that burns in her eyes, because I'm curious about what that question is. She rubs her palms over her thighs, drawing my attention to the nervous action.

"Are you staying for dinner?" she finally asks.

The question isn't posed as an invitation but rather as a need to clarify a fact.

"Would you like me to?"

She cocks a shoulder. “It’s your house. You’re free to do as you please.”

It’s true. Then why does the statement disappoint me? We keep on balancing on this thin edge, walking a tightrope between peace and war. I’m not ready for the ceasefire to end.

Opting for humor, I ask, “Is it poisoned?”

The corner of her mouth lifts, but she’s quick to wipe any traces of amusement away. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

In return, I offer her a full-blown smile. “I guess then I’ll see.”

She gets up and collects a plate and eating utensils from the cupboard that she carries back to the table. I drink in her graceful movements as she sets everything in front of me. It feels perfectly ordinary but also hugely eventful, like some kind of milestone. My first dinner cooked by my wife. Sure, she didn’t cook the meal for me. She had no way of knowing I’d be here. But I’ll take it anyway. I’ll own the gesture and make it mine, pretending if only for the sake of the odd warmth that spreads through my chest at the thought.

On her way to the oven, she shoots me another insecure look. “It should be cooked. I hope. The chicken has been in here for more than an hour.”

I can’t help another smile from stretching my lips. “I should think so.”

Enjoying the homely scene playing out too much, I don’t offer my assistance when she fits a pair of oven mittens. I’m too greedy for the normality of watching her serve dinner to break the trance by getting out of my seat.

She takes a casserole from the oven and places it on a cork plate on the table. A baking tray is next. Her nervousness is

palpable as she sits down again. Her anxiety over a simple meal is touching. I find it adorable. I'm not arrogant enough to believe she wants to impress me. Her tenseness has more to do with embarrassment at failing this test, not that cooking should be a test.

“What do you think?” she asks, working her luscious bottom lip between her teeth.

“It looks delicious.”

“All right,” she says, sounding doubtful as she picks up a serving spoon and offers it to me.

I motion at my plate, for an inexplicable reason wanting her to do this for me. “Go ahead.”

That warm feeling in my chest intensifies when she loads a generous helping of grilled aubergine and chicken on my plate. It's not the way my mother took care of me. This is different.

When she's dished up for herself, I raise my glass. “To your first dinner. I'm honored.”

“Don't be so quick to toast the food. It may be inedible.”

“It's no big deal.” My statement is aimed at setting her at ease. “I can always make us an omelet.”

“Is that the extent of your cooking experience?” she teases as she picks up her glass.

“More or less. Like you, I always had people who cooked for me.” I cut into the chicken. “I never needed to learn.”

Her chest expands and stills with the breath she holds as I bring a bite to my mouth. I chew slowly, taking my time to savor the meat. The chicken is crispy on the outside and tender inside.

“Perfect,” I say when I’ve swallowed.

She blows out a sigh. “Really?”

I grin. “Best chicken I’ve had.”

A pretty flush grows over her cheeks. “There’s no need to patronize me.”

“I’m serious.” I spear a piece of aubergine onto my fork. “It’s delicious.”

“Thank you,” she says, looking vulnerable and grateful and way too beautiful.

“But I meant it when I said I could hire a chef. You need a housekeeper too.”

She stills with her fork halfway to her mouth. “A housekeeper?”

“I was going to bring up the subject later, but now is as good a time as any. I assume you’d like to do the interviews.”

She puts down her fork. “I don’t need a housekeeper.”

“It’s a big house.” I sample the aubergine. Not bad. “There’s a lot to clean.”

Lowering her gaze, she picks up her fork again. “I like my privacy.”

“There’s enough space to accommodate a couple of live-in personnel without compromising your privacy. They can stay in the rooms at the other end of the hallway. The staff will be discreet. You won’t even know they’re here.”

“I’ll know,” she says, pushing her food around on her plate. “Trust me.”

I study her as I sip my wine. Her reluctance to have people in the house surprises me. I expected her to welcome the idea.

“Why are you so set against having help?”

“It’s not the help.” She lifts her gaze back to mine. “I just want to be able to walk naked through the house if I like. Having strangers around is inhibiting.”

Ah. I think I understand. “Is this about how you’re supposed to greet me?”

She winces. It’s obviously a sore point for her. “Not only.”

“Because that’s easy to work around. I can order them to retire to their rooms after a working day.”

“That’s severe. It’s like telling someone they don’t have the right to leave their room at night.”

“If I’m paying the right price, they should be happy to oblige.”

“That’s what you believe, isn’t it? That everyone has a price.”

“Don’t you?”

Her jaw hardens. Yes, even she has a price. In her case, it’s her family.

“Don’t make such a big deal out of this.” I twirl the wine in my glass before downing what’s left. “Staff don’t have a reason for hanging around the living areas after hours.”

A bit of the old spite creeps back into her voice. “Does that mean you’re only gracing me with your presence at night?”

“I work during the day.”

She takes a sip of wine and looks away. “Of course you do.”

“Sabella.”

At the command in my voice, she turns her face back to me.

“It’s your choice,” I say. “Let me know when you want help, and I’ll arrange it.”

A beat passes while she watches me with hesitance in her eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes.”

“Fine,” she says, her effort at sounding assertive not masking her relief.

“Eat,” I order, because she needs her strength. “Your food is getting cold.”

She cuts the chicken into small pieces before taking a bite. I let her eat in peace for a while, making sure she finished at least half of the food on her plate before I speak again lest I spoil her appetite.

“We’re attending a formal dinner party next weekend.” I refill my glass. Hers is still full. “I’ll have a dress delivered.”

Her hands still for a second before she continues to halve a slice of aubergine. “What’s the occasion?”

“Fundraiser.” I leave my knife and fork diagonally on my empty plate and lean back in my chair. “A potential client will be present. Thomas Powell. He’s the owner of one of the biggest British shipping companies.”

“So, you’re going for networking and not to support whatever the fundraiser is for.”

“The event is raising funds for saving dolphins. I thought it would interest you.”

She sits up straighter.

“Powell’s company is putting measures in place to prevent them from getting tangled in fishing nets.” Smiling, I bring my glass to my lips. “The two of you may have lots to talk about.”

For the first time since I dragged her from her home country, excitement sparks in her eyes. “I’d like that.”

“Good. When you meet him, you can give me your opinion of Mr. Powell.”

“*My* opinion?”

“Yes,” I drawl. “I’ll appreciate your input.”

She sips her wine. “Why?”

“He’s a hard nut to crack. He’s more like the people who move in your circles—well educated, cultured, and politically correct. Comes from old money. He looks down on self-made men like me.”

“Hmm. Tell me more.”

“He has a monopoly on the safest sea routes between Indonesia and Mozambique. I’m currently moving containers between Asia and South Africa, but they have to go via France. If I can get direct access to Mozambique, I can transport them from Maputo to Johannesburg via road. It’s little over five hundred kilometers.”

She tilts her head. “What’s in it for you?”

“Lower transport and insurance costs, safer routes with less product losses due to theft or accidents, shorter delivery times, less import red tape, and guaranteed availability of the products to my clients on the stipulated dates. In short, it’ll be cheaper with less hassles while enhancing my brand image and reliability.”

Resting her chin on her hand, she scrutinizes me. “What kind of products are we talking about?”

“Silk and spices. Nothing illegal.”

Her expression is doubtful. She drinks again before asking, “What’s in it for him?”

“Money.” Taking the bottle, I top up her wine. “Lots of money.”

“From what you told me, it sounds as if money isn’t his main motivation. He’s got enough of that. He’ll want other benefits.”

“Such as?”

“Prestige. Power by association.”

“What do you suggest?”

She crosses her arms, balancing her glass in one hand. “What are his interests?”

“Golf and yachting.”

“Do you play?”

“Golf?” I shake my head. “I’ve never had the patience.”

“Then that leaves you with yachting.”

“Yachting,” I parrot.

“You have a big boat, don’t you?” she says, arching an eyebrow. “Big enough to impress him.”

“Are you suggesting I invite him for a party on my yacht?”

“Where is he from?”

“He’s from Welsh origin. He currently lives in London.”

“Well, then you can invite him for a cruise along the beautiful shores of Corsica and demonstrate how cultured you are with a five-course, sit-down meal. You can compare sizes—in boats, of course—or whatever it is you men like to compare. Horsepower and engines and all that stuff that’s meant to prove what macho guys you are.”

“You reckon?” I ask with a grin. I have no idea why she’s helping me, if it’s the wine or the fact that her opinion matters to me. Whatever compels her to play along, I’m enjoying this exchange.

“Absolutely.” She bats her eyelashes. “And you should let him have the biggest boat and the strongest engine, even if it isn’t true.”

“What?” I say with a growl. “Do you expect me to lie about the horsepower of my engine?”

“Yep.” Her smile is a little too sweet. “It’s going to hurt, but you’ll survive.”

“I know for a fact my yacht is worth three times the price of his.”

“Then don’t mention the price. If material gain isn’t his biggest motivation and he’s from an older school of upbringing, he may find the topic of money vulgar. He probably didn’t buy the biggest and most expensive yacht because those aren’t the criteria that count in his book. Maybe his yacht was designed by a prestigious engineer, or he preferred to go greener and use less fuel. Instead of pointing out how his yacht falls short compared to yours, praise his boat for its positive features. Focus on how it has more character than yours or how it’s prettier than the Sea Hawk.” Her smile stretches wider. “You get the point.”

I can only stare at her for a moment. “Are you serious?”

“Hmm-hmm.” She uncrosses her arms and rests her chin on her palm. “It’s like letting a potential client win a game of golf. Try to find some common ground. If you show him a good time on top of that, he’ll be more likely to consider your offer.” She adds with a wink, “Oh, and a few bottles of good Scotch can only help in creating an unforgettable bonding experience.”

Downplaying my wealth or my property just so an old snob of a man can feel better about his inferior status goes against every grain of my being. It’s not like me to pretend, but I find her over-simplistic and generalized take on the male psyche amusing. Her innocence is almost naïve, a trait I find attractive because, unlike me, she’s pure and uncomplicated. However, she does have a point.

“You have it all figured out, don’t you?” I ask, my lips quirking.

“You asked.” She shrugs. “You don’t have to follow my advice.”

“We’ll see.” I hold her gaze as I take another sip of my wine. “Maybe I should let you earn commission on the deal. That’s to say if he accepts.”

She pulls a mock-serious face. “That would be fair.”

“If we really want to be fair, there should also be a punishment if I lose the deal because your tactics didn’t work.”

For the briefest of moments, her eyes flare with something akin to excitement. It’s not only the dare. The idea of punishment turns her on. We’re more alike than she cares to admit.

The playful ambience evaporates. Lust crackles in the air between us. A simple look, a single thought, and all I want to do is pull down her pajama bottoms and bend her over the table.

She must be picking up on my vibe. The red color of her cheeks, which could be attributed to a combination of the wine and the warmth of the kitchen, intensifies.

Her throat bobs as she swallows. Pushing to her feet, she says, “I better clear the table.”

I let her escape, not chasing after her when she stacks the plates and takes them to the counter. I carry the rest of the empty dishes to the sink. She rinses, and I pack the dishwasher. We work in silence until the kitchen is clean. When there’s nothing left to do, she blows out the candle and rests her ass against the edge of the table. She’s waiting for me to say goodbye and leave.

That was the plan.

Instead, I take her hand and draw her against me. Lowering my head, I brush my lips over hers. “Tired?”

“A little,” she says in a breathless voice.

I pull her behind me to the door. “Then come.”

She hangs back. When I look over my shoulder, she’s studying me with a frown.

“Come on, *bella*. It’s late.”

Relenting, she lets me lead her to the bedroom. We brush our teeth side by side in the bathroom like an old married couple. I go to the room and turn down the covers before getting into bed.

She hesitates for a second when she comes out of the bathroom.

“Come on, wife. I don’t bite,” I tease.

Her tone carries a tinge of bitterness. “Do I get to sleep in the bed?”

I pat the space next to me. “You more than earned it.”

Her back goes stiff. I didn’t mean for it to sound like that, like sex is a currency, but there’s no denying that beautiful ugliness is our truth.

“Come,” I say, trying to be gentler.

She crosses the floor gingerly and lies down beside me. The question she’s not asking hangs in the air. She’s wondering why I’m staying.

To be honest, I have no idea. I only know when I pull her close and wrap my arms around her that this is exactly what I want. I’ll close my eyes, just for a while. I can always get up and leave in an hour.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sabella

I wake up in a cocoon of warmth. A solid weight anchors me to the bed. I blink my eyes open. My husband is spooning me from behind, his arms locked around my waist. The soft fanning of his breath is warm on my neck. The feeling is oddly pleasant. I'm safe and content.

I lie still, taking a moment to process the sentiments. It's still new for me, waking up in the arms of a man. From the light that filters around the edges of the curtains, it's morning.

He spent the night.

The fact both shocks and surprises me. I don't know why I didn't expect him to stay over. It just seemed unlikely. I assumed he'd go home to his own bed. It's a strange notion, considering that we're married, but then again, our marriage isn't normal by average standards.

He stirs. The way in which his even breathing turns quiet tells me he's awake. I close my eyes, pretending to be sleeping because I want to savor this comfortable warmth for a short while longer. He presses closer and tightens his arms. The heat

turns into a different kind when his cock grows hard against the crack of my ass.

A perverse curiosity compels me to lie perfectly still. I don't know him well enough to predict his actions. Will he wake me and demand sex? Or will he get up and sneak out without saying good morning?

Angelo doesn't do either. He doesn't shake me awake with verbal demands or slip out of bed. He simply grabs the elastic of my pajama bottoms and pushes the pants down my hips, exposing my ass. My breath catches in my throat when the smooth head of his cock nudges my opening. Before I have time to brace myself, he slides all the way in. I'm wet in a second, easing his way.

As if he's worried I'll flee, he keeps me in place on my side with an arm locked around my waist and a hand wrapped around my neck. We're still spooning each other with my back pressed against his chest and my ass in his groin. I'm immobile in his hold when he starts to move. The pumping of his hips is lazy. He's exploring this new position at leisure, taking his time to work up his pleasure.

When he changes the angle of his hips, I utter a gasp. Like this, I feel him deeper. He cashes in on that sound, hitting the same spot inside me repeatedly as he scrapes his teeth over the arch of my neck. My inner muscles spasm when he bites down gently, locking his teeth on my shoulder. I'm clenching around his cock, my own pleasure building as he tightens his fingers around my neck and allows me just enough air to breathe.

His possessive and dominant grasp sparks more heat inside me. Surrendering has never felt sweeter. Righter. Instinctively, I understand the game. The quieter I lie, the harder he gets. His cock grows thicker inside me. Wanting more, I stay still. I let

him use me, allowing him to manipulate my body as his lust dictates by giving him control, and it's never been hotter.

He rewards me by loosening his arm around my waist and sliding his hand between my legs. His fingers on my clit are my undoing. When he rolls the nub before delivering a wicked pinch, I come with a cry. My inner muscles lock down on his cock as shocks of pleasure tighten my body. In a reflexive reaction, I turn my head, seeking out his face like a flower turns toward the sun. He presses his lips on mine in a deep, lingering kiss before pulling away.

“Say it,” he coaxes, his voice seductively low in my ear.

I can't deny him. Not now. So, I give him the sounds he wants, but not the words. “Mr. Russo.”

He picks up his pace. One more thrust, and he grunts out his release with his lips pressed against my neck. The moment is intense but also strangely languid. What we shared feels like more than sex. It's more intimate than fucking. He doesn't pull out or remove his hand from between my legs. We stay like that for a moment, linked together, catching our breaths while he keeps his hold on my sex and my neck until long after the game is over.

I understand it now, this game of dominance and submission. He likes to chase. I like the catch. He conquers, but somehow, I win.

The soft kiss he plants on my shoulder alerts me of his intention before he untangles himself from me and pulls out. I feel empty when he lets go. The heat is gone, replaced by an awkward silence as he pulls my pajama bottoms back in place.

The bed dips. He arranges the comforter over me, making sure my shoulder is covered. I'm still staring at the wall when

I feel his presence fade. The click of the bathroom door confirms his absence in the room. Why does that hurt so much? He's only doing what everyone does in the morning—getting up and having a shower. Why does the perfectly normal act leave me so cold in the aftermath of what just happened?

The water in the shower comes on. I listen until it turns off again. I only summon the willpower to move when the door opens and a whiff of shower gel drifts into the room.

Sitting up, I clutch the covers to my chest. He exits the bathroom in a billow of steam, wearing a towel around his waist. His broad chest and deeply cut muscles exude masculinity and the sweet promise of protection that comes with his male strength. Drops of water roll over the black ink on his chest. I follow the trickle that runs to his navel with my gaze, fixing my attention on the letters eternalized below his waistline. It's not his powerful physique or the darkness emanating from him that reminds me of his true nature. It's the single word those letters spell.

Resilience.

It's a harsh wakeup call. My husband isn't a gentle or romantic man with whom I can share candlelight dinners and lighthearted banter. He's a powerful criminal who doesn't let anything or anyone stand in the way of his ambition, least of all a wife he hates. I don't know why I lowered my defenses last night. I only know I felt something when Angelo asked for my advice. The fact that my opinion mattered to him softened me in a dangerous way.

He heads for the dressing room without looking at me. When he disappears inside, I get out of bed and rush across the floor.

The bathroom is still humid from his shower, the mirror fogged up with vapor. I lock the door and lean on the wood, acutely aware of his cum dripping down my thighs.

Hurrying to the cupboard, I yank open the drawer and feel underneath. Relief rushes through me when I find the packet of birth control pills where I left it. I pop today's pill from its casing and cup my hand under the tap to swallow it with a sip of water.

Once it's in my stomach, I feel calmer. More rational. I can examine the strange mixture of disappointment and hurt that squeezes my chest. I shouldn't see more into the sex. My husband is a man. He's only sating a physical need. I shouldn't let that affect me. It will be irresponsible to need more from him when he's not capable of giving it. Yet I can't help the hollow feeling that settles in the pit of my stomach.

In a way, my banishment is a blessing in disguise. At least I have my own space, a space where his presence is temporary. I can sneak to the village and earn a little money. There may come a day that I'll need that money, a day when I open the drawer and find my birth control pills gone. That's the true reason I rejected his offer to employ a cook and a housekeeper. If permanent staff live in the house, I'll have to give up my secret excursions. Then, I'll be completely cut off from the outside world. I'll have no options of saving myself.

No, it's best I stay here alone. I may not have a real marriage or a partner who loves me, but I don't need someone else to make me happy. I can do that all on my own. I have a duty to myself to try. When I look at it like that, being stowed away in an abandoned house in the middle of nowhere counts in my favor. The freedom that gives me makes the feat considerably easier.

The new resolve lifts my spirits somewhat. I'm not naïve enough to think my husband's actions will never touch or hurt me. I simply accept that there will be times I'll have to internalize the pain. That's why it's vital that I build a new life for myself here. I can't be strong if I'm permanently unhappy. I can only survive if I'm in a healthy mental state of mind.

When I step out of the bedroom, showered and dressed, smells of coffee and toast greet me. I'm surprised to find Angelo in the kitchen in front of the stove, scrambling eggs. He's dressed in a fitted button-down shirt and formal slacks. The table is set for two with a rack of toast and a carafe of coffee in the center.

"Hungry?" he asks, measuring me from over his shoulder.

"Starving," I say honestly.

"Good." His lips tilt in one corner. "Sit down."

Obedying, I take a seat. Our roles from last night are reversed as he serves a large helping of eggs on my plate.

"Eat before it gets cold," he says, leaving the pan on a cork plate before taking the seat opposite me.

He prepares my coffee the way I like it while I butter a slice of toast. We eat in silence until he takes his phone from his pocket and connects a call that he puts on speaker.

At my questioning look, he says, "Your brother would like to speak to you."

The piece of bread I just swallowed gets stuck in my throat. "He called?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Two days ago?" I exclaim.

“During my business trip.”

I’m about to point out that he had plenty of time last night to return the call when Ryan answers.

“Angelo?” my brother says in a strained voice. “It’s about fucking time.”

My husband slides the phone across the table with a warning in his eyes.

Swallowing, I pick up the phone. “Ryan, it’s me.”

“Sabella,” Ryan says with a sigh of relief. “Thank fuck. How are you? I was afraid Angelo wouldn’t let us speak to you.”

“I’m fine.” I add quickly, “I’m with him.”

A moment of silence passes as my brother no doubt understands that the phone is on speaker.

“How are Celeste and Brad?” I ask, trying hard to keep the emotions assaulting me from my voice.

“They’re doing great. Celeste is working full time as a volunteer again. Brad is going to a fancy new-age kindergarten. You know Celeste.” He chuckles. “However, I have to admit, he loves it there. More importantly, tell me your news.”

“There’s nothing much to tell,” I say, forcing a smile into my tone.

“Where are you?”

“In Corsica.”

“How are things going there?” he asks carefully. “Are you adapting?”

“Yes.” I glance at my husband. “The house is very nice.”

Angelo's expression remains blank.

"Are you...?" Ryan hesitates. "Healthy?"

We all know it's code for asking if my husband is treating me well.

"Yes," I say. "How's Mom coping?"

"She's good. She moved in with Mattie and Jared."

"Oh my God. How does Jared feel about that?"

"You know Jared. He doesn't have an opinion about anything."

"That's nasty."

"But true."

My throat is tight with longing when I ask, "How's the baby?"

"He's a handful." He laughs. "He gives Mattie and Jared a run for their money. That's one of the reasons why Mom moved in, to give them a hand. It was hard in the beginning, especially when Mattie was suffering from postnatal depression."

Concern makes me uneasy. "Is she all right?"

"She's doing better now."

I look at my husband even as I pose the question at Ryan. "Can you send me a photo?"

Angelo nods.

"Sure," Ryan says. "What is your new number? Can you send it to me?"

I clear my throat. "You can send it to this phone."

Ryan's stifled anger is palpable in the beat of silence that follows.

I don't sound convincing when I add, "The reception is iffy here."

"Sure," he says in a wry tone. "I'll send our messages to Angelo's phone."

My husband holds out his palm in silent instruction.

Not ready to say goodbye, I grip the phone harder. "How's Colin?"

Angelo clenches his jaw. The violence that darkens his eyes almost makes me falter, but who knows when I'll have another chance to speak to my family?

Ryan hesitates. "He and May got back together."

"That's great," I say, genuinely happy for them.

"They, um..." Ryan coughs. "They got engaged."

"Wow." I can't help but think about Colin and my disastrous attempt at a wedding and what a big mistake that would've been. "Tell them I say congratulations."

"Sabella," my husband growls under his breath.

"Tell everyone I love them." At the narrowing of Angelo's eyes, I say, "I have to go. It was good to hear your voice."

"It was good to hear yours too," Ryan says. "Take care of yourself, Bella." He adds with a clear message to my husband, "Don't wait so long before you call again. We worry when we don't hear from you."

"Okay," I say, even if I have no idea if I'll be able to keep the promise.

Angelo takes the phone and ends the call before slipping the phone in his pocket. His features are set into harsh lines as he picks up his mug. I suppose it's hard for him to make concessions for the people who murdered his family. It's tough for me too. But sometimes, I choose to forget. Especially when I'm in my husband's bed and crying out his surname when I come.

He pushes to his feet, pulling my attention back to him. "I have to go. I already missed my first meeting."

Blinking, I watch him in a daze as he starts clearing the table. I don't tell him to leave it, that it's okay, that I can do it. Because it's not okay. None of it is. Not knowing when I'll see my family again leaves an ache in my chest. I'm too apprehensive to ask. I'm too scared it's a question of if and not when.

When the kitchen is tidy, he walks to the table and stops next to my chair. For a moment, he only looks at me. I can't read him. I have no way of telling what's going through his mind. I only know the call with Ryan upset both of us, albeit for different reasons.

Threading his fingers through my hair, he tugs on the strands to tilt my head back. I stare up at him, recognizing the war that wages in his eyes. The cause is unclear, but he doesn't give me time to ponder it. He swoops down and plants a kiss on my forehead. The tenderness of the gesture catches me off guard, but before I can find my bearings, he's already walking through the door.

A moment later, the front door slams. The key scrapes in the lock. The engine of his car roars to life. He takes off with screeching tires, driving too fast. I listen to the sound of his car until it fades into nothingness and only silence is left.

It takes me a long time to gather myself and to honor the promise I made this morning. I get up and walk on autopilot to the door. After pulling on my coat and scarf, I leave via the back, lock up, and head to the village.

Mrs. Paoli opens the door dressed in the same pink terrycloth robe and slippers from yesterday. Diva sits at her feet, wagging her tail. Today, she doesn't bark at me.

"There you are," Mrs. Paoli says, sniffing as she hands me the leash. "Diva has been waiting in front of the door all morning. Animals are so clever. She knew you'd come back."

"How are you feeling?"

"A little better, but the flu is strong this year. It knocked poor Mr. Martin down for two weeks. By the way, my friend, Corinne, fell and broke her hip again. Will you be able to help her out with grocery shopping? I mentioned that you're looking for the odd job when I spoke to her on the phone, and she said the help would be welcome."

"Sure," I say, crouching down to pet Diva and fit her leash. "Where does she live?"

"In the house at the end of the street—the one with the red shutters. You can't miss it."

I straighten. "Would you like me to get you anything from the shop while I'm there?"

She scratches her head. "Tomatoes. Half a dozen. They're high in Vitamin C."

"Oh, talking about vitamins, did you remember to take yours?"

She clicks her tongue. "That old hag, Mrs. Campana, put you up to asking, didn't she?"

“She’s just looking out for your health,” I reply with a smile.

She lifts her chin. “Well, if you see her, you can tell her I took my vitamins, thank you very much.”

I wave as I lead Diva outside. “See you later.”

“Wait.” She hurries down the hallway and returns with a ten-euro bill. “For the tomatoes. Don’t get the round ones. Get the elongated ones. They last longer. Oh, and I forgot to ask your number so that I can call you if Diva is sick or not up for her walk. You never know.”

My neck heats under my scarf. “Um, I don’t have a phone.” When she gives me a baffled look, I add quickly, “Not yet.”

“Don’t worry about it then.” She pats my shoulder. “We’ll just play it by ear.”

Before she can ask more questions, I leave with Diva. We pass a few people on the pavement whom I greet. They return the greeting politely and turn their heads to stare after me.

At the end of the street, I knock on the door of the house with the red shutters. An elderly lady with raven-black hair knotted in a bun on her head opens the door. She’s leaning on a walking frame.

Taking one look at Diva, she says, “You must be the dog walker Antionette mentioned.”

“Sabella,” I say, shaking her hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Mrs. Filippi, but you can call me Corinne.”

“Mrs. Paoli said you’d like me to pick up groceries for you?”

She points at a caddy in the entrance. “The list and the money are inside. And don’t take the overripe bananas. Make sure they’re green. Mr. Luciani always tries to get rid of his brown bananas. He’ll slip them into the bag if you don’t pay attention.”

“I’ll do that,” I say, taking the caddy. “See you later.”

“If Mr. Luciani asks, tell him I’m doing great,” she calls after me. “Just a little pain. Nothing serious.”

Diva pulls on the leash, eager to continue her walk. We stop at the pharmacy to say hello to Mrs. Campana, who says the cake tasted better than it looked. Unfortunately, her husband ate most of it, and now his cholesterol is sky-high again. I apologize for her husband’s cholesterol and continue on my way when a customer comes in.

Our next stop is the greengrocer on the square. The man gives me a strange look, but he takes Corinne’s list and helps me to gather the items from the shelves. When he takes a bunch of brown bananas from a crate, I say, “Corinne prefers the green ones.”

He scoffs. “I bet she told you I always try to get rid of the brown ones.”

Diva barks as if agreeing.

When he’s packed everything into the caddy, including Mrs. Paoli’s tomatoes, I pay and leave with a quick greeting. It’s getting late. I better get home before Heidi or my husband decides to visit.

Corinne pays me for the service and asks if I can do another grocery run next week. We agree on the same day around the same time. Diva’s tongue is dragging on the ground

from the long walk. After returning her home, I rush back up the mountain.

As the house comes into view, my spirits sink. Fabien is leaning on a snazzy sports car parked in the road.

“Sabella,” he says, straightening when I approach.

Shit. How do I explain my absence?

“Oh, hi,” I say, out of breath from the speed-walking. “I hope you haven’t waited too long.”

“A while.” He frowns. “Where have you been?”

“Just out for a walk, getting some fresh air.”

His brow smooths out as a look of understanding comes over his features. “Suffering from cabin fever already, my poor darling?”

“Something like that.” Changing the subject quickly, I ask, “What are you doing here?”

“Not happy to see me?” he teases.

“Of course I am. I just didn’t expect to see you so soon again.”

“Angelo sent me to deliver a dress.” He wags his eyebrows. “Apparently someone needs to look gorgeous this weekend.” He opens the back door of the car. A clothes bag lies flat over the seats. Taking it out, he says, “I did my best to transport the gown without getting a crease in the skirt.”

“Oh.” I reach for the bag. “Thank you.”

He holds the bag in the air. “Hands off, darling. This isn’t a common knock and drop delivery. I have to make sure it fits properly. Adjustments may be necessary.” He continues with a

wink. “Plus, I left an excellent bottle of red in the wine fridge. We may as well pull the cork.”

My smile is genuine. “Then we better not let it go to waste.”

I use my new key to let us in through the front door. The television is on. My pulse spikes. That’s strange. What’s that smell? Popcorn?

“Make yourself at home,” I say, trying to keep my voice normal as I remove my coat. “You know where to find the wine.”

While he goes through to the kitchen, I hold my breath as I round the sofa. The throw from the backrest lies cast aside on the seat, and a half-eaten bowl of popcorn stands on the floor. A movie is playing with the sound turned down.

I can only guess who broke into the house. The cold air coming through an open lounge window tells me how he got in. The windows open with a sliding system. He must’ve forced it open. Shall I mention something to Fabien? What if he tells my husband? I don’t want Angelo to go on a child hunt, but this can’t go on. We need to find out who the poor little boy sneaking into the house is so that we can help him.

