



the  
DEVIL'S  
VOW

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BELLA J.

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## AUTHOR NOTE

The Devil's Vow is a dark romance novel and contains scenes that might offend sensitive readers. If you have any triggers regarding sexual acts/situations then this might not be the book for you.

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## Prologue

The cold steel against my back relieved the burn of marred flesh. My body felt heavy, the weight of every bone pulling me down. Tears stained my face, and the dried-up sorrow of pain and torment clung to my cheeks like his vile lust stuck to my thighs.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, trying to remember her face, her voice. With every lash of his whip, every bite of his teeth, and every insult he spat at me, her face would be as clear as daylight. Beautiful blue eyes. Innocent smile. Pure heart. But it was moments like these, the moments where exhaustion dug its claws into my body, despair choking the fight from my soul, that her face would disappear. I couldn't forget her. Not now. Not ever.

"*Schiava.*" The bars reverberated against my spine as he slammed his cane against the steel. "Don't you dare pass out on me now. The night is only beginning."

I opened my eyes, staring at the monster who leaned over the cage with his arms stretched out wide. Sweat covered his naked body, his cock hard, and his expression that of pure evil. Dark brows framed wild eyes that reflected hell's shadows within them, and I feared it would engulf me.

The five o'clock shadow that covered his jaw wasn't there when I first met him. Those familiar eyes weren't so wicked and malevolent either, possessed with an unspeakable evil as he unleashed the devil in him. He used me to fulfill his wretched fantasies as he bathed in his sadistic tendencies that pierced my flesh over and over again. The only part of my body which remained unharmed by him was my face.

"Let's not ruin the prettiest part of you," he'd say while he stared at me as if I was a dream to him. A dream caught in the web of this nightmare he created.

I glanced at the woman on the bed, settled on her knees, arms stretched above her head. She moaned as she fought against the chains, mouth gagged and ankles tied to a spreader-bar. But she was only playing her part, doing what she was paid to do. To let him fuck her while I watched, her body bent and used in the most depraved ways. But unlike me, she had a choice. She chose to be here. She chose to give ownership of her body to the monster who relished our pain.

"Eyes here, *schlava*." He slammed his cane against the bars, the sound vibrating all around the cage and crashing against my chest as he demanded my attention. He glanced down at the fresh cut on my inner thigh. "If you get blood all over your cage, I'll make you lick it up like a fucking dog."

I snarled, my hatred oozing like an open sore. If I weren't so tired, I would have launched myself across the cage so I could claw his eyes out while I spat in his motherfucking face. Piece of shit.

He smiled as if he could read my every thought. "No matter how exhausted you are, the fight in your eyes remains."

I pulled my dirty knees up to my chest, wincing as the cut on my thigh stretched with the movement.

"I'll tell you what." He pushed away from the cage and sauntered toward the bed, the gagged whore moaning as he approached her. "You seem like you need some rest, so I'll grant you a little reprieve by letting you watch. But tomorrow I'll be sure to fuck the filth out of you, prove what a masochistic slut Emilio Moretti's daughter really is."

Renewed strength surged through my veins at the mention of my father's name. The man whose actions and decisions had brought me to this moment. He might as well have placed me in this cage himself, locking it with his threats and lies.

I watched as he tightened the belt around the whore's neck, pulling her

head back. Her back arched and spine bent with a sickening curve. The glint of a knife in his hand demanded my attention, and I gasped as terror stole my breath.

“Nothing is as pure as the color of blood, don’t you think, Daniela?” He placed the tip of his knife against the pulsing vein in her neck, and my mind was already a few seconds ahead, picturing her cut throat and bleeding corpse hanging from silver chains. “You know,” he brought the knife up to his lips, feigning a look of thought, “I think this was the part I looked forward to the most.” Evil eyes locked with mine. “The part where I could share my most immoral and heinous fantasies with you. The part where I could show you just how perfect we are for each other.”

Before I could digest his words, he flipped the blade and pressed it against her shoulder, slicing it down her arm. She screamed through the gag, and I slammed myself harder against the bars, my cries joining hers with alarm. I tasted my fear as I watched blood ooze from her flesh. The monster behind her dragged his fingertips through the crimson liquid and spread it across her skin, his eyes dark and hooded, his expression that of the devil’s lust. Tears of pain slipped down the woman’s face. Dirty blonde hair clung to her cheeks and forehead, but no matter how she screamed, the lust glowed in her eyes as she tasted hell.

I sobbed while watching him fuck her from behind, her blood soiling the white satin sheets. Her cries of pain turned into shrieks of pleasure, the chains above her head complaining as her body was used mercilessly. It was an endless game of mindfuckery, a gauntlet on the devil’s playground. His low grunts of euphoria mimicked a demon’s laugh. The wickedness that radiated from the scene clawed at my soul, and I could no longer keep the bile down. I heaved and pressed my palms against the cold ground. My body expelled the morsel of stale bread he had fed me, and along with it the last shred of strength I had left.

The bars reverberated as I collapsed against it, my palms drenched in vomit. My mind pulled me back to the day my life changed irrevocably. The day my fate was decided because of my need to protect her.

*“Do not defy me, daughter.”*

*“If you refuse, this duty will be passed on to her.”*

*“One of my daughters will marry the Silvestro boy. It’s up to you to decide which one.”*

I decided.

While their moans of ecstasy filled the room, no part of my body untouched, and in agony, I didn't regret my decision. I never would. No matter what kind of torment fell upon me, I'd endure it for a thousand lifetimes if it meant sparing her one day of pain. But now it no longer mattered. Nothing mattered anymore. But still...I did not regret it. There was only one thing I regretted the most, and that was falling for his deceptive lies. It was the biggest mistake I had made since I walked down that aisle. It was a mistake I would pay for every second I spent in this cage—an eternity because no one would come for me. No one.

So, even though my soul cried for God to help me, I refused to pray. I refused to fall asleep with hope, dreaming of a life before I walked down the aisle. She was a part of that life, and remembering those times hurt more than the whips and chains that sliced my flesh.

This was my life now.

This was my fate.

This cage.

This hell.



## Chapter One (Few weeks earlier)

It should be the happiest day of any girl's life—a day she gets to wear a designer label wedding gown and Jimmy Choo heels. Instead, the soft layers of white lace and exquisite embroidery that embellished the delicate bodice and sleeves of the dress handmade by one of the world's most famous designers made me feel like a sacrificial lamb adorned with wealth so the gods would accept my family's offering.

Not a day went by in the past eleven years that I didn't think of this day. Wondered how it would be, how it would all play out. The day that marked the beginning of a future destined for me because of the name I carried. It was yet to be determined whether the Moretti name would be a blessing or a curse. The warning at the back of my skull said the latter.

For years I prayed this day would never come. That I'd be spared the burden which laid upon my shoulders—the duty of the firstborn Moretti daughter. I dreaded it, feared it, even rebelled against it. But my father had made the decision without deliberation, and my fight against it only rewarded me with my father's scorn.

I still remembered the day my father informed me of my duty to our



family. The day I went from beloved daughter to prized possession to be kept in a gilded cage until negotiations had been set. It was carved in stone, written in my blood that my virtue would be exchanged for an alliance on my twenty-first birthday. It would be a union blessed by my father to secure a business merger of families worth millions. I hated it. I hated that I was nothing but currency used to buy an ally.

Defiance had filled my veins for so long. Not a day went by that I didn't challenge my father. He claimed that choosing a wealthy and powerful husband for me was for my benefit, but I saw through his superficial bullshit. I was hellbent on showing him that no matter what he did I would never marry any man who wasn't of my choosing. I refused to comply with his ridiculous demand...until he swept in with a weapon which assured I would. And that was' how I came to be here today, dressed in a wedding gown with only a few moments of freedom left.

"Daniela." My mother strolled into my room just as the hairstylist placed the last pin in my hair. "Oh, my God. You look..." She struggled to find her words. "I'm speechless." The plush white carpet muted her heels as she made her way toward me. My eyes met hers in the mirror, the reflection of a proud mother and an apprehensive daughter creating a daunting image.

"Thank you, Mother." My reply was polite, but it lacked the sweetness of a daughter reveling in a parent's approval.

She gently placed her hands on my shoulders, careful not to disturb the delicate fabric. Her touch was warm yet did nothing to thaw the fear in my gut. "I can't believe this day is finally here. My baby girl is all grown up."

I smiled, knowing all too well it didn't reach my eyes.

"Daniela," she started, "I know you're nervous, and rightfully so."

"I'm not nervous. I'm unhappy."

She recoiled at the word no parent wanted to hear their child say. I watched her reflection, how she diverted her gaze, unable to look me in the eye.

"All we can do is trust that your father made the right decision in this regard. It wasn't an easy decision for him to make. But it was based on what he felt was right for you."

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"Daniela Faye Moretti. Mind your language." Her reprimand did nothing to ward off the ice in my veins.

"You and I both know I'm getting married today because it's best for

him, for family business. It has nothing to do with what's best for me."

She stepped back and brushed a blonde strand from her face. "I know you don't agree with your father's way of things, but you carry the Moretti name, and with that comes certain responsibilities."

I turned to face her. "The only responsibility I am taking today is to make sure the same fate doesn't fall upon my little sister. That is the only reason I am doing this."

"Nevertheless," she straightened her shoulders, the fabric of the lavender shade dress pulling taut around her arms, "it has to be done."

I narrowed my eyes at her in disbelief. "How can you be okay with this? How can you stand there in your five-thousand-dollar dress and high heels pretending this is a real wedding?"

"It is a real wedding."

"No, it's not. Nothing about this is real. There are no pretty flower girls throwing petals down the aisle, no bridesmaid to hold my train. No reception where my love and prosperity with my husband is celebrated. It's just a ruse."

"You didn't want that," she shot back. "You were the one who said you didn't want all those things."

"Because it's not a real wedding."

"You're only making this more difficult than it needs to be."

"Faye." Alessa came rushing in, the rose-gold satin dress floating above her feet. She wrapped her arms around my neck, almost knocking me over. "I can't believe you're getting married!" She all but squealed with excitement and leaned back, narrowing her eyes at me, pulling her lips in a teasing grin. "I knew it would only be a matter of time before one of those handsome Silvestro brothers would sweep you off your feet. You've always been the prettiest girl at every party with your deep red hair, wild curls, and flawless skin. You're like a Renaissance goddess."

"Oh, stop."

She snickered, her eyes filled with excitement that would have been infectious under different circumstances. My younger sister took more to our mother than I did. Bright blue eyes, light hair, and a dusting of freckles on her dainty nose. Me, on the other hand, I was lucky enough to inherit the fiery red curls of my grandmother from my mother's side. Apparently, the gene decided to skip a generation and made me its target.

Alessa smiled. "This is going to be such a beautiful wedding."

I wondered if she'd still carry the same amount of enthusiasm if she knew

the truth masked with a fairy tale of lies. Protecting her from this fate wasn't enough. I had to protect her from the truth about mine as well.

Her blonde strands curtained around her shoulders. "I still can't believe you never told me you were dating a Silvestro."

"Let my lack in sharing my personal life with you be payback for your decision to go to Oxford University and move halfway across the world."

"You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Nope."

"It's not my fault you decided to stay close to home."

I smiled, knowing the truth about why I couldn't leave like she did. I was the prize. The cattle. The princess who couldn't go too far from the kingdom, waiting for the day when the king would decide who would have her hand in marriage. My education consisted of private tutors and online classes instead of lockers, uniforms, and overcrowded halls. But deep down I was thankful Alessa had the freedom to go to Oxford. The more distance there was between her and our family, the better chance there was of our father not corrupting her life as he was mine.

"But seriously." She took both my hands in hers. "You look beautiful. Like a princess about to marry her prince."

Oh, how naive and innocent my little sister was. The idea of romance and fairy tales was still alive in her heart, and I'd do anything to keep it that way.

I merely smiled, the strength of our bond reflecting in her unshed tears of happiness for me. If lying to her meant she'd never shed a tear of sorrow in my name, then I'd live with lies for a thousand lifetimes.

"I love you, Faye."

Tears stung the back of my eyes. I could still remember her smile the day I told her to call me Faye as she struggled to pronounce my first name.

*"Faye, as in fairy?"*

The wonder that beamed from her eyes as she stared at me was amazing to witness. She begged me to dance around in the garden with her, pretending we were both fairies in a magical, make-believe world—a world I was hellbent on protecting from the harsh truth that was my world.

"I love you too, Alessa." It was the one thing I told her today that wasn't a lie. The one thing that didn't burn my tongue with deception.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Wait. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied as convincingly as possible.

She squeezed my hand. "Something's wrong. I can see it in your eyes."

“Nothing is wrong,” I assured her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve just been gone from home for so long, and I’m thrilled you’re here today.”

“I wouldn’t miss your wedding for anything.”

A part of me had hoped she wouldn’t have been able to make it to the wedding. Yet, another part of me was thankful she did. I found strength in her presence, reminding me of what was at stake if I didn’t do what was expected of me.

I smiled as warmly as I could and pulled her in for a hug, tightly squeezing my hands around her shoulder.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked softly against my ear.

“I am. It’s just pre-wedding jitters. I’ve never been happier, sister. I swear.” I leaned back and pinned my gaze on hers. “Now, go back to being extremely excited about my wedding.”

I winked, and she smiled so brightly, reminding me once again why I had decided to step into this role, sacrificing my happiness to make sure her smile never had to fade.

“Alessa,” my mom touched her elbow, “go see if all the guests have arrived yet.” A subtle way of getting rid of her.

“Okay.” She gave me a final glance. “I’m so happy for you, Faye. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you.”

*Oh, God. If you only knew.*

The door shut as Alessa left, and my mother sighed, pulling me in for a comforting hug, careful not to ruin the elegant updo of my hair. “I genuinely believe everything will work out in the end. I really do.”

“At least that makes one of us.” I swallowed the tears that threatened to expose my fear and took a step back. Having my mother’s arms around me only made me want to give in to the need to break down. If I thought it would have made a difference, I would have begged my parents to reconsider. To not make me do this. But I knew better. I knew nothing I said or did would change the path they had chosen for me.

“Alessa can never know. Promise me she will never know the events that led up to this day.”

My mom weaved her fingers together, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I will try my best to protect her—”

“No. Trying isn’t good enough. Promise me she will never know.”

Moments of silence settled between us, a long pause before she finally

gave me her word. “I promise.”

Adriana cleared her throat and held out the silver tiara and veil. “Time for the final touch.”

“Allow me.” My mother took the tiara, and I hesitated for no longer than a second before leaning down and closing my eyes as she effortlessly placed it on my head, weaving it between the pinned curls. Adriana straightened the veil, her hands smoothing out every crease, allowing the lace to drape down my shoulders and back, all the way past the hem of my dress.

My mother wiped at a tear that shimmered on her cheek, and at that moment, I wished I had the freedom to cry. I would have traded all the wealth, every luxury I ever had growing up as a Moretti, for the privilege of being able to cry a single tear as I mourned the loss of my own free will.

“I’ll go get your father. He can’t wait to walk you down the aisle.”

“I’m sure,” I mumbled without even attempting to hide my sarcasm.

My mom merely gave me a look of warning before leaning in to give me a loving peck on the cheek. “You look stunning, Daniela. I know you will make your father and me very proud.”

Words that were meant to motivate and praise only intensified the pressure that was already debilitating. I smiled, grabbing hold of every shred of courage I had within me, and watched as my mother exited the room. The door shut behind her, and I exhaled, allowing myself a moment’s reprieve by relaxing my shoulders.

Adriana handed me the bouquet of blush peonies, a dusting of pink within the thickly lush floral arrangement. “Smile, Daniela.” Her voice was soft. “It’s your wedding day. Every bride should smile on her wedding day.”

“I’m not just any bride,” I whispered as Adriana bent down to fluff the hem of my dress. It was all so surreal, a nightmare within a reality I couldn’t escape.

There was a light knock on the door, and I looked up as my father entered. My heart turned inside my chest, and I had to fight the urge to run toward him so I could wrap my arms around his waist like I used to do as a little girl, before he burdened me with this curse and ruining the trust a daughter should have in her father.

His expression softened, yet his presence filled the room as it always did. And whenever he wore a black tuxedo as he did now, with the golden cufflinks that held our family crest, he was the epitome of pride and power.

“You are the most beautiful bride I have ever seen.”

“Don’t,” I warned. “Don’t pretend like any of this is real.”

He righted himself, squaring his shoulders as if he could intensify the heavy presence he brought into the room with him. “One day you will appreciate what I’ve done for our family.”

“You mean what *I’ve* done.”

His dark eyes narrowed, and there was a silent snarl from his lips. “I hope you treat your future husband with more respect than you do me.”

I crossed my arms. “That depends on whether he’ll make me do something I don’t want to do.”

“I’m going to say this only once, Daniela.” He stepped closer, the authority he carried smothering my courage. “You will do anything and everything to ensure your husband is nothing but thrilled to have you as a wife. You will respect him. You will obey him. And you will carry the Moretti and Silvestro name with nothing but pride. If I so much as suspect defiance from you toward this marriage, I will remove you from this family and let your sister take your place.”

“You promised!” My heart surged up my throat. “You promised you wouldn’t—”

“And you gave me your word you will behave. Break your word, and I’ll have no choice but to break mine. Now,” he straightened the lapels of his tuxedo, “are you ready?”

I took a few seconds to wallow in the river of loathing I felt toward my father, the memory of a time I loved him wiped from my mind.

I squared my shoulders and gripped my bouquet tightly between my fingers. “Yes,” I lied.

Adriana picked up my veil as I moved toward him—linking my hand into the crook of his arm, his cashmere suit soft against my palm.

“Can I ask you something?” My pulse raced, my palms sweaty and fingers shaking.

“What is it, Daniela?”

“Why?”

I looked at my father and immediately saw his disapproval of my question in his dark eyes. “It’s what’s best for the family. To secure a good future for us and our future generations.”

“I just don’t understand—”

“You don’t have to understand. You just have to obey.” His hand squeezed mine, but it wasn’t meant to reassure. It was meant to warn. “You

are a Moretti, Daniela. Nothing is more important than strengthening our family, and you marrying the man chosen for you is doing exactly that.”

The reprimand in his voice was loud and clear, and I had no choice but to look away. He was right. My role as a Moretti daughter was written in my blood long before I was born. It wasn't a fate chosen for me, but rather a destiny I had been chosen for. I had learned this many years ago, and even though I acknowledged the fear, I had to embrace my position as the eldest daughter. If I didn't, this fate would fall upon my younger sister—a fate I would rather drown in than see it become her curse.

I pushed aside my apprehension and lifted my chin, grasping at every ounce of strength within me. “I'm ready.”

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## Chapter Two

I balled my fists as I stood in the front of the church, staring out over the one hundred guests, of which only thirty were close friends and family. The rest were all here to sit in the decorated pews and watch the spectacle and witness the merging of two families. A motherfucking business transaction that took place before God. But they didn't know the secrets behind it. Family secrets. Moretti secrets.

Not only was this arrangement ridiculous, but my father just had to add insult to injury by choosing a Moretti girl to be my wife. It was like he just woke up one day thinking, *'How can I fuck up my son's life today? Oh, yes, let's have him get married, and let's choose a Moretti daughter to be his wife.'*

He knew how I felt about Emilio Moretti and everything he stood for. The man was a greedy son of a bitch, a fucking menace who should have been buried years ago. He was the embodiment of everything wrong in this fucking world, but according to my father it was a business merger that could not be avoided. One that would only strengthen our family. I disagreed, but here I was, a hypocrite dressed in a motherfucking Armani tuxedo, and moments away from marrying his daughter.



I glanced at Darion, who stood next to me with a grim expression that almost matched mine. My younger brother and I shared the same ink-black hair with our trademarked Sicilian skin tone. Three years younger than I was, I had the height advantage when it came to my brother—a fact I liked reminding him of whenever I felt the need to piss him off.

Darion shifted from one leg to the other and glanced in my direction. “Smile, brother, it’s a wedding.”

I scoffed. “It’s a goddamn charade.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a charade we need to get through without drama.”

“It’s a fucking exhibition, that’s what it is. An exhibition of two families who think respect and power are negotiated, rather than earned or demanded.”

He straightened his black tie. “If it’s an exhibition as you say, let’s be thankful the Moretti girl has a pretty face, at least.”

“Her pretty face doesn’t deter from the fact that she’s a Moretti.” I straightened the sleeves of my Armani tuxedo. “If father had any pride left in him, he wouldn’t have even considered any sort of entanglement with the Morettis.”

“He wants to merge our families, Gian. We are two of the most influential families in New York, each with their own successful shipping company.” Darion glanced my way. “Imagine what a powerhouse we’d be once the companies merge.”

“And now you suddenly agree with this arrangement after you had a mouthful to say about it when father first broke this news to us?”

“I don’t agree with it, no. If I could, I’d help you storm out of this church and run your ass to Italy. But you and I both know you’ll never defy Father, no matter what he expects of you.”

“Don’t start, Darion.”

“Hey, I know, brother,” he chimed in. “You’re the crown prince, and one day you’ll take father’s place at the table. And this is a sacrifice you have to make.” His gaze met mine. “Right?”

For a moment, I was sure it was a challenge that flashed in his dark brown eyes. Like when we were kids, the times he would dare me to do something that would get me in trouble, and me getting in trouble meant him slithering his way into our father’s good graces for a while.

I rolled my eyes just as the piano started the slow tune of *Canon in D*, the guests all rising to their feet. My appreciation for fine music eased some of

the tension that rolled in my shoulders. As the cello joined the ballade, it formed the perfect fusion of classical notes and heavy strings. It was a beautiful sound only to be wrecked by the reality of why we were all here.

First, Emilio Moretti appeared, his gray beard unable to hide the smug look on his face. The bride's father dressed in a black tuxedo as if it could conceal the fucking insect he truly was. Then my bride-to-be stepped in next to him, layers of lace hugging her tiny waist, flaring out into an elegant ball gown, with her face hidden behind an exquisite embroidered veil suited for a princess. Her shoulders were squared, her every step confident as elegance radiated off her. Daniela Moretti caught the eye of every boy whenever there was a social gathering that required all family members to attend. But over the years no one could come near her. Emilio made sure she was never in the public eye too much, a move I now recognized as a way to keep her untouched and a worthy trade for when it would suit him most.

I clasped my hands and widened my stance while watching Emilio escort his daughter down the aisle. As they approached, I had to suppress the need to either storm out in a theatrical display to cause a stir or put a bullet in his fucking head.

Emilio leaned closer to Daniela, whispering something in her ear. What could a father possibly say to a daughter he was trading like cattle?

Through the veil, I could see Daniela show no reaction to her father's words, a prized performance by a loyal daughter. Emilio nodded in our direction, a subtle acknowledgment of his approval. I couldn't hide my disdain by pretending to welcome his blessing. This union made a mockery of something sacred, and it placed a curse on the Silvestro name—something I didn't take kindly to.

Daniela stepped up to take her place in front of the priest, her small frame held with pride. I couldn't help but wonder which thoughts occupied her mind, knowing she had no control over what was about to happen. I'd be a liar if I said the idea of playing God over a woman's life didn't stir something within me. Entice me. But that was precisely the part of me I had worked so hard to suppress and ignore. Something I spent night after night cloaking with secret endeavors.

The priest started the formalities, preaching about the beauty of matrimony while we stood and listened. Father Francesco had been on our family's payroll for as long as I could remember. Numerous priests who had roamed these poorly ventilated halls that smelled like candle wax and

Murphy's Oil Soap were paid employees of the Silvestro family. They wouldn't have been able to hide their indiscretions if it weren't for the influence of our community. Another thing I'd be changing the day I stepped up as head of the Silvestro empire. Dirty fuckers had no business fucking breathing.

I glanced at the bride, her striking red hair and her face barely visible through the thick lace of her veil. If she had felt any type of peace before, experienced contentment in any way up until this moment, I hoped she cherished it because after today it would all be gone. Daniela Moretti's life would never be the same now that she had been given the Silvestro name. My name.

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### Chapter Three

“I do.”

Two simple words. One single moment. Forever bound to the Silvestro hierarchy. Gian Silvestro and his brother, Darion, had a reputation among the women in this city. New York was filled with an abundance of rich and self-entitled young men, and the Silvestro brothers’ names crossed the lips of many women.

The Silvestro family was one of the most influential in the city. Even I knew that—a girl who had been kept hidden as much as possible, preserved and protected for the day her innocence would be traded for an ally. And the Silvestro family was a powerful ally to have.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

My heart thumped, and my insides churned as my conscience struggled with how wrong this all was. I thought the hard part would be standing here until the priest announced us as married. But I was wrong. As Gian gently clasped the veil between his fingertips, I held my breath and closed my eyes, anticipating our first kiss with nothing but fear. Just the thought of kissing a man whose name I only knew from meaningless gossip and the occasional social event was daunting. My father made sure I was guarded in a way that

left no escape, not even to steal my first kiss.

I felt the lace being lifted, yet I couldn't get myself to look at him. I was too busy forcing myself not to run, the nervous weight of concrete in my belly begging my feet to move. It was only when I felt his touch against my chin that I exhaled and opened my eyes. The moment our gazes locked without the barrier of a veil, I stared into the eyes of my husband. His amber irises resembled limpid pools of gold as he stared at me, the dark lines of a hardened man fiercely present in his expression. His square jaw and cleft chin lifted with pride, a thin faint scar visible on the edge of his top lip. At first glance, Gian Silvestro was handsome. Dapper and clean-cut. Intimidating. But I didn't know this person who stood before me. I didn't know the man I had just exchanged vows with.

I searched for what I was so sure I would see in his eyes, only to find it surprisingly absent. Questions. Confusion. Surprise at the flaw that so prominently set me apart from a crowd. It wasn't there in the way he continued to stare at me. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing but an expression of stone, and a reflection of resentment in his eyes framed with thick, black lashes.

He frowned, thick dark brows slanted inward as he hesitated. We stared at each other as if caught in an argument. As if we were both fighting what was about to happen—what *needed* to happen. He licked his lips, and my insides coiled, anticipating our first kiss. The kiss that would seal today's formalities. The kiss of husband and wife.

My first kiss.

He leaned down, and I glanced at his glistening lips, his bottom lip thicker than the top, which had the perfect bow. My heart hammered, my chest rapidly rising and falling.

Closer. Closer. I could smell him now. Wild spice and pepper. It enveloped me while this man overwhelmed all my senses.

Gian reached up and placed a palm against my cheek. Warm. Gentle. Caring. And it calmed the uncertainty that raged inside me, allowing me to lose myself in the moment. The moment his lips finally touched mine.

My heart stopped as he fused his lips to mine with a fiery kiss that erased the hundred guests staring at us. I expected nothing more than a chaste kiss. A mere peck on the lips. But it was soft and slow, comforting in a way I needed it to be. With a subtle touch of his tongue, he beckoned me to open for him, and I did. He tasted of peppermint, the perfect blend along with his

spice-infused cologne. After a single lap of his tongue against mine, he ended our kiss with a delicate touch of his lips. He pulled away, but I was frozen, my eyes still closed as his taste lingered.

The guests started to clap and cheer, and Gian pulled away, taking my hand. The way he carried himself, even the smile on his face, proved he was well prepared for this moment as if he had been waiting for it his entire life. Just. Like. Me.

Hand in hand, we turned to face the guests. My parents stood in the first row, my father's eyes beaming with pride. Or was it victory? My mother merely smiled while Alessa struggled to keep her excitement contained. I tried my best to smile at the guests as we made our way down the aisle. Gian clutched my hand tighter and tighter with every step, and it became increasingly hard to ignore the apprehension that grew heavy inside my chest. But no matter what I felt, how scared I was, to play my part as perfectly as I could was most important.

We reached the foyer, and I heard my sister's voice behind us. "Faye."

I turned to face her, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "That was beautiful. You are beautiful." She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly. "I pray you and Gian have a wonderful life together."

My heart sank to the soles of my feet, my own tears moments away from slipping free. She leaned back and glanced at Gian over my shoulder. "You take good care of my sister, you hear?" Her eyes found mine again. "She's one in a million."

"Daniela. Gian." My mother walked up to us with my father at her side. "I just want to wish you two a happy life together, and I pray for a blessed union."

Gian nodded, and my mother reached out to pull me in for a hug. Gian let go of my hand as my mother wrapped her arms tightly around my shoulders. "Everything will work out as it should. You'll see," she tried to reassure me. "In time, everything will slip into place."

I couldn't respond. I was afraid I might tell both her and my dad to go to hell—an inappropriate thing to say while one stood in the house of God.

"We need to go."

I turned to face Gian, a man I only knew by name and never officially met before today. The day I married him. My frazzled thoughts jumped in every direction, the sharp edges of panic stabbing deep inside my gut. It felt surreal, as if everything that led up to this moment had all been a dream...or

a nightmare.

We reached the limousine, and I struggled to find my breath as the driver opened the passenger side door. He helped gather my gown as I clambered into the limo with a layered wedding dress. The door shut, and I squeezed my body against it as Gian joined me on the back seat.

I glanced at him, watched as he brushed the delicate confetti from his suit jacket. He let out a breath and leaned back, turning his head toward me with nothing but disdain on his face. I didn't trust him. I didn't trust the malicious gleam in his eyes as he studied me without saying a word.

The silence was excruciating with him focusing his amber eyes on me, and I shifted in my seat, sweat slowly slipping down my spine.

