

VICIOUS REDEMPTION

IVY THORN

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A DARK MAFIA AGE GAP ROMANCE

DARK REDEMPTION

BOOK 2

IVY THORN

PNK PUBLISHING

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Epilogue

TIA



“Is it true? Did you tell your father about my deal with the mayor to sabotage me?” My husband’s voice is cold, emotionless, as he stares me down. Suddenly, he’s that same terrifying specimen who showed up late on our wedding day with a man’s blood staining his collar.

My lips part in my defense, but “I changed my mind,” isn’t much of one. Not when I’m standing between Leo and my kneeling cousin, shielding Maury with my body to stop my husband from executing him for his treachery.

The room full of valuable auction items is utterly quiet. All my father’s Guerra men kneel in stunned silence at the mercy of their Moretti captors as they wait for my response.

I don’t want to speak the truth because it won’t look good. But I can’t lie, either.

Slowly, I nod.

And the shift in Leo’s face is like a dagger to the heart. All the trust and affection we’ve built together these past few weeks vanishes just like that. And seeing the pain it causes him breaks my heart. I desperately want my reason to be enough, but at this moment, “You hurt me first” doesn’t feel like a good enough excuse for betraying him.

Not that I knew what I was doing—that tonight would come to this. My father used me. He led me like a lamb to slaughter the day he gave me away to Leonardo Moretti. Then he took the information I told my sister in confidence and utilized it to destroy the man he sold me to.

All for some dark, twisted game, it would seem.

Because he refuses to see our family pay tribute to another.

Leo's penetrating gaze holds mine, and all I can think about is the utter betrayal in his expressive hazel eyes.

I made a terrible mistake.

I picked the wrong side by trying to stay loyal to my family, by seeking revenge for a slight that now feels so far in the distant past. Leo has saved my life and made up for his cruelty countless times.

This time, I'm the one who's broken our bond, and I need to fix it. *But how?*

"Leo, I—"

Before I can explain myself, Leo cuts in, his expression transforming in the blink of an eye back to the deadly face of a mafia boss. "I'll deal with you later," he states flatly.

My stomach drops at the underlying threat in his words.

Then, he turns his attention to the mayor. "You signed the contract allowing me and my men to protect the items up for auction—we were granted permission to bear arms, unlike Don Guerra's men, who not only had guns but fired upon my men. And now you stand here and judge me for holding one of them at gunpoint? You want to pretend like I'm the bad guy? It makes me wonder if you aren't in Don Guerra's pocket already, *Honorable Mayor*. Is that why you took such a shine to my wife? She's your puppet master's daughter?"

Heart in my throat, I shift my gaze to Mayor Romney, who looks genuinely offended. "I assure you, my boy, I have no intention of being in *anyone's* pocket." His tone is pointed as his eyes cut Leo down with fresh distrust. "And these men will be held accountable for their actions. That is what the *law* is for. That does not give you the right to execute them, which is exactly what your wife was pleading for you not to do. So don't stand there and point fingers at me when you've decided to enforce your own twisted sense of justice."

Despite the terrible circumstances of the moment, I find my heart swelling at the mayor's conviction. And I'm intensely grateful to him that he's willing to stand between Leo and my family to save their lives—no matter his reasoning behind it. But his next words are condemning, and I swallow hard as my guilt rises up my throat once again.

"I refuse to work with someone who would decide a man's fate like that. I gave you a second chance because of Tia, but you've shown your true colors, and I want nothing to do with you. You're as hot-headed and violent as your reputation would say. And I assure you that is not the kind of man I want looking after the safety of this town."

Mayor Romney's statement ends in a growl, and all the while, my father stands smugly beside him, silently reveling in his victory as the scene unfolds.

"Well then, send for your policemen," Leo sneers, seeming intent to keep my father's men in custody until they're handed off to the authorities.

He scans the room authoritatively, a fierce warlord in charge of his poised warriors who await his command. And when his eyes land on mine, the tendons in his jaw flex, raising the flesh beneath his perfectly stubbled cheeks. His hazel eyes ignite with a fiery contempt, making my stomach tremble.

"Leo," I breathe, taking a step toward him now that his gun is lowered and Maury seems to be out of imminent danger.

"Take her home," he says to two of his men, his face rigid as he refuses to let me speak.

His men immediately jump into action, leaving their prisoners in the custody of their reinforcements as they stride across the room to collect me.

Tears sting my eyes as my husband refuses to look at me. I never knew it could hurt this much—losing Leo's trust. I never dreamed that earning it would be something I might yearn for in the first place. Except to later use it to betray him. But now, as his two burly men escort me from the auction room without

touching me, I feel as though I've lost something immeasurably precious.

“Wouldn't you rather take your daughter back under your protection?” Mayor Romney demands, turning to Don Guerra with anxious tension written across his face. “Can you really entrust this man with her well-being after this?” His arms move in a sweeping gesture to take in the scene before them.

His concern for me warms my heart, and I'm sorely tempted to reach out and squeeze his arm to show my appreciation as I near the doorway. In a world of cold, ruthless men, Mayor Romney is still trying to look out for me. But I have no doubt that would only get me in further trouble.

But my father simply shrugs in response to the mayor's concern. “The Morettis won't hurt Tia while she's carrying his child.”

Heat radiates through my body as yet another secret I've kept for my family's sake is obliterated, the truth exposed for everyone to see. And the look of satisfaction on my father's face tells me this is my true punishment for having disobeyed him. The night I snuck out of the house, the night I gave my virginity to Leo, the night I got pregnant—that created a far more definitive divide in my relationship with my father than I had realized.

I thought we could recover from it.

I thought marrying Leo would be enough.

I thought my father had forgiven me.

But the punches keep on coming.

Mayor Romney looks stunned as his wide eyes shift to my face. My stomach knots as I think of all the lies I've been collecting lately. I hesitate, wishing I could say something to defend myself. But I can't think of anything.

Glancing over my shoulder, I will Leo to look at me, to see the apology that consumes my face. And when he continues to glare at my cousin Maury, I know he won't. Strong hands wrap around my upper arms as the men Leo assigned to me

take charge. They steer me from the room when I refuse to go on my own.

“Wait, Leo. Leo!” I call as they drag me through the door. I don’t want to leave the scene as it is—with the man I love in a standoff with my own father’s men. Anything could happen in my absence, and I fear things could go terribly wrong if I’m not here to intervene.

“Let go of me!” I command, jerking in my escorts’ hands in an effort to break free.

But they’re so much stronger than me; my escape attempt is little more than a joke.

They take me out the front doors of the town hall and down the cement steps to the black SUV waiting at the curb. Neither says a word to me as one opens the door, and they form a wall behind me, corralling me into the vehicle.

Heart throbbing as I think of what might be going on inside the silent auction room, I resign myself and climb into the car. My freshly assigned prison guards slip onto the leather seats a moment later, surrounding me with their bulk as they close the doors.

The driver pulls onto the road, taking me away from the evening that had started out so magical and ended so horribly. As I watch the grand town hall building grow smaller in the rear window, all I can think about is the utter look of betrayal on Leo’s face—and his promise to deal with me later.

Anxiety sits like a cold rock in my belly. I don’t know what might come next. My past experience with Leo would tell me that I won’t enjoy whatever “dealing with me” might entail. But worse than my anticipation of his wrath is my fear that what I’ve done has destroyed the connection we developed over the past weeks.

I would hate more than anything if I got a small taste of happiness and then killed it stone dead out of past resentment.

My guards don’t say a thing as I turn to face forward once again, dropping my face into my palms as I fight off the tears that strangle me.

When we arrive home, I climb from the Escalade without argument and let Leo's men follow me up the front steps. Luigi greets me with a solemn face, his lips pressed into a straight line that only intensifies my anxiety. Though I can't say why.

Finally, my escorts leave me at the door to the room I share with Leo. And only after I shut it soundly behind me do I allow the tears to fall.

LEO



“I hardly think Signor Moretti’s men should be holding anyone in custody at this point, Mayor Romney,” Don Guerra insists, his lip curling in disgust as he pronounces my name.

“The police will be here to take them into custody momentarily,” he assures the don, his apologetic tone curdling my stomach.