Fabien speaks behind me, making me jump. “Toy Story? My God. How old is that?”

I pick up the remote and switch off the television. “It’s one of my favorites.”

For some reason, I’m hesitant to tell him the truth. I want to break the news to Angelo myself. I need to make sure he won’t scare or harm the child.

“Hmm.” Fabien grins. “Movies and popcorn are one of my favorite activities too.” Waltzing ahead of me with the clothes

bag in his hands, he takes the stairs with bouncy steps. “I poured the wine. Grab the glasses while I lay out the dress. I can promise you, when Angelo sees you in this creation, he won’t be able to keep his eyes off you. Or his hands, for that matter.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Angelo

The air is crisp on top of the hill. The oxygen seems thinner. It's just my imagination though. The graveyard is the reason why every breath punishes my lungs. Situated on the highest point of the property, the graves face the sea in the east and the mountains in the west. The view is beautiful. The landscape is stark and unpretentious. A few bushes grow between the rocks, lending splashes of green to the brown landscape. There's honesty in the simplicity. Peace. That's why I buried them here and not in the overpopulated cemetery in Bastia.

The three headstones are new. They're the first ones to mark the family burial ground. My mother and father lie side by side. Adeline is next to my mother. The empty plot left of her is reserved for me. A distance away is a marking for my wife's grave. She won't rest close to me. If she'll rest at all. Maybe her spirit will haunt me in the afterlife just as she haunts me in the flesh in this life.

I remember the roses in my hand when the thorns dig into my palm. I haven't realized how tightly I was squeezing my

fist. The sharp pricks of pain ground me in the moment, pulling me from my dark thoughts to the present.

Stepping up, I place the perfect white hothouse blooms on Adeline's grave. I take a moment to trace my thumb over her name that's engraved in the marble. A cascade of sorrow crashes down on me, leaving me hollow and destitute. I miss my sister's bubbly nature and impulsive hugs so much I feel it like a punch in the gut. Regret is a monster that breathes fire into my chest. I regret not spending more time with her when I had the chance. I regret not showing more interest in her friends. I was always too rushed, too busy to take over the business, too caught up in work to make the time.

I pick up the two remaining bouquets and leave them on my parents' graves. More regret torments me when I kiss my fingertips and press them on my mother's name. I always did too little for her. Always too late. I'll never forgive myself for failing her, for never giving her the gift of rehousing her family while she was alive. I'll never forgive myself for her death. And my father... He never witnessed the wedding he was so set on bringing to fruition. Neither did he enjoy the vengeance of Sabella's death. He died having given that order, knowing I hadn't executed it. He died before I had a chance to let him come to terms with my decision. Because of my actions, he couldn't pass on peacefully.

And me?

I'm the despicable traitor who thinks about love when I fuck my wife. I'm the weak man who too damn quickly ignores that she's my enemy. I should let her rot in her banishment. I should hate and torment her. Instead, I held her in my arms as I slept in her bed. I let the unthinkable happen, letting her get to me. Letting her crawl even deeper under my

skin. Because something happened this morning when I came inside her, something intimate that gave me pause.

Hate is intimate. But these feelings of fulfillment and content were different. They scared me. They reminded me how dangerous she is. They reminded me how fickle human nature can be, how fast I am to forget the people who lost their lives for the life I'm living. My family paid with their blood for Sabella to become my wife. For that alone, I should hate her forever.

I can fuck her and love it. I can torment her and savor it. I can plant my seed in her belly and take the biggest gift a woman can give a man without owing her as much as a thank you. Her say doesn't have to matter. It won't. Her obedience can please me, but it should never make me forget. I can find my peace in her suffering, but I can never find my salvation in her arms. She's my destiny, but she can never be my love. Not if I'm to honor my family.

What happened this morning can never happen again. I can't let my guard down when I'm with her. I'm a fucking idiot. Sabella is clever. Her compliance is nothing but a trap, a ploy to steal her freedom. She's a pretty Delilah, trying to coax my secrets out of me with her luscious body and seductive submission. I have no doubt she'll sell me out to Lavigne in a second if it means she'll walk free.

She's a beautiful con-artist, a deceitful betrayer, luring me in with her sweet talking and naïve advice and winning me over with her coy smiles and home-cooked chicken. She can try, but I'll give her nothing. No incriminating information. The only thing she'll get is my cum. I'll fill her up until she can't take anymore, until our souls are grafted and I'm spilling from every crevice of her body. I'll make her pregnant if it's

the last thing I do, and she won't even see it coming. No, she'll be falsely secure, thinking her birth control pills will save her. She's bound to me by law and name, but I'll also bind us in blood.

When she's the mother of my child, she'll no longer want to run. She'll have a very good reason to stay. No child of mine is going anywhere. My offspring will remain here where they belong, and so will she. She'll blow out her last breath on this property. Her body will fertilize the very soil I'm standing on. Even in death she'll be punished, banished to her corner like a traitor deserves. Nonetheless, she'll be here, her soul at peace or not—I couldn't care less—for all eternity.

My turbulent thoughts don't abate when I walk to the car. What I did last night and this morning shook me. What passed between Sabella and me was a blessing in a way. The disturbing feelings served to put me back on the path from which I steered with alarming speed.

Heidi intercepts me in the hallway when I arrive home.

"Mr. Russo." She crosses her arms and widens her stance. "We have to talk."

The use of my surname rekindles a memory. Then it clicks in place. Suddenly, I understand the reason for that pesky thorn in the back of my mind that won't let me find peace. It's what Sabella called me when she came. Not Angelo. Mr. Russo.

"Your wife," Heidi says. "You're not treating her fairly."

My irritation escalates. "She's getting more than she deserves."

"Leaving her alone in that place isn't right."

I push her out of my way and continue to my study. “My wife and how I treat her is none of your business.”

“Not letting me go there,” she calls after me. “What good can that do?”

I turn on my heel. “You will go there to deliver groceries and nothing more.” My tone is cold. Harsh. “I thought I was clear.”

Worry and disapproval shimmer in her eyes. “What if something happens to her?”

“I’ve been there all night. She’s happy. A little too happy, to be honest. Satisfied?”

“Mr. Russo—”

I get into her face. “I don’t want to hear another fucking word about it. One more chirp out of your mouth about Sabella and a delivery service from Bastia will make a monthly food drop at the new house. Is that clear enough for you?”

She reels and swallows, watching me with disappointment that shouldn’t bother me.

I don’t wait for her answer. I spin around and stalk to my study, slamming the door behind me.

Fuck.

Spearing my hands through my hair, I take a moment to find calm. How did I go from wanting to kill Sabella as little as a week ago to craving her affection? There was a time when that need wouldn’t have terrified me, a time when everyone was alive, and the biggest stumbling block was getting her father’s blessing to tie the knot. That was only three years ago, but it feels like twenty. I feel like an old man. The weight of

the past keeps dragging me down. Coming up for air is a constant battle, a never-ending, exhausting fight.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I take it out. It's Hugo, the informant I met in Marseille. My gut tightens. I'm not in the right mindset for more bad news today, but my hand has a will of its own. My thumb is already swiping over the screen before my mind can make the more intelligent decision of taking the call when I've calmed the fuck down.

I answer with, "Do you have something for me?"

"Is the line secure?"

"Yes." I sit down behind my desk. "You can talk."

"I had an interesting chat with Lieutenant Lavigne. His tongue loosened after a few beers."

"Save me the details," I bite out. "Get to the point."

"Mrs. Russo cut a deal."

My vision unravels. It's what I expected. It's what I knew. Yet hearing it does things to me, things that make violence explode in my veins. I shouldn't take it personally. It shouldn't cloud my reasoning. But it fucking does. Because like the idiot I am, I care.

I care.

The realization only makes me more volatile. I'm angrier with myself than with anyone else. A voice deep down says Sabella isn't to blame. Anyone in her shoes would've done the same. But the monster in me doesn't want to listen to reason. The monster is only interested in vengeance.

"Did you hear what I said?" Hugo asks.

My voice is flat, not giving away my dangerous emotions.
“Carry on.”

“If she provides evidence that’ll guarantee you get locked up for good, Lavigne will arrange indemnity for her family and move her to a safe house.”

The words ring in my head. She wants to run away. From me. She wants to escape me. Save her family. Put me behind bars. Does she believe locking me up in a cell will keep me away from her? Does she think I’ll let any fucking thing stand between us?

At my silence, Hugo sounds uncertain. “I thought you’d like to know.”

“When is the exchange due to happen?”

“Whenever she has information. She’s supposed to make contact when she’s ready.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s it. Do you want me to keep tabs on Lavigne?”

“Don’t let him smell a rat, but stay close to him. If anything comes up, let me know.”

“Done.”

“Thanks,” I say, ending the call and dumping my phone on the desk.

I stare at the wall for a long time, the control I’m trying to scavenge not coming. Grabbing a paperweight from a stack of papers on my desk, I hurl it at the wall. It hits the bricks with a thud, cracking the plaster. Pieces flutter to the floor. Dust sifts down.

Yanking open the drawer, I dig through the contents and take out the silver cigar box my father gifted me for my sixteenth birthday. The lid is engraved with our family emblem. I never took to cigarettes or cigarillos and neither to cigars. The occasional joint was more my style.

The box still holds my stash from three years ago. I stopped for Sabella because she didn't like the habit. Back then, she was still a beautiful ideal, a woman I wanted to woo and please. To seduce. To win over. She was always the woman I intended on making mine.

I'll admit I don't miss it, the smoking. I was going to stop anyway. I only took a few drags from time to time to take the edge off when the business got messy. Lighting one now seems fitting. If I don't dull my senses, I may truly kill her. And I don't want to take it that far. No matter what she's done or what she'll do, she's still the woman I marked with my seal, my ring, my name, and my cum.

Fishing the Zippo lighter from the drawer, I slip it with the box in my pocket. I'm wearing the formal pants, shirt, and jacket from this morning. I didn't bother to change into more suitable clothes or shoes before visiting the graveyard. I don't take the time to do so now. On the way to the door, I grab my coat.

I don't say a word to Heidi. She's used to my spur-of-the-moment comings and goings. She's used to cooking meals for a man who doesn't pitch for lunch or supper. She'll do what she always does. She'll keep my dinner warm without posing questions. Against my better judgement, I get into my car and drive at breakneck speed to the new house.

Lights are on in all the windows. Fabien's car is parked outside. What the fuck is he doing here? Sabella has no

business receiving visitors. I let myself in with my key and stop in the entrance. The ground floor is deserted. A blanket is tossed aside on the sofa. A bowl of popcorn stands on the floor. The television is off, the remote lying discarded on a cushion.

Well, well. Isn't this fucking cozy?

An image of Sabella and Fabien on the sofa, eating popcorn and watching a movie, rushes into my head. I can't think about the blanket over their knees because what happens under blankets makes me see bright fucking poisonous green. The laughter that drifts from upstairs only acts as fuel on the fire.

I mount the steps two by two and charge like a raging bull through the open door of the bedroom. The scene that greets me makes me wish I took my gun. The urge to plant a bullet in Fabien's head is so great he must see the intention in my expression.

His eyes flare where he sits on the bed, clutching a glass of wine in his hand and swinging one leg that's crossed over the other. Another glass with a lip gloss stain on the rim stands on the dresser.

My attention shifts to my wife who exits the bathroom, still giggling about what the fuck ever. She stops dead when she sees me.

Fabien jumps to his feet. "Angelo." His laugh is uncomfortable. "How good to see you."

I narrow my eyes. "Is it?"

He blanches. "I was just dropping off Sabella's dress."

I fix my gaze on the glass in his hand. "Is that what you call it?"

Sabella rushes forward, placing herself between me and Fabien. “I invited him to stay for a drink.”

“Did you now?” I take in her T-shirt, yoga pants, and bare feet. “In the bedroom?”

“She had to try on the dress,” Fabien says before adding hastily, “In the bathroom.”

“Good,” I drawl, pinning him with a stare over Sabella’s head that makes him cower. “Because if you got a glimpse of my wife in any state of undress, I’ll have to kill you.”

Sabella lays a palm on my chest. “Would you like a glass? The bottle is in the kitchen. I can get you one.”

I tear my gaze from Fabien to look at her, noticing the beauty spot at the corner of her mouth. Her lips. “How was the movie?”

She blinks. “What?”

My smile is cold. “You watched television.”

She pulls her hand away as if my coat has caught fire. “Not with Fabien.”

Fabien sidesteps to the door, leaving his glass on the coffee table on his way. “I’ll, um, just give the two of you privacy. Call me if you’d like jewelry to go with the dress, Angelo. I can get a few valuable pieces on loan from a good jeweler.”

He all but runs, escaping as fast as he can.

“I’ll see you out, Fabien,” Sabella says, giving me a defiant look as she steps around me and follows him into the hallway.

Clenching my hands into balls, I count to ten.

Fabien is gay.

They're both wearing their clothes.

I did instruct him to deliver a dress.

It makes sense that Sabella would have to try on the gown.

I tell myself all these things, all these reasons why I shouldn't go after Fabien and bash his skull in. Why I shouldn't punish Sabella for yet another betrayal. But the monster in me stays green.

Their voices reach me from downstairs. Soft whispering. Too fucking intimate for my liking. I go out on the landing. Fabien is standing in the open front door, buttoning up his coat.

"I'm sorry about that," Sabella says, sounding embarrassed. "My husband can be a little possessive."

"Don't worry. I know how Angelo is." Gripping her shoulder and dipping his head, he asks in a lowered voice, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes." She takes a scarf from the coat stand and hands it to him. "Thanks for bringing the dress. Drive home safely in the dark."

He drops his arm and walks out onto the veranda. "Take care of yourself."

She shuts the door and locks it, pausing for a second on the spot before turning her face toward the stairs. Our gazes lock. Apprehension sparks in her brown eyes. Instead of walking to me, she cuts across the lounge and enters the kitchen.

She can run until she doesn't have a single breath left in her lungs, but she can never hide from me.

Taking my coat off in the walk, I descend the stairs and drape it over the rail. When I enter the kitchen, she's filling the

kettle with water.

“Tea?” she asks with a strained smile from over her shoulder. “I’m afraid I didn’t have time to start dinner yet.”

“Dinner?” I chuckle, advancing on her. “Is that why you think I’m here?”

Her back goes rigid. She puts the kettle aside. When she turns, she finds herself trapped between the sink and my body. Leaning back to put distance between us, she asks, “Why are you here?”

“To fuck you, Sabella.”

Her throat bobs as she swallows. “Nothing happened. You must know that Fabien is gay. Why are you so angry?”

Nothing happened.

That was what she told me yesterday too.

Pretty little liar.

When I lean in, she plants her palms on the counter behind her and catches her weight on her arms. I’m bending her backward, invading her space and breathing her air.

My tone is taunting. “Who says I’m angry?”

I give her a little leeway, just enough not to have to crane her neck. She watches me warily as I remove the silver box and Zippo lighter from my pocket. I take out a joint and tap the tip on the flat side of the box to compact the weed.

“You’re smoking again?” she asks.

I bring the joint to my lips. “Do you care?”

My question is layered. She must get the nuance, because she doesn’t reply.

She turns her face away from the flame when I light the joint.

I take a drag, filling my lungs with the smoke. The head rush is immediate. Lethargy settles over my senses, but it doesn't dull the anger.

Blowing out a circle of smoke, I watch it fade like a halo over her head. My voice is deceptively soft. "Do you care, Sabella?"

She turns her face the other way, trying to avoid the smoke. "You know I don't like it."

"How about this?" I ask, cupping her sex. "How much do you like this?"

She goes on tiptoes, pushing with her palms on my chest. "What's gotten into you?"

"I don't know," I taunt. "Perhaps you?" I'm being too honest. It's the weed. It's always loosened my tongue. But I can't stop. "Maybe I'm getting addicted to your pussy. It's a lot like smoking. Once you start, it's difficult to stop. Maybe I should break the habit and fuck your ass tonight." I rub my thumb in a circle over her clit through the thin layers of her clothes. "Will you like *that*?"

She clenches her jaw.

I pull my hand from between her legs and place my palms on either side of her body on the counter. A ribbon of smoke coils from the joint I'm clutching between my fingers, tainting the air with the smell of weed.

"Have you ever smoked, Sabella?"

She glances at me briefly before looking away again. "You know I haven't."

I bring the joint to my lips, take another drag, and blow out a thin line of smoke. “Perhaps you should. It’ll relax you, help you to spread for me and take my cock.”

More defiance sparks in her eyes when she finally faces me squarely. “I don’t need drugs to have sex.”

“Oh, but it can be so very different.” Using the hand in which I’m clasping the joint, I brush my knuckles over her nipple. “It heightens the senses. Makes you feel everything with more intensity.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “It sounds as if you’re talking from experience.”

“Don’t worry.” I caress the soft curve of her breast. “I only had hand jobs when I was high.”

She scoffs. “I’m not worried.”

“Because you don’t care,” I say, giving us both the answer she refused to tell me in words.

But she will care when I fuck her. She will care when she’s desperate to come.

Gripping her face in one hand, I hold her gaze as I take a long pull on the joint. I’m giving her defiance by disrespecting her wish, a request she uttered a long time ago, letting her taste some of her own medicine.

I don’t drag the smoke into my lungs. I apply pressure on her jaw, parting her lips as I lower my head and plaster our mouths together. She realizes my intention too late, gasping as I slowly blow the smoke into her mouth. She chokes on the lungful she swallowed with her gasp. I let her breathe, using the seconds to fill my mouth with more smoke before feeding her again.

I kiss her with a languid pace, molding my lips around hers and tangling our tongues. The objective is to fill her lungs with my second-hand smoke, but that objective quickly changes as heat builds between us. The burnt-out joint drops in the sink. I let go of her face to thread my fingers through the long, silky strands of her hair. She moans when I tug. Cupping her breast in my free hand, I knead the curve. Her nipple hardens against my palm.

Deepening the kiss, I push my knee between her thighs and kick her feet apart. I abandon her breast to explore the heat between her legs. She's wet. I can feel it through her clothes. My onslaught on her mouth triples as I slip a hand into the elastic of her pants and thong. Her flesh is hot. Her pussy lips are plump and slick.

I groan into the kiss, rubbing my hard-on against her hip. Her moan reverberates in her chest. Too eager to think, I tighten my grip in her hair and work her pants with one hand down her hips to her thighs. My actions are staccato as I lift her T-shirt, exposing her bra.

She pushes my jacket over my shoulders, her urgency matching mine. I release her to pull my arms free, but my hands are back on her in a second, yanking on the cups of her bra. Her breasts spill over the lace. I close my lips around a nipple and suck the hard tip deep into my mouth. She fumbles with the buttons of my shirt as I lick her curve like candy. We're groping and gasping, our need uninhibited and messy.

Abandoning her unsuccessful effort with the buttons, she reaches for my belt. I tear my mouth from her breast, watching the desire in her eyes as I grip her wrists, move them away, and finish the task of freeing my cock.

I'm about to bend my knees and sink balls-deep inside her when she cries out, "Wait."

My body protests. It's only pure reflex that makes me pause.

"The blinds," she says, breathing hard. "Close them."

I dive for her mouth again. "There's no one out there."

"No." She leans back and stops me with a hand on my heart. "I want you to close them."

I frown. She doesn't feel exposed, does she? Could it be that she senses she's being watched? One of my cousins is on babysitting duty, but neither of them will dream of looking through her windows. They know what'll happen if they do. I'll cut off their limbs and stab out their eyes.

Drunk on the moment, I reach over her and jerk the string that brings down the blinds. The only light comes from the backlit cupboards with the glass doors. Once we're shut into our own world of darkness and sin, I wrap my hands around her waist, spin her around, and walk her to the table. It's difficult for her to move with her thong and pants trapping her legs. Hooking an arm around her waist, I lift her off her feet and carry her across the floor. At the edge of the table, I let her stand and push her upper body down. Her breasts are visible on the sides from under the T-shirt that's scrunched up to her shoulders, the curves pressed flat on the wood. Her ass is pushed out, presented like a gift for my taking.

I'm too far gone to bother with freeing her legs from her pants. I leave them around her thighs. I don't even bother with the rest of my clothes. I only shove my briefs down as far as necessary before pressing my cock against the tight hole of her ass.

She stretches her arms above her head and grips the edge of the table, bracing herself for what's to come. Burying my fingers in the flesh of her globes, I spread her open. She's swollen and willing, glistening like a ripe fruit between her legs. Unable to resist a taste, I lick her from her clit to the hole I'm about to claim, working that tight ring of muscles with my thumb. She wiggles beneath me, moaning as I stretch her.

I can't wait. I'm close already. I caress the curve of her spine as I straighten. She turns her head to the side, watching me. I home in on her eyes, on how dilated her pupils are, and I know it's going to feel good for her. I *want* to make this good for her. My hold on her back turns different. More dominant. I recognize the signs of the animal inside me as my lower body tightens and my cock pulses with need. Keeping her down with one hand between her shoulder blades, I spit in my free hand and lubricate my cock. When I position the head against her back hole, she tries to lift her upper body.

I anchor her with my grip on my table. "Relax, *bella*. Take me."

She's barely settled again before I part her with the crest, splitting her open and sinking a tight inch into the heat of her ass.

Not yet.

I can't come.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I keep still to slide a hand around her waist and between her legs. I sink a middle and forefinger inside her and press my thumb on her clit, working her with my hand until she starts moving, taking me deeper in both holes.

Clenching my teeth, I hold back. I control myself like never before while slowly sinking my cock deeper. When I'm buried up to my balls, I can't hold back any longer. I pump. I fuck her pussy with my fingers and thrust my cock deep into her ass. It's hot and dirty, depraved, and so fucking satisfying. I'm pivoting my hips like a crazed man, taking her hard, but her moans turn louder and needier until a single word slips from her lips.

“Please.”

“Say it,” I demand through teeth clenched in pleasure, slamming my groin against her ass.

“Mr. Russo,” she cries out.

I come hard enough to see sparks. Fireworks fizzle in my vision as I empty my cock and fill her up with my cum. It takes me a moment to find my breath. Everything is amplified—the heat, the tightness, the pleasure...and the fact that she didn't say my name.

“Please,” she says again, her voice strangled.

Her ass grips my cock so hard it's almost painful.

I pull out. Fingers and cock.

She gasps as the wide crest of my cock pops free.

I plant one palm on her lower back and spread her with the other, digging my fingers into her ass cheek as I watch my cum dribble from her dark hole. It's so fucking dirty. So beautiful. I watch until her pussy and thighs are covered. My softening cock that hangs heavy between my legs twitch at the sight. I pin her down as I smear my fingers through my release and pump my cum with two fingers into her pussy. She spasms around the intrusion, her panting increasing as I fuck her harder and faster. I know what she needs. I know this isn't

enough. Pulling my drenched fingers free from the hotness of her pussy, I roll her clit between a thumb and a forefinger until her body bows and her moans turn hoarse.

She orgasms.

But I don't stop.

I punish her with more pleasure, rolling and pinching her clit until she collapses flat on the table in a boneless heap. I'm insatiable. I can't get enough, not of her. My cock is rock-hard again. I slide the length through the cum in the seam of her ass. The lubrication aids my movements when I pump between her ass cheeks, taking care not to penetrate her again. I'm so high on her and on the sight that it doesn't take long before I come for a second time, painting her back with ribbons of release.

It's done.

I won't come a third time.

I should be sated. I should be ecstatic, but it feels unfinished.

I'm not done.

I want to do so much more to her. Fucking her didn't quench my lust. The need to claim her is only fiercer. And I know why. I understand now. I understand why I want to slay her with sex until we're both exhausted and choking on the perversity of the passion eating me alive. Because even as she gave me the most intimate parts of her body, she didn't give herself to me.

Like this morning, she didn't call me Angelo.

She called me Mr. Russo again.

She's putting distance between us and keeping that distance. I'd lie if I say I don't miss the sound of my name on her lips and the way in which she said it when I fucked her after our wedding.

For that reason alone, I put my own distance between us. Mine is physical. Mine is the two steps I take away from her. She's bent over the table, her ass and cunt exposed, both fucked raw. Spent. A beautiful erotic sight. It softens me, igniting something in my chest. Escaping the onslaught, I stumble to the sink and clean myself before adjusting my clothes.

I hear her move, but I force myself not to look at her. Instead, I clench my jaw as I zip up, hating myself and hating her. I shove my shirt back into my pants and pick my jacket up from the floor.

I'm pulling it on with jerky movements on my way to the door when she says, "Wait."

Before I can stop myself, I look. It's impulsive. She's facing me, leaning with her ass against the edge of the table. Her naked tits peek out from between her T-shirt and her bra. Her lower body is exposed. She's gripping the elastic of her pants, battling to pull them up and cover herself.

Fuck.

I spin around and continue on my way.

"Wait, please," she calls after me. "I have to talk to you. It's important."

I don't wait. I don't listen. I don't look at her.

If I do, I may stay again. There's nothing my foolish heart wants more than another night in her bed. So, I train my gaze on the door, and I keep on walking.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sabella

My husband doesn't give me a chance to tell him someone—I suspect a child—broke into the house. He slams the door behind him and goes without locking it, leaving me used and naked and drenched in his cum in the kitchen.

I feel a mess.

I *am* a mess.

I don't get it. Last night, when he asked for my advice, he gave me the impression that my opinion mattered to him. He gave me the idea that we could have peace if not happiness, but that notion now lies shattered at my feet.

I should've known better than to hope for something less ugly than the hate between us. I've been stupid and naïve. It's not a mistake I'll repeat. I won't make myself that vulnerable again.

When I've scavenged the energy to peel myself off the table, I shower and cook pasta for dinner. My grumbling stomach insists that I feed it. After eating, I dress in warm clothes and go outside to look for the child that climbed through my window, but I don't have a torch, and the night is

moonless. I almost break my neck twice by falling over the rocks. When I nearly walk over the edge of a cliff, I admit defeat and turn home. I make sure the windows are closed but leave the one that was forced open a crack. Then I settle on the sofa with a blanket and wait.

After spending a sleepless night in the lounge, I get up early and resume my search.

Soon, I'm despondent. There are no traces of a child or anyone else for that matter. The soil is too hard and the terrain too rocky for shoes to leave prints. I follow the river for most of the morning but find no other houses or signs of life.

By the time I reach the village, I'm exhausted.

Mrs. Paoli looks a lot better when she answers her door.

"My dear, you look like you walked ten miles," she says with a hand pressed over her heart.

She's not far off.

"Would you like a glass of water?" she asks.

I show her my water bottle. "I'm good, but thank you for the offer."

"Corinne told me there are kumquats at the market. Do you mind picking me up half a kilo while you walk Diva?"

"Of course not."

"You better go straight away. Most of the vendors will be gone already. They only stay until late morning, but a few hang around until the afternoon." She takes an envelope from her pocket. "Here. You can buy Diva a treat with the change. There's a lady that sells homemade dog biscuits at the market. Diva loves them." She clutches the edges of her robe together as she leans outside for a glance down the street. "Oh, and

before I forget, Mr. Martin needs a little help with house cleaning. He's a retired widower. If you're interested, he lives in the old mill next to the river."

"I appreciate that you thought about me."

"You're welcome, my dear." She hands me Diva's leash before addressing the dog in a sing-song voice. "Come, baby. Look who's here."

Diva barks and wags her tail.

The market is a short walk from Mrs. Paoli's house. When I get there, most vendors have already packed up, but I manage to find a clementine farmer that set a bag of kumquats aside.

"It's for Mrs. Paoli," I explain.

"In that case," he says, spitting the tobacco he was chewing on the ground.

He's weighing the kumquats when I spot a bald head in the crowd. The man is tall, standing out above the rest of the shoppers. My heartbeat quickens. I haven't seen him in a while, not since South Africa. I may be mistaken. It may be someone else, but then he turns around and our gazes lock across the distance.

He freezes.

Shit.

The vendor hands me the bag and mentions a price, but I don't pay attention to what he says. I give him the money without breaking eye contact with the man at the fruit stall. The habitual dark suit is absent. He looks different in a sweater and a pair of jeans.

The vendor drops a few coins of change on my palm.

Mumbling a rushed, “Thank you,” I make my way toward the fruit stall just as the man turns and stalks away.

“Come, Diva,” I say, breaking into a jog.

We only catch up with him at the fountain.

“Roch, wait,” I call after him.

He stops dead. Turns. His eyes are cold as he measures me.

“Hi,” I say, out of breath from running. “What are you doing here?”

He looks pointedly at the bag in my hand. “Same as you.”

My heart is beating too fast to think. If he tells my husband he saw me here, I’ll get into trouble. The last thing I want is for Angelo to put an end to my excursions.

When he makes as if to turn, I utter the first thing that pops into my mind. “Aren’t you working?”

He glares at me. “Didn’t you hear? Your husband fired me.”

I reel with shock. “He did?”

“You don’t have to act so surprised.” He smirks. “You must be happy about it.”

“I’m not,” I say quickly. “I didn’t know.”

Sneering, he spins away and continues to cross the square.

I go after him, grabbing his arm. “Roch, wait.”

He stops and looks at where I’m gripping his sleeve.

I let go. “I owe you an apology. I’m sorry for acting like a brat. My behavior was uncalled for. The day was just getting to me with everything that happened.”

“Don’t try to justify your actions.”

“It’s not an excuse, I know. I wasn’t aware he fired you. I never thought he would, not because of that.” I want to say I’ll put in a good word for him with my husband, but I’m the last person my husband will listen to, let alone please. “I’m so sorry, Roch. I mean it.”

“Yeah.” He snorts. “Whatever you say.”

“Roch,” I say when he attempts to walk away again.

He pauses.

“I, um...” I clear my throat. “My husband doesn’t know I’m here.”

He only watches me.

I swallow. “I know you don’t owe me anything, but I’ll appreciate it if you don’t mention running into me to him.”

His smile is wry. “Don’t worry. Mr. Russo and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms.”

Crumpling the paper bag in my hand, I say, “I truly am sorry.”