I caved under the intense pressure of not a word being spoken between a woman in a wedding gown and a man in a tuxedo who found themselves in the most uncomfortable setting in the back of the limousine.

"I'm Daniela Faye Moretti." I held out my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Gian."

He glanced from my eyes to my outstretched hand and back up again. There was not a hint of anything other than contempt and dislike as he stared at me.

"Gian Davide Silvestro," he replied dryly without taking my hand.

I wiped my palm down the lace of my dress, my stomach crawling with nerves and unease, the urge to vomit strong as I struggled to keep still and breathe at the same time. I hated the silence. It gnawed at every bone in my body, making an uncomfortable situation even worse. "This is all so—"

"Let's get one thing straight, shall we?" he interrupted with a tone as hard as the reality I now faced. "We might be married, but as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more to it than a piece of paper that gives you the right to use the Silvestro name." He ripped the peony boutonniere from his jacket and threw it aside, anger rolling off him in waves that crashed against my chest. "I have no desire for small-talk in a bid to tame the awkwardness between us. It would be futile and a waste of my time. Understood?"

I raised a brow in disbelief, the memory of the kiss we shared inside the church gone. "So much for trying to make this easier—"

"Easier?" he blurted. "Oh, believe me, this arrangement will be quite easy and simple. All you need to do is know your place, do as you're told, and do not cause me or my family any sort of embarrassment."

"Embarrassment?" My discomfort instantly morphed into annoyance.

“Why on Earth would I embarrass you?”

He scoffed. “I suppose for someone like you, the options are endless.”

“Someone like me?”

He turned to face me, hard lines covering every inch of his face. “You are a Moretti. Your embarrassment is right there flowing through your veins.” He gestured toward my arm. “It’s in your fucking blood.”

“Screw you.” The words just dropped from my mouth like hot coals, and I regretted it the second I said it.

His cold eyes and wicked glare forced me to press myself harder against the door as he stretched his arms along the headrest of the seat. His expensive cologne filled the tiny space between us—a scent of black pepper and spice.

He rubbed his clenched jaw, eyes pensive and cold. “I will assume your outburst is due to a lack of manners and the inexperience of a woman raised without pride. But this is the first and last time I will be so lenient.”

“Lenient? Oh, my God, this is insane.” I exhaled and leaned back in my seat. I wanted to spit in his face, the chauvinistic asshole who had an ego the size of fucking Texas.

I let out a breath and braved a glance his way. His glare held nothing but malicious intent, and warning prickled the back of my neck, cautioning me to tread lightly. My feet itched to run. I wanted to tear the wedding dress from my body and run from this entire situation as far as I could. But my father made it clear that if it wasn’t me, it would be Alessa, and I’d rather die than witness the same fate befall her.

“Once we get to my estate, we’ll discuss the rules.”

“What rules?”

He lifted a brow, and his lips curved at the edges. “Mine, of course.”

It was three simple words, yet it reeked of unspoken threats. But I chose to ignore it and refused to continue the conversation regarding his rules, which was merely a method to intimidate me.

I cleared my throat. “Just as long as we’re clear, we might be married, but I won’t sleep with you. If you so much as think about touching me—”

“Then what?” he countered. “You’ll fight me? Scream? Drive a knife through my heart?”

“That sounds tempting.”

He scoffed, his eyes filled with amusement. “You are my wife, sold to my family by your father because he managed to make enemies he could not stand against alone.” He inched closer. “You are here because your father is



weak and has no son to carry forth the Moretti name. In our world, sons are born to be kings while daughters are bred to be currency.”

“That is such a sexist thing to say.”

“Doesn’t make it less true. I own you, Daniela. And if that diamond ring on your finger isn’t enough to prove that, the newfound alliance between our families is.” He shifted closer, his cologne strong and overwhelming. “Your sole duty in life now is to make me happy. So, here’s your first and final warning about how this is going to go. You will live and breathe only to please me. You will obey my every command.”

“I will never obey you.”

He let out a maniacal laugh while his hand slithered up my thigh. “Then you should know that the harder you fight me, the more I’ll want to break you.” He inched closer, his vile breath skidding across my cheek. “And I always get what I want.”

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## Chapter Four

After driving for an hour to upstate New York, we finally arrived at the estate. Steel gates welcomed us, two statues of eagles with their wings spread wide guarding the landscape. Perfectly manicured grass stretched as far as I could see, and round topiary plants stood proud along the path. The large fountain in the middle of the roundabout driveway was a clear indication of their family's love for everything lavish, and the need to shove their wealth in the rest of the world's faces.

I glanced at Gian as his fingers brushed across the keypad of his phone. Even though he looked the part of a sophisticated man born to wear a tailor-made suit, he was all hard edges with an arrogance reflected from his expression. He had pretended to be immersed with whatever business he had on his cell phone ever since we left the church. On the other hand, I had to stare out the window and into the distance the entire time since my lifelong struggle with motion sickness and the added churning of nerves in my gut had me swallowing bile the whole way.

The car came to a stop, and my passenger side door opened. Climbing out of a vehicle with a wedding dress proved quite the challenge, and I almost landed face first in the dirt if it wasn't for the helping hand of the man who

held the door open for me.

“Thank you.” I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment, and he nodded politely.

The grueling New York sun beamed down, its summer rays seeping through my pores, and the leaves of the surrounding white alder trees showed no sign of even the most subtle breeze. I gazed at the Mediterranean style mansion, the oversized, double iron and glass door clearly custom designed to complement the Silvestro vanity.

Gian stepped in next to me, buttoning his suit jacket.

“It’s beautiful.” I admired the double-story architecture, a wide balcony stretching along the entire top floor. But Gian ignored my compliment as if he didn’t even hear it, or rather didn’t give a damn about what I thought.

“Let’s get inside.”

I hesitated and watched as he walked toward the entrance. I didn’t want to go in. I didn’t want to see what this house looked like because I didn’t want to set foot in it. There were too many uncertainties waiting for me inside those walls, and I wasn’t sure if I would be strong enough to survive it. But as much as I hated being here, I had to keep up my end of the deal. With all the uncertainties regarding my future, there was one thing I knew for sure—my father didn’t make idle threats. If I didn’t do this, he would force Alessa to pay for it.

I clutched the lace of my wedding dress, lifting the hem from my feet and moved across the cobbled driveway, heels clicking across the stone. Through the imposing front door, I stepped into a dramatic entry foyer separated from the dining area with Tuscan columns. Romer rustic gold marble flooring lay beneath expansive chandeliers, every immaculate detail to the priceless art that decorated the white raison walls. Every inch of the interior was adorned with meticulous craftsmanship, gold elements, and pristine trimmings. The open spaces were enhanced by plenty of natural light coming through large windows with draped curtains. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

An older woman dressed in a beige uniform approached us, and Gian stepped closer. “This is Gabriela. She will show you to your room.”

I balked for a second and frowned in question. “My room?”

He placed a hand in his pants pocket and grinned. “Yes, Daniela. Your room. Is there a problem?”

“No. I just thought—”

“You thought that since we just walked out of a church as man and wife

we'd be sharing a room? A bed? To do what, Daniela? To consummate our marriage?" He took a step toward me, his voice low and stare intense. "To fuck?"

I swallowed, hardly able to take a breath. "That's not—"

"This *arrangement*," he bit out between clenched teeth, "is just that. A fucking arrangement."

"A business transaction, you mean." My voice was soft but filled with hatred.

He paused for a second and straightened, his six-foot-four body and broad shoulders towering over me with a looming threat. "I do not want to be your husband. I do not want to share my home with you. And I sure as hell have no desire to share my bed with you."

"Your kiss—"

"Was nothing but a show. I just gave our guests what they came for. A show."

I hardly knew this man, but for some reason his words stung. Especially after that kiss felt like so much more than just a show. But shame on me for reading too much into it.

I squared my shoulders. "Good. I wasn't exactly looking forward to sharing a bed with you either."

"Great. Now, feel free to settle into your *own* bedroom and fucking stay there." His sharp words sliced through the thick atmosphere as he turned on his heel and walked in the other direction as if he couldn't get away from me fast enough. All he left behind was the echo of his heavy footsteps.

Gian disappeared around the corner, leaving me in the foyer with Gabriela. As a woman who had to marry a man she didn't know, I had dreaded this day not just because of the daunting concept of an arranged marriage, but also the knowledge of what was expected on a couple's wedding night. But for now, it seemed I was spared that duty, which allowed me a moment's reprieve. Yet I refused to let my guard down by thinking this would be easier than what I had expected. As I'd learned so many years ago, things could change within the blink of an eye, and your life could change, knocked off its axis so nothing made sense anymore.

"Right this way, Mrs. Silvestro." Gabriela's mention of my new name sounded wrong and felt out of place. I wasn't a Silvestro. I was a Moretti, yet there was a signed and binding document that stated otherwise.

I followed Gabriela up the spiral staircase, my every step adding more

anxiety to the pit of my stomach. The unfamiliar walls were as inviting and welcoming as its owner, the weight on my shoulders increasing with every passing second. If it was any other day under different circumstances, I would have stopped to admire the rustic paintings against the walls or take the time to look at the view from the windows. But all I wanted was to lock myself away and pretend none of this was real. Not even the light through the windows, the beams of white which illuminated the impressive interior design could ward off the dreaded feeling of darkness that loomed over me.

“This is your room.” Gabriela opened the door, and I followed her in. The click of my heels went from sharp to dull as I stepped from marble onto dark wooden floors. I glanced across the room, the old-world charm accentuated with wooden ceiling beams, luxurious over-sized furniture, and rich, bold colors. Red silk sheets with filigree patterns draped over the king bed, the dark wood headboard carved with an exquisite and delicate design. Accents with colors that ranged from dark orange tones to soft neutral hues decorated the stucco walls. It was like I had stepped from the modern world into the vintage era of Italian style and finery.

I tried not to gape while admiring the spacious room. “This is incredible.”

“Mr. Gian has good taste,” Gabriela said with a thick Italian accent and smiled as she watched me admire the room.

“Um,” I turned and glanced around, “did my suitcases arrive?”

“Mr. Gian requested your things to be placed in storage. You should find everything you need in the closet.”

“Excuse me, but—”

“Dinner will be ready in an hour.” She nodded and walked out, closing the door behind her, and I sighed, wondering why the hell he would have placed my stuff in storage.

“This is insane.” I exhaled in disbelief, placing my palm against my forehead.

I walked over to the closet doors, not knowing what to expect, and opened them, revealing a walk-in closet I wouldn’t have been able to imagine in my wildest dreams.

“Jesus,” I whispered, clutching the doors in my palms, staring out in front of me. Rails of dresses, blouses, and skirts spanned along the wall on the right. Shelves with bags and shoes were lined up to my left, and dark chestnut drawers spanned along the wall across from me. I stepped inside, my mind unable to make sense of what the hell was happening. I moved slowly around

the area, subtly touching the fabric as I passed, brushing my fingertips across the wooden drawers. Everything was color coordinated, tidy, and immaculate. A vintage Italian-style armchair with embroidered gold-leaf fabric was placed in the middle of the area, and I sat down, completely speechless.

Again, if under different circumstances, I would be in Heaven right now. Many women could only dream of a closet like this with an expansive wardrobe that catered for every season. But given the *arrangement* I found myself in with Gian Silvestro, I knew not to fall for expensive and pretty things. Just like a firefly that shouldn't trust the glistening spider's web, because once you were caught in the middle of it, your fate would be in the poison of a venomous spider.

"No," I said to myself. "This is bullshit."

I stormed out of the walk-in closet only to come to an abrupt stop as Gian stood in the doorway, clutching a tumbler in his hands. "Settled in?"

"Hardly. What is this?"

He stepped in, and I gave him a warning look, the walls closing in with every step he took inside the bedroom. "This is one of the best rooms in my house. I thought it fitting for my *wife*." The word slipped from his mouth as if it burned his tongue.

"I'm talking about the clothes. Where are my things?"

He shrugged and took a sip of his drink. "I had Gabrielle place your things in storage."

"Why?"

"I wasn't sure whether you'd have the appropriate things, so I decided to make sure you had an abundance of it. I'd hate to be embarrassed by my wife's choice in attire."

I bit my tongue, the words 'fuck' and 'you' raging to come out, but I grabbed hold of every shred of self-control I had. "Where is my stuff?"

He cocked a brow. "Storage. Are you deaf?"

"No. Dumbfounded," I bit out. "You just assumed my wardrobe wouldn't be fitting as a Silvestro wife?"

"Well, you are a born Moretti. I could hardly expect more of you."

"Excuse me?" Anger simmered in my veins, my fear gradually morphing into annoyance.

He smirked, the arch of his lips momentarily distracting me. "The sooner you forget your Moretti ways, the better. It's bad enough I have to live with

Moretti blood under my roof. I'd hate to be reminded of it every day simply by watching you be...you."

I crossed my arms. "What is your problem?"

"My problem is with you and everything your family stands for." There was no mistaking the rage in his arctic glare. "The only reason I went through with this sham of a wedding was because one day I will take over the family business, and then I'll have the power to weed people like your father from our world."

I held up my arms. "I don't have anything to do with my father's business, and I couldn't care less about any of it. I'm here because I had a duty to fulfill."

His mocking laugh filled the room, the sound gnawing at my spine. "Duty?" he blurted. "What the fuck do you know about duty?"

"Please leave."

His laughing ceased, the smile vanished from his face, but I forced my courage to the forefront.

"I said leave."

But instead of turning around and walking out, he moved closer, his jaw clenched and irises hard. "Turn around."

"What?" My eyes widened.

He stalked forward, his entire demeanor threatening and dominant, like a predator consumed with bloodlust as it regarded its prey. "I said. Turn. The fuck. Around."

My heart stammered inside my chest, my mouth instantly dry. I could hardly find my voice as fear tightened its grip around my throat. "No." I breathed out heavily, my legs hardly able to stand under the weight of terror.

He snarled as he lifted his arm, throwing his glass across the room. I gasped when the loud crack of shattered glass splintered to sharp shards just as he reached out and grabbed my waist. With the flick of his wrist, he forced me to turn, and a rush of air escaped my lungs as he pulled me against him, his arm snaked around my middle, securing me in place. "You listen to me, and listen well because I am only going to say this once." He leaned down, his lips brushing against my ear, causing chills to travel down my spine. "This is my fucking house, and if you ever disrespect me again, I will have no choice but to teach you a lesson." He jerked his hold tighter around my waist. "It's already a goddamn embarrassment having to call a Moretti girl my wife, so believe me when I say the urge to whip some manners into you is

fucking strong.”

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even think as fear froze the blood in my veins, his touch cold and cruel.

“Now, say you understand.”

I closed my eyes, struggling to find my voice when he shoved his fingers through my hair, the bobby pins pressing into my skull as he gripped the strands in his palms. I yelped as he pulled my hair, forcing my neck to the side. “Say you understand,” he demanded with a voice laced with malicious threats.

I managed to take a breath. “I understand.” My whispered words were almost inaudible, but thank God it was good enough for him to let go of my hair, loosening his grip around my waist a little.

I kept my eyes closed, his scent of black pepper and spice filling the air around me while my heart tried to break free from my chest one beat at a time. But it was when I felt him reach for the zipper of my dress at the back of my neck that my insides turned into a vise with barbed wire piercing my flesh. My mind had already raced into the direction of any woman's worst nightmares. Panic suffocated me, and I whimpered as he brushed his nose against the skin of my neck while easing the zipper down my back. My legs grew weaker, and I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to keep myself upright, not while he attempted to undress me, his intentions unclear and threatening.

As he slipped the zipper all the way down, I held my breath and heard him inhale, his nose gently touching the skin below my ear. “There is nothing as vile as the stench of cheap perfume.”

Abruptly, he let go of me, and I rushed to the other side of the room, tripping over my dress which was no longer kept in place. My chin slammed against the hardwood floor, the taste of blood exploding in my mouth. Tears stung the back of my eyes as my dignity collapsed along with me, and I was unable to lift myself. I didn't want to. I wanted to stay there on the ground with the hope the Earth would swallow me whole.

All Gian did was stand there not even attempting to help me up, glaring down at me as if I was nothing but a peasant at a king's feet. “Clean yourself up, and don't be late for dinner.”

With that, he left, closing the door behind him and leaving me a mess on the cold floor. For the first time that day—the worst day of my life—I allowed myself to shed more than just a single tear. I sobbed. I crumbled under the weight of my existence, and I indulged in my own weakness by



weeping, mourning a happy future that would never be mine.

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## Chapter Five

“Fuck.” I slammed my bedroom door, the walls reverberating around me. I could still smell her goddamn perfume. It lingered all around me. Maybe the scent clung to my clothes, hence why the fragrance of mandarin, rose, and vanilla refused to abate.

I shrugged out of my suit jacket and ripped the shirt from my body, buttons clattering across the wooden floor. Annoyance pumped through my veins, and I could feel it gnaw at every bone. I knew I’d never have the luxury of choosing a wife of my own. It was a sacrifice men in my position had to make time and time again for their families. It wasn’t something I looked forward to, but I knew it had to be done. But when I learned the name of the wife my father had chosen for me, I questioned every goddamn decision I ever made for our family. For our pride and wellbeing. Daniela Moretti never once crossed my mind as an option. A Silvestro-Moretti alliance was right up there with the world finding out who really killed JFK. Never-fucking-happening. Yet it fucking happened, and now I was stuck with this woman under my roof. It had only been hours, and already she was getting under my skin. That damn kiss we shared in front of all those guests, in front of the priest, and God—it was nothing but a closing act to one

motherfucker of a charade. And I made sure I gave them all what they came for—one good fucking show. But imagine my surprise when I placed my lips against hers and actually fucking liked it.

*What the fuck was that about?*

Warm. Soft. The taste of watermelon lipstick exploding in my mouth when I forced her to open for me. Part of me hoped she'd retreat and slap me in front of the entire church when I lapped my tongue in her mouth. Make a real spectacle of herself and embarrass her family. Her father. But of course, she didn't. Daniela Moretti had been primed for this day, for the day she had to fulfill her duty, and it seemed like she had the backbone needed to do just that.

I pulled my hand through my hair and let out a breath. She provoked me by disrespecting me in my own house, something you shouldn't do to a man who has a taste for inflicting pain. All I wanted to do was tear that fucking dress from her body and whip some manners into her. The best part, the part that really fucked with my head? When I snaked my arm around her waist and felt her body tremble against mine out of fear of what I would do. Of what I could do. The part where I liked watching the vein in her neck pulse and race with adrenaline while she dreaded my next move.

My phone rang, and I glanced at it vibrating on the bedside table. Barrucio Silvestro. I wasn't ready to talk to my father. Not yet.

I pulled on a clean pair of trousers and shirt, clothing that didn't carry her stench, slipped my phone in my pants pocket, and headed down to the dining room. There were a million things I'd rather do than have dinner with my wife, but if we were going to sell this fake marriage to the world, we both had our roles to play, and to do that we had to at least attempt to communicate.

The pungent smell of garlic and rich butter filled the air as I made my way down the stairs. Gabriela was a good housekeeper, but an even better cook. She used to work as one of the kitchen staff for my father, and the day I moved out, I didn't leave before offering her a job. A job she graciously accepted.

Gabriela came walking by from the dining room toward the kitchen, her gray hair neatly tied in a bun, and not a single ounce of make-up to hide her age. But it was easy to see Gabriela was an attractive young Italian woman back in the day. "The veal will be ready in ten minutes, Mr. Silvestro."

"Hmm, veal parmesan. You know just how to welcome me home."

Her smile was warm as she walked by. She never spoke much. But

neither did I. That was probably why I liked having her around so much.

As I stepped into the dining room, I paused when I saw Daniela standing by the bar at the other end of the room, nursing a martini. She hadn't noticed me, and I remained still and silent while I studied her.

The emerald green pencil dress hugged her every curve perfectly, the color complimenting the striking color of her red curls. The nude heels accentuated her calves, her legs seemingly going on for miles. Daniela had always been a pretty girl. I remembered when we were younger and the Morettis attended social gatherings, the teenage boys would stand around and admire her beauty. But no one would be able to come near her, her father guarding her like she was the holy fucking grail. Now I knew why. She was his bargaining chip. His get out of jail free card when he would need it the most.

Pity her blood stained her beauty. I might have felt differently toward my chosen wife if she wasn't related to that low-life piece of shit who dared to call himself a respectful businessman.

I cleared my throat, and she glanced over her shoulder and looked away as if her martini deserved more attention than my presence.

"I have to say, I didn't think you'd show up for dinner."

"Why wouldn't I?" She continued to look out in front of her.

"You took quite the fall earlier. I was sure you'd be huddled in a corner," I stepped in next to her, "licking your wounds."

She glared my way. "I guess I'm not quite as fragile as you think I am." Challenge flashed in her eyes, a spark of defiance spreading to her pink cheeks and pursed lips.

I reached out and grabbed her chin, turning her face toward mine. Her eyes widened, but it wasn't with fear, but rather disgust and revulsion. Without saying a word, I examined the tiny cut on her chin caused by her fall. I let go of her face with a jerk. "Luckily, that should heal before we're required to show our faces in public."

"That's good, then. We all know killing men and extorting money from the poor is acceptable, but beating your wife could lose you the respect of many."

Her cheeky remark thrust me into a rage that had me grabbing her elbow, her drink spilling from the glass in her hand. I twisted my grip around her arm. "Do not fuck with me, Daniela. The last thing you want to do when you're cursed with an eternity in hell is make an enemy of the devil."

“The devil was already my enemy before I got condemned to this wretched place.” Rebellion burned in her irises, no trace of the fear she had shown earlier.

I licked my lips, about to let her bathe in my scorn when Gabriela announced, “Dinner is ready.”

Daniela and I didn’t even bat an eyelash, refusing to break our glares of equal loathing. Hatred. Contempt. Disdain. It was fucking palpable, beating like a corrupted heart that thrived on destruction and chaos.

I let go of her arm with a snarl and stepped back, choosing to sever the toxic atmosphere before it erupted into something neither of us could control.

“After you,” I snapped, and she moved around me, her heels barely making a sound as she stepped with caution.

Good. It would be wise of her to tread lightly.

I politely assisted by holding out the chair for her as she took her seat. My fingers brushed against her shoulder, and she stiffened instantly at the touch. A half-smile curved at the edges of my lips. She might have braved dinner with a defiant demeanor, but fear still lingered in her veins.

I took my seat at the head of the table and picked up the glass of white wine Gabriela had poured. My gaze settled on Daniela, who was seated to my right. “Here’s to a happy and prosperous life together...wife.”

She lifted her glass. “To us.”

“To us.” I lifted a brow, and took a sip of my wine, not breaking eye contact. It was only day one, and already it felt like a duel between us, the flicker of the candle’s flame enhancing the tangible tension.

Daniela glanced down at the plate Gabriela placed in front of her. “Oh, I don’t eat meat.” Gabriela stilled. “But it’s okay,” Daniela quickly added when she noticed Gabriela’s expression. “I’ll just take a double serving of the salad.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Gabriela attempted to remove the plate, but I intercepted by lifting an arm.

“Gabriela went through great trouble preparing this meal.”

Daniela glanced up at Gabriela. “I mean no disrespect. I just don’t eat—”

“It’s considered ill manners when you’re a guest at someone’s house and refuse to eat the food which has been served for you.”

Daniela looked my way. “Good thing I’m not a guest, then.”

“Eat the goddamn food.”

“You know what’s considered ill manners?” she gritted out. “A husband

who doesn't even know his wife is a vegetarian.”

“A forced error due to circumstance.”

Daniela's lips parted, and I knew another challenge burned the tip of her tongue, but she seemed to have decided against it as she looked up at Daniela. “It's okay. You can leave the plate.”

Gabriela nodded and left us. Silence settled, but the tension only intensified as I watched Daniela pick at the side salad on her plate. Even though I could think of ten insults to weave within a stern reprimand, I chose to embrace the quiet rather than fuel the animosity which already threatened to erupt.

When I bought this estate two years ago, I never imagined the day would come when I would be forced to welcome a Moretti in my home. I glanced at Daniela, and took a bite of the tender veal. I wondered if she knew just what kind of man her father really was. Her earlier mention of killing men and racketeering the poor told me she wasn't all that clueless about the family business. But I doubted she even knew the half of it.

I tasted my drink and placed it back down before folding my fists together. “Heterochromia iridis.”

“Excuse me?” She frowned, and I pointed toward her face.

“Your eyes. The color of your irises is different. It's called heterochromia iridis, is it not?”

She shifted in her seat. “Partial heterochromia iridis,” she corrected.

“And that would explain why only half of your left eye is hazel while the other half matches the green of your other eye.”

Daniela took another sip from her white wine, and the action drew my attention to her lips and the subtle movement of her throat as she swallowed.

“You're probably the first person I've ever come across who could call my flaw by its name.” She narrowed her eyes, a sheer look of distrust as she stared at me. “Something tells me your knowledge of my eye condition is not a coincidence.” She crossed her arms. “Snooping around in my medical history, perhaps?”

I scoffed. “Hardly. It's called Google, but I'm impressed you think I'd have that kind of influence to get my hands on confidential medical records.”

“We both know you're capable of that and more.”

“I'm glad to hear you say that. At least it's one lesson you don't have to be taught.”

“And which lesson is that?”

I leaned back in my seat. “To never underestimate me.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that was a threat.”

“Not at all. But if you’d like to take it as one, go right ahead, Miss Moretti.”

“Mrs. Silvestro.” She scoffed and instantly pissed me the fuck off.

I bit my lip and tapped my finger against the wooden tabletop. If I had my way, I’d be sending her packing, dropping her off at the nearest fucking corner so she could make her own way home, back to the fucking thugs she grew up with. Unfortunately, the woman was untouchable while my father used her as some fucking gesture of goodwill between our family and hers.

“Here’s a good piece of advice for you.” I lifted my chin. “Do not mistake my tolerance of you as acceptance of our marital arrangement. If it were up to me, our entire family wouldn’t even know yours existed.”

“That makes two of us, then.” She licked her lips, green eyes blemished with a mark of brown burning with fiery animosity, yet her demeanor remained calm. Cool. Collected. “Do not mistake my marital vows as a sign of respect for the Silvestro name. A family who accepts a living, breathing person in exchange for some bullshit alliance should be fed to the dogs.”

“Says the one whose own father traded her like she was mere currency.”

“You’ve done nothing but insult me since we said our vows. You pretend that because I’m a Moretti I am beneath you, not worthy of being your wife —”

“You’re not.”

She got up to her feet. “Yet you didn’t have the balls to tell your father to go to hell when he told you to marry me.”

I shot to my feet, the chair falling to the ground with a loud thud. There was no chance of her getting out of my reach in time when I grabbed her arm and dragged her across the dining room.

“Gian, you’re hurting me.” She tried to jerk free from my hold, but I tightened my grip and picked up the pace, moving faster than she was able to keep up. “Stop. You’re hurting me.”

“I don’t know what it’s like in your family, but in ours, women show respect by knowing their place.”

“And in ours, men don’t treat women like dirt.”

“I don’t treat women like dirt. Only Moretti girls.”

“What is the matter with you?” She twisted her elbow in my grasp. “Clearly, you hate my family.”

I scoffed. “How fucking observant of you.”

“Why? Why do you hate us so much?” She grabbed the stair railing and dug her heels into the floor. “Stop, for God’s sake.”

I turned and faced her, pulling her close, rigid with fury and hungry for destruction. “Your father is a fucking menace,” I hissed. “You think getting blood on his hands and running some illegal racketeering syndicate is the worst of his crimes? Think again.” I jerked her closer and stared down at her standing on the step below me. “Your father, your grandfather, they built the Moretti empire off the perversions of sick fuckers like themselves. And now that their sins are about to surface for the entire goddamn world to see, they suddenly need some friends to help them hide it, hence why you and I,” I gestured between us, “are now forced to play house.”

Her eyes grew wide, the distinct mark on her one iris a darker hue of hazel than it was a few seconds ago. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, that’s right,” I taunted, and leaned down, my face inches from hers. “You have no clue.”

“About. What?”

The lines on her face told the story of a girl kept in the dark and far away from her family’s sordid secrets. A daughter who had been blindfolded all her life and never saw the sins of her father.

I grazed my teeth across my bottom lip as I regarded her, staring into her mismatched eyes and inhaling her scent once again. Only this time, it didn’t smell as vile as it did earlier.

“Not yet,” I murmured, now more amused than I was angry.

“What do you mean, not yet?”

I lifted a hand and brushed a single fingertip down the side of her face. “I’ll tell you who and what your father really is, but I think I’ll wait for you to fuck up real bad first, because believe me, this revelation will be the worst kind of punishment for you.” I took her chin between my fingers, the make-up she wore doing a poor job at hiding the bruise this up close. She sucked in a breath. “And it’s going to be amusing as fuck to watch you squirm while your mind wanders to the darkest corners trying to figure out what exactly it is your father has been hiding from you all these years.”

Her jaw clenched, and she pulled away, abhorrence clouding her already paled expression. It was easy to spot the vulnerability that lay just beneath the surface of the wall of strength she was desperate to keep from crumbling.

She yanked her arm free, but only because I allowed it. “I’m going to



bed.”

I glanced to the side as she brushed past me, leaving behind the smell of mandarin and vanilla. There was something about her that slithered under my skin, something that had me on edge, knocking at my skull with warning. I wasn't sure what it was. All I knew was that I didn't like it. At all.