It seems the mayor’s view is too easily swayed by tricks and schemes. I’ll admit, I find it frustrating that, for all the time and effort I put into winning his favor, it took nothing for Don Guerra to turn him against me. I remain the villain in Mayor Romney’s book, though Tia’s father is anything but innocent and still seems to hold the politician’s ear.

Holstering my gun, I square my shoulders, determined not to let my fury show. That would only be another victory for Tia’s father.

Just thinking her name puts my stomach in knots. I shove all thoughts of her aside. Right now is not the time to deal with that emotional can of worms. Not if I intend to leave this scene with my freedom and my men intact—and not on their way into police custody. Any of us could easily end up in handcuffs if I don’t keep my cool.

A moment later, the boys in blue start to flood into the room, fanning out around Mayor Romney and Don Guerra as they take custody of the don’s men by order of the police chief.

“Let’s go,” I state to my men as soon as I watch the Guerra men get cuffed. I can do little else right now, and the less time we stick around, the less likely we are to get slapped with charges.

My men move with smooth precision, forming a protective circle around me as we filter past the police and their charges. Mayor Romney levels me with a cold gaze as I pass him near the door, his friendly demeanor as of late frozen into a block of ice.

I let it roll off my shoulders, giving him a curt nod before my eyes slide to Don Guerra. The don smirks, seeming to revel in his victory. But as insulting as tonight might be to my pride, I think he imagines he’s done more damage than he really has.

Because my vision for Piovosa might have been resting on the hope that I could work with Mayor Romney. But that’s not my only avenue to success. I’m not simple-minded enough to pin all my plans on the success of one business relationship. I have other ways of getting what I want. This just would have been the most convenient—and economic.

He might have slowed me down. But all he’s really done is expose his family’s lack of loyalty. Don Guerra has revealed his duplicitous nature. Now, my family has a far stronger force than his—especially since the Fiore and Valencia families have fallen in line.

With the number of families under the Moretti umbrella now, it will only be a matter of time before I crush the Guerras. Their family might have been a formidable rival once, but I’ve drained them of their reinforcements. And now they’ve proven our alliance is nothing but a flimsy facade.

I see no point in honoring it.

My best captain and right-hand man, Johnny, steps close as we file into the hallway, and glancing behind him, he keeps his voice low. “Several Moretti men got shot before the Guerras were subdued,” he states, his tone flat and dripping with vitriol. “Included in that number is Don Moretti.”

I stop short, my hands balling into fists at the newest revelation. Johnny stops with me, his jaw setting as he waits for my command.

“Where is he?” I demand.

“He was rushed straight to the hospital. It’s bad.”

“The Guerras will pay for this,” I grit through my clenched teeth.

Johnny gives a curt nod, the same conviction in his eyes, and next to me, one of my other top captains, Rasco, mutters his agreement.

“Take me to my father,” I command, making a beeline for the front door. “Prepare the men for plan B. We’ll move directly to it. And as of now, no one is to speak to Tia—not even the help—about anything. She’s cut off. I want to talk to her before anyone else does.”

“I’ll see that it’s done,” Johnny confirms.

Outside, a car waits for me, and I slip inside. Rasco joins me as Johnny takes charge of the remaining men. Releasing the button of my suit jacket, I settle onto the soft leather and remove my bowtie. The fine silk fabric is suddenly strangling in my frustration.

The SUV rolls smoothly and swiftly down the road toward the hospital as Rasco gives me a brief summary of what took place while I was spending a romantic evening dancing and hopelessly falling for the charms of my captivating and deceitful young bride.

“They came in right at the shift change,” Rasco states. “Don Guerra must have been watching for it—definitely someone on the inside—because they timed it perfectly. One of the guests feigned a heart attack, delaying the relief’s arrival.”

“They stopped to help the guest?” I ask, my tone coldly disapproving. We didn’t have the luxury of showing unnecessary humanity tonight. And it cost us dearly.

Rasco nods gravely. But when I don't push further, he continues with his story. "His men used the momentary distraction to overrun the front doors. Felix and Dom were both hit. I don't think the Guerras anticipated our Kevlar, though, because neither was wounded fatally. Your father, on the other hand..." Rasco shakes his head. "They shot him as soon as he gave orders. I suspect their mission was to take out the man in charge. Likely, you were the real target, seeing as you normally take operation lead."

"Fucking bastards. They better hope he doesn't die. Because if he does, nothing on god's green earth is going to stop me from removing Don Guerra's tongue before I put a bullet between his eyes. I don't give a fuck if his daughter is my wife—or the mother of my child."

As soon as the Escalade pulls up to the curb, I step out. Striding into the hospital, I approach the reception desk like I own the place—which I practically do, seeing as my family has funded several wings of Piovosa General.

"Don Moretti, where is he?" I demand as soon as I reach the front counter.

"Oh, um, s-s-surgery," the receptionist stutters, her eyes growing wide behind her round wire-rimmed glasses as she instantly recognizes me.

"I need an update on his condition. Now."

"Of course, signore," she gasps, jumping out of her chair to scurry toward the door leading into the emergency room. The bookish girl is gone before I blink, seeming driven by the cloud of fury surrounding me.

Moments later, the head nurse strides through the automated door, her eyes landing on me. "Mr. Moretti," she greets me, striding forward in gray-blue scrubs, her hair pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail. Her distinctly Midwestern accent and form of address are unique in the vastly Italian New England colonial town, and it immediately calms my heart rate.

“How is he?” I demand, cutting to the chase as she meets my eyes with steady blue ones.

“He’s in surgery right now. He took a bullet to the abdomen and suffered some severe internal bleeding. We won’t know the extent of the damage until the doctor finishes sewing him up.” Her voice is as even as her gaze, delivering a pragmatic answer that somehow eases my tension even when she’s delivering less-than-encouraging news.

“How long will that take?”

“It depends on how much damage the surgeon finds. Your father’s been under for nearly half an hour. But he was prepped and taken in as quickly as he arrived, given the nature of his injury, which gives him his best chance. I assure you, we’re doing all that we can to save his life. He’s in good hands.”

Furious that my father is on a surgery table at all, I comb my fingers through my hair. “Thank you, *Infermiera*.” Without waiting for a response, I turn and start to pace.

I’m used to things falling apart. In my world, things go to shit every day. That’s what happens when you’re a criminal working alongside convicts and overseeing all varieties of illicit activities. But my father—the don—is not supposed to be on my list of vulnerabilities. He should not have been left exposed.

He’s the head of this family, even if I am acting commander. And that he was not just shot but targeted is more deeply disturbing than the rest of the evening’s events combined. Don Guerra is out for blood. He’s ready to play dirty. And he seems overly confident that he’s in a position to win this war he started.

But what he doesn’t realize is that his shield, the only thing that has been keeping him and his men safe these past few months, is the very person he’s left at my mercy. His daughter. I let him be, first for the sake of our marriage alliance, and later to ensure Tia’s happiness. But I see no reason to concern myself with the contentment of a wife who so readily betrayed me.

Why should I show her loyalty when she's shown me none?

Rasco watches me silently as I cross the lobby floor for the hundredth time. Back and forth, I pace, fuming as I finally have a moment to consider the implications of what happened this evening.

I can't believe Tia's been scheming behind my back this entire time. She lies to my face with the innocence of an angel, her beautiful brown eyes so dark and full of trust. Just the thought of them brings Tia's porcelain-doll face to my mind. Her indescribable beauty, combined with her youthful, incorruptible expression, makes her far too easy to believe.

She tricked me.

She made me feel like some kind of white knight when she kissed me.

And that makes her betrayal cut all the more deep.

I thought I was the villain in our relationship. I imagined I was the monster lurking in the shadows of her pristine and idyllic world. I believed I would need to change if I was to be worthy of her.

And this whole time, she's been playing me.

It weighs like lead in my stomach—the fact that she could manipulate me, not just willingly but so easily. I thought I was all but impervious to people's influence. But my pride left me vulnerable to her masterful game.

Before Tia, I was untouchable. I had one vision, and I had the conviction to reach my goal at any cost. No matter who stood in my way. Then Tia came along and made me question everything. Even the valuable life lesson my father taught me at an early age.