He huffs a disbelieving laugh and carries on toward the street.

I run to keep up. “Where are you working now?”

He looks at me as if I’m stupid. “In case you haven’t noticed, work is scarce around here.”

“If I can help in any way—”

“Have a nice life, Sabella,” he says before stomping away.

This time, I don’t chase after him. He obviously finds my presence unpleasant, and I can’t blame him.

I feel bad for getting him fired, especially since I was the one who provoked him. It had just been such a horrible day. The memory clogs up my throat, but I push it away quickly when tears burn hot behind my eyes. Now isn't the time to think about what happened.

Instead, I go back to the market and find the dog biscuit lady. Diva sits on her hind legs and begs for the treat, which puts a smile back on my face. She gobbles the whole thing up in record time and sniffs around for any crumbs on the ground.

On the way back, I stop to say hi to Mrs. Campana and to repay her with the money I earned from Corinne and Mrs. Paoli.

She waves a hand when I put the bills on the counter. "I said it wasn't necessary."

"Please, I insist. I don't want to take advantage of your kindness."

Taking the money with a sigh, she says, "If it makes you feel better."

"It does. I better return Diva. I'd like to get home before dark."

Her eyebrows pinch together. "Are you still walking up and down that mountain?"

"My feet are my only way of transport for the moment." I give her a bright smile. "I honestly don't mind."

"Gmf. You better get going then. The terrain is dangerous in the dark."

"I'll be fine." I wave on my way to the door. "See you soon."

I deliver Diva and Mrs. Paoli's kumquats with enough time to spare to pay Mr. Martin a visit. It's a detour of about two kilometers. The old mill sits below three rapids on the riverbank. The two-story building is constructed on stilts, the wooden wheel standing on the side. A small boat is attached to a jetty next to the house. Thick greenery surrounds the site. A layer of fog drifts on top of the river, giving the picture a soft, dreamy edge.

A man with stooped shoulders and a weathered face opens the door when I knock. A pipe hangs from the corner of his mouth. Dressed in a pinafore and rubber boots, he reminds me of a picture from my favorite storybook when I was little about a fisherman who saved a whale that had washed up on the shore.

"Yes?" he says in a croaky voice. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Sabella. Mrs. Paoli sent me."

"Ah. Yes." He takes his pipe from his mouth and scratches his head. "Come in, come in."

He shows me into a spacious kitchen with yellow and green wallpaper. "The house is big, but you're young. It shouldn't take you too long to do a bit of dusting and vacuuming." He places a palm on his lower back. "The old body is getting too weak for the work." He taps the pipe against his temple. "The brain still works. It doesn't lack motivation, but you know the saying. The body can't cash the cheques the mind is writing any longer." He laughs at his own joke.

"It's not a problem. When would you like me to start?"

"Whenever you can."

"Tomorrow?"

He pats me on the shoulder and says with a warm light in his watery green eyes, “That’ll be perfect. Any time is fine with me. I’m not going anywhere much of the time. If I happen to be out, just come in and carry on with it. You’ll find everything you need in the broom closet.”

“Did you run the mill?” I ask when he walks me out.

He clicks his tongue. “The mill stood empty for years before I moved in.” He points at the boat. “I only bought the place for that.”

“For the jetty?”

“The river runs all the way to the sea. I can drive my boat from here to fish where roads don’t lead. That’s where you find the best catches, where no big trawlers cast their nets and no one else goes.”

“That makes sense.” I smile. “I better get going. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He waves as I climb up the embankment to the road.

On my way to the house, I scout the area next to the river, but I don’t see any dwellings where a child could live. An idea takes root in my mind.

At home, I bake a cake. This time, I follow Mrs. Campana’s advice and use the oven fan. When the cake comes out of the oven, it’s nicely rounded. Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I clap my hands like an excited child. It doesn’t look half bad, even if I have to say so myself. I leave it on the windowsill to cool and open the window.

After pulling on a coat, I take one of the recipe books outside and make myself comfortable on a chair in a secluded corner of the veranda from where I have a view of the kitchen window on the side as well as the front of the house.

It doesn't take long before I spot movement in the bushes. A scrawny boy appears from the shrubs, looking left and right before cutting barefoot across the yard. His clothes are tattered, and his small face is dirty. In one hand, he clutches what looks like a makeshift doll with twig arms and rope hair. In the other, he holds a walking stick. He plants the stick in the gravel and creeps to the corner of the house.

At the edge of the veranda, he stretches his neck to look through the lounge window. Then he hops up the steps, surprisingly lithe and quiet on his feet, crosses the veranda, and presses a small hand on the glass as he peers through the kitchen window. He turns his head far to the side, no doubt checking if someone is inside. He's sticking his arm through the window, reaching for the cake, when I speak.

“Would you like a slice?”

He jolts, yanking his hand away and jumping back. He stares at me with wide brown eyes, fear etched on his delicate features.

Not wanting to scare and chase him off with an abrupt movement, I straighten slowly. “Do you like chocolate cake?”

His little chest heaves with breaths as he watches me quietly, frozen to the spot.

“You know what I think? I think it can do with frosting.”

His Adam's apple bobs as I go closer.

“What do you think? Would you like to try a slice of cake with chocolate frosting?”

He brings the doll to his mouth and whispers something. The head is made from a wine cork stuck on a stick. Pieces of rope tied around the top of the cork form the hair. Round eyes

and a crooked smile drawn with a black felt pen complete the face.

Lifting the doll to his ear, he listens. After a moment, he says with mistrust sparking in his eyes, “Beatrice says maybe.”

His high, musical voice catches me by surprise. I study him closer, taking in his dainty bone structure and his short, unevenly cropped auburn hair. Knock me over with a feather. The he-child is a she-child.

“I’m Sabella.” I point at the house. “I live here. What’s your name?”

“Sophie,” she says before whispering to the doll, “It’s all right. It can’t hurt telling her our names.”

“Where do you and Beatrice live, Sophie?”

“By the river.”

I glance toward the village. “Down there?”

“Not far from here.”

“With your parents?”

“My parents are gone. We lived with my grandfather, but he went back to the camp.”

“Is the camp far?”

“It’s too far to walk. Grandpa went by truck. A friend came to fetch him.”

Dear God. I hope this doesn’t mean what I think it does. “Did you stay behind with Beatrice?”

“I don’t want to go back to the camp.” She clutches the doll in her arms, cradling it against her chest. “I came here to play in the house. Beatrice and I had tea in the garden before

they took our teacups away. Beatrice liked it here.” Addressing the doll, she says, “Didn’t you?”

I remember the broken crockery in the mud, the cracked saucers and teacups without ears. Sweet Jesus.

“Who takes care of you if your grandfather moved back to the camp?” I ask.

She swings from side to side. “My brothers.”

“Do they live by the river too?”

She lifts the doll to her ear and listens. “Shh, Beatrice. She’s a nice lady. She won’t tell the angry man.”

I go down on my haunches. “Is Beatrice scared of an angry man?”

“The man who made us move here. He came to see us at the camp. Beatrice says he’s scary.”

“Do you mean Mr. Russo?”

She only stares at me with a blank expression.

Straightening, I say, “I tell you what. Why don’t I help you wash up, and then you and Beatrice can help me make frosting for the cake?”

She shakes her head. “Beatrice doesn’t want to wash up. She’s scared of water.”

“She has nothing to be afraid of, sweetheart. I won’t let anything happen to her. But she has to wash up if she wants to help in the kitchen. We can’t cook or eat with dirty hands, can we?”

She holds the doll next to her ear. “Beatrice says no.”

“How about we find Beatrice a new dress to wear? Will she like that?”

Sophie glances at the dirty piece of cloth that's knotted around the stick.

"I bet her hair is shiny when it's clean," I say. "It looks as if she can do with a good shampoo. Why don't you wash her hair? Won't she like that?"

After a moment of conferring with Beatrice, Sophie says, "All right, but Beatrice doesn't like sticking her head under the water."

"She doesn't have to. You can rinse it in a bowl."

"What about that, Beatrice?" she asks. "If you're a good girl, you can have a slice of cake."

"That's right." Holding out my hand, I say, "Come on. It's nice and warm inside."

Sophie puts her small hand in mine. Emotions tighten my chest as I lead the frail child inside. The boy who nicked the cereal and milk was a girl, and this poor girl lives with her brothers somewhere next to the river.

I need to alert Angelo. What will he do? Will he take the kids back to their grandfather? From the little Sophie told me, their grandfather doesn't seem to care much about them. If he did, he'd never have left them behind to fend for themselves. How are the poor kids surviving alone in the open and in the midst of winter?

Sophie glances around. "It looks different."

I stop. "Did you climb through the window to watch television yesterday?"

She averts her gaze.

"I won't be angry, Sophie. I just need to know if it was you."

“Why?” she asks, peeking at me through her eyelashes.

“If it wasn’t you, I’ll be worried. Then it means someone else was here while I was gone.”

She bites her lip. “Are you angry about the popcorn?”

“Of course not. I’m just concerned when I think that you could’ve burned yourself.”

“I know how to make popcorn in the microwave. Johan showed me how to do it. We did it a lot when we lived here.”

“You lived here?” I ask as my earlier suspicion grows. “In the house?”

“Yes,” she says, cocking a shoulder.

The pieces click together. If she lived here, she must be a part of my husband’s family on his mother’s side.

“You shouldn’t climb through the window,” I chide gently. “You can make popcorn and watch television any time you like as long as you use the door.”

“The door was locked,” she exclaims.

“Then you should’ve waited for me. The same goes for taking things from the cupboard. Or the windowsill. You shouldn’t simply help yourself. You should ask. It’s not right to take something that doesn’t belong to you. People may get angry.”

“I’m sorry I took the cereal.” She pouts. “And the cake. I was hungry.”

I squeeze her hand. “I know, sweetheart. Next time, please ask. I’m not trying to be mean. I just want to make sure you don’t pick up habits that can get you into trouble.”

“Are you going to take me back to the camp because I took your cereal?” she asks in a small voice.

“Oh, Sophie.” I hug her to me. “Right now, we’re just going to wash up and have a slice of cake. Don’t worry. We’ll sort it out. Just promise me you won’t climb through anyone’s window again.”

She pulls away. “If I promise, can I have two pieces of cake?”

“I already told you that you may have cake.” I smile. “We’ll see about the two slices.”

“Okay,” she agrees meekly.

I bring her to the kitchen and make her sit in a chair by the sink. I still have some of the products the pharmacist gave me left. After fetching the oil and shampoo from the bathroom, I give Sophie a bowl with soapy water in which she washes Beatrice’s hair while I comb the oil through her short hair before washing and rinsing it with her head tilted back in the sink. Once her hair is clean, I trim it as best as I can with the kitchen scissors.

“Do you cut your own hair?” I ask as I dry it with the hairdryer by the kitchen table.

“My brothers do. Beatrice won’t let them cut her hair.” She looks up at me, swinging her legs. “Can I let mine grow long like yours?”

“Sure, but you have to wash it often so that it’s pretty and shiny.” I give her a dry washcloth to serve as a towel for the doll. “Shall we go find Beatrice something to wear?”

She follows me upstairs obediently. When I suggest a shower, her fear of water and submersing her head in it becomes apparent again. With a little coaxing, I manage to

scrub her clean in a few centimeters of water in the bath before giving her one of my T-shirts, a pair of shorts, and socks to wear. We dress Beatrice in a red silk scarf, which Sophie says the doll loves.

While we make the frosting in the kitchen, I contemplate how to bring up the matter that's on my mind without scaring her away. It's not until Sophie is seated at the table with a big slice of cake in front of her and a small slice served on a saucer for Beatrice that I say, "Why don't you stay here for a while, Sophie? Beatrice must be cold down there by the river."

Sophie shrugs and shoves a spoon full of cake into her mouth. "It's warm in the cave when we make a fire."

"Will your brothers worry if you don't go back?"

"They don't really miss me." She adds with an air of pride, "I sometimes stay away for a few days. I know how to take care of myself."

Smoothing a hand over her head, I ask, "How old are you?"

She shrugs again. "I don't know."

The tightness in my chest increases. I can't let her return to that cave, but I don't want Angelo to drag her back to her grandfather either. Will he let her stay at his house? Will he let Heidi take care of her?

When both plates are empty, Sophie helps me to tidy the kitchen, seeming to enjoy the task. I lured her inside with the cake, but she needs a healthier dinner than the sugar I just fed her. After fixing her an egg-mayo sandwich that she devours with a glass of milk as if she hasn't eaten in years, I heat up a carton of soup.

“Are you still hungry? I’m going to have soup. Will Beatrice like a bowl?”

“With bread.” She adds quickly, “And butter,” before climbing on a chair by the table.

After serving three bowls of soup, I sit down opposite her.

She spreads a thick layer of butter on a slice of bread and dunks it in her soup.

I cup my bowl and draw it closer, considering my next words carefully. “I don’t want you to go back to the camp if that’s not what you want, but I can’t let you roam around alone and live in the cave. It’s not safe.”

She stops eating and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “My brothers take care of me. They bring food.”

“Which they find where?” I ask gently.

“They slip into people’s houses or take vegetables from their gardens.”

My God. Those poor children. “If they’re stealing, they’ll get into trouble. It’s not right.” Reaching over the table, I cup her hand. “You do understand that, don’t you? It’s not your job to take care of yourself. It’s the job of the adults who are responsible for you.”

She pulls away. “I’m not going back to Grandpa.”

“Sweetheart, I’m only saying we have to speak to Mr. Russo and make an arrangement.”

“No,” she says, clenching her small hands on the table. “Beatrice doesn’t like that man.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you or Beatrice. But you can’t carry on living alone.”

Her voice climbs in volume. “I’m *not* alone. I have Beatrice. I have my brothers.”

Getting up, I come around the table and brush a hand over her stubbly hair in a soothing gesture. “Why is Beatrice so afraid of the men?” I continue in a soft tone. “Did something happen to her?” My chest constricts as I ask the question on the forefront of my mind. “Did they hurt her?”

“No.” She scowls. “She just doesn’t like them.”

I heave a sigh. “It’s getting dark now, but can you take me to your brothers tomorrow? I’d like to meet them too.”

“They’re not always at the cave. Sometimes, they leave food and come back after a few days.”

“Can you show me the cave then?”

She purses her lips.

“Sophie?”

“Beatrice is full. She doesn’t want to eat anymore. Can I brush her hair?”

“How about you?” I ask, trying hard not to show my worry. “Have you eaten enough?”

She bobs her head.

I smile. “Shall we braid Beatrice’s hair? Maybe we can find her pajamas to wear. What do you think?”

“Okay,” she says, hopping off the chair.

A car pulls up outside. It’s not Heidi’s car. I learned to distinguish between the sounds of the engines.

Sophie stills. Her eyes widen. She looks like a frightened rabbit as she grabs Beatrice to her chest. She glances at the

backdoor. Even before she presses up on her toes like a sprinter about to take off for a race, I know she's going to flee.

"No, wait." I raise my hands and put myself in her path, cutting off her escape route. "It's all right. It's only my husband. He won't hurt you."

Angelo is many things, but he won't lay his hands on a child. I know it with a deep-seated certainty. He tried to give the children a home. It's the only reason this house exists. That says a lot about his intentions where the kids are concerned.

Before Sophie can act, the front door opens with a squeak and closes with a click. I turn toward the doorway, bracing myself to face my husband while Sophie all but blends into my shadow.

Steps fall on the floor, advancing to the kitchen. My husband comes into view, filling the doorframe with his tall, broad body. His dark hair falls messily around his face, making him look way too hot. For a change, he's wearing jeans and a leather jacket over a rollneck sweater. The ensemble is casual, yet on him, it looks fancy. Expensive. The clothes mold to his strong frame. Or rather, he fills them out well. He wears them with the ease of a man who's certain of himself and his destiny.

He pauses on the threshold, watching me with an intense but unreadable expression before entering the room.

Sophie clutches my T-shirt and peeks out from behind my back. My husband cuts his gaze in the direction of the movement, and then he freezes. His black eyes flare. His lips part, but no sound escapes. No one speaks as he stares at the child who fists her tiny hands so tightly in my T-shirt that she's stretching it over my stomach. Beatrice's stick arms press into my hip. It takes a long moment before Angelo finally tears his

gaze away from the small person hiding behind me and lifts his eyes to mine.

His voice is gruff. “What is the kid doing here?”

Sophie wrings my T-shirt to the point of tearing it.

“She has a name,” I chastise. “It’s Sophie.” I reach behind me to hug her waist.

“Sophie,” he parrots, a frown pleating his brow.

Searching his eyes, I ask an unspoken question. “Your niece.”

“Yes.” He glances at her again. “How did she end up here?”

Rubbing a hand over Sophie’s back, I say, “We need to talk.”

His eyes tighten before the creases in the corners even out with understanding. Nodding toward the lounge, he says, “In here.”

“Upstairs.”

The line of his jaw hardens at my blunt contradiction of his order.

Ignoring him, I turn to Sophie and go down on my haunches. “Mr. Russo and I have to discuss something upstairs.”

“Why?” she croaks.

“Sometimes, adults need to talk in privacy. You and Beatrice can wait in the lounge. Did you finish the movie yesterday?”

She shakes her head.

“Why don’t you show Beatrice the end of Toy Story?”

She sticks her head around me, scrutinizing Angelo before averting her eyes. “Is he going to stay like the other man?”

Something like a growl rumbles in Angelo’s chest.

“Fabien?” I say. “He only stayed for a short while.”

“Beatrice doesn’t like Mr. Russo. Is he staying for a short while too?”

I steal a look over my shoulder at my husband who stands with clenched fists near the door, for the first time since I’ve met him appearing out of his depth.

“We’ll see,” I say, turning back to Sophie with a smile. “This is Mr. Russo’s house, so he may decide to stay. Or he may not if he’s busy.”

Behind me, Angelo utters a cuss word under his breath.

I shoot him a frown.

“Can we have popcorn?” Sophie asks.

“Sure.” I straighten. “Make yourself and Beatrice comfortable on the sofa under the blanket, and I’ll make the popcorn.”

Sophie sticks her finger in her mouth and keeps her head low as she skitters around Angelo and darts to the lounge.

Crossing his arms, he widens his stance and studies me while I put a bag of popcorn in the microwave. I feel his gaze burning on my back as I set the timer and push the start button.

“The popcorn and the movie,” he says. “It was her.”

I take a bowl from the cupboard. “Yes.”

“She was here.”

“Yes,” I say again, keeping my voice down.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks in a strained voice.

I give him a hard look. “I would’ve if you’d given me the chance.”

He props his hands on his hips. The action pushes the ends of his jacket open, revealing the hardness of his stomach his sweater doesn’t hide and lean hips hugged by his jeans. “You could’ve tried harder.”

“Really? When?” I drop my voice to a whisper. “When you left me half-naked here in the kitchen?”

The muscles in his jaw bunch. “When did this happen? How?”

“Upstairs,” I say again, taking the popcorn from the microwave.

Angelo steps up and stops so close behind me the heat of his skin sears me through my clothes.

Reaching around me, he takes the box. “Careful. It’s hot.”

I scoff. “I know how to make popcorn.”

He pulls the edges of the box apart, letting out a billow of steam. I watch, curious about what he’s going to do, as he empties the box in the bowl. He picks up the bowl and takes a bottle of water from the fridge before making his way to the door.

“What?” he says when I don’t follow. “Aren’t we going *upstairs*?”

Ignoring the jibe, I walk ahead of him, wanting to make sure he doesn’t frighten Sophie. I know he won’t harm her, but

he can be brusque. As charming as he can be, he sometimes has the finesse of an ogre.

Sophie sits on the sofa with Beatrice clutched on her lap, staring at Mr. Potato Head who lifts his eyes from his face to scout through the window. Her small feet clad in my too-big socks are turned inward, her tiny body drowning in my clothes. A rush of tenderness overwhelms me. I can't even begin to think about the hardships she's been through, that she's *still* going through.

Angelo crouches down in front of her, blocking her view of the television. She leans to the side, trying to see around him. At least she's not acting afraid of him.

"Sophie," he says with such unexpected gentleness that my heart misses a beat. I've never heard that tone from him before.

She glances at him.

"Here's your popcorn."

She grabs the bowl.

Angelo holds on to it. "What do we say?"

"Thanks," she says absent-mindedly, her attention focused on the movie again.

When he lets the bowl go, she pulls it onto her lap and stuffs a handful of popcorn in her mouth. "Shh, Beatrice. I can't hear what they're saying."

He leaves the water on the side table and glances at me as he straightens. Worry is etched on his features.

"We'll be back in a short while," I tell Sophie, but she's not paying attention.

Angelo goes ahead of me. In front of the bedroom, he stands aside for me to enter before following and closing the door.

“What’s with this Beatrice business?” he asks.

“It’s her doll. I think it’s a coping mechanism. By projecting her fears on the doll, she doesn’t have to deal with them.”

“Fuck.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “When did she show up here?”

“The first time was little over a week ago.”

“A week?” he exclaims.

“Shh. Keep your voice down. I heard something in the house in the night, and I saw her sneaking out with a box of cereal and a carton of milk.”

“That’s why you wanted keys.” He spears his hands through his hair. “Jesus.”

“Then a cake I baked disappeared from the windowsill. I think she climbed through a window to watch television while I was out for a walk. Fabien must’ve scared her away when he arrived.”

He stares at me with an incredulous expression. “How did you finally catch her?”

“I baked another cake and sat outside, waiting. At first, I thought she was a boy. Until she spoke. I managed to rid her hair of the lice and to scrub her in the bath.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say something before?”

“I didn’t know who she was until today. I saw a handprint on the window and a dent in a garden cushion from time to

time, but I didn't want you to chase the child away. It was obvious that she was hungry. I went looking for her last night after you left, but I couldn't find her."

His eyes tighten. "You did what?"

"I had to try. I couldn't just leave her out there in the cold night. She told me she lives with her brothers in a cave somewhere by the river."

"Christ." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Don't ever do that again. The area is dangerous, especially if you don't know where you're going. There are gorges and rivers, not to mention venomous spiders and scorpions. If you ever walk around alone in the dark again, I swear I'll lock you up at night."

"Aren't you forgetting the issue at hand?"

"I'm not," he says, getting into my space. "You are my priority. Always." He cups my jaw, his grip a little too hard. "Do you understand, Sabella?"

"Yes." I pull away. "What about Sophie and her brothers? She said their grandfather went back to the camp. A friend apparently drove him while the kids stayed behind."

"Fuck." He turns in a circle, his head tilted toward the ceiling. "That old bastard."

"If she's your niece, that makes him her great-grandfather. Where is her grandmother?"

"We didn't keep contact with that side of the family, but from what I learned, the old man had two daughters—my mother and Francesca. Francesca, my aunt, died in childbirth. The baby, Maria, was raised by the old man and his wife. My grandmother died not long after. Sophie is Maria's daughter.

Maria and her husband and their four kids lived with the old man.”

“Why didn’t you stay in touch?”

His manner is curt. “That’s just the way it is.”

“They’re stealing food to stay alive. We have to do something.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” he asks, facing me.

“I can’t even begin to imagine their suffering.”

“Believe me, those kids are tough. They’re scoundrels, but they’re survivors.”

“They’re *children*.”

“I know what they are.” His eyebrows snap together. “I’m not going to leave them to their own devices.”

“Why didn’t they stay in the house?” The question puzzled me since Sophie told me they moved to the cave. “At least here they had comforts like water and electricity.”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “You saw the state of the place when I first brought you here. It must give you an idea of the kind of people they are. They don’t care about luxuries. They don’t appreciate kindness or charity. All they know is destruction and vandalism. They’re savages, Sabella.” The light in his eyes turn hard. “That’s who they are, who *we* are.”

No matter what’s passed between us, the vulnerability he tries so hard to hide doesn’t leave me unaffected. I can’t help the compassion that sparks in my chest.

Laying a hand on his arm, I say, “That’s not who you are.”

He may be cruel when he hates someone as much as he loathes me, but he won’t destroy a beautiful house just for fun.

Yes, deep down, he is a savage. His actions are as brutal as his personality. On the surface, however, he's perfectly civilized, a man who behaves as society dictates if only for the sake of pretending to fit in.

His chuckle is dry. "Then you don't know me very well, wife."

He shakes me off and walks to the window, staring out at the night. I take in his broad back as I contemplate the statement. I know him better than he thinks. I know what motivates him. I know his family meant everything to him and that his hatred will drive him until his dying day. I know that I'll be the bane who satisfies his quest for vengeance. I know that he's my enemy, a man I despise as much as I once liked him.

The awful truth is that I crave his touch. The horrible reality is that I don't think about what he did as much as I used to. Maybe it's because I'm blocking the memory of the night he killed my dad from my mind. Maybe it's because I'm trying not to think about it. The undeniable fact is that my body is still drawn to his. When he wraps his arms around me, it's as if I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. It feels like home. That's my worst punishment, my insufferable torture, because the safety I feel when he holds me is false.

"What a fucking mess," he says, turning around. His voice hardens with resolve. "I'll deal with it."

"How?"

"There's no need to worry yourself about the logistics. It's not your problem."

I go closer. "Sophie doesn't want to go back to her great-grandfather. I don't know him, but from what I've heard and

seen, he's incapable of taking care of them."

"You're right." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "All he cares about are his fucking chickens and his goats."

"What about their parents? Sophie only told me they're gone."

Concern simmers in his eyes. "I tried to locate them, but I came up empty-handed. They've never been around much from what I understood, but shortly before I moved the old man and the kids here, they simply vanished. I have no idea if they just decided to pack up and leave or if they're dead. I contacted every hospital and morgue in the country. I've got private investigators on the case. There's no sign of them."

"Where does that leave the kids?"

"With me," he says, his smile flat.

"What do you mean?"

"They'll have to move into the old house where I can keep an eye on them."

My stomach clenches with worry. "How's that going to work? Aren't you always busy and often traveling?"

He utters a laugh. "I'll have to hire a ton of tutors, not to mention guards to keep them in line."

"You heard what Sophie said. You scared her. I'm not sure she'll want to go with you. She thought you were angry with them."

Impatience enters his tone. "Well, she doesn't have a choice, does she?"

"Please don't be hard on her. You'll only push her away."

"Are you telling me how to manage my own family?"

“I’m only trying to help.”

“Don’t.”

I blow out a sigh. “What about the legal red tape?”

“In the absence of the parents, the old man has guardianship.” He sneers. “If I pay him enough, he’ll sign it over to me.”

“When are you going to tell her?”

“Now,” he says, walking to the door.

“Hold on.” I wrap my fingers around his forearm. “Why don’t you let her stay with me? You saw for yourself. She’s at ease here.”

He works his jaw. “I already told you, it’s not your problem.” Taking my hand, he removes it from his arm before marching to the door.

“Think about it,” I say, going after him. “Don’t make this worse. She’s frightened enough as it is.”

He walks down the stairs with determined steps and stops in front of the sofa. Taking the remote, he switches off the television.

Sophie stills. Her small body goes rigid as she looks up at him.

“Sophie,” he says in a gentle voice. “It’s dangerous out there for a small girl alone. You’re coming back with me to live in my house.”

Her brown eyes grow round.

“It’s a big house with a garden and a swimming pool,” he continues. “There’s even a beach.”

She jumps to her feet, knocking the bowl with the popcorn to the floor. Clutching the doll in her hands, she looks ready to bolt.

“Sophie,” I say in a soothing tone. “Mr. Russo won’t hurt you. He has a very kind housekeeper who cooks delicious food.”

She sprints to me and jumps behind my back, locking her arms around my legs. “I’m not going. I don’t want to.”

Angelo says in a stern voice, “You can’t stay in a cave. That’s not an option.”

“I want to stay here.” Her voice quivers with tears. “With Sabella.”

“Jesus,” Angelo says under his breath, clenching his hands into balls.

“She can stay,” I say, beseeching him with a look. “I don’t mind. In fact, I think it will be the best plan given the circumstances.”

He opens his mouth and shuts it again. Holding out a hand, he says, “Come on, Sophie. Don’t you want to see my house?”

“No.” She hurls the words at him. “Beatrice doesn’t like you. She doesn’t want to live in your house. She wants to stay with Sabella.”

“For God’s sake,” he mutters, dropping his arm at his side.

“It’s all right, sweetheart.” I turn and crouch down to hug her. “Everyone wants what’s best for you and Beatrice.” I glance at my husband. “Isn’t that true?”

“Fine,” he grunts, wiping a hand over his brow. “Let her stay here while I work out a solution.”

I don't ask what kind of solution. I don't want to spook Sophie more. At least she's staying. For now. Whatever Angelo comes up with, we'll handle it when the time comes.

"On one condition," he says.

I make big eyes at him. He shouldn't blackmail the poor child. He just gave her his word. If he changes his decision, she'll never trust him.

He advances to us. His expression is soft when he addresses Sophie again. "I want you to show me where your brothers are staying."

"Why?" she asks, sounding scared.

He glances at me with an uncertain expression. He opens his mouth, but before he can utter a word, I say, "Because I'm going to cook a big, delicious meal, and I'd like to invite them."

"With chicken?" she asks. "Like the ones that turns around and around in the machine outside the supermarket?"

"Yes." I brush a hand over her hair. "With grilled chicken and chocolate cake for dessert."

She lifts the doll to her ear. A moment passes as she pretends to listen, and then she says, "Beatrice says you'll need three chickens and two cakes."

I raise an eyebrow. "Beatrice is a little gourmand, isn't she?"

Sophie scrunches up her face. "A what?"

"Someone who likes to eat a little too much."

"Oh, no." Sophie shakes her head. "I have three brothers, and they eat a lot."

“Ah.” I catch Angelo’s gaze. “Three chickens can be organized, can’t it? I’ll take care of the cake.”

“Of course,” he replies, staring at me with a strange light in his dark eyes. His voice scrapes in his throat as he clears it. “I’ll let you settle Sophie in then.”

“Thank you,” I say, meaning it.

He nods, hesitates, and finally walks to the door and pulls it open. Pausing on the threshold, he says, “Goodnight, Sophie.”