I knew the moment my father said her name in the same sentence as marriage she'd be trouble. Even as I watched her walk down the aisle in that exquisite dress, her face hidden behind a veil of virtue, there was a feeling of foreboding which churned in my chest. A warning that this woman would be an affliction within our family and would destroy us from the inside.

I had to make sure that that never fucking happened.

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## Chapter Six

I slammed the door closed and fell back against it, taking one deep breath at a time and trying my best to choke back the tears. My heart raced, but it wasn't fear. It wasn't anger. It was pure, undiluted sorrow. Grief. The realization that this was my life now. Day one of my marriage, and already it felt like I was slowly dying, withering away until eventually the day would come when there would be nothing left but an empty shell. I saw the hate in his eyes, the blackness of how he despised me. It was malignant. Toxic. Deadly.

I reached down to lock the door only to realize there was no key. It didn't surprise me. Gian clearly had control issues, so he'd never allow someone the means to lock him out—literally.

I staggered across the room with unsteady feet, climbed on the bed, and clutched the pillow, burying my face within the silk sheet. How was I supposed to survive this? How was I supposed to survive Gian Silvestro when I had no idea who he was? All I knew was the cruelty I saw in his eyes whenever he looked at me like he would deem an insect worthier than me. And it was all because of some feud he had with my family, with my father. Something I had no part of. But it didn't matter to him. All that mattered was the fact that Moretti blood flowed through my veins, and that alone

condemned me to feel the sharp edge of his hatred.

I sat up and pulled the shoes from my feet as if they weighed a ton and tossed them on the floor. Exhaustion had claimed every bone in my body, every muscle. It was a grueling hour through which I had to suffer dinner with that man, and I just about used up every ounce of strength I had in me.

If there was any part of this day I'd see as a blessing, it would be the fifteen minutes I had to consume three martinis before my husband decided to grace me with his presence for dinner. I needed the liquid courage to get through the last part of the day which had proven to be the worst day of my life. So far.

I stood and slipped off the dress before climbing into bed and covered myself with the sheets. One would argue it was reckless of me sleeping naked while the Devil prowled the halls, but I was too exhausted to care. The curtains were still open, and I preferred it that way. It was a crescent moon, the night-sky beautiful with no cloud in sight. My heart ached, but not because of Gian or the animosity he didn't even bother to hide. But because my parents were fully aware of the extent of my unhappiness, I knew they would not lift a finger to help or change anything. I wondered if they knew about Gian's hate for our family and if they knew he would dislike me with such intensity. Knowing my father, he probably did. He was an observant man, a brilliant businessman with a knack for reading people like their faces were the morning paper. That made it even worse, thinking my father chose Gian knowing how the man felt about us.

God. If I had any hope of getting through this, or at least trying to live something that resembled a life, I'd have to steel myself and make sure I had the strength I needed to survive. There was no one else I could rely on to get me through this but myself. I had to show Gian that even though I was a born Moretti, a weakling in his eyes, I would not crack. I would not fall in front of him again. Ever. Gian might think he knew my father, claiming my family had this sinister side I was not aware of, but he didn't know me. He didn't know that along with the Moretti blood pumping in my veins I had the strongest reason in the world to make sure I would not break.

My sister. Alessa.

If enduring a lifetime of days like this meant my sister could have a normal life without such a burden, then it was a sacrifice I'd make over and over again.

There was a sound of a car pulling up the cobbled driveway, and I

climbed off the bed, hesitantly walking toward the window, making sure I was hidden within behind the thick curtain. A black SUV parked out front, and Gian walked toward it as the driver got out. They spoke briefly before the driver opened the passenger side door, and I inched closer, placing my hands on the curtain, wanting to get a better look.

A slim figure emerged from the back seat. A woman dressed in a long, flowing, white sleeveless dress, her dark curls draping down her back. It was hard to see so far down amid the midnight sky, but when Gian leaned in and kissed this woman on the cheek, that was when my stomach turned with a sickening twist inside my gut. Who was this woman Gian ushered into the house like she was royalty?

I slipped back, moving away from the window as my mind churned with a thousand questions about the mysterious midnight woman. Of course, Gian would break his wedding vows on the very night he wed. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it were so. That this woman was a lover he didn't have the freedom to be with because his duty was to marry me. But it still didn't dampen the embarrassment, the betrayal that burned like acid in the deepest pit of my stomach. Just when I thought this day couldn't get any worse, it ended with a scene that came as a slap in my face.

I sat down on the king-sized bed. There was nothing but open space on top of the silk sheets, yet I struggled to breathe within the confines of all the uncertainty that surrounded my life and the future I had no control over. Or maybe...maybe there was a way for me to somehow regain just a sliver of power, but I wasn't going to figure it out tonight. Tomorrow.

Maybe.

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I HEARD THE CLICK OF HER HEELS AND INSTANTLY CURSED BECAUSE ALL I wanted was to drink my first cup of coffee of the day in fucking peace and without looking into the eyes of the wife I despised—eyes that, quite frankly, captivated me with their unique appearance. At least there was one thing I found alluring about Daniela, even if it was something she considered a flaw.

“Good morning.” Her voice sounded light, yet confident.

“Good morning.” I didn’t turn to face her. “You’re up early. I thought you’d sleep in.”

“I went straight to bed after dinner, so I’m well-rested.” I heard the clink of a coffee cup and saucer. “And you? Did you have an early night?”

“I did.” I turned to face her. “Quite unusual, isn’t it? A newlywed couple, well-rested after their wedding night.”

“Unusual,” she reiterated and lifted a brow, “for the lack of a better word.”

I kept my gaze on her and took a sip of my coffee, savoring the bitter and bold aroma of the dark roast. The slim, sleeveless, floral-print dress accentuated her youth, something her wedding gown and the emerald dress she wore last night failed to do. Scorching, fiery red curls flowed over her shoulders, her skin a flawless ivory, and lips a blush-pink. I was inclined to agree with my brother. At least my chosen wife had an admirable beauty. Or as he put it, a pretty face.

I swallowed the last bit of coffee and placed my cup down on the table

with every intention of walking out without saying another word, but as I strode past her, I paused and glanced her way. “We’ll have to talk about what’s expected of you.”

“I have a pretty good idea. It was all there in the vows we took before God, to love and cherish until death do us part. Although,” she shrugged, “we might have a slight problem when it comes to the love and cherish part since you can’t even stay in the same room with me for five minutes.”

“I know how to keep up appearances when need be.”

She shook her head lightly. “Your hate for me is too strong. You won’t be able to hide your dislike for me when surrounded by five, ten, or a hundred guests. You could hardly keep a straight face during the time it took us to walk out of the church.”

“I know what’s expected of me.”

“As do I,” she replied, her expression unreadable, “so it’s not something we need to discuss. When we have guests and public appearances, I will act the part of your doting new wife. When it comes to our families, we will give them what they want and let them see what they want to see. A successful marriage. But your suffocating hatred of me can and will remain behind closed doors. Hate me all you want, Gian, but allow me to be clear...the feeling is mutual.”

She grabbed a bottle of water from the breakfast table and sashayed across the dining room and out on the deck. With my sleeves rolled up to my elbows, I placed my hands in my pockets and watched her walk out. Seemed like I might have underestimated the Moretti girl, and mistakenly assumed she’d be the same spineless creature her father was. But there was something different about her. Fight. Strength. Defiance—something she had shown me plenty of in the last twenty-four hours. It made me wonder why she’d agree to this marriage, since it was clear she loathed the idea as much as I did.

“Daniela,” I called after her. “What was it?”

She stopped, her back still turned toward me.

“What was it that tipped the scale for you?” I stalked closer. “Because it’s become clear that you’re not the kind of woman who does what you’re told without question. So why go through with it?”

“Same as you. Duty.”

“Bullshit.”

Finally, she turned to face me.

I narrowed my eyes as a newfound need to dissect her thoughts gnawed at

my bones. “What did your father threaten you with?”

Anger flashed in her eyes, her cheeks going from a blush pink to a flush of fury. It enticed me, watching her fight to keep her composure, and tempted me to see how far I could push her before she flipped the switch.

I stepped right up to her, leaving just a breath between us. If her mismatched eyes were daggers, I’d be bleeding from the head down right now. “Tell me, Daniela.” I lowered my voice. “What is your father using to make you bend to his will?” I reached up, wanting to touch her cheek with the back of my hand, but she lifted her arm and blocked my attempt.

“Don’t touch me.”

Her warning did nothing but tempt me. A fucking invitation to show her that her fight was no match for my rule. I let my hand hover next to her face, her eyes screaming with challenge—a challenge I found myself wanting to accept. “There’s more to you than just the Moretti name, isn’t there?”

“Wow, it took you a full day to figure that out.”

“Be careful with that smart mouth of yours.”

She lifted herself, trying to level me with her pointed stare. “You don’t intimidate me, Gian.”

“Liar.”

She swallowed, my gaze lured down to her throat by the movement. It was such a vulnerable part of the body, the throat. Weak under pressure, yet strong with allure—a wicked combination when possessed with the compulsion of temptation.

“I want to know what it is.” I looked her in the eye. “What it is that made you marry me willingly.”

She lifted her chin, the sunlight catching her eyes just right, accentuating the forest hues in her irises, the interwoven shade of brown in her one eye hiding an absolute chaos of rebellion which she tried to mask as duty. “It doesn’t matter why I walked down that aisle. The only thing that matters is the fact that I did.”

I smiled. “And by doing so, you helped daddy-dearest to evade the justice he deserves once again.”

Her jaw clenched, her flushed cheeks enticing the fuck out of me. “I won’t stand here and listen to you villainize my father.”

“I’m starting to think I don’t have to.” She turned to walk away from me, but I wasn’t done and grabbed her elbow. “Something tells me you’re well-aware that your father is no saint.”

Her gaze drifted from where my fingers bit into her arm until her glare settled on me. “And I suppose you are?”

She jerked free and stomped off in the other direction, our conversation ending abruptly.

I watched her walk away from me, and while palpable animosity clung to the air, a smile tugged at my lips, admiring those legs which teased from under the floral dress that fit her body perfectly. My cock twitched through the abhorrence I felt toward the Moretti blood in her veins. I was such a wicked bastard.

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## Chapter Seven

I slipped around the corner and immediately steadied myself against the wall. It was only a matter of seconds before I crumbled in front of him while he stared at me with those amber eyes which searched for my every secret. He towered over me, instantly turning up the summer heat just by being so damn close. I'd be lying if I said he didn't intimidate me. With every step that man took, he left footprints of complete dominion, the air around him burning with the authority he exuded. But I'd be damned if I showed just an ounce of how he unnerved me. Plus, it seemed my new husband was a liar too, lying about having an early night when I saw his late-night visitor walk into this house with her high heels. I hated that it bugged me, that I had this pressing need to know who she was, but more importantly who she was to my husband.

*A husband you loathe.*

*A husband you hardly know.*

This morning I woke up with a renewed determination to show Gian that I wasn't just a fragile princess who would be bent and molded to his will. For years I had the backbone to stand up against my father, and the talent to not keep my mouth shut whenever I had something to say...until he played the

one card I couldn't trump. Alessa.

Well, Gian didn't have that advantage, and I didn't care who he was. I would not allow him to suppress me. In the public eye and in front of family, I'd play my part, but I'd bring it like a fucking house on fire within these walls.

For what felt like hours I strolled around the garden of the estate. For such a lavish and luxurious home adorned with wealth, the garden was underwhelming. Apart from the alder trees, the manicured lawn, and a few scattered rose bushes, there was nothing breathtaking about the garden. It was such a shame. A garden was the oxygen of every home, the one place you could go to whenever the confines of four walls threatened to suffocate you. It should be an escape, a paradise you created for you and your family to be surrounded by nature, color, and life.

Since I wasn't leaving this place for the foreseeable future, I made a mental note to do something about the lackluster garden.

I stepped onto the deck, and Gabriela came walking out and placed a tray of freshly cut fruit on a table next to the pool. "Good morning, Mrs. Silvestro."

"Good morning, Gabriela. And please, call me Daniela." I smiled.

"Oh, no. I couldn't." She met my smile and placed her palms together. "If you would like to take a swim, there is a selection of swimsuits in the pool house."

"Thank you." She nodded, but as she turned, I called out, "Gabriela, do you know where Mr. Silvestro is?"

"He's in his office."

I nodded in thanks, and she walked back into the house. I glanced at the pool, the reflective water shimmering as the sun beamed down on it, the crystal-clear liquid inviting me with the promise of lessening the grueling summer heat. Since I had nothing better to do, I might as well enjoy the luxuries this estate had to offer—the large pool being one of them.

Once in the pool house, I searched through the vast amount of bathing suits which still had the tags on them. The pile only consisted of two-piece bikinis that ranged from medium coverage to none whatsoever. Made me wonder what kind of parties Gian hosted out here in his bachelor days, since he had brand new bathing suits at the ready. Not that I cared.

In the end, I opted for simplicity and chose a black set—halter neck top and high-rise bottom. I shimmied out of my panties from underneath my

dress and quickly stepped into the bikini bottom, slipping it on and over my hips. The dress pooled around my feet and I reached up to pin my hair on top of my head so I could tie the straps around my neck.

Lost in thought, I moved to the oval mirror fixed against the cream-colored wall to give my appearance a once-over, only to meet Gian's eyes in the reflection.

I yelped. "What the hell?"

He didn't say anything. God, the man didn't even move. He just stood there staring at me, and I had no idea how long he had been there.

I turned to face him, suddenly hyperaware of just how much skin I was showing. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Why don't you ask me what you really want to know?"

The look in his eyes was frightening—like a hunter trying to decide if he'd tear his prey apart to get his fill or savor every taste. My skin heated, my cheeks burning as he kept staring at me without saying a word.

"I don't know—"

"Ask me." He took a step toward me, my mouth dried instantly, and my words evaporated from my thoughts. With a few calculated steps and eyes that darkened by the second, Gian moved closer...closer...the oxygen in the air igniting into flames that made it hard to breathe.

My back hit the mirror, and he stopped a few inches away, placing his hand above my shoulder, palm against the wall. "Ask. Me."

Earlier, I was determined not to let him intimidate me in any way, yet here I was unable to utter a single word or form a coherent thought while he held me captive with his heated gaze. He tilted his head to the side and brought his hand up to my face, touching the wisps of hair that framed my cheeks. My body shuddered, and I held my breath as he leaned down.

"You want to know if I saw you get undressed." His voice dipped, a low octave of seduction, his hand dropping to my waist, but didn't touch me. "You want to know if I watched you slide your panties down before you stepped into these." A single fingertip brushed against the waistband of the black bikini bottom, my flesh erupting into flames from a simple touch.

I swallowed, and his eyes narrowed as he noticed the movement of my throat before looking me in the eyes. "You want to know if I saw your naked breasts right before you covered them with this." His palm dropped from the wall only to brush down the ties of the bikini I wore.

God. I tried to focus, tried to come up with something to say. But how

could I if I hardly managed to take a breath with him standing so close, his wild spice scent clouding every thought, and wicked stare corrupting every instinct demanding that I fight?

He grazed his teeth across his lip, and my body felt the waves of electricity that rolled from his. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reply or even attempt to respond. It was crazy how he could look at me with amber eyes engulfed in flames, yet it still reflected the disdain he felt toward me. It was the kind of mindfuck that would take a lifetime to recover from.

Finally, I managed to find my tongue when he placed his palm back against the wall. "I'm not going to ask whether you watched me undress like a fucking stalker. You know why? Because I don't fucking care."

While still biting his lip, the edges of his mouth curved into a grin. "You don't care?"

"No. I don't."

He scoffed and looked away, my chest rapidly rising and falling. "Then you won't care if I do this." Two fingers hooked underneath the strap that tied around my neck, and he tore it loose at the same time I sucked in a panicked breath.

"No! What are you—" I frantically grabbed at the black fabric to keep it from falling, but Gian caught both my hands in his, his fingers twisting and biting into the skin of my wrists before slamming them against the wall above my head. "Stop. What are you doing?" Tears burned like smoldering embers as I thrashed and fought, my breasts no longer covered and on full display. "Gian, stop!"

"You said you didn't care." His words were voiced menace, a low thrum of warning, and my fight was no match for his strength as he yanked my arms down, forced me to turn, and cuffed my wrists in his hand behind my back as he slammed me against the wall, the cold of the concrete piercing my naked chest like icy claws.

"Please," I pleaded with my cheek firmly against the wall. "You're hurting me."

I felt his cold fingers slither into the side of the bikini bottom, and I whimpered with panic when he yanked it down with such force I was sure I would have fallen to the ground if it weren't for him holding me in place.

"Please stop." My tears stained the beige walls of the pool house, and adrenaline fused with ice-cold terror pumped and beat to the rhythm of my racing heart. But I couldn't move. I tried. I fucking tried so I could run as far

away from him as possible, but he had me locked in place, the bottom half of my bikini pulled down to my knees.

“You see how easy this is?” His warm breath slid across my skin, and he reached between us. The sound of his zipper blasted the taste of bitter fear in the back of my throat.

“Please,” I whispered, pinching my eyes closed, wanting nothing but for darkness to swallow me whole.

I pressed my lips together, hard, and whimpered when I felt him stroke his cock down my naked behind, saliva thickening in my throat.

“I can take you right here, right now, and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it except stand here and cry while I claim what is rightfully mine. Your cunt.”

A tear rolled down my cheek, and I sucked in a mouthful of air, yet it didn’t reach my lungs as he brushed his lips against my ear.

“So, tell me, *wife*. Do you care now?”

I balled my fists within his grasp, my nails piercing the flesh of my palms, and I shuddered with paralyzing terror.

“Tell me!” He yanked my arms, and I cried out.

“Yes!”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I care.” My scream slammed against the ceiling, followed by a solemn silence which made me aware of the piercing ringing in my ears.

“Good.” Gian didn’t move, his hard length still throbbing with need against my naked ass. I was too scared to breathe, too afraid even to open my eyes.

After what felt like eons of hovering at the edge of my ruin, Gian let go of my hands, yet I still didn’t dare to move, refusing to turn around and look at him.

“Don’t ever fucking tell me again that you don’t care. And next time, think twice when you feel the need to provoke me. You do not have what it takes to fuck with me, Daniela.” His footsteps were hard and heavy across the floor. “You’ll do well to remember that.”

With every ounce of fear that clung to my skin like ice, I remained unmoved against the wall, tears slipping freely down my face. It was only when I heard his footsteps disappear in the distance that I allowed myself to break and collapse to the ground, sobs punching through my chest, tearing through every muscle and bone. The agony was debilitating. All I felt, saw,

heard, and tasted was the fear, the terror of what just happened. Of what almost. Happened.

I crawled up against the wall, clutching my legs in front of my chest, hair sticking to my wet cheeks. A pathetic mess on the cold floor, I didn't even try to pull myself together. It was too hard. Everything was just too fucking hard. Every tear. Every breath. It hurt so damn much, as if my soul was being ripped from my being. And with everything I had inside me, I wanted to stand up and run. Run back home and into the arms of the one man who was supposed to protect me. The man who was supposed to keep me safe. Instead, here I was, half-naked and trampled to the ground because that man failed me. My father.

Through the haze of tears, I forced myself to see Alessa, to see her face, her smile, to think about the happy life she could have because of a sacrifice I was forced to make.

I wiped at my tears, my jaw clenched and eyes burning with the liquid heartache that just poured from my soul. I clutched the fabric of the bikini top and covered my breasts, shivering despite the New York summer heat. Seconds turned into minutes. Hours turned into moments. There was no telling how long I stayed there, flat on my ass on the ground, defeated and bested by the man I was so determined to keep from breaking me.

He was right. Gian was right. I did care and was a fool for thinking I didn't.



## Chapter Eight

I stormed out of the pool house with pounding rage and a throbbing cock. Fuck that little voice inside my head that told me to find Daniela and see what the hell she was up to. The moment I stepped around that corner, spotting her in the dressing room, her back toward me, and very much unaware of my presence, I couldn't help myself. The sick fuck in me demanded I stand there, to not make a sound, and observe her every move. One could tell a lot about someone by how they acted when they thought they were alone, not being watched by the scrutinizing stares of others. It was the moment she shimmied out of those white little panties of hers, letting them drop to the floor, that I knew not even the devil himself would have been able to move me from that motherfucking spot.

I didn't even bother to check the time before I grabbed the bottle of bourbon and poured myself a double shot. The rich taste exploded on my tongue as I slammed it back, the alcohol burning as it settled in my stomach. But it did nothing to dull the ache in my pants, my cock craving to have a pussy wrapped around it, feeling the slippery heat of a needy cunt.

I swallowed another double-shot of bourbon, my entire fucking body on edge just thinking about how much I wanted to thrust my dick between her

legs. Daniela fucking Moretti. My wife. The last woman on Earth I would have chosen myself. But I'd be a fool if I tried to deny that she stirred something in me. Two-thirds hate. One-third...something else. Something that made me want to lose control. Something that turned me into a fucking animal, not caring about whose blood ran through her veins, not caring about motherfucking consent. To just take what I wanted. Take what was rightfully mine.

Fuck! Not only was this woman's family a representation of everything wrong in this world, but now she had me teetering on the edge. She was turning me into that which I had fought against for so long. I married a woman I knew was forced into it, practically sold by her own blood. And here I was with a throbbing cock and raging lust to do to her what I pleased. To take ownership and show her who she belonged to. Me. Mine. All fucking mine.

I cringed after my third shot of alcohol and gripped the edges of the bar, willing the raging lust intensified by festering hate to disappear. But all I saw was her body—smooth skin, tempting curves, perfect breasts. God, those tits had my palms aching to feel the weight of them, and I wanted to watch her nipples harden, taste them on my tongue and suck them raw.

It was so easy to subdue her. Her strength was no match for mine as I pinned her to the wall, tearing at the flimsy bikini so I could ravish the parts of her the animal in me craved. The second I felt the soft skin of her ass against the head of my swollen cock, I bit my tongue, the taste of my own blood doing nothing to stave off the desire that infected me.

So close.

So motherfucking close. I was mere seconds away from fucking her, whether the words *yes* or *no* came out of her mouth. I didn't give a fuck. I had lost all hold on reality, possessed by a tempestuous demon who craved ecstasy more than I needed my next breath.

"Fuck!" A fit of rage slammed into me, and I swept the tumbler with the bourbon off the bar, glass shattering, the potent smell of alcohol instantly shooting through the air around me.

*Jesus, Gian. Get a fucking grip. You hate this woman, remember? You hate everything she represents. Only now...she represented me. The Silvestro name. Maybe it was time for me to see her as such.*

"Hello, brother."

I looked up and saw Darion standing across from the bar, a black suitcase



placed by his feet.

“You seem,” he smirked, “frustrated.”

Forced to pull my shit together, I squeezed the edge of the counter one last time before letting go, straightening and righting my shirt. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the area. Thought I’d stop by and see how the newlyweds were doing.”

Bullshit.

I glanced down at his suitcase. “You packed heavy for a quick visit.”

He shrugged. “I figured you wouldn’t mind if I checked in for a few days.”

“Why are you really here, Darion?”

“Fine.” He tossed his jacket onto the nearby couch and walked across the room toward me. “I had to get out of the house. Without you there, there was just too much air to breathe, you know.”

“No.” I frowned. “I don’t know.”

Darion grabbed a tumbler from the cabinet and noticed the broken glass and bottle on the ground. “Did Mother never tell you not to waste food?”

“Bourbon isn’t food.”

“For me it is.” He grabbed a sealed bottle. “Speaking about food, where’s the wife?”

*The pool house, crying with her panties around her knees.*

“She’s around here somewhere.”

“I’d love to—”

“Darion,” I turned to face him, “what the fuck are you doing here, man? Daniela and I have been married for a day, and you thought it good to pay us a visit?”

“Good thing I did,” he gestured toward me, “because you look like shit. One day and the Moretti girl already has you unraveled.”

“I’m not unraveled.”

Darion glanced at the mess on the floor. “Uh-huh.” He rounded the bar. “Where’s Gabriela? I’d like to get settled in and go for a swim. This fucking heat is killing me.”

“Darion—”

“Never mind. I can find one of the fuck-ton of guest bedrooms just fine without the maid.”

“Third door to the left,” I called after him. “I had that room renovated a

few weeks ago.”

“Fantastic.”

Darion disappeared up the stairs, and I clenched my jaw as my thoughts raced. I was no fucking fool. The only reason Darion showed up uninvited was so he could report back to daddy-dearest. Not that my father would spy on me. He knew I took my duty to our family seriously. If I didn't, I wouldn't have married the oldest daughter of the man I despised. Darion hoped to find something he could use as a ticket to buy some time in the spotlight with our father, just like he did when we were kids. Get me into trouble so he could be the favorite child for however long it took my father to get over his anger for me. My little brother was desperate for attention, and jealous as fuck since he wasn't the prince who would one day take the throne once the king stepped down.

Well, I'd be damned if I gave him anything to use against me. To tarnish my reputation when it came to our father. Make me look weak.

“Goddammit. Gabriela!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jesus.” I glanced at her who appeared out of nowhere. “How is that you're always around?”

She smiled. “It's my job to make sure I'm around when you need me.”

“Yes, well, I need you to pack up Daniela's things and move them to my bedroom.”

“Consider it done.”

And that was another reason I cherished this woman. She asked no questions and just did as she was told, doing what I needed her to do. “Thank you.”

I rushed out of the house and across the deck, past the pool, the sun rays reflecting from the crystal water. “Daniela.” I pushed through the door of the pool house and stopped dead in my tracks when I found her dressed, staring at herself in the mirror as she tidied her hair. There was no sign of any lingering tears, and she appeared as if nothing had happened in this very room a mere twenty minutes ago.

She glanced at me in the mirror, and that was when I saw it. The hate. The anger. The uncut loathing that flickered like a red-hot coal in the dark of midnight. It was there, in the amber mark of her eye, the silent promise that she would never break. Not for me, and sure as fuck not for the devil. Within the few moments of palpable silence, the beast in me didn't admire her

courage. It didn't heed the warning in her hidden promise. No. I only saw it as a challenge. A hunt. The thrill of the chase while you tuned out all the noise, only listening to the heartbeat of your prey.

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## Chapter Nine

What did he expect to find? A weeping wife on the floor? A scared girl wiping tears from her face? A pathetic mess of womanhood after her husband proved just how fragile she really was while he held her life in the palm of his hand? Well, not today.

“Come back to finish what you started?”

He raised a brow at my blatant challenge. “Those are bold words by a woman whose tears still stain that motherfucking wall behind you.”

I turned to face him. “I get it, Gian. You wanted to show me who’s really in control here by intimidating me, forcing the fear of God inside me. And I’d be a fool if I didn’t fear you.”

“Wise.”

“But you’ll be a fool if you think I’ll live my life in fear of breaking.” I approached him with slow, calculating steps. “Next time you plan on raining down your authority, you’d be good to remember who I am.”

He raised a brow. “Who you are is exactly what’s the problem.”

“No. That’s where you have it wrong.” I stopped a few feet away from him. “I’m not just a Moretti. I’m the firstborn daughter a man powerful enough to elicit such strong hate in you.”

He snarled and shot his arm up, grabbing my throat. “What will it take for you to learn not to provoke me? Have you learned nothing from our earlier exchange?” He let go of me with a jerk, and I righted myself instantly, refusing to back down.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“That’s your first mistake, then.”

“Maybe. But I won’t cower away, Gian. I won’t be treated like shit by the likes of you. I’m stronger than you give me credit for.”

His full lips pulled into an amused grin, like the devil who knew the heat was about to go up in this hell. “Good. Then you’ll have no problem sharing a bedroom with me.”

I recoiled. “Excuse me?”

“Gabriela is moving your stuff to my room as we speak.”

A wash of cold swept down my back. “But you said—”

“Things changed.” The smirk remained on his face as he placed his hands in his pants pocket. “My brother decided to pay us a little visit. And while he’s staying here, you and I will be playing our parts as husband and wife perfectly.”

“Why? He knows of our arrangement.”

“He does. But since I don’t trust my little brother, I’m assuming he’s only here to find a reason to discredit me. And I’ll be damned if my new wife gives him one.”

“I’m not playing along with whatever the hell it is between you and your brother.” I tried brushing past him, when he grabbed my elbow, pulling me back.

“You will do whatever the fuck I tell you to do.” He leaned closer, his warm breath touching the skin of my neck. “Or I’ll have to put your theory of being unbreakable to the test.”

I jerked my arm from his hold, and the urge to spit in his face overwhelmed me. “Fine. But just know, if you touch me again—”

“Then what? Huh?” He turned to face me, broad shoulders towering over me, his presence infiltrating all my senses. “Here’s a piece of advice, *wife*. Pick your battles wisely. And make sure you can win the ones you pick.” His amber stare slithered shamelessly down my body, a silent warning that when it came to him taking what he wanted, I had no chance of winning.

Without speaking another word, I walked out. The only sign of the nerves that turned in my stomach was the sweat in my palms. Sharing a bedroom

with Gian was a daunting thought, but I had to keep my shit together. Besides, I had expected to share a bedroom with him once we were married. The fact that he offered me the reprieve of having my own space in the first place was a blessing. I shouldn't be bothered by how short-lived the arrangement was.

Just as I was about to make my way up the stairs, Darion appeared on the top step, wearing a pair of swim shorts, a towel thrown over his shoulder.