Trust no one.

Especially when you're at the top.

Snarling in my frustration, I release my hair and pace more ferociously.

I should be focusing on the traitors I intend to execute as soon as they're released from police custody. I should be envisioning the torture I will inflict and the lessons I can use them for to deliver the clearest message.

But I can't get my mind off Tia. Her betrayal.

And how willingly I fell into her snare.

I thought I was falling in love with her. I thought I was becoming a worthy man by trying to win her over, that I was learning to change for the better. And all the while, she was looking for ways to destabilize me so the Guerras could swoop in and take me down.

Well, they failed.

And though Tia certainly did a valiant job of championing her family, her father cut her loose. Left her hanging. I wonder how that sits with her. As rankling as it was to have Mayor Romney step in and try to protect Tia from my fury, I found Don Guerra's response far more offensive.

His lack of devotion to the daughter who betrayed me for his sake unleashes a new level of loathing inside me. The man is the scum of the earth, and the fact that Tia chose him over me leaves a bitter taste on my tongue. *How can she possibly remain loyal to him still?*

Don Guerra thinks the child she's carrying will protect her from my wrath.

He's not entirely wrong.

But there are more ways to punish a person than to physically abuse them, and I have no qualms with teaching my wife a lesson. If she wants to play games with me, she's going to quickly realize she's challenging a master.

And as smart as Tia is, she hasn't gone toe to toe with me yet.

But I see her for what she really is now.

I thought she was the pawn in her father's chess game. But she's not. She's the queen, and I let my defenses down enough; she almost could have managed to checkmate me.

Never again.

No, after tonight, I'm ready to punish her, to put her back in her place—and obliterate her family.

An inkling of guilt tries to work its way into my chest, weakening my resolve as Tia's face flashes vividly before me, this time tears streaming down her cheeks. I promised myself I wouldn't hurt her like that again.

But that was when I thought she was little more than an innocent victim surrounded by a world of darkness.

Now, I see her for the temptress she really is.

And I crush my momentary weakness.

TIA



My nerves are on edge as I pace back and forth along the foot of the four-poster bed Leo and I have been sharing for nearly a month, since our wedding night. It's been hours, but I can't sleep. I'm too terrified of what's been happening in my absence—and worried about what might happen when Leo comes home.

Sharp footsteps echo down the hall, making me jump, and I whirl toward the door, expecting Leo to enter at any moment. But once again, it's a false alarm.

No one will tell me anything.

If they have news, they're keeping it from me.

They won't talk to me.

The staff won't even look me in the eyes.

And as the hours drag on and Leo doesn't come home, a cold dread slowly starts to settle deep in my belly. *The mayor wouldn't arrest Leo, would he? What if Leo killed my family after he had me removed from the building?* Surely, he would go to jail then.

"We'll be okay," I assure our baby, resting my palm on my belly as I attempt to soothe us both. "He'll be okay. *Everyone will be okay.*" *God, I hope that's true.*

But Leo never comes home.

As the minutes tick by slowly, and the first rays of sunlight start to filter through the blinds, I feel my tears beginning to

build once more. I cried my eyes dry when Leo's men brought me home. I thought I'd run out of them entirely. But now, it seems I've reached a new level of despair.

I don't dare think about the pain of my father's betrayal. He betrayed Leo. He betrayed *me*. *And why?* He can't possibly think our family can win that war. We have no one to stand with us. I thought that was why I married Leo in the first place. To give us a modicum of immunity. To save us from certain death.

Swallowing hard, I press the heel of my palms into my eyes to stave off the tears. The smoky eye I so painstakingly applied at the start of the evening is still fairly intact, though it's left my eyes painfully dry after crying.

But I haven't wanted to spare a moment to undress. I've been too riddled with anxiety at the thought of Leo coming through the door. So I'm still wearing my flirty black A-line corset-bodice dress with layers of glittering black tulle that trail to the floor. The only thing I bothered to take off was my strappy black heels when they started to make my freshly healed ankle throb. Since then, all I've done is wait and pace, chewing the inside of my lip until it bled.

It would seem I've waited in vain.

As the sun creeps more confidently through the window, I resign myself to the fact that I can't keep holding my breath for Leo's return. I'm exhausted—physically, emotionally, mentally. All the while, he very well could have chosen to stay in a different room last night.

Perhaps he's so furious, he doesn't even want to speak to me.

My heart twists painfully as I consider that new possibility.

Reaching up to my hair, I slowly work the bobby pins from my tired scalp, letting the carefully curled ringlets cascade around my face and shoulders. The tiny pins make a soft clinking sound every time I drop one into my jewelry dish that sits on my vanity table.

It feels painfully good when the last piece of metal comes out, and I comb my fingers through my locks, loosening the strands with a grateful groan.

That's when the door slams open.

I yelp at the unexpected noise and whirl to face my stony-faced husband as he fills the doorway. His hazel eyes are flinty with malice, and I take an involuntary step back until my hips bump against the vanity table.

"Leo," I breathe as he closes and locks the door behind him.

My fear swiftly melts back into anxiety at the look of exhaustion on his face. He hasn't slept at all. That much I'm certain of.

"What happened? Are you okay? What kept you out so long?" My bare feet pad silently across the carpet as I draw closer, wanting to see if he's hurt in any way. "Were you arrested? Did you...?" My throat tightens as my fear gets the better of me, making it almost painful to ask what I'm terrified to know. "Hurt my family? No one would tell me anything."

Tears sting my eyes as the intense sense of isolation comes crashing down around me like a cold tidal wave. But rather than the compassion I so desperately crave, Leo only sneers at me.

"They were following my direct orders, considering you've proven completely untrustworthy," he states, his gaze imperious as I stop dead in my tracks just feet away from him.

His fingers grasp the ends of his bow tie that hangs loosely around the back of his neck, and he whips it off, balling it before tossing it carelessly onto the dresser. Working a few buttons loose on his dress shirt, he prowls slowly toward me, his eyes positively predatory.

"What? Are those crocodile tears already?" He scoffs. "Go ahead then, Tia. I dare you to try and manipulate me again. Pretend you're the innocent young bride who only wants to please me. Woo me with your fake concern and compassion."

With each step, he draws dangerously closer, and like a deer in the headlights, I freeze. Speechless at the intensity of his rage, I don't know what to do. I stand stunned as he closes the remaining distance between us, and strong fingers close around my jaw in an almost painful grip.

“Aren't you going to try seducing me with your lying lips, try distracting me with your false kisses?”

My chin trembles in his grip as my heart breaks into a panicked sprint. The words catch in my throat, leaving me unable to breathe, let alone speak. And though I know crying will do nothing to help me right now, I can't stop the tears from pooling in my eyes and trickling down my cheeks.

“Here, let me help you,” he offers, his tone cold and deadly as his hands shift from my face to the keyhole of sheer tulle that lies just above my breasts. Gripping the bodice of my dress, Leo shreds it with astounding force as he roughly undresses me with one violent jerk.

Hurt by his contempt, even if he has reason to doubt me, I sob, jerking away from Leo as I cling to the shreds of the beautiful dress he admired me in before we left for the ball. “Won't you even let me explain?” I demand, trying to hold myself together as my heart unravels inside my chest.

He scoffs, his proud features contorting in disgust. “Why should I bother when you're so good at lying?”

“It's not like you're entirely innocent here,” I snap, my temper flaring red-hot as he drops the burden of guilt squarely on my shoulders. I'm willing to own up to my mistakes, but I hardly think it's fair that he wants to make me into the villain right now.

And to my astonishment, my accusation seems to give him pause. He studies me skeptically, then tendons flexing in his jaw. After a moment of silent debate, he crosses his arms. “Alright then, go ahead. Tell me how you slipping information to your father is my fault.” He waits for her explanation, the air humming between us as he dares me to blame him for what happened tonight.

I won't. Because I know my father's deception could only have happened because of what I told my sister. But it's not like my anger was entirely unjustified. "Yes, I might have said some things I shouldn't have. But you can't possibly blame me for being angry. You took my virginity to show my father how easily you could ruin him. You hurt me just to make a stupid point. I was horrified the day I found out I had to marry you, but my parents told me it was the only way to protect my family."