The smile he directs at me before he leaves is different. It’s not a cruel smile given in a moment of extracting vengeance. It’s not a cold smile to emphasize his hatred. It’s not an arrogant smile that expresses his indifference. It’s a warm smile, soft and gentle, and it dislodges something in my chest. The gesture is so foreign for him that it takes me a moment to place it.

Gratitude.

It touches me a million times more profoundly than when he lays his hands on me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Angelo

At first light, I drive to Uncle Nico's house. It's a Mediterranean style villa on the outskirts of Bastia. When I park outside, it strikes me how seldom I visited him here. Business has always been conducted at our house. As the head of the organization, that was my father's right. It was his brothers' duty to show him the respect he deserved by going to him. However, I'm not thinking about the business meetings. It's the lunches and dinners that are on my mind.

My mother often cooked for my uncles. My father invited them on a regular basis when no business was discussed. My uncles, on the other hand, never invited us for a family or social gathering, not even for a birthday. Why has it never occurred to me before?

A young woman in a housekeeper's uniform opens the door before I reach it. Avoiding my eyes, she asks, "May I help you?"

I push her aside and enter, inviting a strangled gasp. "Tell my uncle his nephew is here."

She scurries across the foyer and up the stairs, leaving me to close the door.

The last time I came here, the old housekeeper was still alive. She had a wrinkled face and thin white hair. I don't recall her name. She offered me gingerbread and milk in the kitchen as if I was six instead of sixteen. The dementia was already eating her mind away then.

Pulling off my gloves, I look around. The place is just as I remember. The interior is still opulent with golden cornices and heavy tassels on the purple velvet curtains. The wooden floor of the entrance with its ebony and ivory mosaic inlay in the center is polished to a shine. The only thing absent is the smell of potpourri. The old housekeeper left bowls full of the dried and scented rose petals throughout the house. Now the space smells like vinegar.

My uncle appears on the landing dressed in a silk robe and a matching paisley cravat. Tying the belt of the robe around his waist, he says in a jovial tone that carries through the acoustic foyer, "Angelo." The soles of his slippers slap the stairs as he makes his way down. "If I knew you were coming, I would've told Emilia to prepare a breakfast buffet."

I shove off my coat. "I've eaten."

He stretches out his arms when he reaches the bottom of the staircase and crosses the floor to greet me with an embrace. Patting my back, he holds me at arm's length. "You look well." He scrutinizes me through narrowed eyes and adds with a sly smile, "Married life seems to agree with you."

"Where can we talk?"

He drops his arms. "This isn't a social call?"

He knows damn well I won't ring his bell at sunrise for pleasure, but for now, I play his game. "Business, I'm afraid."

"You should've called me," he exclaims. "I would've come out to you."

The reason I'm here is to catch him with his pants down like my father used to say. My uncles are hiding something. I don't like the nasty suspicion growing in my gut.

"As you're here now, come through." He takes my arm and leads me to the lounge. Indicating the sofa, he says, "Sit. What can I get you to drink? Coffee? Tea?" He takes a copper bell from the coffee table and rings it. "Maybe a freshly squeezed orange juice?"

The housekeeper appears in the doorframe. She waits quietly with her eyes averted. She looks vaguely familiar. I take in the too short hem of the skirt that will leave nothing to the imagination when she bends. The flush that grows on her cheeks as she peeks at my uncle through her eyelashes makes me wonder about the nature of their relationship.

"Well?" my uncle says as he takes a seat next to me.

"Coffee, thank you."

"Something to eat? Emilia bakes the most delicious scones." He grins and nudges my shoulder. "They're decadent with a little cream." Winking at her, he adds, "So is she."

I lean back in my seat and cross my ankle over my knee. "No, thank you."

The red color of her cheeks deepens. "Anything else?"

"Maybe later," Uncle Nico says, his voice dripping with innuendo.

Well. Who would've guessed my uncle is such a dirty old man?

She spins around and hurries away with quick steps.

“She’s a shy one,” he says, craning his neck to follow her exit from the room. “But I’m derailing you.” Studying me with a shrewd expression, he says, “You haven’t told me what business brings you here.”

I slip a finger into my collar and loosen my tie. “Tell me about my wife. What did she do yesterday?”

He blinks. “Don’t you have the hourly reports from Toma and Gianni?”

“Yes, but it’s been so long since I visited you, I thought I’d drop in and get the feedback in person.”

He smiles even as his eyes tighten minutely. He’s not buying it. “How kind of you. You’re in luck. I read the report myself.”

The housekeeper—Emilia—enters with two cups of espresso. She puts one on the coffee table in front of me. When she leaves my uncle’s cup on the side table, he sticks a hand up her skirt and palms her ass.

“Thank you, Emilia,” he says, looking at her like a wolf sizing up a lamb.

How much does he pay her? It must be a lot. I don’t imagine she’s enduring his humiliating advances for the sake of love.

She stands motionless until he withdraws his hand and pats her backside.

When she’s gone, he brings his fingers to his nose and sniffs them. “There’s something about the smell of a woman.”

Christ. I'm going to puke.

“Anyway,” he says with a sigh. “Where were we? Ah, yes. The report. Toma was on duty. Let me see.” He taps a finger on his chin. “She went out for a walk after breakfast.”

I raise a brow and wait.

He folds his hands over his knee and regards me with a solemn expression.

“That's it?” I ask.

“In the evening, you arrived. As for what happened then, only you can say.”

“Then I went home,” I say.

“Oh. You mean after you spent some time inside? Yes, yes. You went home.”

He doesn't know about Sophie, or he would've mentioned her. Which makes me wonder if my cousins are doing their jobs. Or if they chose not to mention anything about the girl snooping around the house, stealing food, and climbing through the window. And if so, for what reason? Why hide it from me? What purpose will that serve?

“Why are you asking?” Making owl eyes, he leans closer. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Good.” He nods to himself and picks up his cup. “You should drop in more often. This is nice.”

I don't think so.

I down my coffee and leave the cup on the saucer before getting to my feet. “I'll let you get to your scones and cream.”

He's all teeth as he follows my example and stands. "Do let me know in advance next time you're planning a visit. I'll make sure Toma is home. We can have lunch together."

"Where *is* Toma?"

"He got his own place." He tilts his head. "Didn't you know?"

"No," I drawl. "He forgot to mention it."

"Yes, well." Uncle Nico pats my shoulder and says with staged regret, "It's been a while since we've seen each other." He pauses, no doubt giving the accusation time to sink in. "When your father was alive, we had dinner together every week."

"That my mother cooked. Now that you have a housekeeper with such a talent for baking, you could take the initiative of organizing a dinner upon yourself."

The smug look vanishes from his face.

"Goodbye, Uncle," I say, walking to the door. "You don't have to see me out. I know my way."

He doesn't follow me down the hallway. As I fit my coat, a movement on the landing catches my eye. Emilia stands in the shadows, hiding behind one of the grotesque marble statues. I get the feeling I know her. Then I remember. She's the hooker Uncle Enzo tried to set me up with in Marseille, the one I rejected.

Before I'm out of the door, I already have my phone in my hand. I fire off a message to my financial manager to get me Toma's address. It shouldn't be difficult. He only has to tap into the bank account and follow the money trail. Getting into my car, I send an email to one of my PI's and instruct him to gather information on Emilia.

I'm pulling into the road when Toma's address comes through on my phone. He rents a sea-facing loft apartment near the old city.

I drive to the location and park in the street. The old building is well restored. Expensive. The owner is a business connection. I punch in the code my financial manager provided to open the main door and take the staircase that spirals to the top.

There's only one door on the penthouse floor. I knock on the carved wood with a gloved hand. It takes a few minutes before my cousin opens the door in nothing but a pair of boxer shorts, yawning as he scratches his jaw.

His eyes grow round. Suddenly wide awake, he exclaims, "Angelo."

"Hello, Toma," I say, forcing him back as I invite myself in.

He shuts the door. "This is, um, unexpected." Glancing toward the closed door at the end of the hallway, he says, "Do you want to grab a coffee in the bar downstairs?" His bony back is rigid even as he trots casually toward that door. "Let me grab some clothes."

"That won't be necessary." I add with a wry smile, "We're not going to the bar. With regard to the clothes, by all means, go ahead."

He turns to face me. "I don't have coffee in the apartment. I haven't had time to do the shopping."

"I already had coffee at your father's house."

His pale skin turns even whiter. "You had a meeting?"

“Impromptu business call,” I say, looking around as I remove my gloves.

The furniture and decoration are contemporary. A designer white leather sofa faces a coffee table. A pewter statue of a naked woman on her hands and knees forms the base. The glass top is balanced on her back. She’s in a crawling position, one knee and one palm placed in front of the other, her breasts hanging down like melons. I tilt my head to study the artwork. Interesting.

“I, um...” He scratches his head. “Can I take your coat?”

I pull off my coat and throw it over the back of a red plastic chair with crystal feet.

He swallows.

The door he eyed opens. A curvy young woman dressed in a silk negligee steps barefoot into the hallway. “Toma?”

“Go back to bed, Iris,” he says.

“Who is he?” she asks, craning her neck to look at me.

“Go back to bed,” he bites out, hurrying toward her and spinning her around with his hands on her waist.

“But I want coffee,” she says, her tone disgruntled as he shoves her into the room. “You promised me breakfast in bed and—”

He slams the door, cutting short her protest, and tames his curls with his fingers before facing me again. “Sorry about that.” Rolling his eyes in an attempt at humor he doesn’t manage to pull off, he adds, “Women.”

“Hmm. It seems you’ve conquered your...” I drop my gaze to his crotch, “...problem.”

His face turns red. “It’s not like that. She’s just a friend.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Does your future wife know your friends sleep over?”

Exhaling through his nose, he stalks to an open-plan kitchen. “It’s my home. I can do as I please.”

“Until you’re married,” I say, following him with a narrowed gaze.

“As I said, it’s nothing.” He takes a mug from the cupboard and slams it on the counter. “Not that my private life is anyone’s business.”

“Is someone growing a backbone?” I taunt. “Or are you simply learning from your father’s example?”

Pressing his palms on the counter, he says, “My father is a single man. He can do what he likes.”

I suppress the urge to teach him a lesson with my fists. That’s not why I’m here. I remind myself of that fact as I carefully push my irritation down. “Be careful, Toma. You have a duty to this family and an image to uphold.”

He takes a tea capsule from a silver bowl shaped like a fish and pops it in an espresso machine. “I won’t forget.”

“Good.” I measure him. “How’s the job going?”

“You mean guarding your wife?” A tinge of resentment slips into his tone. “Fine, I guess.”

“You guess?” My voice is soft. Dangerous. “You either know or you don’t know, but you don’t fucking guess.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he gives me a sidelong glance. “Fine.”

I watch him with the attention of a hawk. “What has she been up to?”

“Not much.” Gripping the sink, he locks his arms, dips his head, and wipes his brow on his forearm. “Her movements are pretty much predictable.”

“Are they?”

He doesn’t meet my gaze. “Like the reports say, she goes for walks during the day, but that’s it.” Chancing a look at me, he asks, “Why? Did something happen?”

I cross my arms. “I was just wondering.”

He presses the button on the machine. When the noise stops, he says, “You’ve seen our reports.”

“Reports don’t always state everything.”

“Like what?” He turns around and leans his ass against the sink. “Are you implying I’m hiding something?”

“Are you?”

“No.” He bats his eyelashes. “Of course not, Angelo. Why would you think that?”

I shrug. “Some people express themselves better with words. Writing has never been your forte.”

“I just told you. Nothing is going on down there.”

Like his father, he believes I don’t know about Sophie. If he’s been where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to be doing, he should know. And like his father, he’s choosing not to tell me. I don’t know why, but I’ll find out.

I close the distance and stop in front of him. “I hope so for your sake, cousin, because if I find out you lied to me about

my wife, I'll slit your throat.”

He blanches. We stare at each other for a beat, the silence thick in the aftermath of my threat. Everyone knows my warnings are never idle. Especially my family. Toma hasn't witnessed me executing a traitor or taking the life of an enemy yet. He hasn't seen that part of me firsthand, but I have no doubt his father is colorful in his descriptions.

When the silence has stretched long enough, I ask, “Are we clear, cousin?”

“Yes,” he says, the word coming out as a squeak.

“Good.” I slap him on the shoulder, making him stumble sideways. “Then you have nothing to worry about.”

He grips the counter behind him as I make to turn, his shoulders slouching with obvious relief that I'm going.

“And get rid of the piece in the bedroom,” I say on my way to the door. “You have a fucking wedding coming up in a few months.”

Only more silence follows me.

Outside, I send an order to one of my most trusted men, instructing him to watch my cousins when they're guarding Sabella and to inform me of my wife's actions.

With that in place, I drive home and tell Heidi to buy three chickens and food for a feast. When I dial Fabien and give him my order, he's apprehensive. It's not only about how we parted at the new house. The last time I instructed him to buy clothes for the children and the old man, his effort was wasted. My grandfather sold the new clothes. God only knows what he did with the money.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Fabien says, “but you’re throwing your money in the water again.”

“Just do it,” I bite out. “Let me worry about my money.”

“Fine,” he chirps. “While we’re on the subject, Sabella’s new clothes should arrive next week. It took a bit longer than expected because I ordered them from Milan.”

I grunt my approval before ending the call.

Pouring a Scotch, I contemplate the mountain of problems I saddled myself with when I interfered in my mother’s family. I understand better why my father stayed the hell away from that valley and why he never let my mother visit. He was protecting her from them by avoiding contact, but he couldn’t protect her from the lasting stigma that came with her name. He could protect her from the blatant disrespect of the villagers as little as he could keep her safe from our enemy. Now, that enemy isn’t only living in the new house even as she’s plotting my downfall, but she’s also taking care of my niece.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sabella

At sunrise, Sophie walks into my room, rubbing sleep from her eyes with one hand and clutching Beatrice in the other.

“Hey,” I say, only half-awake. “Did you sleep well?”

She stops next to me. “Beatrice is hungry.”

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I say with a smile, “Then we better feed her.”

She runs ahead of me, barging down the stairs.

“Slowly,” I call after her. “Don’t trip and fall.”

When I catch up with her in the kitchen, she’s already seated at the table.

“What would you like?” I ask. “Bacon and eggs?”

She nods with enthusiasm.

I switch on the radio and turn to a music station. While I’m preparing our breakfast, Sophie hums along to the songs and plays with Beatrice. I steal looks at her as I cook, my heart squeezing at the sight of her tiny frame and thin body. When the food is ready, I dish up a generous helping for her. She can do with a little weight on those fragile bones.

After each bite she takes, she offers one to Beatrice. When our plates are empty, she runs to the lounge and snuggles up under the throw on the sofa in front of the television.

After tidying the kitchen, I sit down next to her.

“Aren’t you going to the village today?” she asks.

I give a start. “Why do you think I’m going there?”

“Beatrice saw you walking down the hill.”

“I see,” I say slowly. “No, I’m not going.”

She lies Beatrice down on her lap. “What are you doing there?”

“In the village?” Biting my lip, I consider how honest to be with her. As I don’t want to lie and lose her trust, I opt for the truth. I’d rather face the consequences if my secret is revealed than deceive her. “A few odd jobs.”

“Grandpa didn’t want us to go to the village. He got angry when we talked about it. He said if Mr. Russo knew, he’d be angry too.” She continues in all earnest. “Don’t worry, Sabella. I won’t let him be angry with you. I won’t tell him.” She looks at the doll. “You won’t say anything, will you, Beatrice?”

The exchange leaves me uncomfortable. I shouldn’t ask a child to conceal the facts. In any event, I can’t hide my outings forever. My husband only visits me at night, but that’s not to say he won’t decide to come earlier one day. He’s bound to catch me out. As soon as I have enough money stashed away, I’ll tell him myself.

“Can I go with you?” Sophie asks in her musical voice.

“You want to go to the village?”

She averts her gaze. “Beatrice wants to, but the people in the village aren’t kind.” She lifts her big, brown eyes to me again. “They scare her.”

“You’ve been there?” I ask, unable to imagine her making the long walk alone.

“Yes,” she admits reluctantly, brushing the frayed rope from Beatrice’s face. “I sometimes go alone. Other times, I go with my brothers.” She looks at me quickly. “I won’t slow you down. I promise. Beatrice walks really fast too.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I stroke her arm. “I’m not worried about you or Beatrice slowing me down. I’m more worried about you getting tired. It’s a very long walk.”

“I won’t get tired.” She shakes her head vehemently. “I promise, Sabella. I promise I won’t get tired. I really, really, really want to go. Pleeeeeease.”

“All right,” I say slowly, unable to deny her. “We’ll have to dress you warmly though. I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

She jumps from the sofa. “Can I look in your closet?”

“You may.” Smiling, I stand. “I’ll come help you.”

A short while later, we’re both dressed. Sophie is wrapped up in one of my sweaters that reaches her knees. Underneath, she wears leggings that are rolled up several times and a pair of my sneakers with socks stuffed into the front. I wind my scarf around her neck and pull my beanie over her ears. A warm fleece jacket serves as a coat. Beatrice has an extra scarf tied around her shoulders. I stock up on food and water, and then we set out for the village.

To be on the safe side, I go out the backdoor and around the cliffside of the house. From there, I keep to the thick vegetation at the fringe of the trees, making sure we stay out of

sight from the road. The odd feeling that someone is watching me still makes the hair in my nape stand on end. It was probably only Sophie I sensed, but I prefer to be cautious.

Mrs. Paoli does a double take when she opens the door. Diva goes ballistic. Sophie hides behind me, fisting her hands in my coat.

“It’s all right, Sophie,” I say. “Diva is kind. She’s only barking because she doesn’t know you.”

Mrs. Paoli scoops Diva up and balances her under one arm. The dog immediately goes quiet.

“My goodness,” Mrs. Paoli says. “Isn’t this one of the Russo broods?”

“This is Sophie.” I add with emphasis, “My niece-in-law.”

“My goodness,” Mrs. Paoli says again. “What is she doing with you?”

I smile at Sophie. “She’s staying with me for a while.”

Mrs. Paoli places a hand over her heart. “Is that *convenient* for you?”

“Absolutely.” My smile stretches. “Sophie wanted to come with me today. Can I introduce her to Diva?”

“Oh.” Mrs. Paoli clutches the dog even tighter. She only loosens her hold when Diva yelps. “I suppose so. She looks...” She lifts her gaze from Sophie to me and mouths, “Clean.”

“Here.” I gently pull Sophie out from behind me. “Offer Diva your palm like this.” I show her how. “Let her sniff you. It’s how dogs get to know humans. It’ll reassure her that you’re not going to hurt her.”

Sophie takes a hesitant step forward. She stretches out her little arm, offering her hand, but at the last minute, she snatches it away as her courage fails her.

“She won’t bite, dear,” Mrs. Paoli says. “My Diva has never bitten anyone in her life.”

Sophie tilts her face up to me.

“Go ahead,” I say with an encouraging nod. “Shall we do it together?”

When Sophie nods, I take her hand and let Diva sniff it. Sophie jerks away again when the dog licks her fingers.

“That’s her way of giving you a kiss,” I say.

A radiant smile splits the little girl’s face, making my chest ache with tenderness.

“She kissed me, Sabella,” Sophie says in a soft voice.

I exchange a look with Mrs. Paoli. “Yes, she did, sweetheart.”

“She likes you,” Mrs. Paoli says.

“You see?” Sophie whispers to the doll. “I told you not to be scared.”

Mrs. Paoli hands me the leash before setting Diva on the floor. “Are you walking Diva with Sabella today?”

“Yes,” Sophie says, standing taller. “Can I hold the leash, Sabella?”

“Only if Mrs. Paoli agrees,” I say. “And you first have to practice in a clear area where there’s no traffic.”

“Can I, Mrs. Paoli?” Sophie asks. “Please?”

“I trust you, my dear,” Mrs. Paoli says to me. “You’ll be the judge.”

“We’ll walk to the river today. We can do a practice run where the path is quiet.”

“Yay,” Sophie says, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Crouching down, she tells the dog, “I’ll be really good, Diva. Don’t you worry.”

Mrs. Paoli casts a glance at the too-big sneakers on the child’s feet. “Just be careful not to trip.”

As Sophie is engrossed in smoothing a hand over Diva’s back, I whisper, “I’m hoping to get her some clothes in her size soon.”

Mrs. Paoli winks with understanding.

While I attach the leash to Diva’s collar, Mrs. Paoli disappears into the house and returns a moment later with a zip lock bag filled with cookies.

“Here you go, Sophie.” She gives her the bag. “You may need to recharge your energy during the walk.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Paoli,” Sophie says, suddenly shy.

“It’s a pleasure, my dear.” Mrs. Paoli waves us off. “See you later.”

Sophie skips out ahead of me, the bag of cookies dangling in one hand and Beatrice in the other. She hums to herself as we make our way to the river. On the path that runs next to the water, I take Beatrice and the cookies so that both her hands are free. When I hand her the leash, her small face is scrunched up with concentration.

“Not in the mud, Diva,” she cries out as the dog almost trots through a puddle of water.

Sophie takes great care to steer her around it, clearly taking her task very seriously.

When we return Diva, she tells Mrs. Paoli proudly how she didn't get the dog's legs dirty. At Mrs. Paoli's praise, Sophie's face glows.

Mr. Martin is less surprised when I knock on his door with a little girl in tow.

"She yours?" he asks, motioning at her with his pipe.

"She's my husband's niece," I say.

"Ah. Well, I'll let you get on with it then. I'm taking the boat out, so I won't be under your feet."

After giving me a few instructions, he grabs a fishing rod that leans against the side of the house and gets into the boat. The engine sounds when I usher Sophie inside the house. The space smells of pipe smoke and cabbage.

Wrinkling my nose, I open a window. Mud is caked on the tile floor of the kitchen, and the dust lies thick on the furniture in the lounge. The windows are grubby, the view outside obscured. I don't have much experience in cleaning, only the little I've done at the new house, but there's only one way to learn.

After installing Sophie in the lounge where she plays with Beatrice, I roll up my sleeves and dive into the deep end. I start with the dusting and polishing the wooden furniture. Then I tackle the stove and counters in the kitchen. After changing the linen on the bed in the upstairs bedroom, I put the washing in the machine. While I'm vacuuming, Sophie waters the plants. She walks ahead as I'm mopping, pointing out the spots I miss. After I scrub the bathroom, we eat the sandwiches I packed for lunch in the kitchen while we wait for

the floors to dry. Sophie has the cookies for dessert. Lastly, I put the linen in the dryer and wash the windows.

Four hours later, the house is sparkling clean and smells like lemon-scented floor wash instead of stale smoke. Even if I have to say so myself, I did a good job.

Mr. Martin returns just as I'm closing the windows and switching on the central heating to warm up the place.

"My golly," he exclaims, standing in the open door of the kitchen. "I dare say this place hasn't seen such a shine since the days my Patricia was alive."

He lifts his foot, making to take a step, but I stop him with a palm poised in the air.

"Uh-uh. Take off your boots. You're not going to walk mud onto the clean floors again."

He grumbles something about me sounding just like his late wife but takes his rubber boots off and leaves them by the door.

"That's better," I say when he walks into the room on his socks.

Sophie comes charging down the stairs with a pair of slippers that she puts in front of him. "Here, mister. So that your feet don't get cold."

"Thank you, child." He brushes a hand over her head. "You're most considerate."

"It's a pleasure," she says, imitating Mrs. Paoli's words and tone. "My name is Sophie."

"Thank you, Sophie," he says. "You're a sweet child."

He pays me, and then we're on our way. I'm worried that Sophie will be exhausted by the time we reach the house, but she's still skipping and humming as if she has no cares in the world.

"How about a hot chocolate?" I ask when we've washed up. "I think we earned one."

"With marshmallows like in the picture on the tin," she exclaims, clapping her hands.

We're sitting at the table with a mug of hot chocolate in front of each of us when the front door opens.

Sophie has been talking non-stop about the day, her excitement palpable, so I didn't hear the car arrive. Sophie stills when Angelo appears in the kitchen door, carrying a big shopping bag in each hand.

"Hi, girls," he says, smiling with disarming warmth.

The jeans and leather jacket he wears make him look unfairly sexy in a bad boy kind of way. When he smiles like that, the harshness of his male beauty is softer. If possible, it makes him look even more handsome, and the potency of that appeal hits me like an arrow in the gut. I've always been attracted to his physical looks, right from the moment I met him, but it's not only the superficial quality that drew me to him. It was his darkness and his dangerous side, those elements that reminded me so much of water.

A spark of heat ignites in his black eyes when he catches me staring. He holds my gaze for a couple of seconds too long. Clearing my throat, I turn my face away.

A strained note slips into his voice as he directs his question at me. "How was your day?"

It almost sounds like an accusation, although it may just be my guilty conscience playing tricks on me.

Sophie looks at me and winks.

Angelo's eyes tighten, telling me he didn't miss the gesture, but he doesn't question the meaning of it.

He lifts the bags onto the counter. "Heidi sent groceries and an extra set of linen for the spare bedroom."

"Who's Heidi?" Sophie asks.

"My housekeeper." He turns to Sophie before continuing carefully. "You'll meet her tomorrow night."

"Why?" Sophie asks, grabbing Beatrice from the table.

"She's going to stay here for a while to take care of you," he explains.

Sophie's eyes flare. She presses Beatrice against her chest. "I want Sabella to take care of me."

I open my mouth to set her at ease, but Angelo beats me to it.

"There may be times when Sabella will be busy, for example, like this weekend," he says. "We have to attend a dinner in a different city. Heidi will keep you company until Sabella gets back."

"No." Sophie stands, almost knocking her hot chocolate over. "I want to go with Sabella."

"Sophie—" I start, but Angelo holds up a hand.

Going over, he stops in front of her. "Sometimes, we have to attend evening functions that are for adults only. I promise Sabella will be back." He crouches down, putting them on eye

level. “If you like, you can call Sabella on Heidi’s phone every day.”

Biting her lip, Sophie dips her head.

“Heidi will take good care of you,” I say, pushing to my feet. “You don’t have to worry. She’s a very nice lady.”

“Do you like her?” Sophie asks.

I smile. “Very much.”

“We’re leaving on Friday, and we’ll be back by Sunday,” Angelo says. “The weekend will pass quickly, especially if you help Heidi with all the baking she has planned.”

“Will you come back, Sabella?” Sophie asks in a small voice.

“Of course I will.” I go around the table and pull her into a hug. “Like Mr. Russo said, I’ll be back before you know it.”

She wraps her thin arms around my waist, holding on as if she never wants to let go.

I catch Angelo’s gaze when he straightens, my heart squeezing with compassion and worry for the little girl.

Pulling away to look at her, I ask, “Are you hungry?”

She loosens her hold on me and shows me the doll. “Beatrice is very hungry. Look how flat her stomach is.”

Angelo’s lips quirk.

I stifle a laugh. “Shall we see what Mr. Russo brought for dinner?”

He stiffens. “There’s no need to be so formal. My niece can call me Angelo.”

“Angelo,” Sophie says as if testing the name on her tongue. “Uncle Angelo?”

He ruffles her hair. “Either uncle or Angelo is fine.”

Escaping the intense gaze he locks on me, I go to the counter and unpack the bags. Sophie helps to put the meat and vegetables in the fridge while Angelo watches with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

I do my best to ignore how his quiet observation unnerves me as I start dinner. He offers to set the table when I usher Sophie upstairs for a bath. By the time she’s clean and dressed in another one of my outfits, the salmon and zucchini are cooked.

Sophie talks up a storm during the meal, telling us how she knows the edible wild berries from the poisonous ones.

“My brothers fish too,” she tells Angelo. “Trout in the river and other fish in the sea.”

“What about you?” he asks. “Do you like fishing?”

She shakes her head. “Beatrice is scared of water. She won’t go in the river or the sea, so we stay on the shore.”

I’m surprised at how good Angelo is at making conversation with Sophie. He’s different when he’s talking to her, a lot more relaxed than he usually is. It never occurred to me that he may like children. I suppose it’s because he rarely shows his softer side when he’s with me. For me, he reserves his much darker feelings.

After dinner, Sophie and Angelo load the dishwasher while I tidy the kitchen and put the spare bedding in the linen closet.

When Sophie has brushed her teeth, Angelo and I tuck her into bed.

“Beatrice wants to watch more television,” Sophie says as I place the doll next to her on the pillow.

Angelo pulls the covers up to her chin. “Tomorrow. Little people need their sleep, because that’s when they grow.”

She turns her face to me. “Is that true, Sabella?”

“Yes.” I switch on the lamp. “That’s why it’s important that you sleep enough.”

She sighs. “All right. I’ll sleep so that I can grow tall like you, Bella.”

I tap her nose. “We’re all different. You’ll grow as tall as you’re supposed to be.”

She wrinkles her nose. “How tall is that?”

Angelo grins. “It’s hard to say, but a doctor can make a calculated guess based on your weight, age, and a few other factors. Would you like one to visit to see how tall you may get?”

She takes her arms from under the covers and crosses her hands over her chest. “Will it hurt?”

“No,” he says. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“I can do better than that,” he says. “I’ll arrange for a doctor to come here.”

“Will he measure Beatrice too?”

“Yes.” Angelo kisses her forehead. “Now, go to sleep.”

“Goodnight, Sophie,” I say, following Angelo to the door.

“Angelo?” Sophie says. When he pauses in the doorway, she continues. “Are you sleeping here too?”

“Not tonight,” he says with a smile.

Sophie frowns. “Sabella?”

“Yes, Sophie?”

“If you and Angelo are married, why don’t you live in the same house?”

Not knowing how to answer that question, I look at Angelo.

He replies with a blank expression. “I work a lot, and sometimes, I have to work very late. It makes more sense that I sleep at the big house.”

“Will you work less someday?” she asks.

“That’s enough questions for one night, young lady,” he says. “Sweet dreams.”

He steps aside for me to exit and closes the door behind him.

For a tense moment, we face each other in silence.

Lowering his voice, he says, “I should go.”

“Can we talk first?”

He purses his lips.

I add quickly, “About Sophie.”