"Daniela Faye." He rushed down, a welcoming smile curving at the edges of his lips. "I don't think we've officially met. Darion Silvestro." He held out his hand, and I only had a second to pull together the most polite response.

I placed my hand in his. "You're my husband's brother."

"I am." His earthy-brown eyes had a spark of mischief as he leaned closer. "I'm also the one who will have to kick my brother's ass if he doesn't treat you right." He winked playfully, his palm still clutching mine.

"I'll be sure to remember that." I smiled and inconspicuously removed my hand from his. "I hear you'll be staying with us for a while?"

"Well, I hope I'm not intruding with you being newlyweds and all. But I know," he paused, his eyes softening with what seemed like an edge of sympathy, "I know your marriage to my brother is quite unorthodox."

I glanced to the side and clutched my hands in front of me, warmth spreading to my cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"No, you didn't. It's just all quite...new."

"Understatement of the century." He shot me a warm smile, his eyes filled with compassion as he stared at me. The color of his irises was a few shades darker than Gian's, but it was easy to see the resemblance between the Silvestro brothers. The same ink-black hair and olive skin. Same full lips and dimples that appeared when they smiled. But there was something lighter about Darion. Something warmer. Perhaps it was the few years of youth he had on Gian. Or the lack of the firstborn's burden—the one thing Gian and I had in common.

"Well," Darion broke the sudden heavy silence with his casual tone, "I'm about to take a swim. You're welcome to join me. We can have Gabriela whip up some of her tasty cocktails."

My mouth dried instantly thinking about swimming, the pool house, the black bikini I had wrapped around my knees.

"Um," I tucked a wisp of hair behind my ear, "maybe I'll join you later."

“I’m going to keep you to that.” He winked and bounced past me with an energy I was sure would be infectious sooner rather than later. “Oh, and I know we don’t know each other, well...at all.” He shrugged. “But I know all about the pressures of being part of this family, so if you need someone to talk to, bitch about what an asshole my brother is,” he smiled, and I let out a laugh, “I have lots of space on these broad shoulders.” The way he stretched out his arms drew my attention to his naked chest for just a moment, roped muscles and smooth skin.

“Thank you,” I replied politely.

“Don’t mention it.”

Still carrying that charming grin, Darion turned and walked in the other direction. “Gabriela,” he called, “it’s time for a cocktail, sweetheart.”

With a smile, I watched as he sauntered off with a cool swagger and shoulders that carried no responsibility. A weightlessness I was sure his older brother envied. God knew I did. Made me wish I wasn’t born first.

*Then this would be Alessa’s fate.*

I pushed the thought from my mind, reminding myself how thankful I was that my sister had been spared from a future like mine.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I was just in time to spot Gabriela walk into the bedroom at the end of the hall and immediately assumed that was the room I’d be sharing with Gian. My heart crept up my throat, and my insides twisted into a thousand knots from the mere thought of sleeping in the same room as him.

“Mrs. Silvestro.” Gabriela was stepping out when I stopped by the door. “I’m just moving a few basic items from your room. Anything particular you’d like me to bring for you?”

“No. Thank you, Gabriela. I’m sure I have everything I need here.” I tried my best to smile even though the weight of my circumstances suffocated me.

“If you need anything, please let me know.” Her gaze remained fixed on mine, and I saw the softness of her sympathy. “Anyway, Mrs. Silvestro, I’ll help however I can. I’m no longer just Mr. Silvestro’s housekeeper, but yours as well.”

“I appreciate that, Gabriela. I really do.”

With a smile and a nod, she left me alone in Gian’s bedroom. Our bedroom. The dark parquet flooring was different than the room I had stayed in the night before. Textured stucco walls were accentuated with warm and neutral colors. Ochre, tan, and faded apricot hues decorated the room with

Mediterranean styled furniture. Cream silk sheets draped the bed, the bedroom entirely different than I imagined it. It was light and open...unlike Gian. His wild spice scent lingered in the air. I wrapped my arms around myself as the smell of him reminded me of what had happened in the pool house.

“I trust you’ve made yourself at home?”

I jolted and brought my palm up to my throat, taking a deep breath before turning to face Gian. “Thanks to Gabriela.”

He stepped into the room, and I had to stop myself from moving back, refusing to show even the slightest bit of fear. Gian had an unassailable confidence in his eye, his strong presence large enough to fill every space in the room. I wasn’t blind to his attractive features. Oval-shaped eyes framed with straight eyebrows curved at the ends, square chin, and tanned skin with the faint scar at the corner of his top lip. Gian Silvestro was no stranger to the attention of women. I’d bet he was used to the sudden pause in the expression of women once they looked his way, followed by nonchalant smiles and blushing cheeks. From what I’d experienced so far, he probably never gave them the time of day, his arrogance far too dominant to entertain a female he had no interest in. *Except the one he entertained last night.*

The sleeves of his shirt had been rolled up to his elbows, the veins in his arms thick as they stretched all the way down to the tops of his hands. I touched my left wrist, thinking of his cruel fingers digging into my flesh, a drop of sweat slipping down my spine. I wasn’t sure whether it was the mid-day summer heat, or the weight of Gian’s presence being so close. Maybe a combination of both.

“My brother,” he started, rubbing a finger at his temple, “stay away from him.”

“That will prove quite difficult since he’ll be staying with us.”

“Avoid him as much as possible.”

“Why?”

His brows knitted together. “Just do as you are told. I’ll make sure he doesn’t stay long.”

“It seems like you don’t like your brother very much.”

“We have our differences.”

“So much so that you’d want to keep your wife away from him?”

Gian bit his lower lip and narrowed his eyes. “You have a sister.” It wasn’t a question. “Alessa.”



The hairs in the back of my neck raised with alarm.

He took a few steps toward me and came closer than I had expected, his six-foot-four frame crowding me. Yet I still refused to move an inch even though my instincts screamed at me to. I squared my shoulders and craned my neck to look him in the eye, making sure I had nothing but steel in my bones.

His gaze slipped to the side of my face, and he reached out, taking a curl between two fingers. “You two look nothing alike.”

I swallowed hard and watched him stare at the hair he twirled around his fingers.

“Alessa is the picture-perfect American sweetheart. Blonde hair, blue eyes, pretty face. Remarkably ordinary.”

“Stop,” I warned with a voice that barely passed a whisper.

“But you with your red curls and unique green eyes that beam with a foolish strength. You’re different.” He slipped his fingers from my hair. “Two sisters. The same blood. But different molds, it seems. I wonder,” his lips curved at the edges, “do you resent the fact that you’re here and she’s out there living her life, free to marry whoever she chooses?”

Anger surged. “Do not talk about my sister.”

He smirked and rubbed his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Sensitive subject?”

“My sister is none of your business.”

The grin remained on his face, yet he stared at me as if he had just caught a glimpse inside my mind.

He placed a hand inside his pants pocket and turned halfway before pausing. “Stay away from Darion.” It was his final warning before he walked out of the bedroom.

My legs trembled, my skin running hot and cold at the same damn time. I didn’t like Gian mentioning my sister’s name in any kind of conversation. I wasn’t sure whether it was amusement or menace that resonated from his words while he spoke of her.

After what happened between us in the pool house, I was inclined to assume the latter.



## Chapter Ten

Dinner was excruciating.

Darion kept making small talk while Gabriela had to fill his glass every ten minutes. It was like the man went out of his way to make conversation with Daniela. *My fucking wife.*

*Wait until you see our family vineyard in Italy.*

*Have you ever been to Italy?*

*Why don't you eat meat, Daniela? Who gave a crap about why she didn't eat meat—whether it was a noble cause against animal cruelty, or a mere aversion to the taste?*

My brother just kept feeding the conversation as if silence would mean death. Daniela simply nodded more than she participated. And the way she picked at her food, it was clear as fucking daylight the woman had no interest in dinner, or whatever my brother had to say.

Daniela retired to our room the second Gabriela removed our plates from the dinner table. As I watched her walk away, the wide legs of her black halter-neck jumpsuit fanned around her ankles, the open-back design showcasing her perfectly smooth skin. I had to admit it to myself silently—Daniela had a certain kind of elegance to her, whether she wore a jumpsuit or

a wedding gown.

“Careful, brother.” Darion reined in my attention. “If you keep looking at your wife like that, I’ll be forced to think you actually like her.”

I ignored his remark and stood before making my way to the bar. “How long do you intend to stay?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A few days. A week. Maybe more.”

I poured myself some scotch and didn’t bother offering Darion any as he joined me at the bar.

He leaned against the edge of the counter, eyeing me with curiosity. “What about Irina?”

“What about her?” I took a sip of my drink.

“Daniela is here now. How is that going work?”

I shrugged and rounded the bar. “Like it always has.”

“Are you serious?”

“There’s no reason anything has to change.” I walked out onto the deck, needing the fresh air after the suffocating hour I spent at the dinner table.

Darion followed. “Is Irina still coming around here?”

“She was here last night.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “Gian, you can’t do that. You have a wife living here now.”

I tossed back the last of my drink. “Like I said, I don’t see any need for things to change simply because Daniela is now living under my roof.”

“Jesus Christ.” Darion pulled his hand through his hair. “Do you have idea how reckless that is?”

“You’re one to talk when it comes to reckless behavior.” I turned to face him, annoyed to no end with his meddling. “Your moral compass is fucked beyond repair, which means you are the last person on Earth to even think about lecturing me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the crown prince of this family, am I?” Resentment flashed in his hardened eyes. “I don’t have to keep up appearances to please Father.”

“Is that not why you’re here?” I stepped right up to him. “To see if you can find something worth reporting back to Father so you can step in under the spotlight for two seconds?” I slanted my head. “Or is it something else?”

His eyes were filled with unspoken insults, his top lip curled in a snarl. “You say my moral compass is fucked. At least I didn’t marry a woman I knew was forced to do so.”

“Like you wouldn’t have done it.” He frowned, and I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “I’ve seen the way you’ve looked at her whenever she was around. The redhead Moretti girl, demanding the attention of every man.” I glowered at him. “Including yours.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You think I’m a fool? That I don’t know the real reason you sided with me against Father, objecting to this marriage?”

“I took your side because I knew you didn’t want this.”

“Bullshit. You have never sided with me on anything.” I took a step back, keeping my eyes pinned on his. “You’ve had your eyes on Daniela for the last five years.”

“If that were true, I would have made a move a long time ago. If that were true, I would have had her by now, and not you.”

I let out a mocking laugh. “No, you wouldn’t. Emilio has kept her so heavily guarded, you had no way of getting to her. Just admit it, little brother. You have a thing for my wife.”

His lips pulled in a straight line, a silent acknowledgment that I had just spoken the truth. Even if he tried to deny it, it would have been an unconvincing effort. No one knew Darion as well as I did, and I could spot his lies from a mile away.

I drew a breath through my teeth and wiped the palm of my hand across my chin. “Heed my warning, little brother.” I stepped in next to him, leaning my head to the side so he could hear me loud and clear. “If I so much as suspect that you are trying to seduce my wife...I will kill you.”

I stomped off toward the house when he called after me. “You don’t even care for the woman, yet you threaten your own brother?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “What I feel for my wife is none of your fucking business.”

“You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

I came to an abrupt stop and stormed back to him, bringing my face in inch from his. “I dare you to say that to my face.”

Darion pressed his lips into a thin line, eyes hard and angry.

“That’s what I thought. Just stay the fuck away from my wife.” I turned and walked in the other direction. “Oh, and you’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Sorry, can’t do, Gian. Father wants me to attend to some business while

I'm here.”

“Then you do your fucking business and leave.”

I didn't stay long enough to give him a chance to object when I walked through the open sliding doors into the house. My brother had always made the mistake of underestimating me, thinking he could hide his intentions from me. When he arrived this morning, I knew he was here for a reason, but it wasn't until I overheard his conversation with Daniela earlier that I realized what that reason was. The way he spoke to her, so soft and caring, pretending to have sympathy for her—it was all just an act, and it took a fuck load of control not to storm out into the foyer and kick his ass.

But it was the way Daniela spoke to him that got under my skin. Her voice lacked the hostility it had whenever she talked to me. The loathing—it wasn't there in her tone. Instead, she sounded polite, gentle, even slightly amused...and it pissed me the fuck off.

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## Chapter Eleven

My heart stopped the second I heard the door open. I was in the bathroom, just sitting on the edge of the bathtub feeling like I had concrete shoved down my throat. Sharing a bedroom with Gian was far more daunting today than it was two days ago. I wasn't a naïve woman. I knew I'd have to share a bed with him eventually—in more ways than one. Not knowing what his intentions were was nerve-wracking. Only now did I realize how comforting his disdain for me was, as he made it clear he hated me too much to even touch me. But after what happened in the pool house, feeling his hard cock stroke up and down my ass, I was no longer convinced.

I inhaled deeply, closed my eyes, and allowed the air to settle in my lungs, willing the tension to ease out of my shoulders. The black silk robe I wore fell to my sides as I stood, and I tied it around my waist. It took forever to decide what to wear since I only had red, white, and black nightgowns and robes to choose from. I went with a design that covered the most skin and removed every trace of make-up from my face. My hair was a wild mess of deep red curls, and I didn't even try to tame it. The last thing I wanted to do was tempt the beast while I slept in its cave.

I eased open the bathroom door and spotted Gian on the other side of the

room just as he removed his shirt. The light of the bedside lamp cast shadows across his silhouette. It wasn't his broad shoulders and muscled back that held my attention, but rather the large tattoo covering almost his entire back. I stepped closer, intrigued and wanting to get a better look at the snake inked on his skin, its body swirled and curved.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Didn't your parents teach you not to stare?"

I clutched the edges of my robe together to cover my chest. "Your tattoo."

"What about it?"

"It's amazing."

He turned to face me, surprise gleaming in his eyes. "Amazing? You think a tattoo of a snake eating its own tail is amazing?" He crossed his arms, and my gaze fell to the movement at his naked chest. Smooth skin glowed under the light. Strong. Majestic. Powerful.

A pang of desire surged inside me, and I instantly looked away. "Where will you be sleeping?"

He snorted. "On my bed. Where else?"

"I'll take the couch, then."

"Daniela." His voice echoed around the stucco walls, and I froze. "Get into the bed."

"Gian—"

His fingers wrapped around my elbow, and he swung me around to face him, a swoosh of air escaping my lungs.

My neck craned back as our gazes locked, and I smelled the potent stench of bourbon on his breath. "You've been drinking."

"It seems I haven't stopped drinking since I married you."

I tried to yank free, but my attempt proved futile against his grip. He leaned down, and I heard him inhale while his nose brushed against the skin of my neck. "Still wearing that cheap perfume."

"Yes, well, I'm hoping it will ward off the insects." My glare shot daggers at his forehead, but he just smiled as if my animosity merely amused him.

Abruptly, he pulled me closer, my chest flush against his, our bodies fused together. Whether it was the wine at dinner, the dim light in the room, the heat of his naked chest, or the soft silk against my skin—I didn't know. But this thought popped into my head, a voice that said, *'There is something about this. About him. Something threatening yet enticing.'*

I couldn't look away, and his hand on my arm remained on that one spot, yet I could feel it everywhere.

Gian leaned his head to the side, scrutinizing my every feature. "Tell me, Faye,"—my insides coiled tight from the sound of him calling me that—"did you like feeling my cock against your naked ass?"

My cheeks burned. "Don't."

He moved forward, forcing me to step back, the plush carpet feeling like a cloud beneath my bare feet. My back hit the wall, and I sucked in a breath, knowing I was trapped.

"Did you?"

"No. It was disgusting."

His mouth pulled into a wicked grin, drawing my attention to the scar above his lip. "That cunt of yours is still intact, isn't it?"

"That's none of your business," I shot back, trying my best to hide just how much he intimidated me.

He stepped up, pushing his body against mine. Heat spread from the back of my neck straight down to between my thighs. I hated it. I loathed the fact that my body had any kind of reaction toward him, toward the feel of his body cocooning me in.

He eased the back of his hand down the side of my face, his gaze following the movement. "I bet daddy-dearest made sure no man has ever touched you. The purer they are, the more they are worth."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's the truth." He kept staring at the side of my face as he brushed the curls behind my ear. "If you weren't still a virgin, your father wouldn't have had a lot of options to pick from. He would have had to take whatever he could get," he shrugged, "which wouldn't have been much if your virtue wasn't still intact."

"Why are you doing this?" I lifted my chin. "You've made it abundantly clear that you hate me, that you can't stand me, yet this is the second time you have me pinned against a wall like a starved animal."

"I do hate you."

"Then what the hell are you doing right now?"

His hand dropped to my waist, fire erupting in my belly. "Maybe," he started as he slowly wound up the skirt of my nightgown between his fingers, "maybe I've decided that the best way to piss off Emilio Moretti is to ruin his daughter."



I scoffed. “Do you think my father gives a damn what you do to me?”

“No.” His fingers touched my thigh as he bunched up the silk. “Perhaps I just want to break you for my own amusement.”

“I don’t break easily.”

A single finger snaked inside my panties, and I sucked in a breath. “There’s more than one way to break a woman.”

I knew what he was referring to because I felt it. I felt it as he brushed his finger against my sex. It was the foreboding of my ruin. My inevitable destruction was right there in his touch.

He leaned down, pressing his lips against my ear, and I closed my eyes. “What would I find if I slip a finger inside you right now...Faye?”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Why? I like it.”

“Stop.” I thrashed against him, but it was pointless. He kept his hand between my legs, and it started to throb with an aching need that spread to my core.

I bit my tongue and clenched my thighs as the world spun around me. Nothing made sense. What I felt didn’t make any sense. There was nothing but animosity between us, nothing but disdain. Yet while his presence overwhelmed my senses, his finger touching the most intimate part of me, my body reacted oppositely. Like it wanted more.

My core tightened with heated anticipation, a craving that kept intensifying and wouldn’t stop until it was sated. I had no idea how or why, but all I knew was I had to fight it with everything I had in me. I couldn’t break.

“Would you take a woman against her will?”

“Oh, you’re not just any woman. You’re my wife.”

He flicked his wrist, pressing his thumb between my sensitive folds.

I hissed. “Don’t touch me.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it. About how it feels to have your cunt filled and stretched. To fuck and fornicate.” He bit his lip, his expression that of a starved animal as he jerked my leg to the side, forcing my thighs apart.

“Gian, don’t. You’re drunk.”

His other arm shot up, and he grabbed my face with cold fingers biting into my cheek, pursing my lips. “And you are my wife.” He tightened his grip and leaned closer, the smell of alcohol on his breath rancid. “You belong to

me now, and I have the motherfucking papers to prove it. So, if I want to touch you,” he pushed his hand deeper into my panties, cupping my mound in his palm, “then I will. If I want to slip my finger inside this cunt of yours,” I whimpered as he slid a single digit inside me, pushing deep and hard, pain shooting down my thighs, “then I fucking will.” The scar above his lip moved as a malicious grin appeared. “Will you look at that. You’re wet.”

“Fuck you.” I forced the words out through puckered lips, tears of fear morphing into liquid anger.

His grip on my cheeks loosened the tiniest bit. “Your body wants this.” He moved, flexing his arm so he could push deeper into me, every nerve ending, every muscle set alight, yet my stomach crawled, and my chest constricted.

“You feel that, Faye? It feels good...doesn’t it?”

“Please.” Another thrust of his finger, and I closed my eyes. My legs grew weak, and my hands shook as I started to welcome the blunt invasion. “Stop. I don’t want this.” The lie brushed past my lips while my hips rocked against his palm, an action I had no control over.

“Your body seems to disagree.” He moved, and his finger was no longer inside me as he slid it through my sensitive folds, arousal coating every inch of my sex until he found my clit. Every limb trembled, and I gasped from the desire that stabbed my insides with a thousand blades, every muscle pulled taut, ready to snap under the pressure. His touch was that of an expert seducer turning my body into a warzone where my mind had no chance of victory. It was lava and ice, chaos and enmity all rolled into one while I succumbed to the wicked temptation he drowned me in.

“Gian,” I murmured breathlessly, my fight dissipating with each passing second. “Please.”

“Please what?”

“Please...” *Please stop. Please don’t stop. Don’t stop.* God, I was so lost. Lost in his touch. Lost in his words, his voice, his scent. My innocence was no match for his expertise.

“You want it, don’t you, Faye? I could taste it in our kiss,” he rasped by my ear. “How you loved the intrusion of my tongue. How you craved more.”

“That kiss was nothing but a show.” Yet it felt so real. The warmth of his lips against mine, how his kiss made the world disappear around us. “It wasn’t real.” I tried to convince myself.

“It woke something in you, and you can’t deny it. It made this unused

cunt of yours yearn for something it never had.”

My silence was the only reply he needed. He shot me a lopsided grin of victory and pushed his body harder against mine, our lips a breath apart. It reminded me of our first kiss in the church. How warm and gentle it was. His taste, how it exploded in my mouth. It was the kind of first kiss every girl dreamed about. And now I wanted that again. I craved it. His taste, along with the electric surge of desire he forced through me. But this wasn't right—and neither was the fact that I wanted it.

“Gian—”

“Being married to you has to have its perks, right?” He flexed, grinding his hard cock against my hips. “I'd say fucking you should be my goddamn reward.”

Anger surged, and it overpowered every other sensation that flooded through me. I started thrashing, his weight like a boulder against my chest. With strength I didn't even know I had, I forced my arms in between us and pushed as hard as I could, peeling his body from mine. His hand slipped from my panties as he stumbled back. Eyes dark and hooded, cheeks flushed, and a sheen of sweat covering his chest, Gian oozed with wicked intentions.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” I warned, and this time I couldn't stop the tears. The fear was too strong, the anticipation too fierce.

He wiped at the side of his mouth with the back of his hand, lips parted, his expression that of a ravenous beast who just experienced a taste of what he craved most.

My rapid breathing had my chest rising and falling, and with a sweaty palm I brushed my hair back out of my face. I didn't take my eyes off him. My fight or flight instinct seared my veins as adrenaline swooshed to every corner of my body, but I couldn't get my feet to move.

Gian regarded me with his amber eyes, staring at me, watching me, daring me to run.

*Run, prey. Run.*

Every edge of his roped muscles across his stomach glimmered under the dim light in the room, dark shadows painting every curve of his body. Malice oozed from his pores, but instead of fearing it, I was drawn to it. Like that stupid moth flying toward the light, knowing it would lead to its beautiful demise.

Gian smirked, and I watched as he placed his finger in his mouth—the same finger that was inside me a few seconds ago. Dear God. The way he

lapped and licked and sucked, savoring the taste—it was vulgar and sinful. But it entranced me, the look in his eyes. It was pure lust, a driving need to find release.

He dragged his fingertip along his bottom lip, the tip of his tongue brushing against his finger. It was a twisted display of carnal hunger, a show of pure sin that clung to his lips. “Who would have thought a Moretti girl could taste so fucking good.”

“Just stop.”

It happened so fast. I had no way of anticipating his next move. He launched himself at me and grabbed my wrist, pulled me from the wall, and hurled me across the room toward the bed, the black silk clinging to my skin.

There was no mercy in his touch, the skin around my wrist burning with his cruelty. He yanked me past him and threw me on the bed, my body slamming against the mattress. Adrenaline surged, taking the place of air in my lungs, and I scrambled to try to get to the other side of the bed, away from him.

“Don’t,” I pleaded when he captured my ankle and pulled me back, my nightgown banded around my hips.

I gripped the silk sheets in my palms, and with my free leg, I kicked, thrashed, and flailed. My skin was ice cold while my veins burned with an inferno of fear, instinct knocking at my skull, screaming at me to get away.

The mattress dipped, and Gian caught my wrists, his knee pressing torturously into my back, making it impossible for me to move.

“Did your father never teach you?” He tore the belt from my robe and tied my wrists. “Act like prey, and the predator will hunt you.”

“You’re hurting me, Gian.” I could no longer breathe, suffocating on panic as full-body tremors wracked through me. He yanked me to the side and tied me to the bedpost, the muscles in my back strained from the awkward position my body was bent. My courage eluded me as tears took its place with a sickening weight inside my stomach. “Gian, please.”

He rounded the bed, sweat dripping down the side of his face. His naked chest glowed with perspiration and pure menace, his expression stone and eyes hooded. I didn’t need experience with men to know the look on his face, the dark shadows of sexual hunger, and lechery. It was hypnotizing, and something inside me liked it, the thought of him wanting me so much he would lose control for it. For me.

He reached up and gripped the top of the four-post bed, arms stretched,

and every muscle taut. I stopped thrashing, and our eyes locked. Predator and prey—one fearing the strike while the other craved the slaughter.

“Your mind must be one giant clusterfuck right now.” Lips curved at the edges. “The voices inside your head screaming that you don’t want this, yet your body craves it.”

“That’s not true.”

“I can fucking smell you, the scent of your wet cunt. It’s driving me insane.”

“Then walk away.”

He let out a mocking laugh. “Walk away? Oh, dear, Faye, that’s like expecting a lion to walk away after he’s tasted the blood of his prey.”

“I’m not your prey. I’m your wife.”

“All the more reason for me to have my fill.”

I thrashed against the ties that bound me. “You can’t do this.”

“You do not fucking tell me what I can and cannot do.” Abruptly, he reached out and forced my legs apart, placing his palm against the inside of my thigh. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t beg. I couldn’t even fucking breathe. My limbs were frozen, the only heat that of his touch as it slipped farther up my thigh. “This would be so fucking easy,” he murmured, his voice low and deep. “I could break through that thin barrier of your virginity with one thrust, make you bleed, and fuck you until morning.”

His fingers reached the apex of my thighs, lightly brushing against my panties. Something between a moan and whimper made its way through my quivering lips.

“You know what the worst part is for you?” He flicked his wrist and tore my panties in half. “No one will fucking care whether I hurt you or not. The poor, beautiful Moretti daughter, trapped and enslaved as a Silvestro wife.” He pushed a finger inside me, and my thighs clenched. “Forever.”

I sucked my bottom lip hard, feeling the blood rushing to the surface of my skin. I held back a scream when his thumb found the sensitive nub, massaging the bundle of nerves and causing my legs to tremble. Every muscle in my body tensed, and my breathing hitched. A thousand sensations assaulted me all at once, threatening to tear me in half. Everything was wrong, yet his cruel touch forced me to the edge.

Blood rushed to where he touched me, my thoughts screaming for him to stop, yet my body begged for him not to. This was wrong, but by God, I wanted more—no matter how hard I tried to deny it.

“I’ve never fucked a redhead before.” His thumb slipped from my clit and circled my sensitive folds before tugging at the hair between my legs. “Normally, I prefer a clean-shaven pussy.” He tilted his head to the side as his gaze dropped to where he touched me, my legs spread wide. He bit into his bottom lip and let out a subtle groan. “But I have to admit, I fucking love the sight of the red curls around your cunt.”

“Then I have no choice but to shave it all off.”

He tightened his grip, pulling hard, and I winced. “You’ll do no such thing.”

“I swear to God, I will.” I bit out the words, glowering at him as if my hate alone could snap his fucking neck.

He pushed a finger inside me, and I buried my face in the sheets as I moaned. “Shave this pussy of yours, and I will tie you to this fucking bed, gag you, and make you come over and over and fucking over again until you beg me to stop because your body can’t handle it anymore.”

“Gian,” I breathed as his finger circled my sensitive flesh, spreading my arousal.

“Your cunt is all swollen for me, Faye. Should I take that as an invitation?”

“No!” I kicked at him, but he laughed, amused by my fight, and shoved my legs wider apart. My back ached, the muscles in my thighs complaining from the awkward way he had me bent and tied to the bed. “You sick bastard!”

“Oh, I’ve been called far worse than that.” His thumb moved faster, pressed harder, rushing my body to a plateau I convinced myself I didn’t want. “You call me a sick bastard, yet you’re the one with the weeping pussy.”

“I said no.”

“You don’t get to say no, Daniela. You never had the fucking luxury of ever saying no. You were born and bred to say yes to every fucking man in your life. First, your father and now me, your husband.”

Whimpers rolled from my lips, tears slipping down my cheeks as the taste of my sorrow exploded on my tongue.

He slanted his head to the side. “I didn’t want this. I didn’t want you, yet here we are,” he growled. “I knew from the moment I looked into your eyes, those flawed fucking eyes—I knew you’d ruin me. Taunt the monster I’ve worked so goddamn hard to keep caged.”

More tears escaped, traveling down the side of my face as the pleasure he forced into me drained me of strength, suffocating my fight one fiery circle at a time.

“Stop fighting it, Faye.”

“Never.”

“You want to come. I can already feel your walls throb around my finger.”

He was right. My body was at the edge, begging to be tipped over, but I tried to hold on to the last threat of control I had over my own body. It was torture, fighting to deny my body what it wanted. Release.

“Open your fucking eyes!” His demand slammed against stucco walls, an echo of lust-tainted rage. My mind was a haze, unable to form a single coherent thought while his assault between my legs transformed from violating to pleasuring.

*Don't.*

*Please.*

*Stop.*

*Don't stop.*

*I hate you.*

*I want you.*

“Daniela!” He forced a second finger inside me, and I cried out, the blunt pressure erupting in my core. Pain seared until pleasure dominated. “If you don't come, I swear to God I will fuck you without remorse.”

Tears lapped from my face onto the silk sheets, but I no longer knew if they were tears of pain, or tears for a battle lost—the battle between what I convinced myself I didn't want and that which I truly desired.

“Jesus. Please,” I whispered.

“I'm afraid Jesus isn't here.”