I'm shouting now, my tears streaming freely down my cheeks as I sob with each labored breath. "I agreed to marry you because I didn't have another choice. But you can't possibly think I did it because I wanted to be with you—that I loved you after what you did. You used me and knocked me up without a second thought. So, of course, I hatched a plan for revenge. I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me. I wanted to make you suffer the way you made my family suffer."

Leo stands frozen before me, his eyes watchful, his face masking his emotion, but I can't stop myself. Now that it's all coming out, I can barely suck in my next breath before I'm rushing on to finish my story. Because anger is not the emotion I reside in. I feel so much more. And if I don't say it now, I know I'll never get the chance.

Inhaling deeply, I pull myself together, wiping the tears from my cheeks as I slow my heartbeat.

"But that was before I got to know you, the real you. I started to see a softer, kinder side to you. Someone who could show concern for the woman he married. Then, I watched you kill that man in the woods, and... it solidified my determination to remove you from power. I've never seen someone so cold-blooded. You killed him as easily as a person might swat a fly."

Pausing for the first time, I study Leo's expression, wondering if I might not have said too much. But I can't hold back any longer. If I don't put my cards on the table now—if I don't tell him how I really feel, what drove me to the desperate place I was in—he'll never understand me. And I won't have a dream of earning his forgiveness.

“But since that day, I’ve seen something new in you. Something that made me change my mind. I chose not to act on the information I gathered about you. I never told anyone about what I saw in the woods. And I hadn’t realized my father knew anything. I never even spoke to him directly.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, my blood runs cold. I said too much. And I can see it in the fire of his gaze.

“Who have you been passing information to?”

His question is quiet, the warning in his tone making my heart flutter, and I hesitate, not wanting to put Maria in danger. She can’t possibly have meant to cause the damage that she did. She was only trying to help me. My lips part, but I can’t find words to answer.

Leo leans forward, grasping my jaw once again as he gets in my face. “Give me a name, Tia,” he commands, his voice deadly.

This is the cold, callous Leo I discovered in the woods. The one who swats flies from the face of the earth without a second thought. And I can’t unleash him on my sister.

“If I tell you, you have to swear you won’t seek retribution,” I murmur, my voice quivering.

“Why should I promise you anything after tonight?” he demands.

“Promise, Leo. Swear on our unborn child that you won’t hurt the person I name.”

Silence stretches between us, and finally, he releases my face. “Fine,” he agrees grudgingly.

“I told Maria,” I confess, my tears trickling slowly down my cheeks now as I put her fate and mine in my furious husband’s hands. “I told her everything because she’s the only person in this world I can trust. I told her because she’s the one who gave me hope and made me believe that this”—I gesture between me and Leo—“wasn’t going to destroy me. I don’t think she knew what would happen. When I told her I changed my mind, she seemed genuinely happy for me. You can’t blame my sister for what my father’s done.”

Leo's expression remains guarded, his hazel eyes studying me with a doubt that wrings my soul. And when I can't take it any longer, I drop my eyes to stare at the shredded remains of my corset that I hold over my barely concealed breasts.

"What changed your mind?" he asks finally, and the question gives me a flicker of hope I hadn't dared to feel until now.

Peering up through my lashes, I breathe. "I fell in love with you."

LEO



“Somewhere along the line,” Tia continues, “you stopped seeming like the terrifying monster I thought held me prisoner. I can see the good in you, and I thought maybe... you were changing for the better.”

A charged silence fills the room.

Hearing Tia say she’s fallen in love with me shatters my resolve. I burst through those doors, fully intending to punish her. But now, my heart aches at her confession, swelling as a deep new craving takes the place of my anger. I yearn for it to be true with an intensity that steals my breath away.

And I stand rooted to the spot as I work through the new conflicting emotions.

Tia’s lip trembles as she waits for my response, her arms wrapped around the shredded fabric of her beautiful dress I ruined. And I almost feel bad for destroying it. I hate seeing her look so broken, exhausted, and scared.

Understanding that she wasn’t directly responsible for the way things unfolded at the charity ball makes it hard to stay angry with her—even if it hurts to know she wanted me gone so desperately that she was plotting against me.

But I can see her point.

I was terrible to her when we first met. And I didn’t stop being terrible until after she already felt trapped in a marriage she accepted only because I got her pregnant. Fresh guilt over

my actions gnaws at my gut. And that makes it much harder not to forgive Tia.

Her fathomless onyx eyes look up at me now, imploring me to see the situation from where she stands. If I'm truly honest with myself, Tia is the only reason I had a chance of winning the mayor over in the first place. He hated me before Tia came into my life. And the only reason he was willing to sign the security contract was because she told him I was trustworthy.

It was a long shot, and it failed. *So, how can I be mad at her when she facilitated the opportunity?*

It would be so easy to let go of my anger, to accept her pleas, because I *want* to believe she loves me. But what bothers me is how well she hid her intentions from me. She plotted against me even after I saved her from falling to her death. And she did it without batting an eye. She so convincingly plays the loyal, innocent young wife. *How am I supposed to trust her now that I've seen what she's capable of?*

I'm not sure I can.

"Can you ever forgive me?" she asks tentatively when the silence between us stretches on too long.

And though her betrayal still hurts deeply, the devastation in her voice obliterates my last defense. Closing the distance between us once more, I pull her into my arms and kiss her passionately.

Her body molds to mine, her back arching as her arms wrap around my shoulders, and she returns my kiss with a desperation that sets my blood on fire. Only after my lungs start to scream for oxygen do I release her to press my forehead against hers.

My desire to forgive her overwhelms my sense of self-preservation. And though my mind warns me she can't be trusted, I can't deny Tia her request. "I'll try," I murmur. "We should both try to put the past behind us. We've both done things we aren't proud of."

Tia nods, her fingers combing into my hair as she clings to me.

“Are you still upset about how I treated you?” I murmur. “In the beginning? I thought you put it behind you after I apologized, but clearly, you hadn’t.”

Drawing back just far enough to look into my eyes, Tia gives me a sad smile. “I didn’t believe your apology the first time. I thought you only said it so I would help win over the mayor.”

Sighing heavily, I face fully the damage my actions caused. Yes, Tia might have hurt me, but I’m the one who betrayed her first. I betrayed her so completely that she couldn’t even trust my apology. And I need to make that right. Grasping Tia’s hips, I lower myself, kneeling before her in a show of supplication I’ve never given anyone before.

One arm holding the tattered remains of her dress, Tia watches, stunned. Her eyes widen, her lips parting as anxiety flashes across her face. “What are you...?”

“I’m so sorry, Tia. I never should have hurt you,” I confess with all the emotion I can muster. “In a hundred lifetimes, I could never deserve you. But I promise I won’t use you like that again. I will lay the world at your feet because I want you by my side. Will you forgive me for what I’ve done?”

Tears well in Tia’s eyes, and she smiles as a devastating sob rips from her throat. The fingers of her free hand comb the hair from my brow as she nods vehemently. Then she pulls me back to my feet. “I forgive you. If you can forgive me for ruining your chances with the mayor, I can forgive you anything.”

Releasing a heavy breath, I pull Tia back into my arms. “It should be the other way around,” I murmur against her lips. Then I kiss her fiercely once again, stroking a thumb across her cheek to catch the single tear that falls.

The pain and mistrust between us melt away as I hold her in a passionate embrace, determined to show her just what she

means to me. And as our lips lock, I gently guide her ruined dress from around her body.

She's all but naked in an instant, only her seductive black lace panties covering her trim form. Scooping her up in my arms, I carry her to the bed without breaking our kiss. I lay her out across the sheets and slowly kiss my way down her neck and across her collarbone to follow her sternum between the swells of her breasts.

She breathes heavily, her chest rising and falling as her nipples form two sharp peaks. I'll never get tired of the way she responds to me, the way she comes to life at my touch. And her words *I fell in love with you* keep echoing in my head, filling me with a new sense of passionate need.