He turns on his heel and walks downstairs to the kitchen, leaving me to follow. He left only the lights under the cupboards on. The room is basked in a soft glow. A memory of the night I caught Colin and May kissing in the light of the fridge in her kitchen jumps into my head. I hope they’re happy. Colin deserves nothing less.

Angelo takes two glasses from the cupboard and pours wine from the open bottle. “I instructed Fabien to fit the spare room out for Sophie. It’ll look more like a child’s room when he’s done.”

“That’s a good idea,” I say, accepting the glass he offers me. “It will help her feel more at home.”

He takes a sip of wine, watching me from over the rim. “Her clothes should arrive tomorrow.”

“That’s great. What about her brothers?”

“The cave was empty. The fire was cold, and the footprints were at least a couple of days old, so I took a drive to the camp.”

I lean against the cupboard. “Where is this camp?”

“A good two hundred kilometers away.”

“Did you question your grandfather?”

“I didn’t have to.” He rubs his nape. “The boys were there.”

“What?” I exclaim. “How did they get there?”

“They hitchhiked. Caught a lift with a truck driver who dropped them not far from the road. They walked the last few kilometers.”

I can’t believe it. “They just left their little sister like that?”

“They said they saw you taking her in. They assumed she’d stay here.”

“That may be true, but what if it wasn’t the case? How could they be so irresponsible?”

He takes a long drink. “I don’t think they know the meaning of the word. Besides, they’re still young themselves.”

“So, what happened?” I ask, breathless with worry.

“The old man is willing to sign guardianship over to me.” His lips tilt with a wry smile. “For a sum of money of course.” Scoffing, he adds, “He doesn’t give a fuck about anything else.”

“What will happen when you have guardianship?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

I wipe a hand over my brow as I consider the consequences.

“It’s not your problem, Sabella. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“I can’t help being concerned about those kids.”

“Just focus on Sophie for now.”

“She has to go to school.”

His jaw hardens. “I know.”

“Has she ever been?”

“I put them in a boarding school in Bastia when I moved them into the house, but that didn’t work out. After that, I hired a private tutor who quickly quit. Before then, it’s hard to say. I doubt it. I got their birth certificates from the old man. She’s six years old. She should’ve been enrolled in primary school, but if you ask me, she’s never seen the inside of a classroom before Bastia.”

“What about the local school?”

He sips his wine, not looking at me.

“Surely the principal will understand?” I continue. “If you explain the situation, won’t he accept a late enrollment? Sophie is a bright little girl. She’ll catch up quickly.”

“The school year finishes in June. There are only four months left.”

“Then let her start officially with the new school year. What prevents you from putting her in school in the meantime? She’s been so isolated with no good role models. Being in an environment with other children of her age will do her good.”

He studies me from under his lashes. “Not if they make fun of her or bully her.”

“Why would they do that?”

He clenches his jaw. “Because of whom she is and where she comes from.”

I remember Isaac and the teasing. “I don’t want that for her either, but you have to try. Integration is important. Bullying and teasing can always be addressed.”

“I agree that she’ll have to learn how to handle those things. Bullying happens even between adults.”

“But?”

He puts his glass on the table. “A school in a different city may be a better solution.”

I gape at him. “In a different city? You want to send her away?”

“For her own good.”

“For her own good?” I whisper-exclaim. “She’s only just connected with you, her only family besides her brothers and great-grandfather, maybe the first person in her close circle who she perceives as being reliable. You can’t send her away now.”

“She’ll go back to boarding school. A different one. She’ll be well cared for.”

“No doubt,” I say, slamming my glass down on the counter. “She’ll be clothed and fed and educated.”

“Exactly,” he bites out.

“What about stability and affection and love?”

“There’s stability in routine. She’ll have that at a hostel. And she’ll be at my house on the weekends.”

“You can’t do it.” I ball my hands into fists. “That little girl has suffered more than enough in her short life. What she needs is a family she can depend on, not a tutor in some fancy girls’ school miles away from everything that’s familiar to her.”

Advancing on me, he asks, “Are you a child psychologist now?”

“No,” I say with thin lips. “But maybe you should consult one. You may be shocked to find that a psychologist may agree.”

“Sophie is not your problem and not your responsibility,” he says, animosity sparking in his eyes as he cups my nape. The touch isn’t a caress. It’s a dominant grip meant to intimidate. “She’s my niece, and I’ll decide what’s best for her.”

“I don’t mean to interfere, but—”

His voice hardens. “Then don’t.”

“Mr. Russo, you have to—”

“Stop fucking calling me that,” he says, giving me a shake.

“Then what am I supposed to call you, seeing that your name is off limits?”

Anger glimmers in his eyes. “You want to say it? Go ahead. Say my name.” When I only clamp my lips together, he shakes me harder. “Say it, damn you.”

I throw my oath at him. “I’ll never say your name again.”

He lets me go, reeling as if I’ve slapped him. Taking a step back, he stares at me with disbelief etched on his features. “Is this your way of getting back at me? You think you’ll hurt me with your little rebellion, with something so insignificant?”

It’s got nothing to do with a rebellion and everything to do with my pride. My self-preservation. But I don’t tell him that.

He closes the distance again, putting himself in front of me. “Go ahead. Play your game if it makes you feel better. I don’t give a fuck.” Splaying his fingers over my jaw, he brings our mouths together, brushing soft words over mine. “You want to know why?” I feel his smile as his lips curve. I feel its cruelty even before he says, “Because I don’t care.”

Jerking my face away, I step out of his touch.

His smile turns wider. Colder. “Don’t think just because my niece temporarily lives under this roof that you’ll get away with not doing what you’re supposed to be doing, which is greeting me naked on your knees. You’re two punishments behind, and I’ll collect them soon.”

With that promise, he turns and walks away, leaving an ugly hollowness in the air. His goal was inflicting injury, and I’d lie if I said he didn’t succeed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Angelo

The man I put in charge of watching my cousins enters my study and stands at attention in front of my desk. “You summoned me, sir?”

I close my laptop and give him my full attention. “Your report says nothing transpired at the new house today.”

He watches straight ahead, not looking into my eyes. “Nothing worth mentioning, sir.”

“They never left the house?”

“No, sir. Both your wife and niece stayed inside.”

I’m not reassured. Why, I don’t know. It’s not like Sabella to be so docile. However, she seems sincere about Sophie’s welfare. What she said about sending Sophie to a hostel does bother me. It’s not as if I haven’t had those thoughts myself. I eye the application for the prestigious girls’ school lying on my desk. This is the best way. I’m not going to submit my niece to the treatment my mother suffered her whole life.

“That will be all,” I say, waving him away. “Keep watching the property. Night and day. Set up a rotation

schedule with a couple of our best men, but keep the circle small. I don't want word of this to leak out."

"Yes, sir."

Heidi puts her head around the door when he's gone, looking a little too excited for my liking. "Ready?"

"Yes," I grunt, taking my jacket from the back of the chair as I stand. The sun is already sinking below the horizon, leaving a red glow in the window.

"I loaded the bags in the car. I'll meet you outside."

Heidi peppers me with questions about Sophie all the way to the new house. I only answer her because it's vital that she understands what to expect and how to handle the girl.

Sabella opens the door when we arrive. She gives Heidi a warm greeting and a hug while ignoring me.

"Angelo!" Sophie exclaims, rushing into the lounge but stopping short when her gaze falls on Heidi.

"Hey," I say, doing a double take.

She's dressed in clothes very similar to Sabella's—a sweatshirt, a pair of skinny jeans, and sneakers—but they're in her size. If anything, she looks frailer. The properly fitting clothes emphasizes how small she is for her age. Her short hair is neatly trimmed into a modern style, all the uneven bits gone, drawing attention to her pixie-like face.

Not wanting to make too big a deal of the change, I say, "You look nice."

She hides Beatrice behind her back as she stares at Heidi.

"You remember the lady I told you about?" I say. "This is Heidi."

“Hello, Sophie,” Heidi says with a big smile. “I’m glad to finally meet you. Mr. Russo told me a lot about you.”

Sophie looks at me. “He did?”

“He sure did,” Heidi replies. “He said you’d help me with some baking this weekend.”

“What kind of baking?” Sophie asks, narrowing her eyes.

“Gingerbread men.” Heidi takes a gingerbread man with a face and buttons drawn in glazed sugar from the bag and shows it to Sophie. “Like this one. What do you think?”

Sophie brings the doll from behind her back and holds it in front of the cookie. Whispering, she asks, “What do you think, Beatrice?”

Heidi, having been briefed on Beatrice, waits patiently. Sabella looks on with a soft smile.

Sophie lifts the doll to her ear. After a few beats, she says, “Beatrice says there needs to be gingerbread women too.”

Heidi’s smile stretches. “You’re right. There will absolutely be gingerbread women.” She hands Sophie the cookie. “Would you like to try it after dinner?”

Sophie studies the cookie. “If I take a bite, he’ll miss an arm or a leg.”

Bending down, Heidi tells her conspiratorially, “That’s why you have to eat the whole cookie. So that there are no armless or legless bits left.”

Sophie doesn’t look convinced.

“Why don’t you keep him for now, and you can decide later?” Heidi suggests.

“Okay,” Sophie says. “Must we put him on a plate, Sabella?”

“Yes, sweetheart.” Sabella holds out her hand. “Why don’t I put him on a plate and leave him in the kitchen while you show Mr. Russo your new room?”

Sophie puts the cookie on Sabella’s palm and pirouettes in front of me. “Look, Angelo. Fabien brought us new clothes and lots of things for my room. Beatrice likes him now. He’s funny.” She wraps her small fingers around my hand and pulls me toward the stairs. “Come look.”

Chuckling, I follow her upstairs to the room at the end of the hallway. Fabien did a great job. A sky-blue comforter and scatter cushions in all the colors of the rainbow cover the bed. Stuffed toys sit on the surfaces of the white-washed furniture. A darker blue rug with a couple of poufs forms an area for playing. The room is colorful without being overly bright. It’s a happy room fit for a young child. A temporary room, I remind myself.

Worry gnaws at me again when I think about moving Sophie to the school in Marseille. From the photos I’ve seen, the dormitory room is spacious and clean with lots of light. It’s an adequate room. The principal assured me it’s comfortable with an AC for the hot summers and central heating for the wet winters. It’s not a rainbow room full of fantasy animals, but she’ll get used to it. Children adapt fast. Fabien can create an even prettier room for her in my house, a room with frills and lace and a kitchenette with a tea set and all the things little girls like.

“What do you think?” she asks, tugging on my hand.

I try to remember what the room looked like before they moved in here and destroyed everything. I think it was white

with lilac touches. It's surprising how little of it I recall. Maybe it's because back then, the children were a concept instead of little humans in my mind. The house was a gift for my mother, not for them. Perhaps that's where I went wrong. I only wanted to please my mother without thinking it through. I never considered how a move would affect the children.

Smiling down at her, I say, "It's a beautiful room."

"I like it too." She pulls me to a doll's bed in the corner. "This is where Beatrice will sleep, but she's still sleeping with me until she's no longer scared."

"Is she still scared a lot?"

"Not as much now as before," she says, rocking the doll in one arm. "I think she likes it here."

I squeeze her hand. "That's good. As long as she remembers that her real room will be at my house."

She frowns. "Will Sabella come too?"

"Sabella's place is here."

"Why?"

"I already explained."

"Then Beatrice and I will stay here with her."

"We'll talk about it later. Come." I walk to the door. "It's time for dinner. Sabella and I are leaving early in the morning, so she can't go to bed late."

She pauses in mid-step. "I don't want her to go."

"We've already discussed this. She has to go." When her bottom lip starts to quiver, I say, "Why don't you bake Sabella a special gingerbread cookie? Think how happy that will make her when she gets back."

She tilts her face to the ceiling, seemingly considering the idea. After a moment, she says, “Like a heart?”

“Yes, a heart-shaped cookie.”

“Or a flower.”

“Why not both?”

“All right,” she says slowly. “But don’t tell her. It will spoil the surprise.”

“It’ll be our secret,” I say solemnly.

Pacified, she takes my hand again and lets me lead her to the kitchen where a dinner of beef roast, mashed potatoes, and beans are set out. Heidi joins us. We agreed that it’ll help if Sophie gets to know her better before we leave.

Heidi engages her in a conversation about the movies she’s seen here. Except for the fact that Sabella and I don’t exchange a word, the dinner passes amiably. Heidi is telling Sophie about *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, promising that they can watch it together, when Sophie says out of the blue, “Can I have a dog, Angelo? I want to walk my own dog.”

Sabella chokes on her wine.

“A dog?” I say.

“A small one.” Sophie looks at Sabella with pleading eyes. “He won’t take up much space. He can sleep in Beatrice’s bed. Please, Sabella.”

“We can discuss a dog when things are more stable,” I say carefully.

“Sabella doesn’t mind. She likes dogs. Don’t you Sabella?”

“Of course I won’t mind,” Sabella says. “But it’s for Mr. Russo to decide. This is his house, remember?”

I don’t know why the way my wife phrases that irks me so much. Heidi shoots me an accusing look, making her opinion on the matter known as if she hasn’t already told me multiple times.

“Can I have one for Christmas?” Sophie asks.

“That’s a discussion for later,” I say in a sterner tone. “Finish your food.”

Sophie heaves a sigh. “All right.” Swinging her legs, she says, “You won’t forget, Angelo?”

“No. I promise.”

Shoving a fork-full of potatoes in her mouth, she says, “Okay.”

Heidi brought chocolate mousse for dessert, which wins her more points with Sophie. When we’ve finished dinner, Heidi offers to tidy the kitchen while Sabella and I tuck Sophie in.

“Are you sleeping in your own house again?” Sophie asks when I kiss her forehead.

“Yes. I still have work to do.” I look at Sabella as I say, “I’ll be here at sunrise tomorrow. We have an early flight to catch.”

After saying goodnight, I close the door and follow my wife down the hallway. She enters her bedroom without looking at me. It wasn’t my plan to go inside, but her defiance sets my teeth on edge. She’s ignored me for long enough. Sadly for her, pretending I don’t exist isn’t going to make me disappear.

She gives a start at the click of the door when I close it behind me. She spins around, facing me quietly. When I turn the key in the lock, her gaze homes in on the action.

She doesn't run or cower when I cross the floor. She pulls her sweater over her head and reaches behind her to unclip her bra. Then she kicks off her sneakers and shimmies out of her jeans, socks, and panties.

I'm riveted to the spot, watching her naked body as she goes down on her knees and spreads her legs. Lifting her chin, she meets my gaze head-on, not cowering under the heat that must burn in my eyes as a dead giveaway of the lust firing through my veins.

I'm hard in a second flat. In the back of my mind, I'm aware of the fact that my niece is sleeping at the end of the hallway. But Heidi is here to take care of her if she wakes up or asks for a glass of water. I haven't had Sabella in too long. It's only been what? A day? Two? It feels like a fucking month.

I strip off my clothes. I'm naked before I stop in front of her. My hand is in her hair and my cock in her mouth before she has time to gasp. I'm using her, muffling her sounds with my dick shoved down her throat, but that's not how I want her.

I rip my cock from her lips and slam a hand over her mouth as I yank her up by her arm. She doesn't protest as I march her to the bathroom. I close the door and turn the water on in the shower to drown out any noise we may make, but I don't even make it to the point where the water runs strongly. I lock my hands around her waist and lift her onto the vanity. Bottles fall over and tubes roll off the edge.

Stepping between her legs, I grab the base of my cock and position the head at her slit. I watch as I slowly part and finally

stretch her until her pussy has swallowed my length. When I thrust, I study her face. She's so fucking beautiful, so perfect when she closes her eyes and bites her lip. She's preventing me from seeing her pleasure and hearing her sounds, withholding those expressions like she's refusing to say my name. So, I fuck her harder. I yank her ass to the edge of the counter and slam into her with enough force for her eyes to fly open and her breath to catch on a hitch.

“Say it,” I demand, sliding my cock over and over into her slick pussy.

She moans, but she doesn't give me words.

Locking one hand on her hip, I wrap the other around her neck. “Say it.”

She refuses, even when I squeeze. Even when I pivot my hips faster.

A trickle of sweat rolls over my temple. “Say it, damn you.”

Her eyes go out of focus either from the lack of oxygen or from my rough fucking—maybe from both—and still, she refuses me. Her denial twists me up inside. Because I recall a time when she laid her hand on my cheek and whispered my name in her moment of pleasure. Because I lied when I said I didn't care. Because I want that again so badly it aches with a physical pain in my chest. But just like she'd rather suffocate than say it, I'd sooner die than admit it.

All I can do is steal her ability to speak by crashing our mouths together. By taking away her speech, I pretend that I'm in control. I pretend I'm the one not giving her a choice.

I let her breathe as I kiss her, but I don't take my hand off her throat. I keep her head pinned against the mirror and dip

my free hand between our bodies. She's balancing her weight on her arms, her upper body slightly bent backwards with her breasts pressed out and her legs wide open when she comes. I pull back to admire the view. Her back arches like a bow, every toned muscle pulled tight in a beautiful display of ecstasy.

Having taken care of her pleasure, I chase mine too. I batter her body with harsh, bitter thrusts until release finally comes. The climax doesn't sate me. The need lingers. I can't put a name to it. I only know shooting my load was powerful on a physical level yet unsatisfying on a deeper one.

Resting my forehead against hers, I catch my breath. I slide my hand from her neck to cup her breast. I drag my palm over her stomach and lower, joining the other that's still caught between our bodies. I push her thighs apart before I pull out so that I can watch my cum leak from her pussy and run down her legs. She blushes, but she doesn't fight me. She sags against the mirror, looking defeated and ravished.

How did we get to this point? Have we always been so angry, so depraved? Or is it just me?

Closing her legs, I lift her off the counter and put her on her feet. She doesn't meet my gaze. She steps past me, opens the shower door, and gets into the cubicle. When she closes the glass door behind her, she vanishes in a thick billow of fog, the picture of her already fading. Always unobtainable. Always out of reach. Even with all the marks I've put on and inside her.

No matter.

She's mine.

She'll never escape that fate.

The thought does little to soothe me as I clean up at the basin, gather my clothes, and get dressed. When I say goodbye to Heidi in the kitchen, my features are schooled, my expression empty and my heart already cold.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sabella

The Eiffel Tower is a dazzling display of twinkling lights from the car window. The driver who fetched us at the airport is speeding along the Seine River. My husband sits next to me, engrossed in his phone. As always, he's tense. The most relaxed I've seen him was with Sophie. I'm not even sure *that* was real. Maybe he was just pretending to put her at ease.

I steal a sidelong glance at his strong, handsome features. Angelo didn't tell me our destination when we caught a flight in Bastia this morning. We landed in Marseille. The city brought back unpleasant memories. My husband left me under guard at the same hotel where we'd stayed on our wedding night. Then he disappeared to conduct business. He only came back for me after dark, whisking me to the airport again to board a national flight.

I didn't expect to land in Paris. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. I look through the window again. At night, the city is beautiful. I suspect it will be more breathtaking in the daylight, even in the starkness of winter with the plane trees stripped of their leaves. Or maybe especially because of that.

The driver drops us off at the Ritz where the cocktail party will take place. A bellboy takes our luggage and escorts us to one of the suites. Angelo tips him and locks the door when he's gone.

“Hungry?” he asks, scrutinizing me with his dark eyes.

I walk to the window and draw back the curtains. “No.”

People wrapped up in coats and hats walk arm-in-arm in the street below, couples on their way to an exciting or happy destination. I never thought I'd be in Paris and not be excited. Not happy.

“I'm going to check on the security downstairs,” he says. “We have to be ready in an hour.”

I turn and rest my back against the cold windowpane. “How badly do you want Thomas Powell to sign this deal?”

His eyes tighten in the corners. “I told you it's important to me.”

“If I help you, I want something in return.”

He raises a brow. “Are you negotiating with me, wife?”

I shrug. “If I play my part in convincing Mr. Powell to do business with you, it's only fair that you do something for me.”

“I disagree with your understanding of what's fair and what I owe you, but I'm curious.” He studies me with a tilted head. “What do you want?”

“I want you to give the local school a chance.”

A tinge of anger laces his tone. “Don't you want me to send Sophie to a prestigious school and give her a better chance at having a good future?”

“I think sending her away is a mistake.”

“Yes,” he draws. “You made that clear.”

Lifting my chin, I ask, “Do we have a deal?”

He comes closer. “What if I say no?”

I hold his gaze bravely, without blinking. “Then you’re on your own tonight.”

He narrows his eyes. “I’ll drag you to that ballroom if I must.”

“Oh, I’ll come. Just don’t expect me to pave the way for you. Isn’t that why you brought me? To smooth-talk Mr. Powell? To do something useful with my family name?”

“Sabella.”

I ignore the warning that’s clear in the way he says my name. “Deal or no deal?”

An unfriendly smile curves his lips. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“If it doesn’t work out at the local school, you can try the other one. At least then you’ll know. What do you have to lose? The way I look at it, the only thing you’ll miss out on if you decline my proposal is a chance at putting that deal to bed.”

“Fine,” he grumbles. “I suppose you’ll make an effort if I dangle a carrot in front of your nose.”

“I’ll try my best,” I say, keeping my head high as I grab the clothes bag with the gown and the portable suitcase with my toiletries on my way to the bathroom.

I only blow out a breath when I lock myself in. The door in the bedroom slams hard enough for the sound to reach my

ears. Will it always be like this? Will the sight of my face alone be enough to ignite my husband's anger? Will I always see the distaste in his eyes when he looks at me? The answer to all those questions is yes. Yes, because I know what I feel when I remember what he did.

I shake off the hurt, reminding myself of my promise to make my own happiness. It's more difficult than I thought, especially with such a controlling husband.

While I get ready, I ponder his decision to send Sophie away. He's good with her. I do believe he has her best interest at heart. I understand why he wants to spare her any potential teasing. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away though. Addressing it is the only way to make it disappear forever. Sophie has to learn to stand up for herself. The other kids have to learn to accept her. I'm confident she'll earn not only the people's respect but also their liking. And if anyone has a problem with her, they'll have to go through me first.

As I step into the red dress, I think back to how Angelo behaved with Sophie. He's different with her, kind and gentle. It's beautiful. I like watching him with her. It reminds me so much of my dad that tears spring to my eyes. What kind of a father will Angelo make? Hold on. What am I thinking? Children will never be in the cards for us, not with the life we're leading. Pushing the notion away, I focus on applying my make-up and doing my hair.

When my husband knocks on the bathroom door forty-five minutes later, I'm ready. I give my reflection a last once-over in the mirror. The red dress is made of a light material that glimmers softly. The cut is tight-fitting, dipping low in both the front and the back. It's impossible to wear a bra, but my breasts are small and firm enough not to need one. I applied a

dusting of eyeshadow and a darker lipstick. The make-up is natural but suitable for a fancy dinner. I took my hair up, leaving my neck bare. I chose not to wear jewelry. The dress is striking enough.

“Sabella.” Angelo knocks again. “We have to leave in fifteen minutes.” When I open the door, he drags a gaze over me. “You look beautiful. Fabien did well with the dress.”

“Thank you.” I grab the shoes and the matching clutch bag Fabien provided. “The bathroom is all yours.”

“In a minute.”

His tone makes me pause.

“I have something for you,” he says, taking a flat, narrow box from the dresser. He flips it open, revealing a ruby and diamond choker. “Turn around.”

Obediently, I say, “That looks expensive.”

He walks up behind me. “It is.”

“What if I lose it?”

He drapes the necklace around my neck and secures the clasp. “You won’t. The fastening system is secure.”

I trace the ridges of the big ruby in the center. “Fabien said you’d get something on loan. I don’t want to take unnecessary risks.”

Brushing a thumb over my shoulder, he says, “It’s not on loan. It’s yours.”

I turn around quickly. “Why?”

His expression becomes closed-off. He shrugs, the gesture casual, but the energy underlying his demeanor is strained. “It goes with your dress.”

The reply disappoints me. What did I expect? For him to look at me as someone he doesn't hate? Not for the first time, I wonder how things would've been if my dad had simply allowed us to get married. If he'd honored the deal, would Angelo and I have had a chance at happiness? If my family didn't kill his and he didn't kill mine, could we have looked at each other differently? Will I ever see approval in his eyes instead of contempt?

He steps away. "You'll find matching earrings on the dresser." Backtracking to the bathroom, he adds, "I need a shower. I'll be ready in ten."

The earrings are as classically beautiful as the necklace with a big ruby surrounded by smaller diamonds. I fit the earrings and dab perfume on my wrists. I wish I had a phone to check on Sophie. I wouldn't mind calling my family either. Angelo only let me speak to Ryan that once.

Exactly ten minutes later, he enters the room dressed in a bespoke suit cut to the latest fashion. The pants and jacket are fitted, showing off his muscular shape. A crisp white shirt and black bowtie round off the outfit.

He offers me his arm. "Shall we?"

The cocktail party is hosted in the big ballroom. The guests are dressed in flamboyant evening gowns and tuxedos. My mom would've approved. Angelo takes two glasses of champagne from a waiter and offers me one.

"Thank you," I say, scanning the crowd, not that I'll find any familiar faces. My dad never introduced me or anyone in our close family to the players in his business circles. The reason why he took such pains to keep his professional and private lives apart leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Whatever

happened to Daisy and Laura, my dad's second family? How is Mom coping with that?

"All right?" Angelo asks softly in my ear, brushing a thumb down my spine.

I shiver. "Can I have a phone?"

"No." He sips his champagne, keeping his gaze trained on the partygoers. "You shouldn't ask when you know the answer."

"Can we call Heidi?" I stare at his profile, noticing the straight line of his nose, the high cheekbone, and the square jaw. "I just want to know how Sophie is doing."

His eyes soften marginally as he turns his face toward me. "She'll be fine. You have to stop worrying about her."

"What about my family?"

The warmth vanishes from his gaze. "What about them?"

"Will you let me call them again?"

"If you behave." He brings the glass to his lips, watching me with an intense, dark look as he swallows. "You better put your best foot forward tonight."

A lump lodges in my throat, pulsing there with suppressed anger. "Do you expect me to embarrass you?"

His lips quirk. "I'll put nothing past you."

Before I can reply, a group of people descend on us. Angelo introduces me to everyone as Mrs. Russo, his newly acquired wife. I swallow my dislike at being portrayed as a possession, which, in truth, I am.

I've never been a fan of cocktail parties. I almost missed my own sixteenth birthday party because I hate these

gatherings so much. Come to think of it, if I hadn't been late, I wouldn't have run into Angelo at the service entrance. He wouldn't have manipulated my mom into letting me keep my stray cat, Pirate, and I wouldn't have fallen so hard for him that night.

If only I'd been more like Mattie, I would've been dressed in the gown Mom had chosen, and I would've been mingling with the guests by the time he arrived. My introduction to my future husband would've been very different. Although, I doubt I would've been unaffected. Angelo's presence is too huge to leave anyone untouched. I'd like to think I would've been repelled, but deep down, I know that's not true. I would've been curious about him regardless. I would've let my heart rule my mind ten times over. If I'd met him in a hundred different scenarios, I would've left my heart right there at his feet every single time. It's what happened afterward that changed everything.

Absent-mindedly, I place a hand over my stomach and slide it down to rest over the mark Angelo burned into my skin. He steps in front of me, his gaze trained on the action, and brushes my hand away to trace the mark with his thumb. The touch is too intimate for a public gathering, but I can't bring myself to push him off me because underneath his fingertip, my skin tingles. I need his hand there for reasons I can't explain.

As he looks over my head, he pulls away and sets his features in a polite expression. I turn sideways. A man in his late fifties with an attractive woman on his arm makes his way to the bar.

Angelo offers me a hand. "Come."

He intertwines our fingers and pulls me across the busy floor. The woman veers off toward the ladies' room while the man heads straight for the liquor table.

"Mr. Powell," my husband says as he almost bumps into the man, pretending not to have seen him. "I didn't expect to run into you here."

He's lying so smoothly, it's hard not to believe him.

"Mr. Russo," the man says, pulling up his nose. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

He makes to walk away, but Angelo stops him with a hand on his arm. "Have you met my wife, Sabella Edwards-Russo?"

"Oh. Yes." The man turns to me with renewed interest. "Mrs. Russo." He shakes my hand. "What a pleasure to meet you. I was a big admirer of your father. My condolences for your loss. I do miss his company."

Tension creeps into my shoulders at the mention of my dad's death, of his murder that was staged as a suicide. Angelo places a hand on my lower back as if sensing my turmoil. Does he think I'll take comfort from the gesture?

"Thank you," I say, fighting the urge to shove Angelo away. "I miss him too."

The pressure of my husband's palm increases on my flesh, but the smile he offers Mr. Powell doesn't waver.

"I have no doubt he would've been here tonight if he was alive," Mr. Powell says.

"My dad was always a big supporter of marine life conservation. I'm sure he would've donated handsomely." I

give Angelo a sweet smile. “But my husband will match your donation.”

Mr. Powell raises a brow. “Is that so?” He glances in Angelo’s direction.

“Of course,” Angelo says, meeting my smile with a tightlipped one.

“That business with the second family came as a shock.” Mr. Powell shakes his head. “Who would’ve thought?”

I stiffen to the point of feeling as if my spine is about to snap. Angelo rubs his palm over my back.

“Say, aren’t you studying marine biology?” Mr. Powell asks. “Your father was boasting about it the last time I saw him.”

“I was,” I say, trying hard not to let my smile falter.

“Was?” he exclaims. “Why on earth did you drop out? You should never be a quitter. Always finish what you start, no matter what it is.”

“Things changed when Sabella and I got married.” Angelo brushes his hand up my arm and over my shoulder to cup my nape in a possessive hold. “First of all, she moved to Corsica. Secondly, we’re hoping to start a family soon.”

I look at my husband quickly, heat pushing up in my neck. He has no right to flat out lie about something like that.

“Ah.” Mr. Powell frowns. “Well, it’s a pity. You’re still young. There’s plenty of time for a family. Then again, I suppose a good education doesn’t carry the same importance with everyone.”