I let out a breath and opened my eyes. “But the devil is.”

“You're right.” Dark hooded eyes were trained on my tears as he shoved his pants halfway down, reaching for his cock. “And he's determined to claim what's rightfully his.”

Gian clasped his palm around his cock, no longer holding my legs apart. But I was too far gone to even try to stop what I knew was about to happen. I'd never been with a man while my father held the key to the gilded cage he kept me in all these years. But it was the twenty-first century, and sex was all around us. Human beings were driven by it. Controlled by it. Technology and

magazines flooded with it. I'd seen naked men before, but it was nothing like the image I saw in front of me now. I couldn't look away. Gian was raw power. Majestic. A savage king who ruined and ruled, taking what he wanted without hesitation. A mix of carnal lust and summer heat clung to his olive skin, the dusting of dark chest hair enticing me, my fingertips burning to touch and feel. Gian Silvestro was the devil, a beautiful beast. And I was the lamb he craved to slaughter.

I watched as the head of his cock glistened with sin, his palm pumping hard, matching the rhythm of his fingers inside me. Every muscle in his abdomen was taut, the clefts of the prominent V more pronounced, stained with a sheen of exertion. It was a moment of madness. The moment when I desired the devil's destruction. The moment I welcomed my ruin.

Like a wrecking ball, pleasure slammed into me, breaking me into pieces—fragments of ecstasy piercing my soul. I cried out, my bones about to snap in half under the pressure of sheer rapture. It was pain and pleasure, agony and delectation all in one as his fingers kept stroking, touching, penetrating. Everything moved too fast, the world spinning around me, Gian's guttural moans clashing against my cries.

"Fuck." His voice split through the haze in my mind, his hand gone from between my legs. I opened my eyes as he fell forward, supporting himself with an outstretched arm, and vigorously pumping his cock, propelling toward his climax. "Jesus fucking Christ." The veins in his neck bulged, his hair disheveled, and face flushed, and he came. The second I felt the warm liquid of his pleasure on my thigh, I leaned my head down, closed my eyes... and I wept.





## Chapter Twelve

Darkness pulsed through my veins. I could feel it infect me. Growing. Multiplying. Taking control. My skin was overly sensitive, and every drop of sweat that trickled down my back and chest felt like icicles against my heated flesh.

My cock twitched, gradually going limp in my palm. It was only when I gained control over my rapid breathing that Daniela's sobs cracked through the thick ecstasy that still lingered in my veins.

I straightened and watched her cry into the sheets. Her tears had already stained the cream fabric with a darkened mark. Her cheeks were flushed, almost the same shade of red as her curls splayed in a mess around her face.

I took a step back and pulled up my pants, staring at the woman tied to my bed. Panties torn and nightgown bunched around her waist—exhausted and used.

My wife.

Something twinged inside my chest, but I shook it off immediately, refusing to feel remorse.

I grabbed my pocketknife from the bedside drawer and rounded the bed, slicing through the silk ties that kept her bound, leaving red marks on her

skin. The second I cut her loose, she clambered off the other side of the bed, grabbing at the sides of her gown and clutching it tightly in front of her.

Blinking rapidly, her wild eyes were bloodshot and teary. Torment tainted her every feature, with pain etched on her face as she glared in my direction.

I pulled a hand through my hair. “You expect an apology?”

“I don’t expect anything from you.” Hate clung to her every word, her animosity palpable and toxic.

“Good, because I won’t apologize.”

“Because I’m your wife. Yeah, you made that abundantly clear.”

“Good.” I glanced at her thigh, cum dripping down her leg, and I loved the sight. It was like a fucking imprint on her flesh, a mark of ownership. And now I wanted it inside her, branding her soul with my motherfucking DNA.

Jesus Christ, I was a soulless bastard, but I got sucked down the dark hole I’d spent so long trying to stay out of. One goddamn night in the same room with this woman and my resolve got shot to shit.

I glanced around the room and grabbed the first shirt I could find before pulling it on.

“You hurt me,” she murmured, her eyes downcast before looking up at me. “You made me come, but you fucking hurt me.”

“You’ll get over it.” I buttoned my shirt and tied my belt.

“Yeah.” She crossed her arms and brushed curls from her face. “I have a lifetime to get over it, right?”

“Like our vows say, ’til death do us part...*wife*.” I sucked on my bottom lip as I stilled a few feet away from her, reaching out to touch the side of her face. But she turned her head, denying my touch with a bitterness that oozed from her pores. Remorse knocked at my fucking skull, witnessing the affliction in her eyes. But I refused to let it in and reminded myself I didn’t give a shit.

I grabbed a fist of her hair and yanked her head back, her curls soft in my palm as I forced her to look me in the eye. God, I had to admire the fight that burned so fucking bright in her forest irises, the perfect cupid’s bow of her top lip curled with loathing.

“You should make a note of this.” I tightened my grip, and she merely snarled in response. “I don’t care about this marriage. I don’t care about you. I have no motherfucking empathy for your sad little story of how you got traded like a goddamn cow. Do not mistake me for a man who would

dedicate his life to make shit easier for you, because you'll be sadly disappointed."

"I have zero expectations when it comes to you, so I doubt I'll set myself up for any type of disappointment."

I smiled. "Soon you'll learn that this fight you have, this defiance you're so hellbent on showing," I placed my lips against her ear, "it does nothing but make my dick hard. Now, take a shower. You smell like cum."

I let go of her, our eyes still locked. That damn flawed iris of hers demanded all my attention. It was like staring at a wall full of priceless paintings, yet the one that made the least sense was always the one that garnered the most interest.

My phone vibrated on the bedside table, and both our gazes cut toward the sound.

*Fuck. And they say timing is everything.*

I grabbed the phone and answered. "Hold on."

Daniela stood to the side as I brushed past her without giving her a second glance. There was no goddamn oxygen left in the room, and I stomped out, shutting the door behind me. I took a few steps down the hall when I heard an engine starting and looked out the window. It was Darion, driving off the estate in my Aston Martin. "Fucker," I muttered and brought the phone back to my ear. "Irina, this is not a good—"

I stilled. "What?...No, I can't. Fuck." I lifted my fist, wanting to slam it against the wall, but then thought better of it. "You know I can't just up and leave with her here. I don't want her asking fucking questions."

I turned and leaned against the wall, craning my neck and closing my eyes, wondering if this was the universe's way of lubing me up so it could fuck me in the ass. "Yes, Irina. I get it." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Fine. Okay. Give me half an hour."

I hung up and slipped my phone in my pants pocket, brushing my fingers through my hair. What a clusterfuck this night was turning out to be. Just a few moments ago I was jerking off while finger-fucking my wife as she begged me not to, and I wanted nothing more than to be balls deep inside that virgin cunt of hers. I wanted to taste her purity on my tongue while tearing her virtue in fucking half. The thought of her never being with another man before was a temptation that fucked with my head.

Would she cry out in pain if I thrust inside her for the first time?

Would she moan and writhe while her pussy adjusted to being impaled?

Would her innocence stain my sheets with the most beautiful shade of crimson?

I could practically feel her red hair twined between my fingers as I held her head in place while fucking her from behind, her ivory skin glistening with lust. And, fuck, the sight of her red pussy-curls had me tied in a vise. I wanted to spread those legs with a goddamn spreader-bar so I could stare at that cunt all day.

“Fuck!” This time I did slam my fist into the wall. It was the only thing I could do to stop myself from slipping further and further into a fucking cave I’d fought so long to stay out of. Daniela was pulling me toward the edge without even knowing it while everything she did tempted the devil to drag her down to hell with him.

I had to leave; Irina was waiting for me. But Darion was right. I was risking a lot by continuing these meetings with her. Still, she needed me, and I made this commitment long before Daniela Moretti catapulted into my life—uninvited and unwanted. At least Darion left too, and his presence here was one less thing to worry about while I was gone.

I glanced at my bedroom door and quietly moved closer. There was no sound coming from the room as I leaned in to listen. No sobs. No cries. No weeping.

Of course not. She was too stubborn to pity herself. Too strong to break. Too determined to drown. It made me wonder how such a strong-willed woman allowed herself to get bullied into doing something she didn’t want to do. To let her father force her into a marriage she wanted no part of. I wasn’t stupid. I knew she had a reason—a real fucking good one.

She and I...we weren’t that different.



## Chapter Thirteen

The last tear trickled down my cheek, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand. I couldn't remember a time when I ever cried as much as I did since I married Gian. All my life, I had fought against allowing my father to see my tears. But with Gian, it was different. Maybe because I knew I was trapped with this man for the rest of my life. At least here in hell my tears kept my soul alive during the unrelenting torment that seemed to get harder and harder each day.

I placed my palm on the thick curtain, my finger tracing along the gold filigree pattern. Gian had just left in the back of a black Audi, and I wondered if his sudden departure had anything to do with the phone call he received, if it was the woman from the other night. Maybe. Maybe not. What did I care?

After staring out the window long after Gian had left, my mind void of any thought, I got into the shower and ran the water as hot as my skin could handle. It stung, but it felt good—like it had the power to wash his fingerprints off me. The hot water burned my scalp as it cascaded down over my head and face. I kept my eyes closed, allowing the memories of Alessa and our childhood together to soothe the storm inside me. I loved my little sister. From the first time I saw her, her tiny body wrapped in a blanket and

cradled in my mother's arms, I swore to do whatever it took to protect her. That I would always put her happiness above mine. It was my only solace.

I lathered soap on the white sponge, the scent of rose geranium breaking through the heavy steam. It was that one place on my inner thigh I focused on the most, scrubbed until my flesh was tender from chaffing. I wanted it off. I wanted his cum off me, to erase every trace of it. But it wouldn't go away. I could still feel it, clinging to my skin. The filth. The humiliation. The indignity of my own body betraying me, and my husband finding some immoral satisfaction in it.

The sponge dropped from my hand, and I crouched to pick it up, water gushing down on my back, streaming down the sides of my neck and face. I shifted my heel to cover the outlet, water backing up around my feet. Against the gray marble floor, the water looked like a molten mirror, and it kept rising, becoming more and more. I wanted it to drag me under. I wanted to feel the liquid force its way down my throat as it drowned me, taking with it the wretchedness of how I found pleasure under the devil's touch. Through the tears I cried into his silk sheets, I felt the heat. I felt the anticipation. The need. It pulsed like a lifeforce through flesh and bone. My body was pulled tight like a rubber band, and all it craved, all it cared about was finding a release before it snapped. The thought alone forced bile up my throat, leaving an awful taste in my mouth.

I was no fucking martyr. I wasn't a victim...because, in the end, I liked it.

I lifted my heel as I stood and watched the water be sucked through the outlet in a spiral. I was that water—rushing down a hole I had no idea where it led to, but I couldn't do anything to stop it.

Knowing Gian had left the house, I decided to go downstairs to get myself a drink. Sleep wasn't going to come easily tonight, and I needed something to take the edge off. Dressed in black leggings and a tank top, I made my way through the dimly lit house toward the bar. It was quiet, the only sound that of the swimming pool pump coming from outside.

I brushed the thick curls back from my face and went straight for the tequila bottle that chilled in the glass-door fridge. The first shot I tossed back stung as it slowly traveled down my throat, past my lungs, and settled into stomach. The second shot quickly followed. And then the third.

I was thankful for the freedom of being alone—especially now, since I had no idea in what direction my emotions moved from one second to the next. My head and heart were all over the place, and my resolve stretched

thin now that I had caught a glimpse of the monster Gian could be.

A monster I desired. “God, this is such a mess,” I muttered to myself as I pulled a palm down my face.

“Why is it every time I walk into this house it’s either Gian getting drunk or you?”

I turned in my seat and watched Darion stroll in my direction. “I guess you could say we bring out the best in each other,” I mocked.

“Or not.” Darion smirked. He took a seat next to me, reached over, and pulled the bottle of tequila closer. He poured a long stream of tequila directly into his mouth and cringed as he swallowed. “Where is that dear brother of mine?”

“I have no idea, and tonight, I really don’t care.” I took the bottle from him and did the same, not bothering with a glass this time. I winced and heard Darion snicker next to me.

“Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise so soon? And,” he took the bottle from my hand, “have you ever had tequila before?”

“Yup.” I swallowed. “Once when Alessa and I stole a bottle from our parents’ stash. They were at some charity gala that night, and when the staff retired, we snuck down to the bar and grabbed the first bottle we could find.” I smiled at the memory. “Which happened to be tequila.”

He placed the bottle down and leaned back in his seat. “How much of that bottle did you drink?”

“Oh, not much. Alessa could barely breathe after her first shot, and the room started spinning after my second. In fact,” I tilted my head, “I think that bottle is still hidden in my room somewhere.”

“I bet one of the Moretti staff will be quite happy if they find it.”

“I bet they will.”

“So, you and Alessa, you have a good relationship?”

“Yeah. We do.” I absentmindedly traced my finger along the label of the tequila bottle. “I love my little sister more than anything in the world. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.” I gave him a sideways glance. “And you and Gian?”

“What about us?”

“Do you have a good relationship?”

He cleared his throat and straightened in his seat, placing his elbows on the bar, staring out in front of him. “Our relationship is...complicated.”

“How so?”

He shrugged, his fingers causing a scratching sound against his five o'clock shadow as he brushed across his chin. "Gian and I are just two different people, I guess. I'm more of a laid-back, take life as it comes kind of guy where Gian is just so—"

"Intense."

"I was going to say stuck-up, but I guess intense works."

I snickered, my brain feeling the fuzz of intoxication as the tequila quietened my thoughts. It pushed what happened between Gian and me farther and farther from my mind, and I could feel the pressure being lifted little by little.

"Can I ask you something?"

He nodded. "Sure."

I placed my hands in my lap, my thoughts swerving left to right, wondering if asking this question was a good idea. But I just had to know. "Did your brother see anyone," I glanced at him, "you know, before he had to marry me?"

"Are you asking if he had to break up with someone because he had to marry you?"

I sucked in a breath. "Yeah."

His expression didn't falter. "Why are you asking that?"

"I know, given our circumstances that I have no right—" I exhaled and craned my neck to look up at the ceiling. "No right to judge or act the part of a jealous wife."

"Daniela. What's going on?"

"I just..." I lifted a shoulder. "I saw some woman visit him the other night just before midnight, and I was wondering who she was, and what kind of meeting takes place at that time of night."

Darion didn't say a word as he sat there studying me, his expression stone, giving me nothing. Not an inkling of whether he knew what was going on or who this woman might have been.

"You know what, it's okay. I can't expect you to tell me your brother's secrets, and besides, it doesn't matter who she is." I scoffed.

"You're his wife, Daniela," Darion murmured.

"Your brother hates me, you know?"

"My brother hates everyone."

I glanced his way. "No. I mean, like, he really, really hates me."

Darion regarded me silently, finger lightly tapping on the bar. "And how



do you feel about him?”

“I don’t think now is the right time to ask me that question.” My cheeks burned, and I looked down at my wrists where faint red marks reminded me of what happened between Gian and me.

Darion noticed. “Did my brother hurt you?”

I took a deep breath, still staring at my wrists, not knowing what the right answer was to that. So, I decided no response was the best one.

“Daniela, look at me.” Darion leaned forward in his seat, closing some distance between us, and placed a gentle finger under my chin, urging me to turn his way. Deep brown eyes stared at me in earnest. “If my brother ever hurts you, promise me you will tell me.”

I stared at him, wondering where his sudden concern came from. “Darion...what makes you think he’ll hurt me?”

He licked his lips, keeping my gaze. “It doesn’t matter.” He lowered his voice, still touching my chin with his fingertips. “I just want you to know that you’re not trapped in this house with no one you can turn to. If you need anything, you can come to me.”

“You don’t know me. Why would you care about what happens to me here?”

A half-smile revealed a dimple I hadn’t notice before. “It’s a sad world if people needed to know someone before they could feel compassion.”

There was something soft and tender in his chocolate irises, his expression almost pained while he stared at me. Even though they looked a lot alike, one could spot from a mile away who was older. The crown child who had been born and bred, hardened, and tempered to rule the family empire. The other, a son who had the freedom to discover life on his own, acquired some humanity without being seen as weak.

“Thank you.” I shot him a sincere smile, our gazes lingering for the longest moment. Like a lost child, I found myself drawn to the kindness in his eyes, drawn to the promise of a friend in a life that had the potential to be lonely and cruel.

A sudden glint of mischief flashed in his eyes. “Now, judging by our very casual attire, am I right in assuming that you’re not wearing anything of value right now?”

“Um.” I frowned. “No. Why?”

Darion stood and swept me off my seat, unceremoniously picking me up and carrying me out onto the deck. “Oh, my God,” I yelped with a laugh.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you that I’m the fun brother.” He smirked, waggling his eyebrows suggestively, and I had to laugh.

“No,” I objected when I saw him making a beeline toward the pool. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

“You wouldn’t.” But I knew he totally would and wrapped my arms tighter around his neck. “If I’m going in, you’re going in with me. I swear, I won’t let go.”

His deep laughter filled the open air around us, and I squealed the closer he came to the pool, followed by a playful laugh. “Darion. Don’t.”

I clung for dear life when he reached the edge of the pool, refusing to let him go.

He stilled, looking down at me pressed against his chest. “Hmm,” he feigned a look of thought, “I’ll make you deal. See, you’re going into this water no matter what.”

“Darion—”

“But if you let go of me long enough to just remove my Rolex, I’ll let my insurance write you a personal letter of appreciation in the morning.”

I glanced at his wristwatch, contemplating the deal. I narrowed my eyes at him, my arms still wound tightly around his neck. “You have five seconds.”

“That’s all I need.”

I hesitated, staring at him with a hint of doubt. But this was a Rolex we were talking about, so I loosened my grip slightly.

One second. That was all he needed. I screamed and flailed as he threw me in the pool, my weight cleaving through the water with a splash. My feet found the bottom, and I pushed myself up, taking a deep breath when broke through the surface, wiping my hair back.

“You tricked me.”

He laughed and stood with his hands on his waist. “You should know better than to ever trust a Silvestro.”

“Oh, my God.” I swept my arm through the air and splashed the water in his direction.

He jumped back, droplets falling on his leather shoes.

“Rolex, huh?” I taunted. “Real smooth.”

Darion held up his arm, sporting the silver wristwatch. “I couldn’t chance

it. This is a hundred-thousand-dollar watch.”

“And this is a fifty-dollar shirt.”

“Hmm.” He pursed his lips. “Well, now that you’ve put it that way, I suppose it’s only fair to sacrifice my Rolex for your fifty-dollar shirt.” He pulled off his shoes, threw them aside, and ran toward the pool.

“Darion, no. I was just—”

But he was in the pool, water splashing in my face before I could finish my sentence. Darion came up and swept his wet hair to the side, pulling a palm down his face as he laughed.

“You’re insane. You know that?”

His eyes blinked open. “You are not the first to tell me that.”

“Your watch. It’s ruined.”

“Lucky for you, it’s water resistant.”

“You tricked me?” He shot me a roguish smirk, and I frowned back at him. “Unbelievable.”

“Hey, a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Sure.” I gave him a half-smile.

His black dress shirt clung to his body, the water like glass on his skin with the subtle light around the pool. Midnight hair glinted under the moonlight, dark eyes swirling with devilry.

We laughed and splashed each other, water raining down on us, the smell of chlorine and fresh night air surrounding us. Hair clung to my face, the shirt I wore winding around my middle.

Darion launched forward, trying to catch me, but I swam to the side and dodged his reach. Ripples crashed against the mosaic edges of the pool, splattering on the paving.

It felt good to laugh, a sense of calm settling over me. In those moments, I had forgotten about Gian and what happened between us. I pushed the memory of my body’s betrayal from my thoughts and appreciated the freedom to act foolishly. To have fun.

With Darion.

I slipped below the water and swam toward the edge and surfaced, wiping my face clean. I opened my eyes and saw his Italian leather shoes before I heard his voice.

“Doesn’t this look fun?”

My heart lodged in my throat, and I dared to look up, into the swirls of rage in his eyes. “Gian.”

With his hands in his pants pockets, he stared down at me with amber hues of disappointment. “Get out of the fucking pool, Daniela.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

I heard their playful laughter the second I walked into the fucking house. How could I miss it? I was sure my neighbors who lived four miles from here heard it.

Daniela wiped the wet hair from her face, blowing water from her lips while she made no attempt to get out of the pool.

“I’m sorry,” I sneered, “did I fucking stutter? Get out of the goddamn pool.”

The look in her eyes was a challenge, her expression hard edges and contempt.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Darion climb out of the pool. “Gian, we were just having some fun.”

I tried to ignore him while I kept my glare on my wife, who still refused to obey. But Darion walked closer, the swooshing of his wet clothes the equivalent of nails on a blackboard.

“I have to warn you, little brother. Do not interfere in matters that are not your own. Daniela, get out of the pool before I drag your ass out.”

“Fine,” she conceded and started to make her way to the edge, water rippling around her.

She glanced at Darion, and it instantly pissed me off—the way she watched him as she moved through the water, as if there was this silent conversation going on between them. My blood boiled, and my anger raged while I stood there watching them, witnessing what looked like a blooming fucking friendship.

*Over my dead body.*

Water cascaded down her body as she got out of the pool, the white shirt she wore clinging to her tiny frame. My gaze dropped to her pebbled nipples visible through the wet fabric, and my first instinct was to tear my brother's eyeballs from his skull—especially when he so valiantly handed her a towel to wrap around herself.

*Fucker.*

They looked at each other, and something silently passed between them. I balled my fists and clenched my jaw, jealousy crawling up my spine and wrapping around my motherfucking throat.

Daniela looked in my direction, red curls clinging to her pale cheeks. How was it that now, while she stood in nothing but leggings and a shirt, she seemed more beautiful than she did in a designer wedding gown?

“Where did you go tonight?” Her bottom lip trembled.

“None of your business.”

Darion placed his hands at his sides and turned to face me, his eyes screaming with challenge. “I think I have a pretty good clue where you disappeared to.”

“Stay the fuck out of this,” I warned and stomped closer.

“Your hostility makes me think my assumption is correct.”

I bit the inside of my mouth while we glared at each other like two starved male lions, wanting nothing more than to tear each other to shreds.

I approached him, bringing my face close to his, wanting him to look in my motherfucking eyes and see how damn much I wanted to rip his head off. “Do not fuck with me, Darion.”

“She's your wife,” he bit out between clenched teeth. “She should know.”

“Know what?” Daniela's soft voice penetrated the tension on the verge of erupting between my brother and me. “Does this have something to do with the woman who visited you the other night?”

I snapped my attention to her, lifting a brow in question. “What woman?”

“Oh, stop.” Darion wiped his face with a towel before tossing it to the ground. “Just tell her.”

“I swear to God, Darion,” I seethed, pointing my finger in his face. “Do not push me.”

“I saw her,” Daniela interrupted. “I saw her through the bedroom window.”

“She’s no one,” I spat, my mind reeling in every direction.

“Don’t lie to her, man. She deserves to know who Irina is.”

I snapped. I fucking lost it as untapped rage boiled from my bones and erupted. I slammed my fist in his face, and Darion stumbled back.

Daniela gasped. “Gian, what are you doing?”

I grabbed her elbow and pulled her close, pinning her with my stare. “You need to go inside.”

“What is that on your shirt?”

Her eyes widened, and I glanced down at my sleeve where a splatter of crimson stained it.

“Is that blood?”

*Fuck.*

I shoved her to the side. “Leave. Now!”

Daniela recoiled at the fury that flooded my voice, and she dropped the towel before disappearing into the house.

I pulled my attention back to Darion, who tested his jaw left to right, blood oozing from his split lip. My nostrils flared and my jaw ticked as I watched him right himself. I waited for him to retaliate. I wanted him to. I wanted him to give me a reason to kick his ass some more, but my brother knew better.

“What the fuck is your game, huh?” I demanded, venom dripping from my lips.

“I have no game, brother.” He wiped at the blood on his lip, glancing at the crimson on the top of his hand, and looked at me. “No game at all.”

“Bullshit. You and I both know what you’re playing at. I told you to stay the fuck away from my wife.”

“I came home and found her sitting at the bar, planning on drinking herself into a stupor.” He leveled me with his stare. “I’m guessing because of something you did.”

“What happens between Daniela and me is just that—between us.”

He tore the wet shirt from his chest and threw it on the ground with the towel. “What did you do? You hurt her?”

Fiery rage rolled off me in waves, Darion’s bleeding lip evidence of that.

“As I said, it has nothing to do with you.”

He smirked, his eyes filled with malicious fucking amusement. “You did hurt her...didn’t you? That would explain your late-night visit to Irina.”

“I wasn’t with Irina.”

“Liar.” He pointed at my left sleeve. “Blood. You were with her. Did you think it would lull your conscience after hurting your own wife?”

“Fuck you!” God, I wanted to pull his motherfucking teeth out. The way he grinned, knowing he had touched a sensitive subject. Something that would make me lose my shit.

He grabbed his shirt from the ground, eyes never leaving mine. “Guess you and I aren’t that different...are we, brother?”

“I’m nothing like you,” I seethed. “Nothing.”

He glanced at the blood on my shirt. “Yeah. Nothing.”

I ripped the shirt off and threw it on one of the recliners, my veins pumped with adrenaline. “Pack your shit,” I called after him. “You’re leaving. Tonight.”

He pressed his lips in a thin line, shaking his head lightly. “I’m guessing Father didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“We’re having a little party.” He held his arm out wide. “Here.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

“Father wants us to have a party. You know, show the world how happy the new couple is.”

“Let me guess, your idea?”

“No.”

*Of course it is.*

“Jesus,” I mumbled and pulled my palm down my face. “When?”

“Not sure. Two weeks, maybe three. But until then, I’m staying.”

Fuck, I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face on the goddamn paving.

“Daniela is not ready to act the part.”

Darion raised a brow. “Daniela...or you?”

“It’s just not a good time.”

“She’s your wife, Gian. Get her in line. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need some sleep. Being your wife’s shoulder to cry on is exhausting.”

“Stay away from my wife!” I yelled after him, but he ignored me as he disappeared inside the house. “Jesus!” I kicked at the paving. Having him here was just complicating matters even more. I didn’t have the time or the



energy to worry about him, but somehow he had managed to slither his way into my home, using my father and his business ventures as a way in.

“Gian.”

I looked up at Daniela standing in the doorway, the light of the bar lining her silhouette against the dark. Wet, red streaks framed her face, and I could see a million questions swarm around in her eyes. “Who is Irina?”

“Daniela—”

“I’ll understand.” She moved closer with slow, calculating steps. “As you said earlier, we didn’t have a choice. This marriage was forced on us both, and if there was someone in your life before you—”

“No.” I held up my hand and closed my eyes, shaking my head. “Stop, okay?”

“I’m serious. I will understand. I will. But I won’t be one of those wives who sits at home while her husband is out there screwing someone else. I might have been forced to marry a man I didn’t know, but I won’t live with that kind of shame.”

I studied her in silence, the only sound that of the crickets making their presence known on a summer night. The white shirt she wore still clung to her breasts, the darkened patch of flesh around her nipples shining through. A pang of jealousy knocked at my skull, thinking of my brother’s eyes on her. The sound of her laughter, playing in the pool with my brother, it fucking stung. I wasn’t the jealous type, but I suddenly had this urge to protect what was mine. To protect her.

“I told you to stay away from my brother.”

She shifted from one leg to the other. “I did.” She sighed. “He was just... there. And I needed it. I needed to laugh a little, to forget about—”

“Me?”

She bit her lip. “He’s kind to me.”

“He’s not who you think he is.”

“I know I don’t know him, but at least he doesn’t make me feel like I’m worth nothing. He treats me like a human being.” She looked up to the sky, and my gaze settled on her throat as she swallowed. “I don’t know how to be with you, Gian.” She looked at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Your hate for me, it’s suffocating. It feels like I have no right to breathe around you. And after what happened tonight, I have no idea what will happen next. I might act like this strong person, tough and resilient, but I’m still a woman. And what you did to me tonight, I don’t think I would survive

it if you hurt me like that again.”

I bit the inside of my mouth, not knowing if it was anger, resentment, or regret that flooded through me like a storm powerful enough to wreck everything in its path. Why did I feel this way? Why did her standing there, so vulnerable and alone, do something to me on the inside? But after what Darion said tonight, implying we were the same, it woke a new determination for me to not be like him.

I grabbed a towel and sauntered over to her, the ball of her cheeks a rosy pink. “Here.” I handed her the towel, and I noticed her hesitate for a second before taking it from me. With a deep breath, I reached out, gently easing a wet curl behind her ear, my heart beating stronger at the touch. It wasn’t something I ever felt before and immediately pulled back. “I won’t touch you again.” I lowered my voice. “Not unless you ask me to.”

With those words hanging like a shadow over us, I walked away, leaving her behind. I had to. I couldn’t linger out of fear I might do something—something I’d regret more. But as I walked away, I knew what I had to do even if it broke every goddamn relationship I held dear...keep my brother away from my wife.



## Chapter Fifteen

Gian never came to bed that night. Part of me felt relieved, while another part of me hoped he would so we could talk things through. I wasn't exactly sure why I thought talking to Gian would help. The man was stubborn, infuriating, and there was no negotiating with him about anything.

A few days passed, and we only saw each other at the breakfast table, then again at lunch. I assumed he slept in another bedroom, which was odd since he had me move into his so we could keep up appearances in front of his brother.