Tia gasps as my kisses trail all the way down her stomach, my fingers curling around the waistline of her panties as I drag them from her body. And when I hook one leg over my shoulders, hoisting her hips off the bed to taste her pussy, she shudders, releasing a deep, sensual moan.

"You like it when I kiss you?" I tease, letting my breath wash across her pink folds. She's already glistening with excitement, though we're only getting started. I love that she's eager for me even after we fought.

"Yes," she breathes, her dark eyes smoldering as she looks down the length of her body at me.

"And when I lick you?" I ask, then stroke my tongue along her wet seam.

"Yes!" she whimpers, her dark hair pooling around her delicate face as she tips her head back in ecstasy.

"Do you want me, Tia?" I breathe against her clit. Because I need to hear her say it, and I know she won't deny me now.

"Please, Leo, I want you so bad," she murmurs, her voice agonized.

Licking the juices from her slick folds, I part them with my tongue, tasting her deeply. And Tia cries out as I wrap my lips around her clit and suck. Her hips buck as I repeat the action,

stoking her arousal as I hold her up, a feast for me in both taste and sight.

And all the while, I knead her thighs and full ass cheeks, relishing the way they flex and writhe in my grasp. There's one thing I'm certain Tia's not lying about, and that's the pleasure she feels when I touch her.

Her fingers splay across the bed sheets, her palms flat as she arches up off the bed. Her legs tighten around my shoulders, her toes pressing against my back. And as the slick tang of her arousal gushes more freely from her depths, I know she's close.

So I ease two fingers inside her swollen entrance.

Tia cries out, her breath coming in ragged pants now, and my cock throbs to be inside her, but I want to make her come first.

"Oooh god," she moans, her body vibrating in my hold.

I curl my fingers as I work them in and out, following the same rhythm with my tongue as I circle her sensitive nub. Then she sobs as she falls apart in my hands. Clit twitching, pussy throbbing, Tia comes hard, fresh arousal coating her folds and my tongue.

Humming appreciatively, I lap them up before easing her hips back onto the bed.

Tia collapses onto the mattress, her legs falling open as her dark-painted eyelids flutter closed. She looks entirely too enticing, and though it would seem neither of us has slept a wink, I'm not about to let her fall asleep now.

Sliding off the bed, I make quick work of my shirt buttons. And then Tia's rising to crawl across the bed toward me—a leopard on the prowl. Her bare ass sways temptingly, her breasts on full display as she stops at the edge of the bed and grasps my belt.

Pulling me closer, she starts to unbuckle it, her eyes never leaving mine as a coy smile graces her perfect lips. Tossing my shirt aside, I then reach up to brush the pad of my thumb

across her full lower lip. It's still a deep shade of red from her lipstick, and I want to see them wrapped around my cock.

As if she heard my thoughts, Tia licks her lips and pushes my pants and boxer briefs down until they pool around my ankles. Then she leans in, her hips tipping until her full ass is in the air. Her eyes never leave mine as she grasps the base of my throbbing erection and opens her wide.

“*Fffffuck,*” I hiss at the warm wetness of her mouth, the way her tongue rolls around my swollen tip before stroking the length as she takes me deep inside.

Tia moans as I hit the back of her throat, and the pleasurable sensation sends a jolt of electricity straight up my spine.

“You’re so *fucking* perfect,” I rasp, my fingers tangling in her hair. And I guide her slowly up and down my length, resisting my desperate urge to fuck her mouth.

I want all of Tia. I want to claim her, body and soul, but after what she just told me, I don’t dare push her. Because I want her for a lifetime. I want her again and again.

And I want her to want it.

To want me.

It’s a new kind of yearning I’ve never felt before. But it fills me with overwhelming need.

My cock throbs inside her mouth, the blood pounding as I grow so hard it fucking hurts. I’m not going to last long at this rate. But she feels so good, and she looks fucking sexy every time she swallows me.

“Fuck, Tia. You have to stop,” I growl, my fingers tightening in her hair.

Slowly, she withdraws, releasing my cock with a soft pop as she sits up, resting her hips on her ankles, her hands falling to her thighs. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to come in your mouth.”

“You don’t?” Her tone is almost wounded, like my words hurt her. And she looks at me with round brown eyes.

“No, beautiful girl,” I murmur, cupping her jaw with my palm. “I want to come inside your pussy until you can’t hold any more.”

TIA



I swallow hard at Leo's sensual tone as he tells me he wants to come inside me.

I don't know why that suggestion turns me on like it does. He's come inside me before. But this time, it feels as though he wants to claim me all over again. Like now that the past is really behind us, he wants to truly make me his.

And after so many hours of dreading what might come of us, I'm overwhelmed by the need to establish the deep connection we had before. Only now, it feels even deeper.

Stepping out of his shoes and pants, Leo follows me onto the bed, never letting the space between us grow as I slide back until my head finds my pillow. And as he settles between my thighs, I savor the way we fit together like two puzzle pieces.

His lips find mine as he leans on one forearm, holding his weight there so his other hand can roam freely down my body. He palms my breast and rolls my nipple before skating across my ribs and down to my hip bone.

He traces the line down to the peak of my thighs, and I shiver as he brushes lightly across my clit. A moment later, the silken tip of his raw erection slides between my folds to find my entrance.

And he eases inside me with delicious tenderness.

We groan together, my arms tightening around his shoulders, my fingers pressing into his iron back muscles as

my body throbs to have him inside me. His hips roll until he's buried to the hilt, his pelvis crushing my clit until I moan with pleasure. Then he withdraws to do it again.

The stimulation is as arousing as the way he kisses me, his tongue adamant as it presses between my teeth, tasting me deeply. His lips are tart with the lingering taste of my cum, and that excites me all the more.

I love pleasing Leo. I relish the power of making him groan and feeling his cock swell inside my mouth. But this is so much better.

To be utterly consumed by him, devoured like he won't survive without my body wrapped around his—this is beyond pleasure. I can hardly breathe, he's holding me so close, but I would rather die than be without his lips.

The euphoria builds as my lungs scream for oxygen, and when he breaks our kiss, my head rises off the bed, following him. We pant in unison, our breaths crashing together and warming the air between us. But he seems just as eager to kiss and consume me as I am him.

And a moment later, he dives back in, his lips ravenous as his penetrating thrusts drive me wild. My stomach trembles with excitement as I quickly build toward my release. When my walls tighten with anticipation, Leo groans into my mouth.

“Come with me, Tia,” he commands, his voice hoarse with arousal.

I whimper, my nails digging into his back as I lose control. And when he grunts, his thrusts growing erratic, I topple into oblivion. Shuddering with the force of my orgasm, I milk his cock with my throbbing walls, gripping him as I urge him to fill me with his seed.

And he does, blasting deep inside me and filling me with liquid warmth.

Slowing, Leo comes to rest buried in my depths. And when he kisses me this time, his lips are soft and feather-light compared to their adamant passion during sex. He eases out of

me, rolling onto the bed beside me, and before I have time to catch my breath, he pulls me back against his chest.

Nestled in his arms, I snuggle close to his chest, relishing the way his body curves around mine, his cock pressing softly between my cheeks. I'm so blissfully content that despite the sunlight now streaming through the window, I could fall asleep right here and now.

"Be mine, Tia," Leo murmurs against my neck, and his fingers brush down the length of my side as he raises goosebumps on my hip and thigh.

Turning to look at him over my shoulder, I try to read the meaning of his request on his face. "I already am," I assure him, confused and yet aroused by the fire in his eyes.

"Be mine all morning," he counters, his cock twitching back to life even though we've only just finished.

My heart skips a beat at his suggestion. And rather than answer, I reach up behind my head to twine my fingers in his thick curls. Then I kiss him, stroking my tongue between his lips.

His fingers slide from my hip to between my thighs, and when they find my clit, they start to circle. I'm still slick from the aftermath of our last round of sex, and the sensitive bundle of nerves feels like a live wire after having come twice already.

I gasp, my hips rolling of their own accord, and as I press back against Leo, his cock swells further, pressing adamantly against my tailbone now.

"I fucking love turning you on," he growls, his fingers circling more adamantly as he presses forward with his hips, grinding against me.