Angelo’s fingers tighten on my neck. I clear my throat. The conversation isn’t going how it should. Instead of getting

my husband in Mr. Powell's good books, I'm only making the business tycoon's opinion of Angelo worse.

"There you are," a woman says, walking toward us with a big smile.

"This is my wife." Mr. Powell looks at her adoringly. "Letitia, let me introduce you to Sabella and Angelo Russo. You remember Benjamin Edwards, don't you?"

"Ben's daughter," she cries out, taking my hand. "I'm so happy to meet you."

"Likewise," I say.

"Sabella dropped out of school to have babies," Mr. Powell says to his wife. "What do you think of that?"

She gives him a chiding look. "I think everyone must do what's right for them." Swatting his arm, she says, "Don't be so judgmental, you old snob."

Mr. Powell winks. "She keeps me on my toes. I wouldn't be half the man I am without her." Kissing her cheek, he asks, "Would you like a drink, darling? I was just about to get you something from the bar."

"Allow me," Angelo says.

"You're too kind." Mrs. Powell hooks her arm around her husband's. "Gin and tonic, please. No ice."

"Mr. Powell?" my husband asks.

"I'll have what she's having," Mr. Powell says with a grin.

"Coming up." Angelo plants a kiss on my neck before whispering in my ear, "I'll be right back." He deposits his empty glass on the nearest table and makes his way to the bar.

“He looks smitten with you,” Mrs. Powell says when he’s out of earshot.

“Oh.” I shift my weight, trying not to show how uncomfortable I am with that untruth. “I won’t say that.” Trying to change the subject, I say, “My husband told me you’re putting measures in place to prevent the entanglement of dolphins in fishing nets.”

“Indeed.” Mr. Powell rolls on the balls of his feet. “We launched a non-profit organization that provides acoustic pingers to fishing boats.” He shoots his wife a proud look. “In fact, it was Letitia’s idea. We’re also advocating against the use of gill nets, testing new materials as we speak.”

“I’d love to hear more.”

“Are you also a dolphin lover?” Mrs. Powell asks just as Angelo arrives with two drinks that he hands to the couple.

“I love all sea life, but I have a special affinity for sharks,” I say.

“You too?” Mrs. Powell exclaims. “So do I. They must be the most misunderstood poor creatures on Earth.”

“I always tried to educate the public whenever I could.”

“Did you manage to make a change?” she asks. “It’s difficult to expel the old urban legends.”

“I gave speeches at the aquarium when I was a student in Cape Town. I dare say I managed to convert a few souls. But there will always be people who can’t tell fact from fiction.”

“Exactly,” she says, snapping her fingers. “That’s just how I feel. It’s very difficult to make a real difference. I’m working with a team of scientists on writing a few articles that are due

for publication on online sites and in seaside accommodation brochures. Would you like to give me your input?"

"I'd love that," I say. "If you'd like, I can send you my notes. Maybe some of the data will be useful."

"Yes, please. You do that." Turning to my husband, she says, "This one is a good catch, excuse the pun. You better hold onto her."

"Oh, I intend on doing that," he replies darkly.

"We should donate more money to shark research," she says. "It's extremely worrying that no less than seventy-five percent of the species are in danger of extinction."

"That's a great idea." I nudge Angelo. "Don't you agree?"

"Absolutely." Angelo nods at Mrs. Powell. "Seeing how passionate my wife is about the subject, I'll organize a monthly donation when we get home."

"That's very generous of you." Mr. Powell scrutinizes him. "Businesses like ours that rely on sea freight have a responsibility to conserve the ocean life."

"Indeed," Angelo says. "All cargo ships should switch to low-sulphur fuel and implement an exhaust scrubber system. I only use the best anti-fouling hull paint for my own ships."

Mr. Powell raises his glass. "Cheers to that, my good man."

"I hear you're a keen sailor yourself," Angelo remarks.

Perking up, Mr. Powell asks, "Do you sail?"

"I do. As a matter of fact, I come from a long history of sailors."

“In that case, I have to introduce you to another dear friend who’s a sailboat fanatic.” Mr. Powell turns to his wife. “Will you excuse us for a moment, darling? I don’t want to bore you with boat talk.”

She waves a hand. “You go along. Sabella and I have much to discuss, it seems.”

The men wander off, engrossed in their conversation.

“Do you mind if we sit for minute?” she asks. “I’m suffering from bad blood circulation, and the old legs don’t support standing for so long.”

“Of course,” I say, taking her arm and leading her to a cocktail table with a couple of chairs.

After making herself comfortable, she launches into a conversation about sharks. When I tell her about my one and only encounter with a great white that I filmed, she asks if she may see the video. I make up an excuse of having left the USB key with the clip with my marine vertebrate professor in South Africa. Our exchange is stimulating. I’m enjoying myself so much that I don’t see the time go by.

When the men return, Angelo’s broad smile tells me he succeeded in his goal. We shake hands with a promise to arrange a get-together on Angelo’s yacht in the summer. As the Powells have never visited Corsica, they undertake to sail there from Marseille.

We greet a few more people while nibbling on the finger food the waiters offer. My husband chats a couple of minutes with each, just enough not to appear rude, but now that he’s achieved his aim, I sense his urgency to escape the party. He did tell me on the night we met that, like me, he didn’t care much for them, especially not birthday parties.

Time and again, my gaze lands on the Powells as they do their round of the room. The pride in Thomas Powell's eyes when he looks at his wife fills me with longing for the same. His affection for her is obvious. They seem so happy. I want someone to look at me like that too. I want to know what it feels like to be loved and respected by the man who shares my bed.

"Would you like another drink?" Angelo asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I turn my face to him. "I've had enough, thank you."

His mouth lifts in one corner. "I recall a time when you didn't say no to champagne. On the contrary."

"That was different." I tense at the memory. "I was nervous."

Taking my empty glass from my hand, he brushes a thumb over my cheek. Something dark and heated slips into his voice. "Did I make you nervous, *cara*?"

"You know you did."

His deep timbre drops another octave. "How about now? Do I still make you nervous?"

I swallow. Quoting his words from earlier, I say, "You shouldn't ask questions if you know the answers."

He holds my gaze as he puts the glass aside. Not saying a word, he takes my hand and leads me upstairs. The closer we get to the suite, the harder my heart beats in my chest. His intentions changed in the blink of an eye, going from networking to something entirely different, and as much as it frightens me, I can't say it doesn't excite me too.

Another memory jumps to mind, the one of the night he took my virginity. That was so wrong. I was drunk, and he was angry. Yet everything about it seemed right too, even the part where he branded me. A very dark, very depraved part of me has always been drawn to that side of him. Even now, as he locks the door and ushers me into the bedroom, the sinister promise in his eyes captivates me. His smell wraps around me just as of old, a mixture of cedar and citrus that holds both ecstatic and bad memories, but it's no less addictive.

"I owe you two punishments," he says, pulling his bowtie from the collar of his shirt.

Zings of anticipation needle my stomach. Heat gathers between my legs. Perhaps it's the alcohol, but I'm more turned on and less scared. Less angry. I realize with a start that I crave this, whatever he's got in store for me. I yearn for this when he gives me a choice, and he does. He stands, waiting. When I don't back away or say anything, he closes the distance and puts our bodies flush together.

"What shall I do to you, *bella*?" he asks in low voice. "Make you kneel? Swallow my cock? Spank you? Fuck your ass?"

My inner muscles clench. I both shake my head and nod, not sure what I'm asking. I didn't enjoy our wedding night, but I did like it when he fed me his second-hand smoke. Not the smoking part. The rest of it. I liked how he took control. I liked the bite of pain with my pleasure.

So when he asks, "Shall I decide?" I nod again.

He cups my jaw. "I think you liked the last two options." He drops his gaze to my breasts. "Your nipples turned rock-hard when I mentioned those." He releases my face and brushes his knuckles over a hardened tip as if to affirm his

assessment. “I can see your tits through the fabric.” Gripping the front of the dress, he tears it right down the middle to my navel.

A gasp catches in my throat.

“No one should ever see you in this dress again. I didn’t like how the men stared at you. Did you notice?”

I shake my head.

He juts his chin at me. “Take it off.”

I step out of the dress.

“Thong too,” he says. “Keep the jewelry. I’ll let you decide if you take off the shoes.”

The heels make me feel sexy. I slide the thong down my thighs and over the elegant red evening shoes.

“Perfect,” he says, cutting a path with his gaze over me from top to bottom. He takes a cushion from the sofa and throws it at the edge of the bed. “Kneel.”

He grips my hand and helps me down.

“Push your upper body down on the bed. I want to see your ass and your pussy.”

I glance at him from over my shoulder as I comply. My throat goes dry when he unbuckles his belt. I remember how much it hurt, but I also remember the heat that crawled into my skin and through my body to gather between my legs.

“Mr. Russo,” I croak, suddenly scared.

“Shh,” he says, pulling the belt from the loops of his waistband and settling me with a hand on my lower back. “You deserve this punishment.”

“Do I?” I whisper.

“Did you greet me as you should?”

“You know why I didn’t.”

He bends over me and kisses my shoulder. “Don’t make excuses. You will always greet me naked and on your knees. If there are people in the house, you will do it in the privacy of our bedroom.”

My mind gets stuck on the *our*. *Our bedroom*. Not your bedroom. Something warm unfurls in my belly. I’m sick for wanting this. I’m weak for craving his affection. His approval. For wanting what the Powells have.

But when the first lash falls over my ass cheeks, I close my eyes and forget everything. Heat blooms over my skin, but it doesn’t hurt. Not much. Not enough to draw tears. Only enough to want more. He doesn’t disappoint me. He aims the next blow with the same meticulous force, hitting the back of my thighs. More heat seeps into my skin. When the belt falls more gently between my legs, my clit swells and throbs. I’m wet already, the need that builds in my lower body demanding more friction.

He times the next three swats perfectly, one following after the other over the fleshy part of my globes, leaving me breathless and moaning. He taps my clit with the leather, warning me of his intention, and deals another soft blow right between my thighs, following it up with one on the seam of my ass.

“Will you kneel for me, *bella*?”

“Yes,” I cry out, pressing my hips against the bed in an effort to find release.

“Will you take off your clothes and spread your legs to show me what’s mine?”

“Yes,” I moan.

He whacks me a little harder, stealing my breath, and then the buckle makes a clang as the belt hits the floor. I open my eyes and push my cheek against the cool covers. He unzips and pushes his pants with his briefs over his hips. His cock juts out, hard and thick. He spits in his palm before rubbing himself.

“Do you want this, *cara*?”

“Yes,” I say again. I always wanted him. I hate that I do, but I can’t help myself. I can’t reprogram my body’s reaction.

“Touch yourself,” he commands, teasing my dark hole with the smooth head of his cock.

I slip a hand between my legs and rub my clit the way he usually does.

“That’s right,” he says, stroking his palm up my spine. “Open for me.”

His fingers are on top of mine, playing with me, manipulating my movements. I open my legs wider, giving him better access. He gathers my arousal and traces the line of my slit all the way to my back hole. I expect him to take me there, but he shoves his cock with a single thrust inside my pussy. The pressure on my dark hole doesn’t vanish. It turns more intense, the fullness increasing as the muscles stretch and finally give with a pop.

I look at him, battling to focus. He’s fucking my pussy while stretching my ass with a finger. Two fingers. The sensations are incredible. Overwhelming. I’m burning up inside. Flames crawl over my skin.

He pumps with a leisurely pace, taking his time to prepare me. The pleasure builds already, and just when I think it’s

going to be too late, that I'm going to come, he pulls out and replaces his fingers with his cock.

"Go on," he bites out, sinking inch by inch into my dark hole. "Play with your clit."

The words barely register. I don't know how I even understand, how I manage to touch myself as he increases his pace. It doesn't hurt less. It hurts differently. Darker. More desperately.

"Please," I say, the breath leaving my lungs with every slap of his groin against my ass.

"Say it, Sabella."

I can't. Even if it means he won't let me come. Never.

I'm close. He pushes my hand away, massaging my clit as he pumps harder. Sweet release coils through my lower body. My inner muscles clench so hard they suck him deeper, breaking his rhythm. He utters a curse and lets loose. I come with a cry as he grunts out his climax and spills his release inside me.

It's different.

I'm not sure what changed or why. All I know is that I'm boneless. Spent.

He pulls out and spreads my ass cheeks, always liking to watch. I turn my face to look at him, smiling internally at his animalistic behavior. He's such a pervert. Such a beast. And I let him watch, giving him a show, because I love it.

He adjusts his clothes and bends over me, covering my back with his chest. He's still wearing his jacket. He hasn't even taken it off. Gathering me in his arms, he carries me to the shower. He lets the water run warm while he undresses.

Like the first time, he washes me, and I soak it up because I need this care.

When we're clean, he wraps me up in a towel and drapes one around his waist. He handles me as if I'm made of glass, kissing my lips and my collarbone as he towels me dry before putting me to bed. I'm already dozing off when he slips under the covers next to me. The last thing I register before a deep, dreamless sleep claims me is how safe I feel in his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Angelo

Sunlight already streams through a gap between the curtains when I wake up. I squint. Doesn't housekeeping close the fucking curtains when they turn down the bed at night? Then I remember Sabella drawing them open to look down at the street.

Sabella.

Her body is supple and warm in my arms, her back pressed against my chest. And I don't want to move. I want to stay like this until she wakes up and then some more. I'm well aware that I'm breaking another promise I made myself. I keep on breaking rules and promises when I'm with her. I keep on disappointing myself, proving how weak my will is, because that's what she does to me.

If I'd met her as a random person and not my destined wife, would I have felt the same about her? I can't be certain. I only know possessiveness and obsession tormented me from the moment I laid my eyes on her. I've been true to her since my father announced she was my betrothed. I was only fourteen years old. I've never looked at another woman, even

when Sabella was nothing but a concept in my mind and a promise to be fulfilled in the distant future.

But from the moment I saw her, I wanted her. I desired her when I shouldn't have, when she wasn't a day older than sixteen. I waited for her, counting the days until she turned eighteen. And when I finally took her, I knew I'd never get enough. I waited another year to put a ring on her finger, which, looking back, felt like the longest year of my life. And now she's here, in my arms, the woman who's plotting my downfall.

The woman who's destined to destroy me.

As always, it's a bitter pill to swallow. I can eliminate Lavigne and remove the threat—and in good time, I will—but there will always be another Lavigne, someone else in the force willing to make a deal.

I'm bone-fucking-tired. I'm tired of fighting and pushing and keeping her at a distance. I'm tired of being on my guard twenty-four-seven, making damn sure I don't arm her with the ammunition she needs. This business of watching and waiting for the moment she betrays me again is exhausting. I don't think I've ever been this worn out, not even when I took over my father's business and worked eighteen-hour days.

I think about last night, about who my wife met and who she spoke to. This is legit business. The people who were invited aren't criminals like me. There wasn't anything to hide from her, which is the only reason I brought her. Her choices are placing enormous limitations on our life. I can't take her anywhere without analyzing every minute detail of the event—who will be there, who they're connected to, and how she may use what they say. I can't let her live under my roof.

And now there's Sophie. Fuck. As well as the other children. Sophie will be devastated that Sabella can't live with us. My niece feels safe with Sabella. She likes her. They made a connection. I can't deny that Sabella is good with her. Pride warms my chest. My wife will make an excellent mother. That, in itself, is the biggest fucking problem of all, because when there are children, I'll have to separate them from their mother.

The thought physically hurts. I have good memories of my mother taking care of us. Those times were special, even if I didn't tell her and show her enough gratitude. My children won't make the same memories with their mother. Their mother will always be banished, living in a house at the far end of the property, and they will live in their rightful place with me.

It's not ideal. It's not conducive for a healthy childhood, but she doesn't leave me a choice. During the week, they'll be under my care. I'll make sure they're properly educated and that their every need is met. We'll live like a divorced couple with Sabella getting the weekend visitation rights. Even then, I'll have to be careful, making sure she doesn't get information on me via the children. Because if there's one thing I'll never allow, it's letting her run to freedom and taking any child of mine away from me.

The fucked-up situation weighs down on me. The complications keep on piling up. I'm worried that the whole house of cards is going to come tumbling down. Sometimes, I feel that a pending doom is hanging over our heads, the cloud ready to burst and shower us in a shitstorm. The darkness keeps creeping up, blackening the edges of the picture of our future in my head. I can't shake this premonition that it's all

going to fall to pieces, that it's not a bullet that's going to slay me but my weakness for Sabella.

Sabella stirs, sighing softly in her sleep.

Even with the thoughts milling in my head, I tighten my arms around her. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. Making her kneel started out as a way of humiliating her. A punishment. Last night, I turned it into something different. I turned it into a game of submission and domination. I get off on it. I get off on the control but also on taking care of her.

She stretches, pushing her ass against my groin. My cock has been hard since I blinked myself awake. I'd love nothing more than rolling her on her stomach, pinning her down, and fucking her senseless, but we have a flight to catch.

Kissing the shell of her ear, I whisper, "Wake up, *cara*."

She utters a small protest. It hurts me to deny her sleep. We both need the rest, but a glance at my watch tells me we're already running late.

"Wake up," I say, lust turning my voice thick.

When I nip her earlobe, she opens her eyes.

I lick away the sting of my teeth. "We've got to go in fifteen."

She turns on her back and looks at me. Her beautiful brown eyes are warm and fuzzy with sleep. Dreamy with desire. Her naked body is a temptation too big to resist.

For a torturing moment, I imagine lifting her onto my cock and making her ride me, but the clock is ticking.

Fuck it.

I'll reschedule the flight.

Her eyes flare when I lock my hands around her waist and roll onto my back, bringing her on top of me. She's wide awake now, no longer soft and sleepy. Her gaze comes alive with awareness and need. She's hot and demanding when she sits up and straddles me. I let it be, letting her fulfill my fantasy.

She looks at my cock as she feels her way around it, stroking the length before tracing the tip. A groan catches in my chest when she cups my balls and squeezes like a wicked tease. She pumps me in her fist and catches the precum that spills from the tip on her finger. I nearly combust as she sticks that finger in her mouth and tastes me while giving me the hottest, dirtiest of looks.

I'm done.

Slain.

Grabbing her waist, I lift her onto her knees. She wraps a hand around the base of my cock and guides the head to her pussy. She doesn't go slowly. No. The vixen impales herself on my cock in one swift downward swoop of her hips. I cup her breasts, filling my palms as she starts to move. Leaning back, she takes me deeper. Her soft, urgent moans fill the room. I want to slam into her—hard—but I force myself to let her set the pace.

She slides up and down, rubbing her clit over the coarse hair on my pubic bone. I smooth a hand down her body to trace my mark. The lines are embossed under my thumb. My cock twitches inside her as possession sparks in every molecule of my body.

Mine.

Forever.

No matter how.

No matter what sins I have to commit.

I want her to say it as she rocks her hips faster. Already tasting the disappointment on my tongue, I don't ask. I understand why she won't. I understand what I've broken. It's my punishment to live with, and what an effective one it is. Just how much it pains me, she'll never know.

"I'm close," she says, her smile almost shy.

Fuck, I love this woman. I love everything about her.

I still, breaking my rhythm.

I love her.

The thought is foreign. Heavy. Yet also light. Miraculous. Scary.

The knowledge pierces me in a million different ways, settling with a solid weight in my mind and a feather-light touch in my heart.

I love her.

I think I always have. At first, I only loved the idea of her. Later, I fell in love with the girl. Now, she's a part of me. She's been a part of me from the day I learned about her existence. I can't pretend otherwise any longer. I can't hate her, not even if she destroys me.

Threading one hand through her hair, I pull her face to mine and kiss her lips. I move my other hand from the seal on top of her skin to the button that triggers her pleasure and make her come. The minute her pussy clenches on my cock, I shoot. I jerk my hips up, punching deeper. Never able to get enough.

Before she can escape, I press a palm on her lower back. We're laying skin to skin, our bodies connected and her breasts flattened on my chest. She rests her cheek on my heart while I play with her hair, unwilling to end the moment. But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end.

Too soon, she pushes off me and sits up, still straddling me. My cock slips from her body.

A flush darkens her cheeks. "I think we missed our flight."

I grin even as a strange kind of sadness rips through my ribcage. "I think you're right."

She hooks her hair behind her ear. "Shower?"

It's a timid way of asking if I'll join her.

Not wanting to kill the buzz with the heaviness of my sentiments, I slap her ass playfully. "Give me a minute to order breakfast. You didn't eat much last night."

She leans over, lifts the hotel phone from the receiver, and hands it to me.

I ogle her tits and the triangle between her spread legs as I order two full English breakfasts. Her blush deepens, but she lets me look. I've long since figured out she likes it when I stare.

Stretching to replace the phone, I gently bite her nipple. She yelps. The tip grows hard on my tongue. She tastes delicious. I should carry her to the shower, but instead I suck more of the plump curve into my mouth. Greedier, I bite harder.

This time, she moans. She spears her fingers through my hair and holds me to her, letting me devour her. A groan tears from my chest. Not enough. Never.

I shift to the edge of the bed with her on my lap and lift her when I push to my feet. She wraps her legs around me as I carry her to the bathroom. I take her in the shower again and after our shower on the floor. I take her against the wall while we're eating breakfast and bent over the dresser before we go.

She looks well-fucked when I help her into the car three hours later. I bundled her into a thick coat, but the day is cold. I shift closer to her on the backseat. She surprises me by resting her head on my shoulder. The act may seem small and insignificant, but to me, it's huge. It's so enormous that I freeze, too afraid I'll break the spell if I move.

At the airport, I escort her to the private lounge. Once she's eaten a light lunch, I dial Ryan on speaker and hand her my phone. She held up her end of the bargain. Powell agreed to the deal. We shook hands on it. Signing the contract is a simple formality. It's only fair that I honor the agreement I made with my wife.

She tilts her head, looking at me with a question and hope in her eyes.

"Your brother," I say, unable to prevent the harshness of my tone. The fact that he killed my mother and sister will never change.

She reaches for the phone uncertainly, as if she's afraid that I'll snatch it away, and takes it with a shaky hand. "Ryan?"

"Sabella! How are you?"

"I'm good. How about you?"

I don't give her privacy. I listen with attention to every word she says. She asks about everyone, posing the most questions about the kids, and finally reminds Ryan that he

hasn't sent her a photo. The bastard tells her he's been busy and that it slipped his mind, but he promises to send some straight away.

"How's Mom coping with Laura and all that?" she asks, lowering her voice and turning her face away to scavenge what little privacy she can get.

"The dust has finally settled," Ryan says. "Everyone can go back to their lives now." He pauses. "I suppose everyone but..."

"Me?"

"That came out wrong."

"Is Daisy still making problems?"

"She realized there's nothing more for her to inherit and that the business isn't mine." He chuckles. "She cooled down quickly after that."

"Tell me more about Brad's milestones," Sabella says with enthusiasm.

"There's not much more to tell. Do you think you'll come visit?"

Our gazes lock when she looks up. I shake my head.

She shifts on her seat. "I, um, don't think so."

I hold out my hand.

"I have to go. Will you tell everyone I love them?"

"I'll give them your message. We love you too. Take care, sis."

Taking the phone from her, I end the call.

She bites her lip and turns her face to the glass wall through which the runways and parked Boeings are visible. I know she's practicing self-control, trying not to cry. If speaking to her family only serves to make her sad, I'm not sure calling them is a good idea.

A part of me wants to take her in my arms and soothe her, but she's withdrawing because she doesn't want me to witness her weakness. Respecting the unspoken wish, I get up and walk to a quiet corner from where I have a visual on her before making another call.

The guard picks up immediately.

"How are things at the new house?" I ask.

"Everything is in order, sir."

"Have you widened the perimeter of your watch?"

"Yes, sir. We're keeping an eye on the road and all entry points."

"Focus on the forest and the surrounding terrain too. If anyone decides to visit on foot, they're not going to use the road."

"With respect, sir, no one knows the area surrounding the house is being watched. We're staying out of view. The terrain is rocky. There's a very good chance that any unsuspecting visitor will come via the road."

"Just cover the whole area."

"Yes, sir," he says again.

I end the call and pull up the app that's connected to the cameras I asked Fabien to discreetly install when he redecorated Sophie's temporary room. There's one in each room, showing every angle. Sophie and Heidi are in the

kitchen, rolling out dough. Sophie is chatting away, her lips constantly moving, but I don't activate the sound. Knowing they're safe is the only purpose for now.

"Sophie is happy," I tell Sabella when I return to my seat. "She's baking with Heidi." I don't mention the cameras. I love her, but I don't trust her. It's better not to put all my cards on the table.

"That's good," she says, perking up. "I'm looking forward to seeing her."

My voice holds a warning. "Don't get too attached to her, *bella*."

She gives me a wounded look. "You said you'd try the local school if Mr. Powell signed the deal. Didn't he?"

"He did. I just don't want you to harbor false hope or unrealistic expectations."

"It'll work out." She smiles. "You'll see."

I also don't tell her that the plan was always to move Sophie back in with me, regardless of where she goes to school. Why make her hate me more when I can delay it with another couple of weeks?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sabella

I'm excited when Angelo drops me off at home in the evening. I missed Sophie. She wormed herself into my heart in a very short space of time. She's a sweet, innocent, clever little girl. It's impossible not to fall madly in love with her.

My possessions arrived from South Africa while we were gone. Heidi informs me that she took the liberty of unpacking the boxes, which contained my clothes, books, and a few ornaments. My laptop didn't turn up. My husband confiscated it. Obviously.

Ryan sends the photos he promised, which Angelo shows me while Heidi makes tea. Brad already grew so much I hardly recognize him. He has thicker blond curls and a dimple in his chubby chin. The older he gets, the more he looks like Ryan. Benjamin Jnr. takes more after Mattie than Jared. With his dark hair and olive skin, he's just as gorgeous as his mom. Missing out on seeing them grow up makes me sad, but that's the price I'm paying to keep the rest of my family safe.

After Sophie bombarded us with hugs and stories of her weekend, she introduces us to a row of gingerbread men and women. She named the lot of them, and I'm stunned that she's

not only able to remember so many names but that she also correctly pairs each name with the corresponding cookie character.

While Heidi goes upstairs to pack her bag, my husband spends time with Sophie, listening to her excited chatter. When it's time for Angelo and Heidi to leave, he hooks an arm around my waist and pulls me in for a kiss. My cheeks heat a little, knowing Sophie and Heidi are watching. I'm not sure what to make of the caress, but like the sex this weekend, it's different.

Sophie and I eat a light dinner, and then I put her to bed. I enjoyed being among people. I especially loved the chat with Mrs. Powell. Being without adult company takes getting used to again. To distract myself, I go through the dressing room and get reacquainted with my own clothes. To my surprise, the closets are also filled with new outfits, the price tags still intact. Most of the labels are from Milan. The wardrobe includes day and evening dresses, comfy sweaters and cotton leggings, lingerie in every color under the sun, exercise gear, and enough shoes to fill a store.

I try on a few items, which all fit perfectly. I no doubt have my husband to thank, but I'm sure Fabien took care of the shopping.

I go to bed with my notebook on sharks, highlighting notes Mrs. Powell may find useful, but I'm so exhausted from the weekend marathon sex that I fall asleep before I've read two pages. The next thing I know, Sophie is shaking me awake.

"What's the matter?" I ask, jackknifing into a sitting position.

"The sun is out." She runs to the window and yanks the curtains open. "Look. Let's go outside for a walk."

Yawning, I swing my legs over the bed. Every muscle aches. I swear I still feel *him* inside me.

“Breakfast first,” I say, but she’s already skipping from the room.

I dress quickly and do my grooming before joining Sophie in the kitchen. She’s sitting at the table with a carton of milk open on the side, shoving spoonfuls of cereal into her mouth.

I switch on the coffee machine. “You do know that eggs and fruit have more healthy nutrients than all that fiber and sugar?”

“I like cereal,” she says around the spoon.

“We don’t speak with a full mouth.” I take a mug from the cupboard. “It’s not good table manners.”

She swallows and sticks out her tongue to show me her empty mouth. “I have good table manners.”

“Yes, sweetheart.” I smooth a hand over her hair as I set the mug on the table. “You do.”

When we finished our breakfast, Sophie pulls on her brand-new coat while I fit mine, and then we take Beatrice for a walk. We stop near the cliff to admire the view.

“Don’t go too close,” I say, holding her back with a hand on her arm. “There may be loose rocks. It can be dangerous.”

She picks up pebbles and hurls them over the cliff. “Look how far I can throw, Sabella.”

The rustling of the bushes on the border of the yard pulls my attention. A shadow moves between the trees. Can it be an animal? The property is so remote, there must be wildlife like rabbits and small deer.

Worried that it may be a boar, I take Sophie's hand. "Let's go back to the house."

She pulls free and picks Beatrice up from where she left the doll sitting against a rock. "Don't be scared of the noise in the forest, Sabella."

I look at her. "Did you hear it too?"

"It's only Johan."

"Johan?"

"My brother," she says as if I should've known.

"Your brother?" I ask with surprise.

Clutching Beatrice in one hand, she selects a pebble from the small heap at her feet and throws it over the cliff. "I saw him through the window."

I glance at the forest again, but it's quiet now. "When?" Fixing my attention on Sophie, I ask, "Did you see him this morning?"

"Yesterday." She aims and projects another stone through the air. "He was sneaking around the yard."

"Why didn't you tell Heidi?"

She shrugs. "They're always sneaking around."

"Why didn't he come to the house?"

"Because he's careful. You never know. Maybe he thinks you'll chase him away."

"Why would I do that?"

"People always chase us away."

I take her shoulders and turn her to face me. "If you take people's property or break it, they will want to chase you

away. If you're kind and respectful, they'll be more inclined to be welcoming. Do you understand?"

She bobs her head. "You don't want me to take people's stuff and break their flowers."

"Exactly." I hold out my hand. "Come on. Let's go check what we can make for lunch."

We decide on grilled chicken and baked potatoes. While the chicken grills in the oven, we mix cake batter. When the food is ready, I set the table on the veranda in the sun. It doesn't take long for a scruffy boy with a dirty face to emerge from the woods.