Darion was still there, smiling and talking, trying to be supportive. But I kept my distance, heeding Gian's warning. I spent most of my day walking around the garden thinking of all the changes I'd make to it, all the different flowers I'd plant. I created an entire oasis of color in my head, a garland of the most vibrant blooms, imagining how it would be to spend my days surrounded by the beauty nature had to offer.

The afternoon sun beamed down, and I could feel the vitamin D soak into my pores. The white peony I swirled between my fingers reminded me of our wedding and how drastically my life had changed since that day.

"You like the garden."

I looked up at Gian, who stood a few feet from me, wearing a pair of navy pants with a light blue shirt. I had to admit the shade of blue accentuated his olive skin, and his hair seemed even darker. Broad shoulders, strong arms with his sleeves rolled up, and thick thighs hugged perfectly with his pants' fabric.

I glanced at the flower in my hand and back up at him. "I do."

"I know most women love flowers, but you," he sauntered closer, "you seem to have a deep appreciation for them."

"I've always loved flowers." I twirled the peony stem between my fingers. "The different colors, shapes, sizes. And how each type of flower has its own unique scent."

"You miss your garden back home?"

I pressed my lips together and looked up at him, the sun shining brightly, causing me to shut one eye. "We don't have much of a garden back home. Well, we used to. But my dad renovated the house a few years back, and in the process, decided that his own golf course would be far more entertaining for him and his guests."

We stood a few feet away from each other, and I could see a flash of anger in his eyes by the mere mention of my father. "So, he took the one thing his own daughter loved and turned it into something as trivial as a golf course."

"It's his estate." I tried to act with indifference. "I suppose he can do whatever he wants with it."

"And what is it you want?" He scoffed. "Let me rephrase that. What is it that you wanted before...*this*?"

I glanced at him from under my lashes. "Why the sudden interest?"

"Just curious," he replied nonchalantly.

"Well," a soft breeze ruffled through my hair, and I tucked curls behind my ear, "I've always wanted to be a florist, have my own little flower shop."

He snickered. "A florist?"

"Yes, a florist." I smiled and gently touched a petal of the peony in my hand. "Too often, people overlook the importance of flowers. It's nature's art, and the hues are good for our souls. Think about it. We take them to the sick, decorate hospital rooms with their colors. We send them to express our love, sympathy, friendship. We place flowers on graves while we mourn the loss of loved ones. I can't imagine a world without flowers."

Gian stood unmoved, the sun highlighting his all-year-round tan, creating

golden specks in his irises. “Why didn’t you?’

“What do you mean?”

“Why didn’t you become a florist?”

I looked down at my toe, feeling the lush grass beneath my bare feet. “As you know, I’ve never had the luxury of choosing my own path. Being a florist wasn’t part of my father’s plan for me.”

“But I was.” It wasn’t a question, and there was a slight twinge of remorse in the tenor of his voice.

“It is what it is.” I dropped my hands to my sides, taken aback by the sudden weight our conversation had carried. It wasn’t easy for me to talk about things I couldn’t change—things I wanted but could never have simply because I had been born into a family who valued wealth and power more than happiness.

Silence stretched for miles between us, and I found myself wanting to know what kind of thoughts ran through his mind. What did he think of me now that he knew the pathetic dream of a naïve little rich girl?

His gaze raked across the greenery and trees, the subtle breeze touching the ends of his hair. “I haven’t quite gotten around to doing anything with this garden.” His eyes met mine, and something passed between us. A moment. A breath. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I felt it trickle along my flesh like the subtle breeze that wafted through my loose curls. “You think you can handle renovating the garden?”

Excitement popped like tiny little bubbles inside my belly. “Are you serious?”

“Let Gabriela know what you need, and I’ll make sure you get it.” He turned, but I called after him.

“Gian.”

He paused.

“Where have you been sleeping?”

He turned to face me. “What does it matter?”

“It’s just that was the whole reason for me moving into your bedroom, was it not? To keep up appearances in front of your brother. And now you’re —”

“My study,” he interrupted. “For all Darion knows, I’m just in there all night working.”

“Oh. Okay.” I shifted from one leg to the other, and Gian glanced out across the garden. It was almost like he wanted to say something, sorting

through his thoughts to find the words, but then decided against it and turned to walk away.

I twirled the flower between my fingers. “Thank you.”

He paused without looking my way.

“For the garden.”

Birds sang in the distance, complemented with the sound of the breeze blowing through the trees.

He glanced over his shoulder and simply nodded before walking off.

I just stood there, watching after him, surprised by his sudden act of kindness—if it even was that. We had hardly talked for days, and out of the blue, he offers me something I’d been dreaming about. A project. An escape. Why would he do that? If he still hated me as passionately as he did since the wedding, why would he show me anything but trails of his loathing?

To say Gian was a complicated man would be the understatement of the year. There was no way to predict his one move to the next. But I chose to appreciate the moment and relish the excitement of finally doing something constructive with my time.

That entire afternoon consisted of taking notes, scribbling down ideas, making lists of flowers I’d like to plant.

From vibrant yellow marigolds to dainty white yarrows to add a touch of elegance. Scented geraniums and hyacinths should be planted close to the deck by the pool so guests could appreciate the floral aroma. The possibilities were endless, and my excitement was palpable. It was precisely the kind of distraction I needed from everything.

“So, this is where you’ve been hiding?”

I added hibiscus flowers to my list and looked up as Darion walked my way. Unlike his brother, he was more casually dressed in a pair of cargo shorts and a white shirt, his hair wet and disheveled as if he had just taken a swim.

I smiled. “I’m not hiding, just making notes.”

“Of?” He stepped in next to me and peered over my shoulder at my notebook.

“Gian gave me the go-ahead to upgrade our garden here.”

Darion frowned in surprise. “He did?”

“Yeah. I’m quite excited.”

He rubbed the stubble of his five o’clock shadow as if deep in thought.

I studied him. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. It’s just weird since he’s never cared about a garden.”

“I don’t think he’s given me this little project because he cares about the garden.”

He cocked a brow. “You don’t think he’s doing it because he cares about you?”

“God, no,” I objected. “I’m not that naïve. I just think he wants me to keep myself busy.”

“To keep you out of his hair?”

I shrugged. “Probably.”

“Well,” Darion picked one of the white daisies, “if you were my wife, I wouldn’t be giving you any type of project just to keep you at a distance.” He reached out, his fingertips brushing gently against my cheek as he tucked the flower behind my ear. “I’d want all your attention all the time.” His hand lingered, his eyes searching deep as if he wanted to find my soul.

I broke eye contact first, looking down at the grass beneath my bare feet. “Darion, I don’t—”

“Hey,” he lifted my chin with his fingers, “I’m just saying my brother’s an asshole for avoiding you like this. You shouldn’t have to hide out here every day, all day.”

“I’m not.” I pursed my lips and took a slight step back. “I just like it out here. It reminds me of all the times Alessa and I would play outside. Carefree, with not a worry in the world.”

“I love it when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Whenever you talk about the memories of your sister, you have this half-smile on your face. It’s beautiful.”

My cheeks burned, and I absentmindedly tucked a curl behind my ear, my fingers brushing against the velvet daisy petals.

There was a sudden gust of wind, and I grabbed my dress, dropping the notebook in the process. Darion launched forward and caught the book, accidentally bumping into me, both of us falling back and onto the lush grass. I shrieked, and a rush of air escaped me as gravity pulled Darion’s weight on top of me, daisy petals showering down around us.

“Oh, my God. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I chuckled, and he joined in when he realized I wasn’t hurt.

“That was unexpected.” He lifted himself on his elbows, and I tried to

look anywhere except at him. But the moment dragged a second too long, and I had to look him in the eye. I could see wind-stirred waves in his irises, a flash of desire he no longer masked. Not when we were this close.

I couldn't look away, and I couldn't find my words. Suddenly, I was hyperaware of his body on top of my mine—every muscle, every curve, the gentle warmth of his breath against my cheek. It was a moment one could easily get lost in. A moment where you could lose track of reality, erase everything around you and just drift farther and farther into the abyss of one. Single. Moment.

Darion shifted, a slow descent of his lips toward mine. My stomach coiled tight, and I held my breath, the dark swirls of his eyes pulling me deeper.

Somewhere in the distance, a window shutter slammed shut, and reality came crashing down. I quickly shot upright, getting on my feet, and brushing the grass from my dress. "We should get inside." Without waiting for him, I made my way toward the house, my cheeks burning and mind spinning.

"Daniela, wait up."

I didn't. I couldn't. Whatever was happening between Darion and me, it was racing toward a line that could never be crossed. Ever.

"Daniela." He grabbed my elbow and spun me around, but I jerked free.

"I am married to your brother, Darion."

"I know. I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean...I got carried away. Jesus." He let out a breath and pulled his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. But I think...we just need some distance, okay?"

"Daniela—"

I didn't wait for him to finish his sentence, rushing toward the house, suddenly needing the confines of the four walls that had been more like a prison than a home to me...until today.

Darion has been nothing but nice to me since we met. Kind. Warm. And pleasant to be around. The opposite of his brother, who had become so good at giving me the cold shoulder ever since he vowed not to touch me again. At least not until I asked him to.

Gabriela placed two large platters of food on the table out on the deck and smiled when she saw me approach. "Mr. Silvestro requested I serve dinner outside tonight."

"Oh, wow." I scanned the plates of food, the table lined with delicacies. "This looks delicious, Gabriela."



“Don’t worry, Mrs. Silvestro. I’ve prepared a special vegetarian platter just for you with marinated grilled peppers. Zucchini, eggplant, and some pesto cream cheese.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Even if Mr. Silvestro didn’t request it, I still would have prepared something for you.”

“Wait.” I frowned. “He requested you make a special platter for me?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “He also asked for a bottle of chardonnay from his special collection.”

“He did?” I was sure a giant question mark flashed on my forehead.

She smiled and winked, then trotted off toward the kitchen.

What the hell was going on? First the garden, then the request to prepare a special meal for me, and then the bottle of wine. What was happening?

“Wow.” Darion stepped in next to me, and I sucked in a breath when I felt him so close. “Is my brother planning a party he didn’t tell us about?”

“A party would require more than two people.”

Darion and I looked at Gian, who stood by the giant archway that led to the house, his blue shirt accentuating his eyes’ color up close.

“We’re three,” Darion held out his arms, “so I guess it’s a party, then.”

“No.” Gian stepped closer, his expression unreadable as he leveled Darion with his stare. “I’m afraid you’re not invited, little brother. This is for my wife and me. Alone.” His expression was tight, inscrutable as he looked at Darion.

Just like the sudden gust of wind that had Darion and me end up in a dangerous and uncomfortable situation, all three of us were instantaneously pulled into an environment heavy and tight with tension. I was almost too afraid to breathe, watching the two Silvestro brothers in the middle of a mighty stare-off. A silent battle of titans.

Darion was the first to break the deafening silence. “Well, luckily, I already have plans for this evening. So, if you’ll excuse me.” Dark eyes flashed as he glanced in my direction, a split second of recognition before he stomped off, leaving Gian and me alone.

God, as if I needed any more complications in my life. But I did breathe a little easier knowing Darion wasn’t in such close proximity.

I pulled a hairband from my wrist and started to tie my hair in a messy ponytail. “What is all this?”

Our eyes met, and I froze. The way he stared at me, his gaze fixed, his

expression unreadable. I didn't think I'd ever seen him look at me that way. It was almost like...like the hate was gone.

My heart squeezed as he stalked closer, and I held my breath. I wasn't sure whether it was fear, uncertainty, or anticipation that sang in my blood as he stilled before me, his Italian leather shoes touching my bare toes. I didn't want to look away, his stare so intense I felt it caress every bone.

He slanted his head to the side, studying me as if he saw me for the very first time, scrutinizing my every feature. My skin tingled, heat spreading across every inch.

He reached up, and I sucked in a breath, a moment of weakness as fear broke through the surface and I recoiled. Instantly, he paused, eyes fixed on mine before he slowly reached back and gently eased the hairband down so my curls could fall free.

"I like it when you wear your hair down." His voice was soft, gentle, but not any less intimidating.

There was no way to tell what was happening, and the moment felt as surreal as when I walked down the aisle toward a man I didn't know—just like the man who stood in front of me now.

My husband.



## Chapter Sixteen

I had spent days watching her as she walked through the garden. Each day was the same. She would start down the cobbled pathway leading from the house down the middle of the garden and spend time studying the trumpet vine that grew around a steel arch where the path split in two. The trumpet vine was about the only color the garden had, the bold orange touching the evergreen landscape with its vibrance.

After that, she'd make her way down the path that led to the right where there was absolutely nothing to see. Nothing but alder trees and the stray leaves drifting in the breeze.

I wondered what I would discover if I could read her mind during those moments. What kind of person was she while alone with nothing but her thoughts?

Under the glowing sun, her hair looked like it had been kissed by the gods, her flawless pale skin the perfect contradiction against the yellow rays. Every day she would wear a floral print dress, the hem touching the skin just above her knee. It suited her.

*Fiore.* Flower.

I had no idea when it happened, when I started seeing more than Moretti

blood whenever I looked at her. Maybe it was the night I found her laughing with my brother, playing in the pool as if she hadn't a care in the world. The night I had hurt her in a way that had the power to break her. But she didn't. Daniela didn't break. In fact, she seemed stronger now than ever.

Perhaps I had judged her too harshly and was too eager to compare her to her father—the man I loathed more than anyone. He was the personification of everything evil, the kind of demon I tried so hard to exorcise from this world. Wickedness I fought to smother within myself every goddamn day—and the reason I had tried my best to keep my distance from Daniela. Just thinking about how close I came to losing control with her made me feel nothing but ice in my veins. It didn't matter who she was, who her father was, she didn't deserve what I did to her that night—even if I wanted to do something far worse than I did.

Daniela had done nothing but act her part ever since she walked down that aisle. She had given me no reason to think she had any other ulterior motive than fulfilling the duty to her own family.

With every day that passed and every minute I spent watching her from the shadows, I grew more and more intrigued by her. The redhead *fiore* that kept her radiance no matter what the seasons threw at her.

So, I had arranged for Gabriela to serve us dinner out on the deck, and I also made it quite clear that Darion wasn't welcome the second I walked outside and saw him standing beside my wife, towering over her and hovering like a goddamn insect.

Her soft curls tantalized my fingertips as I pulled her hair loose, and I took a few moments to appreciate her unique beauty.

“What is going on?” Her voice was soft, treading on the side of caution as she looked up at me.

“We're having dinner,” I replied and tucked the hairband in my pocket.

“I can see that.” She glanced at the buffet table Gabriela had set up for us. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Can a husband not have dinner with his wife?”

“Not when he's been ignoring her for days.”

“Then maybe this is his way for making up for those days.”

“There shouldn't be anything he needs to make up for in the first place.”

I smiled, amused. “Maybe he's stuck in an uncomfortable situation, the same as his wife.”

Daniela narrowed her eyes. “Maybe he should stop referring to himself in

the third person.”

I snickered. “Maybe. Here.” I handed her a drink, little droplets forming on the outside of the chilled glass of chardonnay.

Distrust flashed in her eyes, her expression of uncertainty and doubt—clever girl for being cautious.

She took the glass from me, her fingers gently brushing against mine. Our eyes clashed, the subtle contact creating an electric current in the air around us. Her lips parted, and I wondered if memories of the other night bombarded her thoughts as they did mine.

Diverting her gaze, severing the moment, Daniela placed the rim of the glass against her mouth, a movement that demanded my attention, the crisp wine glistening on her blush lips. I wanted to taste it. I wanted to sample the tropical fruit and buttery notes of the chardonnay on her lips, experience the delicate taste of nutmeg derived from the oak wine barrels by exploring her mouth with my tongue. How did I go from hating this woman with a passion to wanting to fuck her until my name rang in her blood?

Instantly, I felt the need to dominate pound against my skull, and I had to take a step back to suppress the overwhelming urge.

“Come on, grab a plate. You haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

She pursed her lips in thought, raising a brow. “Are you keeping tabs on me?”

“Is it considered ‘keeping tabs’ when it’s merely a concerned husband keeping an eye out for his wife?”

“You’re talking about yourself in third person again.”

“Take the plate, Daniela.” I held one out to her, her distrust evident in her glacial stare. But no matter the amount of bravery her expression exuded, apprehension still swirled in her eyes. God, those beautiful, unique eyes.

Reluctantly, she took the plate and examined the vegetarian platter I had Gabriela prepare specially for her.

I stood to the side, no intention of filling my plate, and every intention of studying her while I nursed my glass of wine. The short floral chiffon dress with a black bow around her middle accentuated her slender form. The V neckline emphasized her palm-sized breasts, a part of her body I hadn’t sampled yet because once I saw the delicate red curls between her legs, it was all I wanted to fucking look at while I jacked off—the only thing I could do to keep myself from tearing through the barrier of her virginity like a savage.

Daniela shifted from one foot to the other, my attention dropping to her

legs that went on for miles. I had to stifle a laugh at her choice of footwear—which was none. A designer dress with no shoes. Why wasn't I surprised?

She turned and glowered at me. "Are you not going to eat?"

"In a second."

Her eyes narrowed, grooves forming on her forehead. "What is your game?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're standing there studying me like I'm a goddamn show-horse you're thinking of buying."

I snorted. "I would argue that if you were indeed a show-horse, I wouldn't have to buy you since...well, I already own you."

"We're married, Gian. I'm your wife, and you are my husband. It's a mutual commitment and not just some twisted claim of ownership." She popped an olive into her mouth, and I watched as she pursed her lips while chewing.

"You see, Daniela, that's where you're mistaken." I placed my glass down and sauntered closer, keeping my eyes etched on hers. "Our marriage isn't just some mutual commitment. You are not simply my wife, and I'm sure as fuck not the standard husband type. I thrive on control."

"That's been established, yes."

"I'm also possessive as fuck."

"Of a wife you didn't want in the first place? A wife you dislike?"

"I changed my mind."

"That's not something you get to do and then expect me to just fall in line."

Fueled by a need to touch her, I brought my hand to her cheek to feel her smooth skin beneath my fingertips. "I expect you to do whatever I tell you to do."

She shifted, her eyes flashing with equal parts desire and fear. I loved that. I loved how conflicted she was, how her mind pulled in one direction while her body pulled in another—toward me.

"You pretend to fight it, Faye." Her cheeks flushed instantly when I called her that. "You think because I'm a hardened man, a man who hurt you and hated you, that you shouldn't want me. That you shouldn't...desire me."

"What kind of woman would I be if I did?"

I stepped up, our bodies a breath apart. "My woman."

Silence stretched for an eternity while I kept her hostage with my stare,

her eyes a whirlpool of confusions. Full, tempting lips parted as she inhaled, her chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. Unfortunately for her, she couldn't hide what she truly desired—not from me. It was there in her eyes, the way she looked at me as if silently begging to be ravished and used—yet still too innocent to give in to the need without an inner turmoil that fucked with her mind.

I brushed the pad of my thumb across her lips. Soft. Sensual. Perfect. She did not attempt to escape my touch, and my mind reeled with how things had changed so drastically so fast. Was it my guilt over hurting her that peeled the layers from my eyes to see the woman in front of me as more than my enemy's blood? Or perhaps my brother's obvious interest in her that ignited a fit of jealousy strong enough to smother the disdain I felt toward her?

Or maybe...maybe it was her. Perhaps it was her presence, her strength, her beauty that managed to captivate me in a way I never thought possible. But I could feel something different between us, a crackle of electricity that hummed through the evening air. A buzz that would soon siphon my every inhibition about my wife and replace it with something strong enough to ruin me.

I bit my lip as my gaze drifted from her lips to her eyes and back again. The need to taste her was overwhelming, my dick hard and throbbing just by being near her. "I wonder."

"What?" she whispered, the heat of her breath skidding across my thumb.

I cupped her cheek with my other palm, and she didn't move an inch. "I wonder if it would be the same."

"If what would be the same?"

"If I kissed you now, would it be the same as the kiss we shared in front of God?"

I bent down, licking my lips as it hovered an inch from hers. Her scent enveloped me. Vanilla fused with the smell of fresh grass, a reminder of how she loved strolling through the garden.

One breath became two. Seconds stretched into eons. The sound of crickets and water slowly slipped into silence. And we both stood there unmoved and entranced, her mouth tempting me like a drug, offering me a high like no other, which would surely follow with a severe comedown, a crash that would have me crave so much more. More than she'd be willing to give.

But I wanted to taste her too damn much—this woman who forced fire

and ice in my veins.

“Gian—”

I crashed my lips against hers, drowning her voice and smothering her words. There was a single moment’s hesitation from her, her body stiff against mine. But I dominated our kiss by breaking through the barrier of her lips, my tongue delving into her mouth. I tasted wine, the lingering saltiness of olives, and a flavor that was uniquely her. Sweet. Fiery. Mine.

Her subtle moans echoed between us, her body melting into mine as her inhibitions dissolved. My thoughts had instantly been obliterated. There were no Morettis, no Silvestros. No feuds or wars. It was just the two of us. Husband and wife...and a kiss that felt right yet made no fucking sense.

Drunk on desire, I deepened the kiss, pressing harder as I snaked my arms around her waist, pulling her against me. I waited for the moment she’d shove me away, waited for her fight to sever the connection, but it never came. In fact, she leaned deeper into the kiss, her tongue dancing against mine with equal vigor.

I felt her pebbled nipples against my chest, and I slipped my hands down to her ass, pulling her harder against me. I thrust my hips, desperate for some relief from the throbbing ache in my cock.

Everything faded to black around us, and I was willing to drown in her taste. When the fuck did this happen? When did my desire for this woman trump the hate I felt for everything the Moretti name stood for?

I tilted my head to the side, my lips never leaving hers. She gasped for breath, the cold air colliding with the heat of our mouths fused together.

Control was slipping from my grasp as I grabbed the fabric of her dress between my fingers, winding it up over her thighs. I wanted more. So. Much. More.

Lost in the moment with a hunger that demanded to be sated, I bent down and slipped a hand behind her thigh, pulling her feet off the ground, leaving her no choice but to wrap her legs around my waist.

“Gian—”

“Unless you’re about to tell me to rip your panties off right here, right now...shut the fuck up.”

Her whimpers filled my ears and fueled the carnal hunger that possessed me. Slipping deeper, my mind was a maze of lust and desire while our lips and tongues duelled for power.

Glass shattered, and the piercing sound sliced through the fantasy.



Daniela had dropped her plate, white shards scattering around us.

Our lips tore apart, and I leaned my forehead against hers, our billowing breaths interlaced. Reality struck like a ten-ton wrecking ball, and I was reminded of the dangerously thin line I tread on with her.

I stepped a few feet away from the broken glass and slipped my arms from her waist as I set her down. It was evident in the way her eyes burned with desire that she wanted more, that her body needed more. Fuck knew, so did I.

I touched her chin with my thumb, leaning as close as possible without kissing her. “I gave you my word that I would not touch you again without you asking.”

“What are you saying?” Her words were nothing more than a breathless whisper.

I lifted her face so she could look me in the eye. “I will never claim to be a good man, Daniela. But I won’t break my word, not after I already broke my vows once.”

My body ached, yet I managed to take a step back, every instinct in me screaming to devour her until there was nothing left. But I wouldn’t hurt her again. I wouldn’t become one of those men who took pleasure in another’s pain.

I would not become...her father.



## Chapter Seventeen

I was sure I would have turned into ash if he hadn't stopped when he did. The fire, the flames, the embers of his touch—it was almost too much.

But he was right. I couldn't understand how I was attracted to him, how my body could react to him the way it did after he proved to have nothing but ill intentions toward me. Yet now it seemed that too had changed.

Dinner. Wine. The fact that he stopped kissing me, reminding me of the promise he made and how he had already broken his vows. That was the mindfuck. That was the part that had my head spinning. Was he referring to his midnight visitor? The woman Darion referred to as Irina? Had I been right all along about him having a personal relationship with her after taking me as his wife?

The thought sickened me. Our marriage might not have been anything more than the seal of an agreement between our families, but we were still married. He said his vow before God, and he needed to honor that.

So did I. I said those same vows.

*I, Daniela Faye Moretti, take you, Gian Davide Silvestro, to be my husband. I promise to be faithful to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love you and to honor you all the days of my life.*

We were both guilty of ignoring our vows.

“Daniela, you damn hypocrite,” I mumbled to myself, picked up my glass of wine, and emptied it.

“Don’t let him screw with your head.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Darion standing by the archway, his eyes cold and expression somber

“My brother is a master manipulator, Daniela. He knows what to say to people to get what he wants.”

“I’m well aware of your brother’s shortcomings, Darion.” I placed the glass down.

“How did he hurt you?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “You eavesdropped?”

With slow steps, he approached me, hands in his pockets. “How did he hurt you?”

“Darion, listen, I appreciate how kind you’ve been to me since all this started, but—”

“How did he hurt you?”

He came right up to me, so damn close, I could smell the whiskey on his breath. Furious waves stormed in his eyes, dark pools of indignation.

“Darion,” I whispered, “please don’t do this.”

“Can you honestly stand there, look me in the eye, and tell me you feel nothing for me? That you don’t feel...free whenever you’re with me?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple.” He pushed forward, forcing me to take a step back. “Gian is a soulless bastard who will never see you as anything more than Emilio Moretti’s daughter. He’ll always hate you because of the blood that runs through your veins.”

I bit my lip, and it still tasted like him—like Gian. The buttery taste of wine and the bittersweetness that was so uniquely him.

Darion grabbed my arms, his grip tight as he urged me to look him in the eye. “Tell me you’re not attracted to me.”

“Darion, please.”

“Tell me! If you were free to have made your own choice, who would you have picked?”

I studied him in silence, the only sound that of my wildly beating heart inside my chest. If I had to lie, I’d deny the pull I felt toward Darion. The fondness I’d grown for the man who had shown me nothing but kindness

when I needed it most. If it were under different circumstances, it would have been so much easier to answer his question.

I pressed my lips in a thin line then took a breath. “If I had control over my own life, I would—”

Darion launched forward and slammed his lips against mine, squeezing my arms in his tight grip. It took me off guard, the way his hard and desperate kiss invaded my mouth. It was instinct, an impulse that evoked my actions. I pushed against his chest and slapped him across the face the second his lips tore from mine. His head jerked to the side, and I pressed the fingers of my other hand against my burning palm.

“I was saying,” I seethed, “if I had control over my own life, I wouldn’t have chosen either one of you.”

“Daniela, come on.” He reached for my elbow, but I jerked away.

“Stop, Darion. The fact that you thought I’d willingly kiss you back is insulting. I’m married to your brother.”

He nursed his cheek with his palm. “He doesn’t care about you. And you said it yourself. Your marriage is nothing but a sham. Have you even had sex with him yet?”

My skin flushed. He knew the humiliating truth; I could see it in his eyes. “That is none of your goddamn business,” I spat as anger and humiliation boiled in my veins. “I don’t care if your brother feels something for me or not. I am his wife, and you will respect me as such.”

I couldn’t stay there a second longer. My mind was a minefield of thoughts that made no sense. And even if I did feel something for Darion, a mutual affection born from kindness, he had no right to place me in such a compromising position.

“Mrs. Silvestro.”

I spotted Gabriela as she came walking from the foyer. “Yes, Gabriela?”

“A phone call for you. It’s your father.” She handed me the cordless phone and turned on her heel. My heart tumbled to the soles of my feet, my mouth instantly dry. There were only two reasons my father would call me. Either something has happened to my mother or Alessa, or he had more responsibility to pin on my already heavily burdened duty toward him.

I placed the receiver against my ear. “Hello?”

“There she is.” My father’s voice grated at my bones like a knife on an empty plate. “How are the newlyweds?”

“Good.” I toyed with the fabric of my dress between my fingers. “We’re

good.”

“Just good?”

“We’re fine, Dad. How is Mom? Has Alessa gone back to Oxford yet?”

“Your mother is perfectly fine, and Alessa is still here at home. We managed to convince her to stay awhile before going back.”

Instantly, the hair at the back of my neck stood up. My father never cared whether Alessa was home or not. Why would he suddenly convince her to stay?

I paced. “Dad, why are you calling?”

“Can a father not check in on his newly-wedded daughter?”

“You’re checking up on me, aren’t you? Making sure I’m fulfilling my duty.”

“Now, Daniela, there is no need for hostility. But since you brought it up, we might as well discuss it.”

I clenched my jaw and closed my eyes, my fingers clutching the receiver tighter. “There is nothing to discuss. My marriage to Gian is personal and not something I want to discuss with my father.”

There were a few seconds of silence before he cleared his throat. “Very well. I’ll just remind you, then, of what’s at stake.”

“I know what’s at stake,” I gritted between clenched teeth. “You’ve reminded me plenty even before the wedding.”

“Then, I’ll remind you again.”

I heard the click of his pen in the background and pictured him sitting behind his desk, a glass of whiskey adding another stain to the mahogany surface.

“Do what is expected of you to keep your husband happy. I’d hate to find out that Gian isn’t happily married to my daughter.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, biting my tongue as curses begged to be spat out. “I know, Dad.”

“Good. I’d hate to tell Alessa that she can no longer attend Oxford simply because her older sister couldn’t do what was expected of her.”

Tears burned, and anger simmered. “You know what?” I started. “One good thing about being married is that I no longer have to listen to you. I only have my husband to keep happy now. Send my love to Mom and Alessa.”