"Mmm," I hum in an effort to agree. But I'm so aroused it sounds more like a needy moan.

A dark chuckle rumbles from Leo's chest, vibrating against my spine and making my skin tingle. And as he works my clit with his fingers, I start to rock back against him, rubbing his length between my ass cheeks as best I can.

“Sexy little minx,” he purrs in my ear. “Are you ready for me again already?”

“Yes,” I whimper, my clit throbbing.

Shifting his hips, Leo guides his swollen cock between my legs, his fingers aligning his head with my entrance. And this time, he slides effortlessly inside me.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he groans, his fingers stroking my clit in praise.

“That feels so good,” I breathe, my heart pounding against my ribs at the new tantalizing way he manages to fill me up and cuddle me at the same time.

Humming against my ear, he nips my lobe playfully.

Then I yelp as someone raps sharply against our bedroom door.

“What?” Leo snarls, refusing to stop my pleasure, though someone is demanding his attention.

“Sorry to disturb you, boss. But your nine o’clock meeting is here, waiting in your study.”

I recognize the voice as one of Leo’s men, though I can’t say which.

“Tell them to fuck off. I’ll reschedule,” Leo commands.

“Yes, sir.”

Stunned by Leo’s choice to stay with me rather than deal with business, I turn my head to kiss him once again. “You’re sexy when you blow off meetings for me,” I tease.

He rumbles another dark laugh. “Who says I’m not doing this for me?” he counters.

Then his arm snakes around my waist, and he rolls my body on top of his chest, exposing my breasts as he guides my legs apart. With his shoulder as my pillow, I arch my back as his one hand continues to tease my clit and the other palms my tender breasts.

This can't possibly be for him when he's torturing me with pleasure, stimulating me with his hands, his cock, and his teeth as they lightly nibble my ear.

"Oh god, I'm coming!" I gasp, the realization hitting me out of the blue as my system reaches sensory overload.

I don't even care if someone hears me. I scream with pleasure as Leo plays me like an instrument, releasing wave after wave of ecstasy that crashes through my body. He continues to rock inside me, his thrusts growing more adamant as my walls clench around him.

I shudder with the overwhelming sense of release, the euphoria trickling all the way out to my fingers and toes as my nipples pucker until they're throbbing with sensation. His fingers roll them lightly, making me jerk and gasp.

Then he rolls us once again, this time letting my cheek find my pillow as he bends my hips, lifting them until I'm on my knees, my chest resting on the mattress.

"You've got a sexy ass," he growls, massaging my cheeks and spreading them as he glides in and out of my dripping entrance at a tantalizing pace. And when he reaches around to pinch my clit between his finger and thumb, I cry out.

I slam back against him, taking all of him deep inside me as I nearly lose my mind. Leo groans, his pace increasing as my unbridled desire seems to drive his own. We find a rhythm that leaves me panting as his head finds that secret spot deep inside me over and over again.

"Oh god, Leo," I moan, my pulse roaring in my ears. My hands find the headboard, and I brace against it as he penetrates me deeply with each forward thrust.

"Tell me what you want, *bella mia*," he rasps.

"Let me come," I plead, my walls tightening with anticipation.

Leo snarls, his fingers working my clit and his cock filling me passionately. I can feel him harden and swell, warning me he's on the brink, and the thought of him coming inside me once again powers my release.

Hot cum bursts inside me as we finish at the same time, my core tightening around his hard length and begging him for every drop. He collapses forward, his chest pressing lightly across my back as his palm finds the bed beside my breast.

And all the while, his fingers continue to roll my clit until the last shuddering aftershock ripples through my body.

“Holy hell,” I groan, slumping onto the bed and turning my head to face him as he drops onto the bed beside me.

He quirks an eyebrow, his grin cocky as he eyes me up and down. “So I take it, you liked that?”

I groan, nodding appreciatively. Then I scoot closer, resting my head on his shoulder as I drape my body along his side. Leo holds me close, his fingers tracing circles on my skin as he puts his other arm behind his head. The position shows off his considerable muscles, reminding me of just how strong he is. And yet, how gentle he can be.

I can’t believe that after everything that’s happened, we somehow made it through the storm and feel closer than ever. Being with Leo just feels so... right. It brings me immeasurable peace.

And yet, as we share the silence, I can’t help but think of my family.

I never got a straight answer from Leo about what happened after his men took me home.

Deep down, that makes me wonder if he has a reason to not want to tell me—like he’s already killed them.

And despite my father’s actions, despite the hurt he’s caused, I don’t want that.

“Leo?” I ask tentatively, not wanting to disrupt our happiness. But I have to know the truth.

“Hmm?” he hums, the sound adorably content.

“What happened to my family after I left?”

Leo tenses beneath me, his fingers stopping their affectionate design on my skin. “Why do you even care?” he

demands, suddenly defensive. “After how callously your father disregarded your safety... He didn’t even flinch about letting you go home with me when the mayor was worried for your well-being. Your father said what he did to drive a wedge between us. All he cared about was getting a rise out of me. And he didn’t care if it put you in danger.”

His words cut deeply—even if they’re true—and worse, his defensive answer brings a sense of foreboding that knots my stomach.

Sitting up abruptly, I turn to face him, my heart pounding an unsteady beat. “What did you do?”

LEO



Tia's eyes shine with unshed tears, her hurt and anxiety twisting my gut and making me tense. Of course, I couldn't do anything to the Guerra men, with Mayor Romney and half of Piovosa at the charity ball as witnesses. Not to mention, the police took the men into custody almost directly after Tia left.

But that doesn't mean I won't settle the score once Don Guerra's men are released. They need to be taught a lesson. And I don't particularly want to say that after how Tia behaved at the town hall—and how she's acting now. She clearly still cares for them, fears for their safety, and would side with them even if they betrayed me.

It doesn't seem to matter to her that I'm her husband.

She still chooses them even when she says she loves me.

"I didn't do anything to them," I growl, sitting up in bed to meet her eye directly. "But they deserve an ugly death for shooting my father and breaking their word so blatantly. Your family is traitors, and I can't just go around forgiving them because I married one of Don Guerra's daughters."

The color drains from Tia's face, and it's like we're right back to where we were before. The trust shatters between us as she sides with her family, concerned for their well-being even though they're the ones who broke their word.

They're the bad guys here—not me.

But she will never see it that way.

“Leo, please—”

“No,” I state flatly, cutting her off because I don’t want to hear her beg for mercy again. I don’t want her to plead for the lives of the men who don’t give a shit about her. “I was willing to accept an alliance for your sake—and the baby’s—but I won’t just roll over and let your family disrespect me. They’ve made it clear that they intend to overthrow me, and the best way to crush that idea before it gets too far out of hand is to kill the men involved and teach the remaining Guerra family members what happens when they break their vows.”

Tia gasps, her expression horrified as she leans away from me. Her arm comes up to cover her breasts as if to defend against me. Every inch of her body language tells me I’m a villain. “Does that mean you intend to kill my cousin along with all those men at the ball?”

Her voice is barely above a whisper, and yet, I can hear every trembling word.

“That’s exactly my plan,” I state coldly, and I watch as the emotion transforms, her features twisting as true recognition dawns in her eyes.

“You’re going to kill my father.”

It’s a statement, not a question, but I answer her all the same. “Don Guerra wasn’t just involved in the plan. He instigated it. He walked the mayor into the auction room to set me up. How can I possibly let that slide?”

Tia jumps out of bed, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. “How could you do otherwise if you really loved me?” she breathes, then she races to the bathroom before I can respond.

“Fuck.” Scrubbing my tired face, I fling back the bedcovers and stand. Snatching my boxer briefs from the floor, I don them as I follow her.

But the main bathroom is empty, only my reflection looking back at me from the wall-length mirror. I frown as I scan the empty space. Then, my ear catches a sniffle behind the closed door to the toilet. Sighing, I step closer and hear Tia sobbing softly inside the enclosed space.

Despite my intense ire toward her father, I don't want to make her cry.

It tugs at my heartstrings and makes me feel like a monster.

I know it can't be easy being torn between two feuding families, trapped in the middle with people she cares about on both sides.