He's not dressed in rags, but his clothes have seen better days. I judge him to be about four years older than Sophie. I pretend not to see him as he slowly creeps closer.

"Sabella," Sophie whispers, leaning over the table.

"I know," I whisper back.

It's not until I carve the chicken that he finally walks up with a straight back and his arms standing away from his body.

"Hey," he says in a brusque manner, stopping at the rail.

I acknowledge him with a smile. "Hey."

He points at the chicken. "Give me that food."

"Are you hungry?"

He fixes his gaze on the chicken, almost salivating as he nods.

"Then you can join us at the table when you've washed up," I say.

He glares at me. "Why will I do that?"

“We wash our hands before we eat, Johan,” Sophie says, swinging her legs.

“I never wash my hands to eat,” he grunts.

“That’s the rule,” I say. “You can use the bathroom inside.”

Stomping to the garden tap, he opens it and scrubs his hands. He shakes off drops of water as he returns. “There. Happy?”

It’s a start. “Sit down.”

He watches me with wary eyes as he climbs the steps and scrapes a chair over the floor. Throwing himself in the seat, he says, “Give me some chicken now.”

“The magic word is please.”

“Please,” he snaps.

I dish up a big portion of chicken and potatoes on his plate. “My name is Sabella.”

He grabs his fork in a fist and mutters, “Johan.”

“Are your brothers around too?”

He stabs a potato and stuffs it in his mouth. “Somewhere.”

“We don’t speak with a full mouth,” Sophie says.

He sneers. “What do you know?”

“She’s right,” I say. “At my table, you don’t.”

Rolling his eyes, he shoves a big chunk of chicken into his mouth next. He eats as if he hasn’t eaten in days. I let him eat in peace, knowing he must be starving.

Sophie says proudly, “Heidi showed me how to hold a fork and knife properly. Look.”

“Who the fuck is Heidi?” he asks around another mouthful of chicken.

“No swearing,” I say. “When you’ve swallowed, you can ask again, and Sophie will answer your question.”

He scoffs but swallows before asking, “So, are you going to tell me or not?”

“She’s a really nice lady who cooks for Angelo,” Sophie says in her serious voice. “She’s going to take care of me when Sabella has to go away with Angelo, but only for short whiles.”

He chugs down a glass of water. “You’re staying here now?” He points the fork at me. “With her?”

“Yes.” Sophie adds salt to her potatoes. “She’s very nice too. She’s Angelo’s wife.”

He squints at me. “That true?”

“Is that true? Yes,” I say. “I’m Mr. Russo’s wife.”

He waves the fork at his sister. “That she’s staying here.”

“Don’t point at people with your eating utensils,” I say. “That’s bad table manners too.”

“What the fu—” He catches himself. “What’s with all the manners?”

“Like I said, these are the rules in my house.”

“This your house now?” He lifts his fork to indicate the house but stops midway.

“Is this my house now?” I correct. “I live here now, yes.”

“Ha.” He sucks a piece of chicken from his teeth, watching me as he drinks more water. “You cleaned up the place all nice.”

“Why did you make such a mess of it in the first place, if I may ask?”

Engrossed in eating, Sophie doesn't seem to pay attention to our exchange.

“There was nobody to clean it.” He shrugs. “The cook got scared.” He takes another bite of potato and makes a show of swallowing before adding, “She left. After that, Grandpa didn't care if the goats got in the house.” He reaches across the table for another piece of chicken with his hand.

“We don't use our hands,” I say. “We use the serving fork and spoon. Would you like seconds, or do you want to save space for dessert?”

He grumbles but pulls back his hand. “Seconds.”

“Excuse me?”

Rolling his eyes again, he says, “Please.”

I serve another helping on his plate. “Now you say thank you.”

“Thank you,” he says, making a face.

When his plate is empty, I ask, “Sophie, will you please bring the cake?”

She pushes back her chair and jumps to her feet. “It's chocolate, Johan, with frosting.”

He assesses me when she's gone. “Why do you let her stay here?”

The question catches me by surprise. “I like her. Plus, she's a minor, and she needs an adult to take care of her.”

He snorts. “I took care of her.”

“You did.” My heart softens. “I’m sure you did the best you could, but you’re a minor too. You also need someone to take care of you.”

His voice hardens. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can survive on your own, but that’s not the care I’m talking about.”

“What then?”

“You need someone to provide warm meals every day and healthcare when you need it, an adult who can take care of your education and teach you good values.”

Most of all, he needs love and affection, but I don’t say that. One, I don’t want to hurt him by implying no one loves him because I’m certain that’s not true. His brothers and his sister must love him. I can’t speak for his great-grandfather, but who am I to judge when I know nothing about their dynamic? In his own way, Angelo also cares. And two, Johan’s exaggerated macho behavior gives me reason to think he wouldn’t want to talk about love.

Just as Sophie exits the kitchen with the cake, a car pulls up in the road. A Jaguar.

Johan’s thin shoulders go rigid. He grabs his knife in a fist.

“It’s only Mr. Russo,” I say, leaning across the table to lay a hand on his arm.

“I know who it is,” he grumbles as he puts down the knife and pulls away from my touch.

Sophie leaves the cake on the table and rushes around the veranda. “Angelo!”

The car comes to a stop at the end of the road. There’s no fence around the yard and no gate to give access to the

property. For a silly moment, I imagine a picket fence to mark the border of the garden and a gate to make the wilderness of the setting seem more homely. I must be going either crazy or soft.

My husband gets out of the car. His big body is broader than when I first met him. He's packed on muscles over the years. Dressed in a pair of ripped jeans and a dark sweater, he looks mouthwateringly sexy. I can't help but stare. His beauty has always been undeniable, his attraction irresistible, however wrong that may be in our circumstances.

Our gazes lock. He gives me a private, heated smile, knowledge sparking in his dark eyes. He knows what he does to me. But then Sophie runs down the path and jumps into his arms, and he looks away as he gives her his attention.

Her young voice carries across the yard. "We made chicken, and I helped Sabella bake a chocolate cake."

His smile is amused. "Is that so?"

"Did you come for dessert?" she asks, tightening her little arms around his neck.

"Is there enough?"

"Oh, yes." She nods with enthusiasm. "It's a big cake."

"In that case, I'll definitely join you."

He looks at Johan over her head as he carries her down the path, caution creeping into his features. At the bottom of the steps, he puts her on her feet.

Johan watches Angelo like a wild animal assessing a situation for danger as my husband approaches with Sophie in tow.

“Hello, Johan,” Angelo says, acting as if finding him here having lunch with us is an everyday occurrence.

“Uncle Angelo,” Johan says, his tone challenging.

Angelo walks around the table and presses a kiss on the top of my head. “Sabella.”

Not knowing what to make of the caress, I clear my throat. “This is a surprise.” He’s never visited during the day before.

“I’ll get another plate,” Sophie says with much excitement before running to the door.

Angelo takes a seat next to me. “How are your brothers, Johan?”

“Good, I guess.” Johan slouches in his chair and spreads his legs. “They were okay the last time I saw them.”

“Sit up straight, please,” I say. “No lounging at the table.”

He makes a face. “Another rule?”

“You don’t want to give people the impression you don’t have manners.”

He mutters a protest but straightens in his seat.

“How did you get here?” Angelo asks.

Johan smirks. “Same way we got to the camp.”

“Hitchhiking is dangerous,” Angelo says. “You shouldn’t trust random drivers.”

“I’m here, ain’t I?”

Angelo’s tone turns sterner. “No more hitchhiking.”

The line of Johan’s jaw grows hard. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“In fact, I can.” Angelo folds his hands on the table. “Your great-grandfather gave me custody.”

Johan jumps to his feet. “He did not.”

Angelo’s gaze is level. “He did. The paperwork has just been completed. As of yesterday, I’m your legal guardian.”

The boy’s eyes glimmer with suppressed tears. “You’re a fucking liar.”

Angelo clenches his hands into fists. “Do not take that tone with me, boy, and you better watch your tongue.”

I get up quickly and go around the table. “Sit down, Johan.” I put a hand on his shoulder and gently push him back into his seat. “We’re all going to have dessert, and then you can talk about this calmly.”

They hold each other’s gaze in a stare-off across the table until Sophie returns with another plate and a cake fork that she sets in front of Angelo.

“Did you see the frosting, Angelo? That’s the best part.”

I cut thick slices of cake for everyone.

“You know as well as I do that you can’t carry on living with your great-grandfather,” Angelo says carefully when Johan digs into his cake.

He stops chewing and casts his gaze down.

Angelo continues in a reasonable tone, “I’m still looking for your parents. When I find them, we can talk about your living arrangements, but in the meantime, I want you to live with me.”

“Why?” Johan bites out, lifting a rebellious gaze to Angelo.

“Because you’re family.”

Johan stills at that.

“You’re my uncle,” Sophie says with pride.

“I am.” Angelo smiles at her and returns his attention to Johan. “You can make this difficult or you can let me help to take care of you. The choice is yours. Either way, you’re not going back to that camp, and you’re not running wild in the open any longer. It’s not safe or what’s best for you.”

“How do you know what’s best for me?” Johan asks with a bitter expression.

“I know what’s not good for you. How about we take this one day at a time and figure it out as we go? Aren’t you tired of being cold and hungry, of having nowhere to sleep at night?”

“It’s really nice here with Sabella, Johan,” Sophie says, laying her small hand on his. “Beatrice loves it.”

Sniffing, he shoots her a sidelong glance. “I s’pose we can give it a try.”

“That’s my man,” Angelo says, picking up his cake fork. “What I can promise you is that I only want you to be happy.”

“Why?” Johan asks. “Why do you give a fu—a flying fish about what happens to us?”

“Seeing you safe would’ve made my mother happy,” Angelo says with so much conviction I don’t doubt his intentions for a minute. “Now finish that cake. I want to go look for your brothers before dark.”

Johan eats three slices before he leans back and rubs his stomach. “I’m as stuffed as a pig.”

“Saying that you’ve had enough will do, thank you very much,” I say, clearing the plates.

“Yum.” Sophie licks icing off her spoon. “That was sooo good. Wasn’t it, Johan?”

He only grunts.

“I’ll wrap up the rest of the food and the cake for your brothers,” I say. “Please help me take the dirty dishes to the kitchen.”

Sophie takes two of the empty dishes, eager to please me, but Johan doesn’t budge.

“You heard her,” Angelo says. “Everyone eats, everyone helps.”

“Oh, for fu—” Johan swallows the rest of his words and pushes to his feet.

“You can take the casserole dish,” I say. “It’s too heavy for Sophie.”

He grabs the dish and drags his feet after Sophie to the kitchen.

When the kids are out of earshot, Angelo says, “It may not be a good idea to let him inside the house. He probably has lice.”

“What do you want me to do? Restrict him to the garden?”

Angelo sighs. “I’ll get him cleaned up.”

I narrow my eyes, watching my husband with suspicion. “Did you know he showed up?”

He doesn’t blink. “How would I know that?”

I cross my arms. “It seems like too much of a convenient coincidence that you never visit in the day but happened to

show up here just as I managed to lure Johan out of the woods.”

Curiosity sparks in his eyes. “How *did* you manage that?”

“Food.” I wave at the table. “Grilled chicken and chocolate cake.”

His lips quirk. “I’ve been using the wrong tactics all along.”

“Don’t you know that the path to a man’s heart runs through his stomach?”

“Is that why you’re suddenly so interested in learning how to cook?” He raises a brow. “Do you have ulterior motives where my heart is concerned?”

Heat pushes up in my neck, not because what he says is true—it’s not—but because of the way in which he says it. There’s a new lightness between us, a glimpse of something other than hate, and it makes me wish for things I can never have. I don’t know when the shift happened, if it was yesterday or the day before, or if it has been so gradual since the start that I haven’t noticed, but I do know that things are no longer the same between us. The notion ignites a spark of hope, but it also frightens me. It frightens me because I desperately want it when logic tells me it’s impossible. Not with deaths and vengeance between us.

The children return, cutting our banter short.

Angelo stands. “Come on, Johan. I’ll give you a ride in my car.”

Johan eyes the sports car. “Where to?”

“Let’s get you out of those stinking clothes and go find your brothers.”

Under the dirt on his face, Johan turns red as he glances in my direction. He doesn't like Angelo to point out his grooming shortcomings in front of me.

"I'll just wrap up the food then," I say, not meeting my husband's gaze as I get up too.

A short while later, Angelo takes off with Johan, who clutches a plastic container with the leftovers on his lap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Angelo

We find the boys in the creek by the river, fishing for trout. They fall like vultures on the food Sabella packed. I call one of the guards to bring the 4x4. After bundling the kids inside, he drives them back to the house where Heidi takes care of delousing them before scrubbing them clean.

The clothes I ordered from Bastia are delivered not even an hour later, courtesy of my reputation. The shop owner made the selection and did the drop-off himself. Once the most urgent task of fitting them out in clean clothes is taken care of, I instruct Fabien to make more elaborate purchases.

Heidi feeds the lot in the kitchen, and then I ship them off to bed. Deciding against putting each one in his own bedroom in the old house, I put them up in the dormitory in the guard's quarters for the night, which is situated a mile from the house. At least there, the men can keep an eye on them, and they won't be tempted to vandalize my furniture and wreck my house.

I'm catching up with work after dinner when Uncle Nico shows up. Heidi brings him through to the study.

I get to my feet and round my desk. “Uncle.”

“Forgive me for calling so late.” He unwinds his scarf and removes his hat. “I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important.”

“Naturally.” I go to the wet bar and take one of my father’s reds from the wine rack. “Drink?”

He dumps his hat and scarf on the coffee table and lowers himself with a groan into a chair. “Why not?” Brushing back his thinning hair with his fingers, he watches me shrewdly. “I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

I unscrew the cork. I’ve been neglecting the vineyard. I should hire someone to manage it. Now that my father is no longer here, the vines are growing unattended, and the cellar is gathering dust.

The cork gives with a pop. I pour two glasses and carry them over to the lounge area.

My uncle takes the glass I offer and clinks it against mine. “To your health, Angelo.”

I study him as narrowly as he’s scrutinizing me. “And to yours.”

He takes a sip and pinches his mouth. His face pulls into a sour expression that he tries to control but fails to hide. Squinting at me through one eye, he says in a thin voice, “Nice wine.”

“It’s our own.” I suppress a sardonic grin as I take a seat opposite him. “I’ll send you a case. I still have a hundred of them in the cellar.”

He winces. “Thank you. That’s most kind.” Pulling at his collar, he cocks his neck. “About the reason for my visit...”

He coughs. “Angelo, you should’ve told us about the girl.”

I cross my legs and raise a brow. “Which girl will that be?”

Frustration enters his tone. “The one living with your wife. Your niece, I assume?”

“Ah.” I smile. “Did Toma finally enlighten you?”

He puts the glass on the table and spreads his palms. “We had no idea. Why did you keep it from us?”

“My private life is hardly your business, Uncle.”

“It’s not that. It’s that we didn’t know,” he stresses again. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

I sip my wine, enjoying his discomfort. “Such as thinking that Toma and Gianni aren’t doing their jobs?”

“She must’ve slipped into the house unnoticed.”

I smile wider, but internally I’m bristling because my cousins failed me. They could’ve fucking failed me in keeping my wife safe.

“She walked right through the front door with my wife,” I say.

He pulls his shoulders up to his ears. “It could’ve happened while Toma was taking a piss.”

“That sounds like a very convenient coincidence.” I swirl the wine in my glass. Fuck. It’s a mannerism I must’ve inherited from my father. The action is an uncanny imitation of how he used to do it. “Perhaps a little too convenient.”

“It’s possible. You know it can happen. Toma wouldn’t be the first man who screwed up because nature called. That’s why I’m here, not only to swear on my wife’s grave that it was an unfortunate mistake but also to assure you that it will never

happen again. From now on, Toma and Gianni will each take a man with them. There will be eyes on the house without fail.”

“That’s very generous of you,” I muse.

“It’s the least I can do.” He nods solemnly, mistakenly assuming the matter is closed. “Toma will come around tomorrow to apologize in person. He’s on duty tonight.” He reaches for the glass, eyes the wine, and then pulls back his hand. “By the way, he told me the oldest boy showed up there this afternoon, but you already know that.”

I stand. “Thank you for your reassurance.”

He follows suit hastily, pushing to his feet. “For how long must Toma and Gianni carry on with this duty?”

“Until I say so.”

A pained look flashes through his eyes. “Haven’t we done enough already?” He picks up his hat and his scarf. “How much longer do you want us to pay?”

He’s such a good martyr. The suffering old man standing in front of me is a far cry from the horny one I met in his house. It’s something else I haven’t realized before—what a good actor he is.

“Until I say so,” I repeat.

He bows his head. “Whatever you say, Angelo.”

After a humble pause, he leaves the room.

Just as well I have eyes on the men who are supposed to watch my wife. I don’t trust my uncles any longer. I don’t know what they’re up to, but I will find out. So far, the informant I planted in Uncle Nico’s household produced nothing useful. The file the investigator sent me on Emilia didn’t prove valuable either. She’s just a middle-class girl

trying to find a wealthy, old husband who'll leave her a fortune when he dies. One thing is certain, I'm not fucking around with Sabella's safety. Tonight still, I'll triple the men who watch the new house, and I'm not saying a word about it to my family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sabella

When Heidi calls with fresh provisions the following afternoon, she tells me the news about the boys in a hushed voice where we're unpacking the groceries in the kitchen. Sophie is out of earshot, watching television. Relief rushes through me. I didn't stop worrying and wondering where they were.

"Do you think she misses them?" Heidi asks, jerking her head toward the lounge.

I bite my lip as I consider the question. "It's hard to say. She never talks about them unless I ask questions."

Heidi's smile is warm. "Maybe she doesn't miss them so much because she's happy here."

"I hope so."

"It's plain for anyone to see." She goes on tiptoes to put a packet of tea in the cupboard. "Mrs. Russo—Teresa—would've been happy, I think. She never spoke about her family. But who could've blamed her?"

I'm still battling to understand their family relations, but I'm starting to get a better idea. The late Mr. Russo might have

doted on his obedient wife, but they weren't enemies from the onset. At least that advantage counted in their favor.

Once Heidi is gone, I wrap Sophie and myself up in our coats and go out for a walk.

"Let's go down here," Sophie says, pulling me toward the cliff.

"No, sweetheart." I hold her back. "You're never allowed to go near the cliffs. Remember what I said? It's too dangerous."

"No, it isn't." She tugs on my hand. "Over there. See? There's a path. It goes all the way to the beach."

I crane my neck for a better view. She's right. Stone steps zigzag to the small half moon of white sand that borders the turquoise water.

"See?" she says again. "My brothers and I used that path to go to the village. It's better to go this way if you don't want anyone to see you."

"It runs all the way to the village?"

"No, silly." She turns her eyes toward the sky in a dramatic gesture that reminds me a lot of Johan. "It runs to the river, but you have to climb up a bit to get there. There's another path we take from the river to the village. It goes all the way along the stream." Taking on an important air, she adds, "If you walk straight down the valley, people can see you coming from far."

This is how they managed to stay out of sight. They must've used the path when they slipped to the village to steal food.

"Who built the steps?" I ask. "Your great-grandfather?"

“No,” she says, dragging out the word. “Angelo did. He told the men to make them so that we could go down to the beach to swim in the summer.” She bobs her head as she says, “It gets *very* hot in summer. Angelo didn’t know Beatrice is afraid of water and that my brothers can’t swim. He needn’t have gone to so much trouble telling the men to make the stairs. Grandpa is too old to climb them anyway. Do you want to go down?”

The water pulls me with a force as strong as ever. A sudden pang of nostalgia hits me hard when an image of the beach and the surf in Great Brak River springs into my mind. The memory of swimming for miles into the sea and drifting on my back while the clouds made pictures in the sky leaves me homesick. The ocean has always been my safe haven. Water is the element in which I feel the most at home. I’m afraid if I go down there now, I’ll be swamped with longing and drowning in sadness.

“Let’s go up the road today,” I suggest.

“Okay,” she says, skipping ahead of me.

We follow the dirt road up the hill. Where the tracks disappear over rolling mountain tops, we cut toward a rocky outcrop dotted with bushes. Sophie falls into step next to me. She talks about the birds and the plants, but I’m ashamed to admit that I’m not fully paying attention. I’m worried about her and her brothers’ future. I’m also concerned that I can’t get a message to Mrs. Paoli and Mr. Martin, who’ll wonder what happened to me. I don’t want them to think I let them down, but I can’t risk going to the village today, not if there’s a chance that my husband may return. With everything that’s happening with the boys, our predictable routine is disrupted. Plus, I don’t entirely believe that Angelo showing up at the

same time as Johan was a coincidence. What if he's having me watched? He used to have men following me in South Africa. What's preventing him from doing so again?

I'm so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I don't realize how far we walked until Sophie cries out, "Look, a cross."

I turn my head in the direction she's pointing, and then I still. Three crosses stand on top of the highest hill, their shapes forming stark black lines against the winter blue of the sky. A picket fence encloses them, marking the patch of tamed earth that isolates the crosses from the rest of the wilderness.

My heart skips a beat. Those crosses and the fence can only signify one thing—a graveyard. And I already know who were put to rest there before Sophie pulls on my hand and says, "Let's go look."

I want to object, but my curiosity gets the better of me. Together, Sophie and I make our way to the top. The gate isn't locked. It works with a latch, which only purpose is to prevent the wind from blowing the gate open. I lift the latch and push the gate. It swings inward without a squeak. The hinges are oiled. The coat of varnish that covers the wooden spikes of the fence is shiny. The sun and wind haven't damaged it yet. The distinct smell of the varnish still hangs in the air. Except for those three crosses, there are no other gravestones. The graveyard is new.

Sophie trots in carefully. Just in case, I hold onto her hand. I don't want her to step on the nurslings growing next to the path and around the graves. We stop in front of the crosses. They're massive, cut from granite with carvings of roses. Names and dates are engraved in the centers of the flower artwork, intertwined with the leaves and the thorns.

Teresa Maria Russo.

Adeline Sofia Russo.

Santino Romeo Russo.

As if on cue, a cloud drifts in front of the sun. The mild winter heat on my back vanishes. A shiver runs through my body. I take in the browning flowers at the foot of each grave. Roses. The blooms must've been a pristine white, their petals thick and velvety. Now, they're the nondescript color of decay and withering around the edges.

Did my husband leave those flowers?

An incredible sadness invades my senses. The sentiment is deep and profound like a smell that's pulled into the woodworks and that you can never wash out, the kind that clings to a soul. I imagine his loss and his pain as he laid the beautiful, perfect flowers on each grave. I try to put myself in my husband's shoes, to imagine what he must've suffered when his mother and his twin were ripped from him in such a violent way, both on the same day. And as compassion and the echo of his anguish rip through me, I experience an intense urge to soothe him.

I lost a dad, but Angelo lost so much more. I heard his father when he gave the order, when he told his son to kill me. An eye for an eye. My father for his mother. Me for his sister. Only, he didn't. He didn't pull the trigger. How much self-control did it take to defy and disappoint his father? How much did he risk letting me live? For the first time, I also consider that his motives involved more than vengeance, that he kept me alive for selfish reasons. That he spared me not only for the useful purpose of my name or for extracting punishment but because he wanted *me*.

A deep, furious voice cuts into my melancholic thoughts. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I spin around. Angelo is stalking up the path, his powerful legs bunching in a pair of tight jeans as his long strides eat up the distance.

Confused, I frown. It's as if he materialized from thin air. I'm still in a different space, and it takes me a moment to come to my senses as he grabs my bicep and shakes me.

His dark gaze drills into mine. Every word is measured. "What are you doing?"

His hold on me is painful. I understand his anger. I trespassed in his most private space—his grief. But when he starts dragging me to the gate, Sophie's eyes flare.

"Stop," I cry out, my voice soft but urgent. "You're scaring her."

At that, he freezes. He cuts his gaze to Sophie where she's standing with round eyes in front of the graves, clutching Beatrice against her chest.

Heidi's head appears over the curve of the hill. She jogs toward us with an anxious expression.

Angelo looks at where his fingers are digging into my flesh. He drops my arm. When he lifts his gaze to mine, his eyes are cold and hard. Lowering his voice, he orders in a biting tone, "Do not fucking move."

He walks to Sophie and holds out his hand. The effort of controlling himself is visible in the harsh set of his jaw, but he manages a strained smile. "Heidi is going to take you to visit your brothers. She made a cake for teatime."

Backtracking, Sophie shakes her head. "I don't want to go. Beatrice doesn't want cake."

“It’s just for a short while,” he says. “Heidi will bring you back in time for dinner.”

Heidi reaches the gates. She shoots me a concerned look before charging down the path toward Sophie and then slowing her step as if not to frighten the child. “Come on, honey. Don’t you want to say hello to your brothers? We’ll come back afterward. I promise.”

Sophie’s gaze snaps to mine.

“It’s all right,” I say, looking at Heidi for confirmation.

The housekeeper nods. I trust her.

“Heidi will bring you back,” I say. “Mr. Russo and I just need a private moment.”

“Are you angry, Angelo?” Sophie asks with a quivering chin.

“No, darling,” he says, his eyes softening as he wraps his large hand around her small one. “Not with you.”

“You’ll bring me and Beatrice back?” she asks in a small voice as he hands her over to Heidi.

His nod is solemn. “I promise.”

“Are you sure, Sabella?” she asks.

I smile. “Absolutely. Go say hello to your brothers.” I wink. “And then you can come tell me everything.”

She doesn’t look convinced as Heidi steers her through the gate. She glances back over her shoulder at us until they disappear from view.

Angelo grips my arm and drags me from the graveyard. I stumble over a rock, but he doesn’t slow down. He doesn’t even stop to close the gate. He manhandles me toward the

road. As we reach the top of the hill, I'm just in time to see Heidi and Sophie leave in the Land Rover. A 4x4 is parked behind.

Angelo pushes me ahead of him and opens the passenger door. He all but shoves me inside and slams the door. Then he stomps around the vehicle, gets in, and starts the engine.

“Put on your safety belt,” he bites out.

As soon as I've obeyed, he floors the gas. The road is bumpy. I bounce in my seat as we speed over potholes.

I study the profile of his furious face. “I didn't mean to trespass.”

He clenches the wheel in a death grip. “Then what the fuck were you doing?”

“We just—” I was going to say we just happened to wander upon the site when a thought hits me. “Hold on. How did you know we were there?”

The muscles in his jaw bunch. I wait, but he doesn't reply. I was right. He's having me watched. That's how he knew when Johan showed up yesterday. It's the only explanation that makes sense. Does that mean he knows I went to the village? If he did, why didn't he say something? It's not like him to keep quiet about my disobedience. He won't let something like that slide. Unless he's only had me watched since recently.

When we arrive at the house, he cuts the engine and jumps out of the vehicle before I have time to reach for my door handle. He comes around and yanks my door open. My breath catches as he grabs me around the waist and lifts me to the ground so fast that my stomach dips like when I'm on a rollercoaster. Gripping my wrist, he drags me to the door.

The minute we're inside, he lets me go. I almost lose my footing from the momentum. He doesn't give me time to utter a word. He doesn't demand explanations or excuses. He slams the door and locks it. And then he turns to face me.

Everything he bottled up inside for Sophie's sake in the graveyard comes tumbling out in the way he stares at me with vicious, dark eyes. All the hatred. All the bitterness. All the sorrow. Darkness pours from every molecule of his being as he unbuckles his belt.

I freeze. I'm not sure where he's going to take this, if he wants to fuck me or kill me, but I know it's the latter when, instead of unzipping, he pulls the leather from his waistband. Folding the belt double with the buckle in his palm, he advances on me.

So, it's punishment he's after. Vengeance again. I can't go back to how we were before Paris. I can't regress that far because we'll never come back from it. This is the turning point. I know it instinctively. Even though his mouth twists with distaste as he looks at me, I think about the graveyard and the notion that struck me, that perhaps he spared me because a part of him wanted me for who I am. Maybe, like me, he wanted better things for us. I think about the pain and the loss and all that sorrow. And when I think about him instead of myself, I do the only thing I can. I unbutton my coat and let it slip down my arms. I pull my sweater over my head and drop it at my feet.

He stops.

I unclip my bra, discarding that on the floor too.

His gaze dips to my breasts. His knuckles turn white on the belt. "Put your sweater back on, Sabella, or I swear your tits will get a taste of this belt instead of your ass."

Ignoring him, I kick off my sneakers and pop the button on my jeans. Still, he doesn't move. Not when I shimmy out of my jeans and panties and not when I pull off my socks. He stands frozen to the spot as I go down on my knees and spread them, offering myself like a sacrifice. It's what he ordered. It's what he asked of me. But in this moment, I see the truth in his eyes. He doesn't like it. The insight gives me courage. It gives me the strength to meet the rage in his gaze head-on and to be honest. For once, to say what's in my heart.

"Get up," he snarls.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He charges over the floor and stops in front of me. I'm not even sure he heard me.

"Get up and bend over or I swear..."

He doesn't finish that sentence because he can't. He doesn't want to. He's fighting me, fighting what could be. That's what he did on the morning he woke with his arms around me in my bed. That's why he clammed up and took off so fast. He's resisting that glimpse I got of us this weekend in a hotel room.

"I'm sorry," I say again. "I'm so sorry for what my family did to you."

The rage transforms into something furious, a storm that wreaks havoc inside him. I know, because that storm lives inside me too. It's been living there for too long, trapped between the confines of my ribcage.

"I'm sorry." I stare up at his devastatingly handsome face, my heart shattering for this beautiful, tormented man. "I'm so sorry for everything."

The storm breaks as he throws the belt aside. Towering over me, he clenches his hands into fists, fighting still.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Russo.”

Whatever he’s holding onto so tightly snaps like a twig in a tornado. Buttons go flying as he rips his shirt in his haste to peel it off. His shoes and pants follow next. He’s on top of me in an instant, pinning my naked body to the floor. His weight sinks into me, anchoring me with a painful pressure on the wood. His cock is hard between my legs. Surging his hips, he enters me with a single thrust. I lift my head as he lowers his, our mouths meeting halfway in a crushing kiss. He pumps twice, shifting me over the floor before he pulls out and gets onto his knees. Clamping his hands around my waist, he rolls me over. Before I have time to drag in a breath, he’s inside me again, spearing into me from behind.