I hung up and swallowed, a painful tightness in my throat. What I felt wasn’t shock or disbelief. I had always known where my father stood on the subject of his oldest daughter’s happiness. But whatever it was that I felt, it

was deep, and it fucking oozed. Maybe there was merit to Gian's hate of my father.

My father had made it crystal clear that if I did anything to embarrass him or to risk the peace between our families, Alessa would be the one to pay the price. I'd do whatever was needed to keep that from happening.

My gaze swept up the staircase, my chest tight, and lungs struggling to expand. Maybe it had been long enough. Perhaps it was time for me to fulfill my duty as Gian's wife...completely.

With every step I took toward the bedroom, my heart beat faster as it knocked against my ribs. Adrenaline surged, and I could feel the heat build inside my veins. I toyed with my thumbs, slowly making my way down the hall, my stomach a giant ball of nerves that cut at my insides with shards of glass.

The scent of freshly polished furniture clung to the air, and I took a deep breath when I reached for the doorknob. The click of the latch sounded like a gunshot right next to my ear, all my senses heightened as I walked into the room, which always smelled like him—expensive cologne and Italian leather.

My heart skipped a beat when I found Gian leaning against the windowsill, arms crossed, staring right at me as if he had been waiting for me. His blue shirt was unbuttoned, hair disheveled, and eyes threatening as any deadly predator. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid. I'd be a fool not to fear him; a man like Gian could easily ruin a woman like me. I didn't need experience when it came to sex to know Gian wasn't gentle. He proved that the other night. He was a hunter, an untamed brute who dominated and devoured. Undoubtedly, Gian Silvestro would consume me whole, leaving no part of me untouched and unscathed.

My insides twisted, and sweat pooled in my palms. It was the first time since the night he had me tied me to the bed that we were in this same room together, and I had to consciously push the memory from my mind out of fear it would smother my courage.

I took a deep breath, feeling the air settling in my lungs as my chest tightened. But the longer I stood there with him staring at me, studying me, scrutinizing me, the more palpable the atmosphere around us became.

He tilted his head to the side, dropping his hands to the edge of the windowsill. "Something on your mind, Faye?"

I swallowed, knowing he loved taunting me by calling me Faye—my name rolling off his lips like liquid seduction, igniting a spark of hunger deep

within my veins.

My hand shook as I reached up, gradually tugging at the bow that kept my wrap-around dress intact.

The bow untangled, and with a gentle pull on the inside tie, the layers of chiffon fell to my sides, revealing nothing but a pair of light blue panties. I sucked in a breath when the summer air caressed my naked skin, Gian's gaze sweeping down my body, and I watched his expression hardened with promises of wicked acts and carnal sins.

I thought marrying a man was the most daunting moment of my life, but I was wrong. Standing half-naked in front of Gian was unnerving, my courage hanging by a thread because of self-doubt that swarmed through my thoughts.

*What if I'm not pretty enough?*

*What if my body isn't attractive enough?*

*What if I'm not sensual enough?*

A man like Gian was used to perfection when it came to women's bodies, and mine was far from it.

His eyes locked with mine as he straightened, my angst making him seem larger, his shoulders broader, his expression more menacing. His amber irises raked up and down my body, drinking me in as he walked across the room. The moment he stilled before me, I held my breath, my heart beating like a jackhammer, about to crack through my ribs at any moment.

"What is this?" The tenor in his voice was low, dark, intimidating, yet his lips curled with amusement.

"I'm your wife," I whispered and let the dress slip from my arms to pool around my bare feet on the floor. "This is how it should be, isn't it?"

A gasp slipped from my lips when he traced a fingertip leisurely up my stomach, reaching the swell of my breast.

"After fighting me around every corner, defying me every chance you get, you're here to what? Finally, consummate our marriage?"

I bit the inside my flushed cheeks, my mind blank of any answers.

He raised a brow, his finger still drawing delicate circles around the swell of my breast. "Does this have anything to do with the conversation you just had with your father?"

"What?"

The scar on his top lip moved as he smirked. "This is my house, Daniela."

"You listened to our phone call?"

His silence was answer enough.

“That was a private conversation.” I wanted to be angry, but there was something stronger pulling at my insides. It was intoxicating and exhilarating being so close to him, feeling his touch against my breast, the gentle swirl of his finger around my pebbled nipple.

“Your sister. He’s using your sister.”

I licked my lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I knew there was something he was using to control you. You’re too strong, too stubborn to have someone dictate your life like this.” Abruptly, he palmed my breast, feeling its weight in his hand, earning a whimper from my lips. “He’s threatening to marry Alessa off the same way he did you.”

I bit my lip, torn between the annoyance of his blatant invasion of my privacy and the desire that bloomed inside my core.

“He reminded you to keep me happy, reminded you what was at stake if you failed.”

Tears stung the back of my eyes, and he squeezed harder before taking my nipple between his fingers, tugging and pulling, and heat spread down my spine.

“And that’s why you’re here now, naked and so willing to give yourself to me. You’re protecting your sister from the same fate.”

I remained silent. There was no need to speak the truth, as it would only reiterate what he just said.

“Admirable,” he murmured, “but foolish.”

His hand dropped from my breast, and I instantly mourned the loss of his touch, only to hum once again as his fingers teased along the waistband of my panties. “I told you I wouldn’t touch you again unless you wanted me to.”

“I want you to.”

“Liar.” His hand snaked inside my panties, and I moaned out loud as he palmed my sex. “The problem is, whether you’re lying or not, we both know I’m not a good man. And with you standing in front of me, naked and so willing, there’s no way in hell I can stop myself from taking you. So, I am only going to ask you this once, Faye. And you only get this one chance to say no. If you say yes now, I won’t accept a no later.”

“I won’t—”

“Hush.” He pressed a finger against my lips. “Let me ask you first.”

The wicked grin on his face should have been a warning, a sign of his need to play. To hunt. He pulled his hand from my panties, yet kept his fingers against the skin of my waist, dragging his touch all around as he



circled me with slow, calculated steps. I could feel his leering stare on me, how it caressed my flesh with a heat that seeped through my pores.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Faye? Make you bleed?”

Fear slammed against my spine, and I looked at him in question.

He stopped in front of me, his finger lingering against my silk panties. “You’ve never been with a man before. It will hurt before it feels good. Your blood will coat my cock and stain my sheets. Do you want that?”

I sucked on my bottom lip, both dreading and anticipating how it would feel to be with him.

“Well...what will your answer be?”

The golden hues in his eyes gleamed with something primal. It should have scared me, but instead, it captivated me. “Yes.”

One word. One moment. And it could lead to a thousand mistakes.

“Get on the bed,” he ordered, and I didn’t hesitate for a second, determined to get through this.

I sat down on the mattress, the silk sheets soft against my thighs. I scooted up to the top without taking my eyes off him and lay back on the pillows.

I held my breath, watching Gian take off his shirt and unzipping his pants, slipping them off. Even naked, Gian looked regal, majestic...ruthless. Roped muscles stretched along his abdomen, a dusting of hair covering his chest, his olive skin perfectly unblemished—except for the tattoo I knew covered his back.

He didn’t say a word while he stood there at the end of the bed with his cock hard and standing proud. Just from his gaze alone, I was already writhing on top of the covers.

“You said yes, Faye. I will no longer accept a no. Understand?” The mattress dipped as he got on, and I simply nodded. There was no going back now. I knew that.

“Say it,” he demanded. “Say you understand.”

“I understand.” My voice sounded brave and daring, yet I was quivering on the inside because I had no idea what to expect. Not from him.

He leaned over me and hooked his fingers into the sides of my panties. “Lift your hips.”

I obeyed, and he gently pulled them down my hips, my thighs, until finally slipping them off. Warm fingers wrapped around my ankle. Soft. Gentle. A teasing of flesh against flesh, and he lifted my leg, pressing his lips

against the sensitive skin on the inside of my calf. It was such a simple act, yet it ignited a flurry of sensations that trickled across my flesh. My back arched as his delicate kisses continued upward. It was so slow. So tender and gentle.

The deceptive calm before a destructive storm.

“I need you ready for me, your body prepared to take my cock. Otherwise, this will hurt much more than it has to.”

His mouth floated to the crease between my thigh and pelvis and lapped at my flesh, forcing a heavy breath from my lips.

“Just do it.” I whimpered, clutching the silk pillows between my fingers. “Please.”

“As much as I want to ram my dick inside you right now and fuck you for days, you need it this way. Trust me.”

My eyes fluttered open, and I lifted myself on my elbows to look down at him, dark brows framing wild eyes. I watched his lips form the perfect O and moaned when his breath caressed my sex. Shivers ran up my spine, and I craned my neck back as my eyes rolled closed.

“You like that? My warm breath against your wet pussy lips?”

I answered with an appreciative moan, relishing the exquisite thrill that bubbled inside me.

With his palms flat against my inner thighs, he forced my legs wider, his thumbs finding my sensitive folds, spreading them, teasing the tip of his tongue against my clit.

“Oh, God,” I moaned as a shockwave slammed against my core, causing every limb to tremble. I’d never felt anything like this—a basic need to be consumed. To be taken to the edge with the promise of falling.

“How does it feel to have a man’s tongue against your cunt?”

“Good,” I whispered, placing my palm against my forehead, arching my back, my body writhing and muscles tensing.

His warm lips touched my wet folds, and I cried out when his tongue prodded against my entrance. He groaned, the sound vibrating against my swollen flesh, rippling up to my core as he licked upward, taking my clit into his mouth.

I moaned when he pulled away, his fingers tugging at the curls. “I’m serious when I say this stays. You hear?”

Euphoria had crept in from every corner of my mind, possessing more of me little by little.

He tugged harder, and I yelped. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” I breathed. “Yes.”

“Good.” His lips were back against my sex, and I reached down, weaving my fingers through his hair, his tongue lapping harder, faster, from my clit to my entrance and back up. The throbbing he evoked between my legs ached mercilessly, and it was almost too much to bear. Too strong. Pleasure and pain fused into an onslaught I wasn’t sure I could handle.

“Jesus, Faye. Your taste, it’s fucking with my control, and your pussy is dripping for me.” I felt my sex grow wetter with each passing second, his lips and tongue creating the most sensual smacking noises that amplified the desire that bloomed so fiercely inside me.

Every muscle in my body started to burn, and I ground my body, lifting my hips, needing more. Gian knew this and slipped a finger inside me, the last push I needed before my climax exploded, fragments of pleasure flooding my pelvis, through my core, and up my spine.

“That’s it.” He breathed against my center, inserting a second finger. “Ride it out.” And I did, flexing my hips as my orgasm crested, my skin hot and body coiled so tight I was sure it would snap in half. “God, that’s beautiful,” he murmured, “watching you come. Your body, your face, your lips—it’s exquisite.”

Every inhibition was gone, replaced by my animal self, finally tasting the pleasure of a man taking control of my body. I became unhinged, lost within the seductive touch of my husband.

My skin tingled, and the ecstasy withered as his touch slowed to a rhythm that allowed my body to settle. My mind was void of every thought, and I was on sensory overload as Gian lifted himself, settling his weight between my legs.

My eyes fluttered open, loving the way his skin felt against mine, our heated flesh crushed together. He wiped a curl from my face, my chest rising and falling with my uneven gasps. Steadily, he held himself there as his head dipped to my neck, his lips touching my sensitive skin, sucking gently and nibbling as he worked his way down, across my collarbone, creating a frenzy of sensation that feathered over my flesh.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and I squirmed under his touch, unsure if I could take any more. But anticipation broke through the exhaustion as he wrapped his lips around my nipple, sucking gently. Then roughly. Then gently again, flicking his tongue slowly. Fast. Slow.

“Gian—”

“Shh. Just lay there and take what I give you.”

Palming my other breast, kneading, squeezing, and tugging at the pebbled bud, his body started to rock on top of mine. Our skin rubbed together like silk, his cock slipping between the crease at my thigh, massaging back and forth—his shaft hard and hot.

His back arched, and he reached between us, dragging a finger through my wet slit. “Now you’re ready.”

I held my breath, steeling myself for what was to come. I bit my lip and pinched my eyes closed as he guided the tip of his cock to my entrance.

“Look at me, Faye.”

I opened my eyes and stared into his, mesmerized by the hunger I saw in them. The carnal wantonness that darkened every line on his face.

“You need to breathe.” He eased forward, his cock entering me. I was just about to cry out from the blunt pressure when he pulled out before slipping back in again. Just a little more than before. “Breathe, Faye.”

God, what was happening? This wasn’t what I expected. I prepared myself for an onslaught, to be mercilessly used by a callous man. Instead, it was the complete opposite.

He balanced himself on his elbow, his face inches from mine, covered with lines of exertion. “Put your arms around me.”

I did, and he leaned his forehead against mine.

“The next part is going to hurt.”

My breath hitched.

“Claw at my back if you need to.”

I closed my eyes.

“You ready?”

“Yes.” I nodded, and Gian moved, pushing inside me the same time his lips crashed against mine. Pain erupted in my groin, feeling as if my insides were being torn apart. I tried to scream, but his kiss drowned out the noise, his tongue lapping against mine hungrily, ravaging my mouth. My legs shook as he reared back, allowing me a few seconds’ reprieve before plunging back in, fire erupting inside me all over again. I clutched his shoulders, digging my nails into his flesh—the only outlet I had since he held my mouth prisoner with a kiss that made it possible for me to feel pain and passion at the same time.

With another thrust, I dragged my nails down his back, a groan ripping

from his throat, escaping from his lips onto mine. Our bodies were fused, and while I still adjusted to the fullness, to have him buried to the hilt inside me, my hips moved.

“Jesus, Daniela,” he whispered and reached down, hooking an arm underneath my leg, and forced me to wrap it around his waist, leaving me no choice but to take him deeper. “You okay?” His breathless rasps caressed my cheek, and he rocked on top of me, every thrust slipping in more comfortably, growing sweeter.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m okay.”

“I can’t—”

I looked up at him, his expression pained and brutal, beads of sweat on his forehead, as if there was a war taking place within him.

“Jesus. I can’t slow down.”

Tears pricked my eyes. Why was he fighting so hard to be gentle? Why, after everything, did he care so much about my pain? He would suffer only to spare me, let me tear through his flesh if it meant it would be easier for me.

“Gian,” I brought my palm to his cheek, “let go.”

“I’ll hurt you.”

I pressed my thumb under his chin so he would look at me, our gazes fused in a moment where we were the only two people who existed. “Let. Go.”

His nostrils flared, and he bit his bottom lip, eyes dark and hooded. “Fuck!” he roared and pushed deep and hard into me as he wrapped his hand around my throat, his thumb pressing into my jaw. Warm, heady breaths coated my skin as he buried his face into my neck, his back flexing and arching with every thrust.

The pressure between my legs was intense as his girth stretched me, my inner walls struggling to adjust to him. Tears pooled at the back of my eyes, but even with the fire and flames that burned inside me, I felt something else. A force that kept building, rising, as my whole body became primed to burst. It was something I couldn’t control, and my hips moved of their own accord, matching his thrusts. A different kind of ache started at the back of my neck, slithering down my spine until it finally collided between my legs.

“Oh, God,” I cried, trembling and shuddering as my muscles coiled tight. The euphoria crashed against every bone, my orgasm ripping through me.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Gian groaned and flexed, and his entire body went

rigid on top of mine, ecstasy covering every line on his face. I felt the pulse of his cock as he came inside me, pouring his pleasure into me.

His body went lax, and mine was utterly spent as our sweat blended between us.

He pulled out, and I winced. The pleasure subsided, and now I could feel the intensity of the onslaught my body had just endured.

“Stay still,” he ordered, and the mattress dipped. I was too exhausted to lift my head when I heard the water running. Whatever just happened wasn’t anything like I imagined. Gian was kind, tender, gentle—not anything like the man who had me tied to his bed a few nights ago.

“Open your legs.”

I looked at him as he sat down beside me, the stern look in his eyes leaving me no choice but to obey.

The second he placed the warm, wet towel between my legs, I gasped from the sting. My legs shivered as Gian cleaned me. Why was he taking care of me?

I just lay there staring at him as he tended to me in the most delicate, caring way.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

“I’m the devil, remember?”

I shook my head as he removed the towel and eased my legs together. “No, you’re not.”

He leaned down and brushed the back of his hand down my cheek. “I am. And you, sweet angel, are shackled to me...forever.”

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I HAD NO INTENTION OF MAKING IT EASIER FOR HER, TO MAKE IT HURT ANY less while I claimed her virgin cunt. But somewhere between eating her pussy and watching her come, feeling her legs move and body writhe, there was this fucking short-circuit in my brain. My animalistic urge to dominate and fuck morphed into a desire to caress and to savor. Not once did it cross my mind that it would mean anything to be the man who claimed Daniela for the first time.

Virgin, or no virgin. Pussy was pussy.

But with her, it was different.

The feel of her slick heat against my bare cock, how powerful shockwaves of pleasure zapped through my system, it drove me fucking insane. Just placing the very tip of myself against her entrance already had my balls tightened with a climax that would have made me blow my load against her creases.

Sucking her tits, rolling her nipple in my palm as I felt her body tremble beneath mine—it was nothing like I ever experienced before. I had never been so in tune with a woman’s body as with hers. It wasn’t just about my own rush toward a release. It was about hers, too. In fact, hers mattered more.

Daniela opened the bathroom door, steam drifting into the bedroom as she walked out with a towel wrapped around her. Her hair was an even darker red, an intense shade of scarlet as water dripped off the ends.

“You okay?”

She nodded, sucking on her bottom lip, her cheeks the color of cherry blossoms as her gaze raked down my naked body.

I smirked and crossed my arms, not giving a fuck that my cock was starting to grow hard again. “You’re going to have to get used to it. Now that I’ve had you, I’m only going to want to fuck you more.”

“Jesus, Gian.” She blushed, a deep red starting at the base of her neck and spreading upward.

I shrugged. “Just saying it the way it is.”

“I’m just…” She pulled her hand through her wet hair. “I’m just going to pull on some PJs and get some rest.”

“Hold up.” I reached for the piece I had chosen for her and held it out. “Wear this.”

Her eyes narrowed as she took the emerald-green nightgown from me. “This isn’t even enough fabric to cover everything.”

“Exactly.” I lifted my brows suggestively. “If you’re going to share my bed with me, you’ll wear what I want you to wear.”

Her lips pulled into a thin line, and she tossed the nightgown on the bed before walking across the room to my chest of drawers. She reached for a white tee and pulled it over her head, her tiny frame drowning in it. She held her arms out wide. “I’ll be wearing this. You’re more than welcome to take the couch if you’re not happy with my choice of sleepwear.”

The challenge beamed from her eyes, and I licked my lips, the ends of her wet hair causing water to soak through the white shirt, pebbled nipples teasing through the wetness.

She looked down at my hard cock, and her eyes widened before she looked back up to me.

I shrugged. “I guess I prefer you in one of my shirts, then.”

Silence followed as we stared at each other, the sexual tension even more potent than it was before. Yeah. Something changed—shifted in a different direction, and now I had no idea where it would take us.

Daniela brought her thumb to her lips and nipped at her nail, a nervous habit, it seemed. And then she saw the red stain on the beige sheets.

“Oh, God.” Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Um…we need clean bedding. Gabriela must be sleeping by now.”

Silently, I watched her squirm as she swept across the room, opening closets in search of sheets. Did she think I’d care about that? The sick fuck in me loved that I made her bleed and relished the fact that no man had ever



been where I had now claimed her.

“Shit. There are no sheets in here. I’ll just go look in one of the other rooms.”

“Daniela,” I grabbed sweatpants and slipped them on, “relax. I know where Gabriela keeps the sheets.”

She stilled. “Of course you do.” There was no missing the jealous sneer in her voice. But she made the right assumption. I knew where the sheets were because I hated sleeping with the smell of a woman’s perfume and the scent of wet pussy after they’d left. Another thing that seemed to have been different with Daniela, because—by God—I loved the smell of her pussy clinging to the air around me. If I had my way, I’d be sleeping right now with her sticky body next to mine with her cum-stained thighs draped over me.

I had just reached the door when the sound of engines and screeching tires came blasting through the open window, both Daniela and I rushing to see what was happening.

My heart thumped, and my stomach twisted when I recognized the SUV that came to an abrupt stop right in front of the house, tires screaming across driveway.

Daniela leaned over the windowsill. “Who is that?” But there was no need for me to answer her question when a woman got out of the passenger side door.

“It’s her.” Daniela glanced at me. “That’s Irina.”

Fuck.

There was a hard bashing on the door before Darion came rushing in, eyes wide with panic. “We got trouble, brother.”



## Chapter Eighteen

My heart leaped up my throat, my chest no longer expanding as I tried to breathe the moment Darion stormed into the room to warn Gian.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Gian grabbed a shirt and pulled it over his head.

“Irina. Security just called to say she’s on her way. It’s an emergency.”

Gian grabbed his phone on the nightstand. “Motherfucker. Eleven missed calls.”

Darion frowned. “Why the fuck didn’t you answer your phone?” But his words were barely cold when he looked at the bed, noticing the bloodstained sheets. God. He knew. He knew what happened here tonight between Gian and me.

When he looked at me, I crossed my arms and ran my palms over my elbows. There was a visible flush on his cheeks, his expression sullen. Dark eyes showed me so many things while he kept staring at me as if he wanted me to see what he felt.

Pain.

Hurt.

Jealousy.

It was all there, and it pricked at my heart, thinking of what this moment was doing to him on the inside.

“Jesus Christ.” Gian’s voice thundered through the room. “This can’t be good. Daniela, stay here.” He rushed out of the bedroom, but Darion stayed behind, still not taking his eyes off me. It was like darkness had cloaked him, and not even the dim light in the room could dispel the gloom that painted his expression.

“Darion—”

But he turned and stomped out of the bedroom before I could continue.

“Jesus.” I inhaled, placing my hand on my forehead. Every muscle clamped down on bone, squeezing painfully at my insides.

A loud thud sounded, and I heard raised voices coming from downstairs. Fuck. There was no way I’d stay up here and not know what the hell was going on.

I ran out of the room and down the stairs. There was something heavy in the air, and it clung to my skin when stepped out the front door, finding Gian on his knees and leaning over what looked like a young woman, lying lifeless on the driveway. Naked.

Adrenaline smothered the blood in my veins, and I yelped as Gabriela came brushing past me with an arm full of towels.

“What the hell happened?” Gian yelled, leaning down, trying to listen for breathing while his finger attempted to find a pulse in her neck. That was when I saw the blood on his hands, and I held my breath.

“Jesus, Daniela. You can’t be here.” Darion placed his hands on my shoulders, but I shrugged out of his hold.

“What is going on?” Feeling dazed and confused, I kept staring at the scene in front of me. My husband was desperately trying to help a woman lying on the ground, and I had no idea what was happening.

I turned and shot daggers at Darion. “What the fuck is going on?”

“She got hurt.” He pointed at the girl.

“I can see that, but how?”

“Fuck.” He sighed, placing his hands on his waist. “You really can’t be here, Daniela.”

A breeze wafted through the front door, and the air was abruptly tainted with the pungent scent of fresh blood. I searched the area and noticed the woman I had seen before.

“Irina,” I whispered. Her cherry red lips pouted as her striking blue eyes

gleamed with tears.

“Gabriela, call 911,” Gian ordered, and Gabriela immediately jumped into action. “Fuck, we need to put pressure on the wound.”

Panicked, yet possessed with adrenaline, I rushed forward, grabbed a towel, and pushed it against the gaping wound at the woman’s side, blood oozing out.

“Keep the pressure on that. Jesus, there’s no pulse. Fuck!” He sat up, positioned her neck, and started giving her CPR. She was so small, I was sure he’d break her sternum.

Liquid flooded through my fingers, the towel drenched in blood.

“Come on!” Gian shouted. “Breathe, dammit. Breathe.”

The girl’s face was ghostly pale; blue lips parted, blonde hair clinging to her cheeks.

“Breathe.” Gian’s forearms were strained as he pushed down on her chest, his neck stiff as he silently counted. He pinched her nose closed, placing his open mouth over hers, blowing before clutching his hands over her chest, fingers weaved together while pumping.

Up and down.

Up and down.

“Keep that fucking wound covered,” he yelled at me, his voice echoing through the night, panic coating his every word. “Don’t you fucking let go.”

I wasn’t sure whether he was talking to me or the girl he was trying to save.

Nothing. There was no movement. No sign that the CPR was working, yet Gian kept going, continuing to blow air down her throat, pumping her chest.

Nothing.

“Gian.” Darion stepped closer, placing a hand on his shoulder, but Gian snarled and jerked away. “One, two, three...”

An air of melancholy surrounded us, and I glanced up at Darion, who gave me a knowing look, lightly shaking his head.

“Four, five, six...”

A tear slipped down my cheek while I watched Gian fight with a desperation I had never seen before. The expression on his face held nothing but sheer determination, eyes wild and cold, and lips dry as he kept counting. He was no longer there. He lost grip on reality—and the reality was...the girl was dead.

“Gian.” I let go of the towel and tried to stand up when his arm shot out and grabbed my wrist, pulling me back down.

“Keep the fucking pressure on! Do you want her to fucking bleed out?”

Blood had already pooled onto the pavement, and my knees were immersed in the thick liquid, my shirt covered in crimson.

“Gian, stop,” I said softly. “She’s gone.”

“No.” He pursed his lips, not looking up at me once. “No. She’s not dead.”

“Gian—”

“She’s not fucking dead!”

I pinched my eyes closed, tears slipping down my cheeks, my chest cracked wide open.

“She’s not dead.” He kept pumping. Pumping. Pumping. Blowing air down her throat and pumping again.

Dear God.

“Gian, stop this.” Darion grabbed him around his shoulders, but Gian shoved him back hard, sending him to the ground.

“She’s not dead!” He pushed down on her chest, and a sickening crack followed.

Gian froze, and I gasped. I could practically feel the split of bone just from the sound alone.

“Oh, Jesus. Fuck.” Gian’s hands trembled as he lifted them from her chest, letting them hover over her. “Oh, God.” He looked at me, eyes wide and panicked, and I couldn’t stop the tears from pouring down. It was so surreal, like a damn horror movie was playing out right in front of me—the dead girl’s head lolled to the side, chest collapsed. She was so skinny and frail, as if she had been starved.

“Fuck!” He stumbled back on his ass, pulling his legs up, draping his arms over his knees.

Gabriela came rushing out, phone in hand, busy dialing. But the moment she took in the scene in front of her, she knew it was too late and sucked in a breath, choking on a sob as she dropped the phone to the ground.

All I could do was keep my eyes on Gian. I couldn’t understand what I was seeing, what the hell I just witnessed. It was like he entered this trance, going to a place where the only thing that mattered was saving this girl. Frantic. Manic. Crazy. To save this girl.

I didn’t move. Neither did anyone else. Not even the light of the full

moon could defeat the darkness that had settled over all of us. The silence was excruciating, and the erratic beating of my heart was the only sound I heard.

Gian pulled his hand through his hair, tugging hard at the ends. “Jesus fucking Christ! Goddammit!”

I whimpered. I hated seeing him like this. The pain. The agony. The utter defeat that framed his every feature—it was too hard to witness.

Darion came up behind me and reached down to help me to my feet. The metallic stench of blood grew more robust, more intense, and I glanced down at the pool of thick, crimson liquid. Only moments ago, that blood was the life force that flowed through this woman’s veins, and now it stained the asphalt.

“Come on, let’s get you inside.” Darion guided me toward the house, but I couldn’t leave Gian out here.

I pulled from Darion’s grip and walked toward my husband. “Gian?”

He didn’t look up at me, his eyes pinned on the dead girl.

“Gian?” I crouched down beside him. “Let’s go inside.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” His tone was cold.

“Please,” I urged. “Let’s go inside.”

“Gian?” The woman who had been standing silently to the side the entire time stepped toward us, and he looked up at her, his eyes flashing with something hard. Rage. “What the fuck, Irina?” He pushed himself up to his feet. “Why the fuck did you bring her here?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know where else to go.”

“The safehouse, Irina. The motherfucking safehouse,” he yelled, his voice like a sonic boom through the night sky. “Not fucking here.”

“Don’t you think I would have if I could?” Her bottom lip trembled, blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Our last goddamn safehouse has been compromised. They are fucking everywhere, Gian. Everywhere.”

“Then you should have stopped at the nearest fucking hospital.”

“And tell them what? That I found this girl bleeding in the trunk of my car?”

“How did you find her?” Darion stepped in next to Gian.

“I was at dinner with some friends, and I got this anonymous call.” She looked down at the ground as if she were trying to piece together the puzzle. “I don’t...I don’t know who it was. He just said I should check the trunk of my car.” She glanced up at Gian, who oozed with menace, hands and chest

covered in blood. “When I got to my car, this...this girl,” she pointed at the body, “she was in my trunk, bleeding out. Gian, I tried to go to the safehouse. I called Hunter, but he said it wasn’t safe, and I couldn’t go to the hospital. You know that.”

Tears now streamed freely down her face, leaving visible lines in her make-up, her mascara ruined and smudged.

“Jesus. What the fuck is happening right now?” Gian kicked at the ground, frustration and rage pulsing off him like an electric current.

“Gian,” Darion called and looked in my direction, silently making Gian aware of my presence.

Gian turned to face me, streaks of blood on his cheeks, and our eyes locked for no more than a few seconds. “Take her inside, Darion.”

“No!” I objected and rushed toward him. “I want to know what is going on here.”

“Nothing. Just go inside.”