"Tia, will you come out and talk to me?" I ask, keeping my voice low and calm as I lean my forehead against the door that separates us.

"I don't want to talk to you. I hate you. Just leave me alone!" she shouts.

First, she loves me, now she hates me? I thought we were making progress, coming together, and working through our issues. But it feels like we ended up right back where we started. And the sudden whiplash from her emotions makes me question her once more. *Did she only tell me she loves me to manipulate me? To get me to let down my guard? Was she hoping that would convince me to be lenient with her family?*

And if her only concern is for them, how can I trust her?

I don't know what to think, what to believe anymore. But once again, I find myself questioning her loyalty.

Beyond frustrated that she's angry with me when her father is the one who set this whole thing in motion—and showed such little concern for her at any point along the way—I bristle. "Fine. You know what? Stay in there and pout. See if I care," I snap.

Storming into the other room, I change quickly into fresh clothes, putting on a suit, and finger combing my hair into place. I'd intended to spend most of the day with Tia, trying to reconcile what happened and willing to blow off my meetings to mend the rift between us.

But if she's going to act like a spoiled brat, then that's exactly how I'll treat her.

Glancing at her side table, I unplug her cell phone, then scan the room one last time before heading out the door.

I'm fucking spent after staying up all night, waiting for news on my father's condition. It pisses me off further that Tia's in there crying about her own father's future when mine is the one who spent hours on an operating table last night, fighting for his life.

"Signor Leo," Luigi says, falling into stride with me as I head down the hall toward the front door. He must have been waiting for me but knew better than to disturb us.

"Any word from the hospital yet?" I straighten my tie and give my suit jacket a tug.

Luigi shakes his head. "I assume no news is good news, though."

I hope he's right. The ICU will be my first stop, though, before I carry on with what needs to get done today. "Tell Rasco and Johnny to meet me there in an hour."

Luigi gives a curt nod but continues to walk with me to the front door.

Digging into the front pocket of my slacks, I pull out Tia's phone and hand it to him. "My wife is not to have access to a phone—or leave the house. Post guards at all the doors, and never let her out of your sight if she leaves our room."

"Sir," Luigi confirms with another nod.

His lips press into a thin line of determination, and I wonder if he doesn't like putting Tia on house arrest. I don't care if it bothers him, so long as he follows my orders. It's not his place to question me. Still, I can't just leave it there.

"She can't be trusted, Luigi," I explain. *Since when have I ever felt the need to justify my decisions to anyone but my father?* Perhaps he's right. Tia's making me soft. "Not until this is settled. Even if she wouldn't want to betray me again, she's still loyal to her family. Anything she says to them could be used against me."

“Of course, sir,” he agrees, his tone impassive as he wipes his face clean of emotion.

Buttoning my suit coat, I pause as Luigi opens the front door for me. Then I exit, signaling my driver to bring up my Ferrari. I know I have work to get done, but I also need the opportunity to blow off some steam. And driving fast will help with that, at least a little.

Pulling out my phone before my canary-yellow car pulls up in front of me, I dial my first number. It’s time to make the calls required to put my schedule back in order. Thankfully, as the leader of my family—and most of Piovosa now—it’s not like anyone can refuse me.

Except Tia, it would seem.

TIA



I know my reaction was childish. Even as I hear the door to our bedroom slam shut, signaling Leo's departure, I wish I would have handled things differently. There are so many better ways I could have dealt with the situation besides screaming that I hate him.

I don't hate Leo—I don't think—even if my feelings would be justified, considering he intends to kill my family and doesn't seem to feel a drop of remorse. But despite the conflict my father has started, despite the fact that he showed such little concern for me—even going so far as to use me to rub Leo's face in his loss—my father is still my father. And I don't want him to die. Least of all, at the hands of my husband.

My stomach knots as I think about Leo's admission that his own father was shot and is now in the hospital. I didn't know that until after my temper tantrum. Dropping my head into my hands, I fight the fresh wave of tears that threaten to fall.

My family is responsible for so much that's gone wrong. *If Don Moretti dies, how could I expect Leo to show them any mercy?* If he were to live up to the name he's earned since his rise to power, Leo would kill me along with the rest of my family—wipe us clear off the earth—if his father dies.

I should be happy that he doesn't seem to intend to do that. And hopefully, he'll stay true to his word and leave my sisters alone as well.

Do I have any right to ask that of him?

Still, I was willing to ask for their sake.

Once again, I have no clue where Leo and I stand.

It seems I won't likely find out for a while, either. I doubt Leo will return until late tonight.

And that's my doing.

Pulling myself together, I rise from my spot on the floor and open the door. I hadn't bothered to turn on the light, and the bright morning sunshine filters in through the door to the bedroom, making me squint.

Now that the argument is over, it's time for me to get cleaned up. Then, I intend to spend the rest of the day in bed. Pulling my hair back, I wash my face, scrubbing the smokey cat-eye makeup away along with my red lipstick. The cold water feels good on my puffy eyes, and after brushing my hair and teeth, I make my way back into the bedroom.

I reach for one of Leo's oversized T-shirts in the dresser drawer and hesitate. *How can I relax in the clothes of a man who has no problem murdering my family members? How can I stay with a man like that?*

And at the same time, I yearn for that closeness I feel when I'm with Leo. The happiness he's brought me. The inner turmoil has me in utter knots. I feel absolutely spent. I don't know whether it's wrong of me to hate Leo or love him. *Can I possibly do both at the same time?*

I'm so tired, I can't decide.

But I pull it out and shrug into it anyway, feeling guilty as I draw comfort from his familiar scent. Then I collapse into bed, exhausted after the night's events. I don't even bother closing the curtains. Instead, I turn my back to the sunlight, letting it warm me as I swiftly sink into unconsciousness.

Leo's in my dreams as well, seeming to occupy every corner of my mind, but my dreams are no better than my waking nightmare. And I toss and turn as I watch Leo force

my father onto his knees at gunpoint in the middle of a forest clearing.

“It’s him or me, Tia. You can’t have both,” Leo states, his hazel eyes cold and emotionless as he watches me.

“I can’t choose. Please, don’t make me,” I beg, standing helplessly as I watch the man I love prepare to take my father’s life.

“If you don’t pick one, then we both have to die,” he says.

“No one has to die!” I insist, stepping forward to reach for the gun.

But Leo only shakes his head. “Wrong again.”

Then he pulls the trigger, putting a bullet through my father’s head. And as his body drops, Leo turns the gun on himself.

“No!” I scream, racing to stop him in time.

The gun goes off a second time, and Leo falls to the ground, lifeless.

But as I run to him, sobbing in my utter loss and despair, the ground suddenly drops out beneath me. And this time, there’s no tree to stop me. No Leo to save me.

Instead, I plummet toward the rocky gorge below.

I jolt upright in my bed, my heart racing as I look frantically around the room. The sheets are in a tangled knot at my feet. I must have kicked them off in my troubled sleep. But I see no dead bodies around me, no gorge ready to swallow me whole.

Pressing my palm to my chest, I try to calm my heart as I breathe deeply.

“I’m okay. They’re okay. We’re all going to be okay,” I say like a mantra, and I let my hand slide down to rest comfortingly on my belly.

What my baby must think of the rollercoaster ride she’s survived in the three short months since her conception. I’m due for my next appointment in a few more weeks, and at this

one, we'll have the chance to learn if she is, in fact, a girl like I suspect.

Despite my best efforts to calm myself and comfort the tiny life growing inside me, my dream disturbed me deeply, and I can't shake the sense of foreboding it leaves in my chest.

Needing to hear a comforting voice, I turn to my bedside table to find my phone. Maria is the only person I can always talk to. And while I learned my lesson about filling her innocent ears with my worries and fears and half-cooked schemes, it won't hurt just to call her and see how she's doing.

It would be nice to know she and my family are alright.

Even if their future still hangs in the balance, it will bring me peace of mind to know they're safe for now. But as I scan the tidy surface, I frown. I thought I plugged my phone in last night in case Leo decided to call.

But I was so stressed and anxious, I must have forgotten to. Climbing out of bed, I search the room, checking my vanity, the bathroom, and even my dresser drawers in case I put it somewhere without thinking.