I know what he’s doing, why he’s not looking at me. He’s avoiding me even as he’s fucking me like his life depends on it. But I won’t let him.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Russo.”

He thrusts harder, shoving his cock deeper until he hits that sweet spot that makes me lose my ability to speak. I can only moan as he punches his hips faster, creating too much friction and not enough.

“What you do to me, *cara*,” he says, his voice laced with something close to pain.

He grunts and stills, holding himself up on his arms as his body pulls tight on top of mine. I’m lost in his pleasure, needing it more than my own. I feel him riding that wave of euphoria as warmth bathes me inside. And I’m glad. Because I love it when he comes inside me.

The tension abates. His muscles relax. The storm has passed. Lowering his head, he brushes a kiss over my shoulder. I turn my head sideways and catch his lips. He doesn't deny me. The caress is tender, a far cry from what he set out to do when we walked through the door, and I revel in the small victory.

"Sabella," he mutters, nipping my earlobe.

My name is both a protest and a prayer on his lips. The heat of his chest on my back vanishes. Instead of lifting off me as I expect, he slides a hand around my stomach and between my legs. When he presses his fingers on my clit, the tension in my lower body builds again. A gasp slips from my lips, telling him what he does to me. He doesn't work fast and efficiently. He takes his time, rubbing me slowly.

By the time I'm ready to beg for release, he's growing hard inside me again. My panting is loud and my moans needy, but I don't care. He fucks me slowly, savoring it this time. I'm overstimulated and raw inside when he finally lets me come. He doesn't climax again, but he moves with me, setting the rhythm of my hips until my aftershocks have faded.

The floor is cold beneath me, but as long as his body covers mine, I'm in no rush to move.

Too soon, his warmth disappears. I turn my face to the side. He gets up and looks down at me with confusion etched on his face. Spearing his hands through his hair, he steps away. It feels like the cloud that moved in front of the sun. The room turns ten degrees colder. Confusion morphs into urgency as he grabs his pants off the floor and pulls them on with jerky movements.

I push up onto my knees, feeling the effort in every muscle. He avoids my gaze, groping for his torn shirt and

balling it up in his fist. Still not meeting my eyes, he offers me a hand and helps me to my feet. He stands tall, a stunning picture of ink and muscles. I wrap my arms around myself and press my legs together to prevent his cum from running down my thighs. I'm not so sure of my victory any longer. I failed to get through to him, and I don't want him to see me so vulnerable, not when he's so detached.

I needn't have worried about his attention, because he turns his back on me and walks up the stairs. Leaving me like this is a thousand times worse than when he watches his release leak from my body. I'm unable to move. I can't bring myself to take a step toward the stairs.

He comes down a moment later, dressed in a clean shirt and carrying my robe in his hands. What I see on his face is no longer anger. There's just...nothing. His mask is back in place. He hangs the robe over my shoulders. For a fraction of a second, his hold tightens, but then he drops his hands and walks through the door, leaving me alone once more, still banished, forcing me to face the fact that we may be broken forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Angelo

Sabella's apology rings in my ears as I speed over the gravel road to the old house. What do I do with that?

It changes so much.

It changes everything.

I can't hate her even as I love her any longer. Then again, I haven't hated her for a long time now. No. The naked, raw truth? I never hated her. I only chose to project my hurt on her.

So what the fuck do I do with this?

I have no idea.

Because she's still going to betray me.

The notions are two warring entities in my chest. Two opposites. Redemption and betrayal. She apologized for something she's not guilty of, and she's scheming against me. On the one hand, she acknowledged my feelings and thereby showed me she cared. On the other, she's plotting my arrest to guarantee her own freedom. I have no clue how to reconcile the two. There's a very good reason for that. It's impossible. The question of what I'm going to do about it remains. As

always, the answer is the same. Keep her in isolation. Cut her out of parts of my life. Which leaves us right where we are, trapped in this fucked-up circle.

But she apologized.

She said she was fucking sorry.

And I believe her. She meant it. Her honesty was too pure. She left herself too vulnerable to have been faking it.

But I don't have a solution.

In the end, that's what takes its toll. I'm not just tired. I'm exhausted. I can't think about it anymore, so I do what I always do. I turn my thoughts elsewhere.

The road is uneven. Sabella's body was knocked around during the drive to the new house. I need to have the potholes filled and the road tarred. I have to brief the lawyer on finalizing the contract for Powell to sign. A shitload of paperwork waits on my desk. The report from the guards watching my cousins sits unopened on my phone. Lavigne has to be dealt with. The children's future has to be decided, their school secured. The gardens require work for spring, pruning and transplants. I focus on the shitload of tasks on my list until I arrive home.

The children are in the kitchen with Heidi. I hear the chaos from the front door. Frustration laces my steps as I make my way there, but my despondent state has nothing to do with the boys yelling and running around the table. Only Sophie is seated with Beatrice on her lap, talking to the doll as if the disorder around her doesn't exist. A cake lies turned over on the counter. Icing sugar runs over the edge and drips on the floor. Heidi chases after the boys with a wooden spoon, much

to their entertainment. After everything that's just happened, my patience is thin.

My voice thunders through the room. "Enough."

The boys freeze. Heidi shoots me a helpless look. Sophie doesn't react. She carries on talking to Beatrice. The rest of us may as well be transparent.

"Where are the guards?" I ask, not bothering to conceal my anger.

"I didn't think their presence was necessary." Heidi's lips pull into a wry smile. "My mistake."

I take a step into the room. "Sit down."

None of the boys move.

"Sit down or it's military school for the lot of you," I order through gritted teeth.

This threat gets through to them. One by one, they flop down on the chairs.

"Not you," I tell Johan just as he's about to take a seat. "You clean up that mess on the counter."

His mouth twists into a frown. "Why me?"

"You're the oldest. You should've taken responsibility and stopped this." I walk to the table, pinning him with a stare. "And I don't need a reason."

"That's fucking unfair," he mutters.

I get into his personal space. I'm not his frail great-grandfather. I hope he takes me on, because I'd love to teach him his place. "What did you say?"

He sneers. "Nothing."

“They’re uncontrollable,” Heidi says, looking miserable.

“I’ve got it from here.” I indicate the door with a flick of my head. “You can take care of your other duties.”

She looks between me and the children. After a moment’s hesitation, she leaves the room.

I motion at the ruined cake. “Who did this?”

The three of them all point at each other as they say in unison, “Him.”

“Fine.” I narrow my eyes. “All of you are punished.”

Sophie jerks her head up. “I didn’t do anything.”

Johan steps up, putting himself between me and his sister. “It’s true.” He puffs out his chest. “It’s our fault. She didn’t join the food fight.”

“Sophie,” I say. “Go to Heidi.”

She hops from her chair with Beatrice in her hands, but she doesn’t budge.

“I said go to Heidi,” I repeat in a stern but gentle tone.

“Are you going to hurt them?” she asks in a small voice.

The question throws me off kilter. Is that what she thinks? My father was strict, but he never laid a hand on me. “Of course not.”

I only realize how much she trusts me in that moment, when she nods and walks with a bowed head from the room. I follow her with my gaze, the severity of her confidence in me sinking in. It’s vital that I never betray her trust lest she loses faith in me.

Johan lifts his chin. “How are you going to punish us?” His dark eyes simmer with contempt as he bravely stands his

ground. “The cane or the whip?”

“What?” I look at him, even more taken aback. “Neither.”

I’d never do that to a child. But I was ready to do that to my wife. I *did* it to her. I punished her for things she hadn’t done and things she’s yet to do to me, and that makes me worse than a monster.

Johan’s lip curls. “What then? Your fists? You think I’m scared?”

I can’t listen to this any longer. “You’re all grounded. You’ll stay in the guards’ quarters until after the weekend.”

“Without going out?” the youngest, Guillaume exclaims.

I take in his unruly auburn curls. The color reminds me so much of my mother and Adeline’s hair that my chest caves, trapping a painful breath in my lungs. “You’re limited to the yard, but more mischief from any of you and even the yard will be off limits to everyone.”

“You can’t do that,” Étienne, the middle brother, says with his arms pressed tightly at his sides.

“I just did.” I add before walking from the room, “When I return, this kitchen better be spotless.”

A great deal of grumbling follows, but they don’t protest further.

On my way to the study, I call the guardhouse and summon a man to watch the boys in case they get it into their heads to run away.

Heidi and Sophie wait in the hallway.

“Didn’t you take her to her new bedroom?” I ask my housekeeper.

Heidi's smile is apologetic. "I did, but she insists on having a word with you."

My niece regards me with a serious expression, the doll pressed against her stomach.

I raise a brow. I'm curious about what she wants to talk to me about that's put that look on her face.

"You better come in then," I say, smiling to put her at ease.

"By the way, the doctor came," Heidi says. "He examined the children. Except for malnutrition, they're healthy. Johan and Étienne have cavities in their teeth. You'll have to make an appointment at the dentist."

"How tall are you going to grow?" I ask Sophie.

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth.

I frown. Not so long ago, she was excited about learning that fact.

"I'll be in the laundry room if you need me," Heidi says with a sigh.

Sophie enters my study ahead of me, looking around the space. I can't help but notice how lost she looks in the big room.

"What is it, Sophie?"

She turns to me. "I want to go home."

Something inside me tightens in protest. "You are home, darling. Don't you like your new room?"

Fabien went to a great deal of trouble to make it even prettier than the temporary one in the new house. I thought she'd like the doll's house that's structured like an artificial

cave and the fairy garden in the bay window, but what do I know about what little girls want?

She averts her gaze and drills the toe of her sneaker into the rug. “It’s nice, but I want to go home to Sabella.” A note of uncertainty slips into her slight voice. “You promised.”

Yes, I did, and I also made myself a promise earlier in the kitchen not to break her trust.

Going to my desk, I take the parcel that I got from Bastia and carry it back to her. “I have something for you.”

She stares at the gift wrapped in pink paper and tied with a big white bow. Isn’t she excited or curious? I thought she’d jump on it. It just goes to show how little I understand her and how much I still have to learn.

“Take it,” I say with another encouraging smile.

She slowly untangles her grip on Beatrice and puts the stick doll on the sofa before taking the parcel. She glances at me as if she expects a vile surprise. Her actions are unenthusiastic when she peels off the paper to reveal a white box with pink hearts. The white and pink remind me of Sabella’s sixteenth birthday party. The colors transport me back to the time when I first saw her. I remember with startling clarity how I felt—the pleasant discovery of her beauty, the instant possessiveness, the overwhelming jealousy, and most of all, the inappropriate desire. I shake off the memory and force myself back to the present moment, to the little girl who stares at the closed lid of the box.

“Open it,” I urge gently.

She wiggles the lid and pulls it free. A porcelain doll with blond curls and an exquisite dress of anglaise embroidery rests on a cushion of velvet. The blue eyes are made of glass. Her

face is delicately painted. The toy is a work of art. I watch Sophie intently, waiting for her reaction.

“It’s very pretty,” she says, handing me the box.

I frown internally but manage another smile. “She’s yours. It’s a gift. You can keep her.”

She lowers her arm reluctantly.

I crouch in front of her. “What’s the matter, darling? Don’t you like the doll?”

She bites her lip and looks away, clearly sad instead of happy.

Fuck. What did I get wrong? “Is the dress not the right color?”

She shakes her head and meets my gaze again before saying in a trembling voice, “I want to go home, back to Sabella.”

Blowing out a silent sigh, I consider how to approach this. I can’t lie to her. That will definitely betray her trust. I did however promise I’d take her back today.

“Sophie,” I start carefully, brushing a hand over her short hair. “Do you remember when we talked about your room at Sabella’s house being temporary and that you’d eventually live here?”

She shakes her head more vehemently and says with more volume, “I want to see Sabella.”

“And you will. I’ll take you back in a moment.”

Tilting her head, she considers me with a pleated forehead. “Really?”

“That’s what I said back at the—” I catch myself, not being able to say that word out loud. “Back on the hill.”

“Can we go now?”

“Yes.” I straighten with an audible sigh this time. “Of course. If that’s what you want.”

She holds the box out to me. “Thanks anyway. She’s very nice.”

My heart softens. This scrap of a girl is going to wrap me around her little finger. Correction. She’s already won me over tenfold. “As I said, it’s yours. You can take it with you.” I don’t want to tell her my intention for giving her a real doll was to replace the stick one. I’m not as sure as I was when I bought the doll that the gesture will be welcome.

“Really?” she asks again.

“That’s what a gift means. You can do with it as you please.”

“All right.” She looks with closer attention at the doll. “I’ll have to ask Beatrice first. Maybe Beatrice won’t like her.”

“If Beatrice doesn’t like her, she can stay here.”

“Okay,” she says, wrapping her small hand around mine.

When I close my fingers around hers, I’m a goner. I already love her like she’s my own. “Shall we go?”

“Yes.” She sounds relieved. “Please.”

After letting Heidi know I’m taking Sophie to the new house, I load my niece and both her dolls in the car. I’m buckling Sophie in on the backseat when Toma pulls up. He gets out of his car and walks to me with a hesitant stride. I test

the hold and the stretch of the seatbelt while he stops two steps away and hovers there with an air of uncertainty.

I take my time to double-check that Sophie is secure before straightening and acknowledging him. “Toma.”

“Angelo.” He shifts his weight. “I came to apologize for taking a piss.”

Pinning him with a stare, I say, “You mean for not doing your job.”

He scratches his head and looks away. “Yeah. That’s what I meant.”

“It’s not a difficult job, is it?”

His nostrils flare. “No.”

“Then don’t give me the impression that you’re an idiot.”

He clenches his fingers into balls at his sides. “It won’t happen again.”

“It better not.” I get into the car. “I don’t suffer fools gladly. If you don’t have what it takes to be a part of this business, I can always find you something else to do. Maybe you’re more suited for filing paperwork in the vault.”

His face turns red, but he’s wise enough not to answer. I shut the door on his indignant expression and step on the gas. The moment I clear the gates, Toma is forgotten. As always, Sabella and our problems crowd my mind. How do I handle the situation with Sophie? How do I wean her off my wife?

With Sophie in the car, I’m extra careful not to drive recklessly or to exceed the speed limit.

I’m not sure what to expect when we arrive and Sabella opens the door. Fortunately, Sophie runs up the path and

throws herself into Sabella's arms, preventing me from having to face a situation I have no idea how to handle. If I'm at a loss of how to act, it's because of how I left Sabella. It's what happened. It's what's changing between us. I want it. Badly. More than ever. I can almost taste the longing on my tongue. But I still don't have answers, and being caught in this hostile limbo leaves me weary to the bone.

Sabella hugs the little girl tightly before lowering her to her feet. "What do you have there?"

"Look." Sophie thrusts the box with the new doll at Sabella. "Angelo said I can keep her." She adds hastily, "If Beatrice likes her."

"Wow." Sabella goes down on her haunches and studies the doll. "A friend for Beatrice. I bet Beatrice is going to be very happy to have the company."

"I think she will," Sophie says with a big smile, for the first time sounding excited about the gift.

What is Sabella doing right that I'm doing wrong? She always knows exactly what to say and what to do where the kids are concerned.

I hover on the threshold, feeling out of place and oddly like I'm trespassing as the women talk about naming the doll. Sabella suggests that Beatrice should have an input. Sophie decides the doll is from the city, not like Beatrice who's from the valley.

I'm enraptured as I watch their exchange. I can't help but admire my wife's skills with the child. Sabella is protective of Sophie. She'll do anything to keep her safe. She'll always put the little girl before herself. She'll be no different with her own children. She'll be an amazing mother.

“Why don’t you make our new friend at home in the kitchen?” Sabella says, pulling Sophie inside. “I’ll fix you something to eat.”

She catches my gaze as I close the door, a question burning in her eyes. Am I staying? I don’t reply, because I don’t have an answer. When a beat passes and I don’t move, Sabella ushers Sophie from the lounge, leaving me to my own devices.

My choice.

My decision.

A feeling of loneliness descends on me. Exclusion. A deep, painful longing beats under my breastbone. I want what Sabella has with Sophie. I’ve always wanted a family of my own. It goes deeper than needing an heir. It’s the desire to be a father. It’s the sweet notion of putting a baby in Sabella’s belly. *My baby.*

And just like that, I make my decision. As I stand on the doorstep of a house I’ll never live in, I know it’s time. I know what my choice will be. It’s not the solution that will break the vicious circle of my warped relationship with my wife, but it’s all I have. There’s only one thing that will prevent her from running from me, only one situation I can exploit to make her stay. It’s not a foolproof plan. It’s not an ideal arrangement. It won’t give me guaranteed insurance that she’ll never betray me, because she may still try, but it’ll make escaping me considerably tougher.

Yes.

It’s wrong.

But.

Sometimes, a man has to do what a man has to do.

She can't say I wasn't honest about my intentions. She can't accuse me of not warning her.

In any event, this will serve to achieve the purpose of our marriage. Or that's what I tell myself as I climb the stairs and enter the bedroom. However, I don't look at myself in the mirror as I pull open the drawer and remove the packet of birth control pills. Even before Fabien installed the cameras, I knew where she hid them. It's not a very clever hiding place, but my wife is young and inexperienced when it comes to deceiving seasoned criminals like me.

I hesitate for a second. There's no coming back from this. But it's always been this way between Sabella and me. Full sail ahead. Act first and think later. Do what needs to be done and deal with the consequences in the aftermath of the wreckage.

Fuck.

I brace my palms on the vanity and drop my head between my shoulders when I take a moment to think about how she'll feel.

She'll come around.

She has to.

Once it's too late, I'll soothe her. I'll give her all the bling her heart desires. When there are children, she'll be tied to me in a different way. She won't be able to leave the country without my consent, not with a child. And she won't leave her children behind. After seeing her dynamic with Sophie, I'm certain of it. She'll stay, and she'll see them on weekends. Yes. We'll operate like a divorced couple, like I envisioned before.

All that remains is to get rid of Lavigne. It can't hurt to remove the temptation. It doesn't mean there won't be others

who'll be willing to aid her. I'll just have to eliminate them all.

Steeling my heart, I straighten. My jaw locks with determination. Before I have time to change my mind and be a better man, I pop the pills out of their casings and wash them down the drain.

TO BE CONTINUED

AFTERWORD

Thank you for embarking on the third part of Sabella and Angelo's journey. If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a short review (only a couple of lines will do!). Every review makes a huge difference in helping other readers discover the book.

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For updates on my future books, special deals, and exclusive offers, please join my [newsletter](#). You'll find my Facebook group and social media links in [About the Author](#). I look forward to staying in touch. :-)

Please turn the page for a sneak peek of Book Four, **Kisses Like Rain**.

Hugs,

Charmaine

**SNEAK PEEK OF KISSES LIKE
RAIN**

CORSICAN CRIME LORD, BOOK
FOUR

I gave him my innocence and my virtue. I gave him my love and my hate. Is there anything left to give?

Angelo Russo came like a storm into my life and left destruction in his trail. The man who hates me beyond measure is the man who put a ring on my finger and gave me his name. My husband is my worst enemy.

There's nothing left to salvage from the wreckage of our lives. He married me to destroy me, and he did an outstanding job. He took my innocence and my virtue. I gave him my love and my hate. And just when I think there's nothing else to give, I realize how wrong I am. What Angelo wants most is the promise of life I carry inside my body. When he's taken that last piece of me, he'll crush me with a smile on his beautiful face and wipe my existence from his memory forever.

Excerpt from Kisses Like Rain

The windows of the new house are dark. I park and let myself in with my key. The noise of my car must've woken Sabella, because she walks onto the landing, tying a robe around her waist as I lock the door behind me.

Her tone is cold. "What are you doing here?"

Her animosity gets my hackles up. In turn, my tone is hard. "It's my house, isn't it?"

"It's late."

“I was working.” It’s a lie. I haven’t focused on work for the last two hours. I stalk up the stairs. “Shouldn’t you be on your knees?”

“I tried that.” She doesn’t retreat, not even when I stop so close to her that she has to crane her neck to look at me. “It didn’t work.”

My laugh is full of spite. “Were you trying to make something work?”

Hurt flashes in her beautiful brown eyes. “Yes. What a pity you didn’t notice.”

I grab her around the nape and yank her against me. “I did notice.” Taking in her gorgeous features, I lower my head and breathe over her lips, “That’s the problem. You’re fucking with my head.”

She places her palms on my chest, but she’s not pushing me away. She answers me in a breathless voice. “Why is that a problem? Why would you think I’m trying to fuck with you?”

Tension flows through my body and branches out into every direction until I feel it in my fingers. They tighten with an involuntarily force on the soft skin in my grip.

My honesty is raw. “Because you’re going to sell me out.”

Fuck.

It hurts to say it out loud, not only admitting the fact in so many words but also letting her in on the truth—that it’s eating like acid into my gut.

“Oh, Mr. Russo.” She reaches up and cups my cheek in a pitying rather than a gentle gesture. “How wrong you are. Why won’t you believe me? Do you honestly think I’ll endanger my family?”

I lock my free hand around her wrist and press my cheek against her palm. “I have the intel, Sabella.” The intense disappointment of that betrayal makes my words hard. “It’s time to admit the truth. Stop fucking lying to me.”

“It’s you who can’t see the truth. Perhaps you don’t want to. Is it simply easier for you to hate me?”

“Hate you?” The alcohol makes me too honest again. “You know I never hated you.”

Sadness washes into her expression. “Not even a little?”

I remember when she asked me that question the first time. I thought I did then. I wanted to punish her. But everything is different now. She apologized. She’s going to be the mother of my child, and all I want to do is take care of her. Yet she’s not giving me the forever she owes me.

“What makes you so certain of your facts?” she asks. “What proof do you have?”

I release her wrist and brush my hand up her arm. “The night Lavigne interrogated you isn’t on record. Someone wiped out the camera feed.”

She looks surprised. If she’s acting, she’s acting it. “Why?”

“Come on, *bella*.” I huff a laugh. “It’s not hard to guess. He cut you a deal.”

“He did.”

Her easy admittance takes me aback.

“But I refused,” she continues.

I stop stroking her arm and rest my hand on her shoulder. “That’s not what my intel says.”

“What intel?” she exclaims. “There was no one else in the room.”

A muscle ticks in my temple. “Exactly. No witnesses. Convenient, no?”

“So it’s someone who spoke to Lavigne, a partner or a colleague, and you trust someone who’ll betray his own team?”

I think about it. Saying it like that, it gives me pause. But no. The force is full of rats, people who honor money more than loyalty. However, I can’t ignore the fact that the informant, Hugo, may be a fake. He *is* my uncles’ contact, and my uncles are up to something. Undermining me, no doubt. I’m yet to prove it, but I will.

Her soft voice is cajoling. So fucking tempting. “Why do you refuse to give us a chance, Mr. Russo?”

“Why don’t you say my name?” I deadpan.

She drops her hand from my cheek. “You know why.”

I squeeze her nape. “Why?”

Rebellion sparks in her brilliant eyes. “You told me not to say it.”

“Unless you come.”

“That night, I made myself an oath.” She meets my gaze squarely, even at the disadvantage of her height. “And I won’t break it.”

Fuck. That cuts into me like glass shards and steel knives. I can’t say I don’t deserve it. I’ve been a prick. I’ve just been so fucking angry, so self-consumed.

“Say it.” I have to try. “Forget about what I said then. Say it now.”

She gives a sad little shake of her head. “A promise is a promise, Mr. Russo. I can’t go back on my word. Not to myself.”

I exhale through my nose as I deal with that blow. I can’t say I didn’t bring that one on myself either.

Securing her with my hand around the back of her neck, I pull her closer until the length of her body is pressed against mine. I inhale the smell of the cherry blossom shampoo in her hair, and suddenly, I miss the salt of the sea on her skin and the look on her face when she comes out of the water. Happy. Carefree. And I realize with a start I only saw her like that once. On the day I met her.

“What will it take for you to believe me?” she asks, her expression empty. Devoid of hope.

It guts me that it’s me who put that look on her face.

I want to believe her so damn much. She has no idea. Under the numbing influence of the alcohol, I’m honest enough with myself to admit that what stalls me in killing Lavigne isn’t the kids or the war Marziale started. No. Those are mere excuses. What’s stalling me is the fear of finally facing the truth. To have proof beyond a doubt of what Sabella is planning. But I can’t live in fear and denial forever. I can’t carry on like this. I’m at the end of my tether.

The time has come to reel Lavigne in.

Order [Kisses Like Rain](#) (Book Four)

WHAT TO READ WHILE YOU WAIT

DIAMONDS IN THE DUST (DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER, BOOK ONE)

A DIAMOND MAGNATE TRILOGY

“She’s like a pretty wildflower pushing through the cracks on a dirty pavement. I’ll make her mine, even if how I do it will make flowers wilt.”

The deeds I do will give most people nightmares. The sights I see will haunt their dreams. If you keep on doing and looking for long enough, your feelings eventually turn to stone. Or maybe I was born that way. Unfeeling.

That’s the price of power and money, of living *la belle vie* and running the French mafia. Then she came along like a pretty wildflower pushing through the cracks on a dirty pavement—fragile yet resilient, a breath of beauty among the filth. She was supposed to be just another nameless person I was to pluck from her life and hand to my brother, nothing but a pawn in the gamble of our diamond business. But everything changed the minute I slammed my hand over her mouth and lifted her off her feet. From the moment I pinned her against my body, I wanted her.

There’s a psychological label for men who don’t have empathy or guilt. Psychopath. Here’s the thing about not possessing a conscience... I’ll do whatever it takes to have what I want, even if my methods will make flowers wilt.

Excerpt from Diamonds in the Dust

When I doze off, the rats soon discover I'm a harmless target and nip at the exposed flesh of my wrists and even at my legs through my tights. I swat and kick at them, but they're becoming fearless, even taking their chances when I'm awake. The broken skin burns at first, but after a while the cold numbs everything, so much so I don't feel the bite of pain as their sharp teeth gnaw at my flesh. The best way of warding them off is moving, but they follow and try to climb up my legs when they can't bite through my boots.

By the time the sun comes up, I'm exhausted and cold to my core. It's as if the damp has infiltrated my bones. I can't stand on my feet anymore. I think the rats may kill me before I starve. I'm not sure which is the most merciful. My stockings are torn and the expensive clothes ruined, dirty from the damp and black mold on the walls. It stinks worse than my apartment building down here.

Leaning against the wall, I kick at a rat that climbs onto the toe of my boot. The slosh of the water is quieter. It's low tide. There's something else too, like the fall of a hammer. It comes closer. No, it's the fall of footsteps. My heart starts thundering in my chest when they descend the steps. I brace myself, praying for rescue, but the door swings open on Maxime's face.

He's wearing a pale suit with a pink tie, and his face is clean-shaven. When he opens the gate and enters my prison, a whiff of winter reaches my nostrils. It's clean and fresh, a stark contrast to my dirt and exhaustion, like a magnifying glass on his cruelty. He's cold and monstrous.

He's not my savior.

I back away, but he grips my hair with one hand and carefully pulls off the tape with the other. It hurts. The skin on my lips stretches and cracks. I drag my tongue over them and taste blood.

Something inside me snaps. My vision turns blurry.

He turns me around to undo the cuffs. The moment my hands are free, I jump at him. I claw and hit, screaming like a mad person. I must be mad, because what I should be doing is escaping. I kick. I punch him in the gut. He only stands there and takes it, my blows doing no damage. After the next fist I jam into his stomach, I shove him and run.

I'm not even on the first step before he grabs hold of my ankle. I go down, stopping my fall with my hands. The heels of my palms burn as the skin comes off, but I kick with all my might. I dig my fingers into the stone, my nails breaking as he drags me back into my cell.

“No!”

He flips me onto my back and covers my mouth with his hand. My lips are pulled back, my jaw wide. I bite down until the pressure of his hand becomes so severe, I think my skull may crack.

“Are you done?” he asks through thin lips.

I shake my head, but we both know I am. The fight goes out of me, my energy spent.

“If you scream,” he says, “I’ll leave. I can do this for days until you’re ready to listen.”

When I go still, he removes his hand. “That’s better.”

I lie on my back on the damp stones, the wetness seeping through my coat and dress, through my very skin and into my

heart. He's crouching next to me, studying me with one arm braced on his knee. His frame is big and powerful. The shadow he casts over me swallows me whole. Somehow, it seems darker and colder than the winter night I spent in my cell.

"I want you to listen to me, Zoe."

My gaze homes in on his face, on the non-symmetrical lines of his features and the bump on the bridge of his nose.

"When I take you home," he continues in his musical accent, "you have a choice."

My hope lifts a fraction. "To South Africa?"

"To France."

The words are a punch. I don't know how many more punches I can take. I force the question from numb lips. "What choice?"

"It can be like yesterday, like the day we spent, or it can be like this." He motions around the space. "What you decide is entirely up to you, but you should know that each choice comes with a price."

I hold my breath, waiting for him to carry on.

"If I take you to my family in France, this is what awaits you. You'll be locked up, a prisoner. The men will take turns with you, starting with my brother, and he's not a kind man. He'll keep you alive, but you'll wish you were dead. The only way I can protect you is to lay claim to you." His gaze pierces mine. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

My body is shaking uncontrollably, my mind refusing to give meaning to the words.

"Do you understand, Zoe?"

I shake my head.

“You’re going to have to become my mistress.” The flames in his eyes burn glacially. “You’re going to have to let me fuck you, convincingly and often.”

Read [Diamonds in the Dust](#) Now

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charmaine loves to write dark and edgy romance that will melt both your e-reader and your heart. She's a mom of two teenagers, an adorable dog, and a dominant cat. Her country of birth is South Africa where many of her stories play off. Her French husband kidnapped her to the south of France where she currently lives with her family. When she's not writing, you'll find her in the kitchen baking cakes or in the gym lifting weights (because ... all those cakes!).

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