“No, Gian. Tell me—”

“I said go inside! Now!”

I froze, the sharp edges of his voice slicing through me like razors, and I sucked in a breath. “No,” I whispered. “No. I will not go inside before you tell me what the fuck is going on here. Who is this girl? And who the hell is she?” I glanced at Irina, who wiped a tear from her cheek.

Gian grabbed my elbow and pulled me closer, fingers biting in my flesh. “Go the fuck inside, Daniela. Do not make me say it again.” Laced with warning, his words filled the space between us. But I gritted my teeth and leaned into him.

“I just watched a girl die in your driveway. For God’s sake, I just heard you crack her fucking sternum. So, please...what the hell is going on?”

Both of us reeked of blood, and I could feel the liquid becoming hard on my hands and knees.

He licked his lips then pulled them in a straight line, and I knew he hated my persistence. But I didn’t give a shit.

He wiped at his chin with the back of his hand. “It’s too dangerous, Daniela.”

“What is?”

“All of this.”

I pushed myself against him, refusing to look anywhere else but into his eyes. “Then protect me, but by God, do not lie to me, or keep me in the dark

about what just fucking happened.”

He didn't move, and neither did I. Silence draped over us with nothing but a breath of distance between his face and mine.

He sighed. “Fine.”

“Gian, no,” Darion objected.

“Stay out of this,” Gian warned. Despondent and grim, he looked me in the eyes. “I'll tell you what you need to know.”

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## Chapter Nineteen

“Send a clean-up crew now. And hurry the fuck up.” I hung up and threw my phone across the counter.

“Shouldn’t you be calling the police? An ambulance?” Daniela’s hand shook as she took a sip of her whiskey.

“That’s not how we work,” I replied simply.

“And how do you work?”

“In a way that doesn’t require us to answer questions that would compromise our...*business*.”

Her throat bob as she swallowed. “What kind of business?”

I stared at her from the other side of the bar. “You need a shower. We can talk after.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I want to talk now.”

“You’re covered in blood.”

“And so are you. The entire goddamn driveway is covered in blood.”

It was easy to see how she bit back tears, how she made a conscious effort to square her shoulders and look brave. But how could she be? She just saw a girl die.

I tossed back the whiskey and cringed before placing the glass down on

the counter, pouring myself another double.

Heels clicked across the floor as Irina walked in, no trace of panic or tears. Unlike Daniela, Irina had seen death before, witnessed a lot of gruesome scenes. So, she knew how to pull her shit together real quick. “Taylor Whitmore. She went missing a few months ago. History of drug addiction with a long list of bad acquaintances.”

I clutched the edge of the bar, leaning my head down. “I’m busy right now, Irina.”

“Well, this can’t wait.”

Rage exploded through my veins, and I slammed my hands down on the counter. “I said I’m fucking busy!” My arms trembled. I was on the verge of losing my shit, the entire goddamn world coming down on me all at once.

Irina didn’t even blink from my outburst. The woman had a spine of steel. “Fine, then we’ll just talk here.”

She sat her ass down on one of the barstools and grabbed herself a glass.

I narrowed my eyes, not sure whether to tape her mouth shut or drag her out of my house by her hair. I’d never felt so hostile toward her. We’ve worked together for almost three years. But tonight, my I-don’t-give-a-fuck level had reached new heights, and I refused to take responsibility for any of my actions that would take place during the next few minutes.

“Two of our safehouses have been compromised in the last week. The last week,” she emphasized. “So, either our security just isn’t up to par, or we have a snitch on the inside. And someone put this girl in the trunk of my car as a fucking message.”

I noticed Daniela scratch against her glass, dry blood crusted around her fingertips and nails.

“Daniela.”

She looked up at me.

“This is Irina Volkov. Irina, my wife, Daniela.”

Irina shot her a cherry-red smile. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Silvestro.”

“Likewise,” Daniela replied politely. I snickered, the moment almost comical. We just tried to save a girl’s life in my fucking driveway, and here we were standing around the bar having drinks and doing a formal introduction between my wife and the woman she saw on one of her midnight visits.

“So,” I started and looked her way, “the other night when you saw Irina arrive, we had a meeting...a professional meeting.”

Irina smirked. “Oh, dear. You saw me? I can only imagine how that must have looked.”

Daniela’s cheeks blushed. “What kind of professional meeting?”

I took a sip of whiskey. “Irina and I run a...well, underground operation.”

“What operation?” Her eyes pulled into slits as she glanced between Irina and me.

Irina sucked on her bottom lip and nodded toward Daniela while looking in my direction, silently urging me to do what needed to be done.

I cranked my neck side to side. “Human trafficking.”

Instantly Daniela’s cheeks paled. “Human trafficking? Jesus.”

“On second thought,” Irina slapped a palm on the counter, “I don’t want to be part of this conversation. Gian, I’ll be outside supervising Hunter’s clean-up crew.”

“Who is Hunter?” Daniela’s gaze darted from Irina to me with a giant question mark on her face.

I poured more whiskey into my glass. “Hunter Keaton, one of our business associates. He and his wife, Scarlet, have a lot of underground contacts that allow us to infiltrate the market. Hunter also has the means to make problems disappear—like the one we currently have in our driveway.”

“Wow.” Daniela let out a breath. “This is definitely the worst case scenario I could have imagined.”

“Gian,” Irina called, “let me know once you’re done.” She glanced at Daniela and silently mouthed, “Good luck.”

*Fuck me.*

With every click of her heel, it sounded like fucking gunshots going off in the room. I waited until she disappeared from view before facing Daniela.

“Before you make any assumptions, it’s not what you think.”

“And what am I thinking?”

I liked my lips, tasting the whiskey on my tongue. “I buy girls on the black market, yes.”

“Oh, my God.”

“But...I don’t sell them.”

“I’m going to throw up.” She held her chest, her eyes wide and nostrils flaring as she tried to breathe.

“Daniela, listen to me.” I reached for her hand, but she jerked away as if my touch had burned her. “Listen, okay? I buy girls on the black market, then give them to Irina to rehabilitate.”

“You what?” Confusion cast shadows across her expression as she struggled to make sense of it.

I bit my bottom lip. “Some of those girls...fuck. Some of those girls are really fucked up, Daniela. They can’t just be placed back into society after being abused, raped, and mindfucked for years. Some of them are addicted to every goddamn drug available out there. So, with Irina’s contacts and my money,” I shrugged and leaned on the counter while clasping my fingers together, “we save girls.”

A loud clapping of hands bounced off the walls, and I straightened as Darion sauntered in. “What a story. So fucking noble.”

“Darion, don’t,” I warned.

“You know,” he rubbed his chin, “I love how you stand there all righteous and shit, pretending like you’re the good guy when we both know...you’re not. I mean, you did marry a woman you knew was forced to marry you,” he pointed at Daniela, “and you did treat her like she was the spawn of Satan until you suddenly changed your mind because, well...” he shrugged, “you fucked her.”

“Get the fuck out of my house!” I stormed across the room, fists balled and rage fuming. I wanted to beat his ass to a pulp, but Daniela jumped in front of me and pressed a palm against my chest.

“Stop. Both of you just stop.”

“I will not let him disrespect me, or you, in my own damn house.”

“Disrespect?” Darion spat. “The only person who got disrespected in this house was her.” He pointed at Daniela. “You disrespected her, big brother, by taking something she wasn’t ready to give you.”

I balked, and it just fucking clicked. I let out a mocking laugh. “You’re jealous.”

His face fell.

“You’re jealous because you thought by playing the role of the good brother, by pretending you cared, she’d what? Fall in love with you?” It was fucking comical. “Poor man, so fucking infatuated by his brother’s wife, he’d make an ass of himself.”

“Gian, stop,” Daniela muttered for only me to hear. “Darion, could you give us a minute?”

Brown irises dueled with mine as we glared at each other, silently tearing each other apart in my mind. Darion and I never saw eye-to-eye, and now it seemed we had come to a crossroad where it was no longer possible to

pretend.

“You’re a hypocrite, Gian.”

“And you ain’t no fucking saint yourself. You think I don’t know about you, but I do.”

Darion’s eyes flashed, yet his expression remained stone. He thought he was the only one who held a secret trump card, but he was sorely mistaken.

Darion stepped forward, and I snarled, my nails pressing hard into my palms. “Daniela, come with me.”

“Fuck off, you motherfucker!” I seethed, but Daniela kept stable between my brother and me. I could have easily shoved her to the side, but she was the sliver of control I needed right now before I tore my brother’s spine out.

Darion ignored me, with his eyes fixed on my wife. “Believe me, Daniela, Gian is not who he says he is. He will hurt you.”

“Darion,” she whispered, and I could feel the fury of hell knock against my skull.

“Leave. Brother. Take your shit and fucking leave. And if you ever so much as think about putting one foot in my house again, I will plant a bullet in your motherfucking heart. Brother or not.”

Darion lingered, his sorry fucking sad eyes begging Daniela to go with him.

“I said leave!” My voice slammed against the ceiling, the final warning my brother would get from me.

“Please, Darion,” Daniela urged softly, and Darion’s glare cut from hers to mine, the last thread of brotherhood between us ripped and torn.

A manic laugh rumbled from the back of his throat. “Fine.” He held his arms out wide as he took a step back, shooting Daniela a final look. “Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He grabbed one of the dining chairs and threw it to the ground as he turned and stomped out.

“Motherfucker,” I cursed under my breath and grabbed a vase, launching it across the room, the glass fracturing into tiny shards. Fury flared in my chest, rage rolling up and down every bone in waves. “What a goddamn clusterfuck.”

“Gian,” Daniela placed a gentle hand on my elbow, “you need to calm down.”

My mind raced. Thoughts scattered.

*Daniela.*

*Sex.*

*Screeching tires.*

*Blood.*

*The crack of bone.*

*Darion.*

Maddened with rage, adrenaline kicked into overdrive, my mind spinning into a frenzy. I roared, going on a fucking rampage as I swept shit off tables, pulled paintings from walls, chaos erupting around me. But I couldn't control it. I didn't want to. For once, I just wanted to let go and not think of consequences. To let my demons out and not give a shit what they destroyed.

"Gian."

Her voice sounded far, muffled by the swoosh of anger in my head.

"Gian, stop."

"I should have saved her. I should have saved her."

"Stop. Please." Her hand touched mine, a subtle brush of skin, yet strong enough to pull me back. I looked at her, her mismatched eyes filled with so much compassion and sympathy, I wanted to fucking shake her and scream at her that I didn't deserve it. I couldn't fucking save her.

Her plump lips pursed as she lifted a hand, fingertips brushing through my hair above my ear, sending a wave of calm through my veins. "You did everything you could."

I shook my head lightly, biting the inside of my mouth.

"Listen to me." She shifted and palmed my cheek while keeping my gaze. "You tried everything to save her. Everything. There was nothing you could have done."

My breath hitched and chest tightened. How could I grieve a girl I didn't even know?

"Come on." Her hand dropped to mine, and she wrapped her fingers around my palm. "Let's go get cleaned up."

"You must have questions."

"It can wait. I want to take care of you first."

Jesus Christ. Darion was right. I treated her like shit, and yet here she was, her first instinct to take care of me rather than to get answers to questions that ate away at her soul. How did this woman I disliked so damn much turn into this beautiful angel? My angel.

We walked over the broken glass on the floor, up the stairs, and straight to the bedroom. Not a word was spoken between us. And with every passing

second, I could feel the storm inside me dissipate—little by little.

“You go get into the shower, and I’ll grab you some clean clothes.”

I studied her, the shirt she wore smeared with crimson, the tips of her gold curls stained with blood. Yet her only worry was to clean me up first.

“Daniela?”

“Yeah?” She opened a drawer and pulled out some clean towels.

“How are you so calm?”

She stilled, gripping the white towel in her hands. “Some situations can only be disarmed with a comforting touch and a gentle tongue.”

My heart swelled the second our gazes collided, and I felt something I had never felt before. Something that had me wanting to hold her. Just fucking hold her.

“Gian.” She smiled. “Go shower.”

“Yeah.” I roughed a hand through my hair, sticky with dried blood. “Okay.”

Streaks of red swirled, and stripes of pink disappeared down the drain of the shower. The water was scorching, but I didn’t care. I liked the burn because it numbed the sense of failure. The splat of the water against the tiles silenced the sound of her bones fracturing beneath my palms, the sickening crack that finalized it. It put a motherfucking timestamp on the girl’s death.

I leaned my head against the wall and breathed out when I felt a pair of hands gliding over my wet back, down my side, and circling my waist. I closed my eyes as she pressed her naked front against my back. Her skin on mine was like silk on silk, steam wrapping around us as if it could shield us from the rest of the world. Keep us in this bubble that was just ours. Just us.

Calm seeped through my pores, the feel of her body appeasing the chaos. Her lips brushed against my back, and I sucked in a breath, desire instantly smothering everything else I had been feeling. Suddenly, it was only her hands, her lips, her presence. There was nothing else.

Fingertips dragged across my abdomen, dipping low, sliding along my pelvis, waking a fiery need in my groin.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to the side and in front of me, pushing her back against the wall, claiming her mouth with mine, ravishing her like a starved animal. There was this voice at the back of my mind reminding me to be gentle, but I didn’t have the strength to fight the urge just to lose myself in this woman while the satin feel of water cascaded down us.

I cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples between my fingers, rewarded

with the most beautiful moan from her lips. Water lapped on my tongue as I kissed down the side of her neck, starving. Famished. Praying to God she wouldn't ask me to stop.

My hand slipped down her side and hooked behind her thigh, guiding her leg around my waist. "I can't be gentle. Not now," I warned with rapid breaths, my lips and tongue tasting all the way across her jaw.

"It's okay."

"I'll hurt you."

"I can handle it." Her arms wrapped around my shoulders, and she pulled me closer, the craving to be inside her feeling like needles pricking against my skin.

My hips already flexed, my cock throbbing, aching with the demand to fuck. Snaking my other arm around her waist, I reached for her ass, lifting her up before pinning her against the wall with my body, our hips grinding together as I fit perfectly between her legs.

I was so lost in the moment, lost inside my own fucking head, I didn't even slip a finger through her slit to make sure she was ready for me. But judging by the sweet noises that rolled from her lips and the way her body squirmed against mine, it was safe to assume she was.

There was no need for me to reach between us, the tip of my cock already nudging at her entrance, and I couldn't control it. I thrust and pushed inside her, her cries sounding like a thousand echoes within the confines of the bathroom.

I should have stopped and asked her if she was okay, but feeling her heat wrap around me, her tightness, her walls sucking me in, I lost my ability to fucking care. All I cared about was losing myself inside her. I wanted to drown in her and never break through the surface.

She had become gravity—the daughter of my enemy. The daughter of the man I hated most—and she had no idea why.

I pulled out and sank back in. "Jesus," I groaned. "It's heaven and hell, being inside you, Faye."

Her moans grew louder, more rapid as I drove into her, sinking so damn deep I could feel her core against the tip of my dick.

"Your cunt will grow accustomed to my cock, and only mine. No other man will ever know the pleasure of fucking you."

"Gian." The way my name rolled from her tongue, water splashing from her lips. "Oh, God."



I fucked her harder, deeper, her back moving up and down against the cold tiled wall. Over and over, my cock claimed her, driving deep and slamming hard.

Nails dug into the skin of my back, her heels pressing into my ass as her legs tightened around me.

“You need to come,” I said, out of breath, placing my hands against the wall behind her, my hips keeping its relentless rhythm. “I swear to God, if you don’t come before I do...Jesus, fuck.”

Leaning my forehead against hers, I watched as Daniela’s expression was overcome with zeal and lust as if she too stood at the edge of rapture.

I reared back, pulled out, so just the tip of my cock remained inside her, and plunged deep. She cried out, and I knew she was there. She was right there with me, at the edge while I pistoned in and out of her as if it would mean death if I didn’t.

Deeper. Faster. Harder.

Water beat down over us with steamy rivulets, and finally, I felt her pussy pulse around me as she moaned, her mouth formed like the perfect fucking O.

“That’s my baby girl.”

I gave one final thrust as my climax shredded me, tore my fucking insides apart as it crested—from the back of my neck, down my spine, and crashing against my balls.

I stilled as I creamed her cunt, my mind finally empty. Void of anything and everything. There was nothing—only peace. Calm. Serenity.

There was only her.



## Chapter Twenty

I sighed and made another attempt to pull my hair up, trying to create a decent looking updo. Not even the silver flower pins and comb could help me tame the wild curls.

“I don’t even know why I still try.”

Gian came up behind me, brushing the curls from my shoulder, and placed a tender kiss in the crook of my neck. “You know I prefer your hair down. So, forget about those silly pins.”

His feathery kisses traveled up, touching just below my ear, and I craned my neck to the side, relishing the feel of his lips against my skin.

“If you don’t stop, we’ll be late to welcome our guests.”

“Then let’s be late.” He snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me against him. “I really couldn’t give a fuck.”

“Gian.” It was more a moan than a protest.

The chime of the doorbell echoed down the hall, and Gian’s head lolled forward. “To say I am in no mood for this party is the understatement of the century.”

I turned to face him and placed my palms on his chest. “It could be worse.”

“Yeah? How?”

“We could have still hated each other. At least now we can stand to be in the same room for longer than twenty minutes without wanting to kill each other.”

He cocked a brow. “True. But now it seems I can’t be in the same room as you without wanting to be inside you, watch your face as you come.” His gaze swept down my body, letting out an appreciative moan. “And it’s not like this dress would make it hard for me to spread these pretty legs of yours.”

“Stop.” My cheeks flushed, and I turned back around to look at my reflection. The off-the-shoulder teal cocktail dress with a fitted bodice and flared skirt was perfect for a midday social event. The hem touched the top of my knees, and a delicate silver strap around my waist gave it a touch of elegance.

Gian and I stared at our reflection together, his hands still on my hips. His navy-blue suit brought out the golden specks in his amber eyes. And his midnight hair was carefully groomed with a rippling quality, my fingertips begging to clutch them tight while he rocked on top of me. Chiseled cheeks and kissable lips, Gian Davide Silvestro was the type of man all the women in a room desired—some with secret glances, others with unabashedly suggestive looks.

The last few days with Gian had been...unexpected. Sharing a bed with him, listening to his deep breathing while he slept, feeling his arm around me, his nose nuzzled in my hair when I woke up in the morning—it felt good. My body was still adjusting to him, but now that I knew the kind of euphoria which awaited me whenever he was inside me, I happily braved the temporary pain and blunt pressure. Being one with him transported me to a place where the entire world disappeared, where it was just us and the ecstasy of his touch.

But I wasn’t naïve. We still had a long way to go to being a happily married couple. There were still times when he would stare at me, and I’d wonder if he thought of my father—of this intense hate he felt for him. One day I would brave the topic and pursue answers as to why he loathed my father so much. But not today.

I swept curls from my face. “Will Irina be here?”

“No. My father doesn’t know about my business relationship with her.”

“Really? Why?”

“I prefer it that way.”

“But Darion knew?”

Gian’s expression turned to stone. “It couldn’t be avoided. But my little brother knows better than to talk about my secret business ventures. He has more to lose than I do.”

I narrowed my eyes while fastening a silver hoop earring. “That’s a vague answer if I ever heard one.”

He stepped away, opened a closet drawer, and picked one of his wristwatches. “You know I like to keep my answers simple. The less you know—”

“The better.” I rolled my eyes as I completed his sentence. Even after the night Gian tried to save that girl, after I witnessed it all, Gian was hellbent on keeping me in the dark as much as he could.

“Have you heard from him?”

He fastened his watch, his silence deafening.

“It’s been days, Gian.”

He straightened his suit lapels and faced me. “You care for him.”

“He’s your brother. Don’t you care for him?”

“He tried to convince you to go with him. Tried to take you from me. So, no. I don’t care for him.”

“So much happened that night. None of us were thinking clearly.”

“Why are you defending him?”

“I’m not. I’m just saying he’s your brother, and if there’s some part of your relationship that can be saved, you should at least try.”

Gian licked his lips, shoulders squared and presence heavy. “Not all siblings have the kind of relationship you and Alessa share.”

The mention of her name made me miss her even more, and part of me had hoped she’d be able to join us today. But my father was too much of a control-freak, loving the power he had over us. His refusal of my simple request of having Alessa here at the party was his way of showing me he still held some measure of control over me.

My eyes welled, but the tears didn’t slip. Gian reached out and gently brushed my cheek with his thumb. “You miss her.”

“I do. So much.”

“Well, then,” he shot me a coy smile, “I’m glad I did this *thing*.”

I frowned. “What thing?”

“Faye?” Her voice rang from the hall.

*“That thing.”*

I gasped when I recognized my sister’s voice. “How did you?”

His lips curled in a wry grin. “Let’s just say I have a way of making grown men do things they don’t really want to do.”

I cocked a brow. “That is a bizarre thing to say, and I will come back to question whatever it is hidden between the lines.”

“Faye?”

“In here!”

I pushed myself up on my toes and kissed Gian—hard, pouring every ounce of appreciation into that one simple act. “Thank you.”

My feet couldn’t carry me fast enough, and I didn’t care whether my Jimmy Choo heels would survive my rushing out the bedroom and into the hall, almost knocking Alessa right over.

“Oh, my God, Alessa.” I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and this time the tears did escape. “I missed you so much.” I tightened my hug and squeezed as hard as I could. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Alessa hugged me back. “Funny thing. I was supposed to fly out to England today, but then your very generous husband offered me his private plane, which will get me back at Oxford in time for when my break ends.”

I leaned back and slanted a brow. “He did.”

“He sure did. Some man you got there, Faye.” Her blue eyes twinkled under the rays of the sun shining through the hall windows. “Make sure to keep him happy. A girl always needs a plane.”

I felt him before I saw him—his presence regal, magnetic, and impossible to ignore. I glanced over my shoulder and found him leaning against the doorframe, watching us with an amused grin.

“Thank you,” I mouthed silently, and he merely nodded.

Alessa grabbed my hand and pulled me off in the other direction. “Now, I want to know everything about married life,” she lifted her brows suggestively, “and I mean everything.”

Alessa and I only had about half an hour for a quick catch-up before I had to join Gian as he welcomed our guests, and socializing. It wasn’t half as many people as at the wedding, but still daunting enough. Standing by his side, being greeted as Mrs. Silvestro, and acting the part of his wife was intimidating as hell. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous. But his inconspicuous touching and reassuring glances were all I needed to get through it.

Gabriela and the rest of the staff had outdone themselves with the party décor. Tables had been set outside to enjoy the summer sun, with elegant white embroidered tablecloths and delicate pink peony flower arrangements. The peonies were my only request when Gabriela approached me for my input on the party details.

Everything was going well. Guests were smiling and chatting, and having Alessa around had blown new life into my soul. It was good...until my parents stepped up, my father the only guest Gian made a conscious effort to ignore.

“You have a lovely home, Gian,” he remarked, standing tall and squaring his chest like a damn peacock. “Certainly big enough for lots of kids to run around.”

“Thank you, Emilio. If you’ll excuse me,” he gave me a peck on the cheek, “I have someone I need to speak to.”

Gian walked off, not giving my father a second glance. It just showed how deeply rooted his hate for my father was, how he didn’t care whether his abrupt departure from the conversation was deemed as rude or not.

Alessa stood on her toes and dragged her attention along the crowd. “Now, where is that waiter with the champagne? I’m parched.”

“And underage,” I reminded her with a teasing smile as she walked off in search of champagne flutes filled with bubbles.

“Daniela.” My father demanded my attention, which I gave reluctantly with a simple glance. “Don’t wait too long.”

“For what?”

“To give Gian an heir.”

“Emilio,” my mother muttered under her breath. “This is not the time.”

“Nonsense. This is the perfect time.”

“Dad, please.”

He straightened his jacket and sleeves. “A man like Gian needs an heir. And you need to make sure you give him one. The sooner, the better.”

“And here I thought there might be a chance you came to our little party to make sure your oldest daughter was happy.” I scoffed. “I should have known you’d use this as an opportunity to bulldoze over me and have me do more of your bidding.”

“Do not speak to me in such a tone, young lady.”

My father was a tall and robust man, his presence alone enough to intimidate any man. But I was done with his bullying. Done with him

dictating my every move. I stepped closer, wanting my father to look into my eyes. “All my life, you treated me like I was an empty shell, like I had no will of my own. Only yours. You forced me into this marriage, threatened my sister so I would do what you demanded. But that ends here. You, dear father, will not pressure me into motherhood. That is the one choice you will not take from me. Do you understand?”

His mustache lifted as he snarled with disgust, his reprimand on the tip of his snake’s tongue, about to be spat out. But I would not stand there in the middle of a crowd of guests, and the first conversation with my father was about goddamn babies.

I made my way through the crowd, needing air. The deck was filled with people, so many faces and voices, and I could hardly catch a breath. I swiftly sauntered to the front door, knowing there would be no one in the parking lot. All I needed was a few moments to catch my breath and calm down.

Who the hell did my father think he was? Did he honestly think he’d still have some kind of hold over me after he married me off, made me some other man’s responsibility? Someday soon I’d probably hate my father as much as Gian did.

I exited through the oversized doors, heels clicking as they hit the cobbled walkway. Just a few moments of silence and an abundance of fresh air were all I needed to calm the storm.

“Faye?”

I looked up and saw a black SUV parked at the other side of the driveway, Alessa standing beside the open passenger-side door.

“Alessa? What are you doing?” I held my hand over my eyes, trying to block out the sun while walking toward her, crossing the asphalt. “What are you doing? I can promise you, you won’t find any champagne here.”

I chuckled, but Alessa didn’t make a sound. In fact, she didn’t move, her face ghostly pale and eyes wide with panic.

My heart jumped into overdrive. “Alessa, what’s—”

“Hello, Daniela.” Darion climbed out of the car, dark hair neatly styled, wearing a black suit and white dress shirt. At first, I was excited to see him... until a glint of silver under the sun caught my eye—a gun in his hand firmly pressed against my sister’s back.

I sucked in a breath, my heart lodged in my throat. “Darion, what is going on?”

“We don’t have much time.”

“Much time for what? Darion, please put that gun away, and let’s talk about this.”

The blood in my veins had turned to ice, my skin feeling like molten lava as panic surged through me with a destructive force. I quickly glanced around us, but there was no one else in sight.

Darion wrapped his hand around my sister’s wrist, and she whimpered, a single tear slipping down her cheek.

“It’s okay, Alessa.” I tried to stay calm, tried to reassure her. “Darion, let my sister go, and we can talk about this.”

His smirk was malicious and his eyes empty. “That’s the plan. We’ll have enough time to talk, but first, you need to get in the car.”

“I will. Just let Alessa go first.”

“Faye, no,” she objected, her bottom lip trembling uncontrollably. But even though my heart was on the verge of cracking through my ribs and my stomach turned inside out, I refused to show my fear.

“Let her go, and we can talk.”

“Get in on the other side.” He indicated to the opposite passenger side door, and I didn’t hesitate for a second. I’d jump off the edge of a cliff without thinking twice if it meant keeping Alessa safe.

I opened the door and got in, not recognizing the driver behind the wheel. With a racing pulse and sweaty palms, I leaned over the back seat. “I’m in the car, Darion. Now, please let my sister go.”

“You know,” he started, “I had no doubt you’d listen. After all, we all know what a good girl you are, obeying the men in your life like a little puppet.”

“Darion.”

He shoved Alessa, and she tripped, falling to the ground. “Run, little sister. Go get some help,” he mocked, and she scrambled to her feet.

With bated breath, I watched as Darion lifted his arm, holding the gun and aiming the muzzle of the silencer at her. The pink layers of Alessa’s chiffon dress waved around her body as she ran toward the house. My heart pounded—my thoughts on mute. Everything around me went dark. No sound. No color. Nothing. Just Alessa and her pink dress, and blonde hair rippling in the wind.

“No,” I breathed, the sound of my exhale followed by the sharp, muffled pop of two gunshots going off in quick succession. It wasn’t a loud, deafening crack, yet my ears rang with shrieks of shock.



My limbs went numb, my lungs no longer expanding while I witnessed my little sister fall in slow-motion—the entire world around me fading to black. Blonde hair wafted through the air as she dropped to the ground, layers of pink scattered on the asphalt. It didn't make sense. The moment didn't make sense. I couldn't think. I couldn't feel. I couldn't speak. Not until I saw the deep red liquid seep through the soft fabric of her dress.

That was the moment a scream ripped from my chest—so loud, so hard, it tore from my throat with a thousand razor blades. Pain fractured every bone, and my heart no longer beat, instantly shattered.

Darion jumped into the car and slammed the door shut. “Drive.”

The screeching of tires ignited a manic frenzy that took hold of every limb and muscle in my body, and I couldn't control it. I punched. I kicked. I fucking wailed.

Darion gripped my wrists and twisted me in my seat, slamming my face against the tinted window. I felt the prick of a needle against my arm, cold spreading through my veins. Black shadows started to blur my vision, and I felt him lean over me—his chest against my back.

“Shh. It's okay.” He placed his lips below my ear, whispering, “Everything is going to be okay.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

All the way from Cape Town, South Africa, Bella J lives for the days when she's able to retreat to her writer's cave where she can get lost in her little pretend world of romance, love, and insanely hot bad boys.

Bella J is a Hybrid Author with both Self-Published and Traditional Published work. Even though her novels range from drama, to comedy, to suspense, it's the dark, twisted side of romance she loves the most.

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