I can't remember where I last had it. I'm not even sure if I brought it to the charity ball at this point.

Frustrated, I change into jeans and a T-shirt, then strike out in search of it somewhere in the larger part of the house. Starting in the library, I check the overstuffed chair I've claimed for reading, looking to see if it slipped into the cracks around the cushion. But no luck. After a wide sweep of the expansive space, I head back out into the hall and start when I nearly collide with the Moretti butler.

"Ah, Luigi, I'm so sorry," I gasp, grasping his arm as I try to calm my overstressed nerves. They're making me jumpy. It doesn't help that the man is so quiet, he's constantly surprising me.

"That's quite alright, Signora Moretti," he assures me with a stiff bow. Then he starts to head on his way without a word.

"Wait!" I call, my hand tightening on his arm.

He pauses, his eyes tracking down to my hold, and I release him.

“Would you mind helping me find my phone? I seem to have lost it and was hoping you or one of the maids might have seen it around the house.”

The butler clears his throat, as if suddenly uncomfortable. “Master Leo expressed the desire that you not have a phone,” he states stintedly.

“He what?” Fury rises inside me as the words hit me like a backhand.

“He insisted it was necessary for the time being...” he states stiffly, his face settling into an emotionless mask.

Squaring my shoulders, I refuse to show that it bothers me. “That’s fine. I’ll just take the car, but I want to go see my sister.” I spin on my heel, jutting my chin in the air.

But before I get two steps, Luigi calls me back. His eyes shift to the middle distance, avoiding mine as he informs me, “Your driver has been released from his duties, signora. Master Leo would like you to remain on the grounds until further notice.”

“You’re joking,” I snap, my fists balling.

But when he looks up to meet my eyes once again, I know he’s not.

“So, after everything he said about putting the past behind us, he’s decided to lock me up? I’m not even free to speak with my family?”

Luigi stands silently, letting me fume as he remains rigidly composed.

Leo probably gave him no insights or explanations as to why I’m to be a prisoner in my own home once again. But it would seem that caring about my family hasn’t just obliterated the trust between me and Leo. It’s launched me back to the spot I was in when we first got married.

Once again, I’m just a pawn in his game.

“Fine. You know what? You can tell your master when he comes home that he can sleep in another bed *until further notice*,” I hiss.

I know it’s not Luigi’s fault, that I shouldn’t be taking my anger out on him. But I’m furious, and I storm back to our room, stomping hard enough to make a racket even in my rubber-soled tennies.

I hate feeling trapped, and once again, the men in my life have me in a gilded cage.

It’s stifling, suffocating, and I can’t get past this horrible anxiety about not knowing if Leo might be out there right now hunting my father down.

Sitting on my bed, I try to find a sense of calm. But it eludes me. Instead, the only thing that seems to fill my mind’s eye is the fabricated image of Leo pointing a gun at my father’s head. And when I finally chase the horrible thought away, the vision of Leo’s lifeless eyes takes its place.

I can’t just wait here for him to come home. I’ll go crazy.

Rising from the bed, I start to pace, contemplating what I might do to fill my time. Then, my eyes wander to the French doors that lead out to our balcony.

Perhaps it’s time I try sneaking out. It’s odd, considering sneaking back *into* my parents’ house when most girls my age would be trying to sneak out. And the irony isn’t lost on me that sneaking out of my parents’ house is what started all this in the first place.

But I need to see for myself that my family’s alright, and what Leo doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

LEO



“He made it through the first night, which is a good sign,” Doctor Ellis confirms, his demeanor grave as we stand at the foot of my father’s hospital bed. “And the operation was a success. That makes me believe he has a decent chance of recovery, though he’s not out of the woods yet. He still hasn’t regained consciousness—likely because it takes a considerable amount of energy to endure surgery. These next few days will be a major determiner. If he remains stable and can start the healing process, he should survive.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” I say, shaking his hand firmly.

He gives a single nod and departs, clipboard in hand, through the door to my father’s private room. It’s the best one in the hospital with staff to attend to my father, twenty-four, seven. I’ve posted a round-the-clock guard at his door, just to ensure no one tries to take advantage of his vulnerable state.

Settling into the chair beside my father’s bed, I study his face. I wouldn’t say we’re close in the deeply emotional sense. He never wasted energy on bonding moments or quality time. But my father raised me to be the successful man I am today. He showed me how to be strong, fearless, powerful. He showed me to take what is mine and have no mercy.

He isn’t without flaws, and we have certainly butted heads over my lifetime. But seeing him brought to such a helpless state fills me with a deep sense of rage. I want to crush the men responsible. I want to rip them limb from limb. The only

thing giving me pause is Tia—and the fact that most of those men are currently in the custody of the Piovosa Police Force.

“They won’t get away with it,” I assure him, though I know he can’t hear me.

Placing my elbows on my knees, I interlace my fingers and rest my lips on my knuckles. *How will I proceed with the situation now that I’ll have Mayor Romney breathing down my back?* It was a clever move and a dangerous gamble, putting his men at my mercy so Don Guerra could make me out to be the bad guy.

He’s a snake, sneaky and deceptive, willing to shake with one hand while the other poisons my wine, and I can’t just let him live. But I can’t kill him outright either without putting myself under further scrutiny. And I have no doubt he intends to make any of our interactions public from this point on.

The door opens behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to find Johnny and Rasco entering the room.

“Good. You’re here,” I state, rising. I’ve spent enough time with my father. Now, I need to keep the business running while he’s hospital-bound.

“What’s the word?” Johnny asks.

“I’ve called a meeting. All the dons who have sworn allegiance to me will be at the club in an hour. Any who don’t show will be branded traitors.” And they better take my call seriously because I’m in no mood to fuck around.

If they’re surprised, neither of my captains shows it as they follow me into the hall. I give my father’s guards, Levi and Cane, a nod before departing.

“And Don Moretti?” Rasco asks from his place just behind my left shoulder.

“The Guerras better fucking hope he survives,” is all I say.

Neither of my captains speaks as we exit the hospital, and we part ways as they jump in their car to follow me downtown.

I head straight to Club Divino, paying little heed to the traffic lights or speed limits as I wind through the narrow city streets. The gentleman's club, where I often hold meetings, sits right at the heart of downtown. The impressive building that has belonged to my family for generations holds its own in the entertainment district.

"Detective Matthews is here to see you," Anita, the manager at Club Divino, says as soon as I walk through the front door. Her high-heeled steps are sharp, her shoulders stiff with unspoken tension.

"Very well," I state, leading Rasco and Johnny toward the elevator. "Send him to my office."

"Right away," Anita confirms, splitting off from us.

With half of Piovosa's police force watching my every move, I need to make sure Matthews is ready to handle his role. He's been my go-to officer for the last few years when I need someone to tidy up on the legal end, and in exchange, he gets a big, fat bonus on top of his detective's salary.

It won't hurt to have him poking around, looking like he's investigating me. That will only keep his cover and open doors when he needs to get to scenes I'm sure I'll be leaving around town shortly. It's a far riskier cleanup plan than if I could have put my men on the task force investigating the crime scene, but it will have to do.

"Detective," I greet coldly as soon as he enters the room.

His eyes cast to Johnny and Rasco, always nervous to have anyone else present for our private conversations. "Signor Moretti," he responds, letting the door click shut behind him before he drops his stiff facade.

"I'll keep it short and to the point. As I'm sure you've heard by now, things did not go as planned at the charity ball last night. Which means I need you ready to take point on any necessary cleanup in the near future. And I think it's safe to say there might be a lot."

Matthews nods, though his brow breaks out in a sweat—as it always does when faced with a daunting task.

“Can you tell me when the Guerra men are to be released?”

“Not yet. The mayor has been overseeing their arrests personally. I get the impression he’s not planning on letting them off easy.”

“Hmm.” I cock my eyebrow, speculatively. “Interesting.” That can mean one of two things—he either saw the Guerra family for what they are when they opened fire on my men at the charity ball, or he’s using their incarceration to keep them out of my hands and under his protection. Either way, it’s not common for the mayor to oversee criminal arrests himself.

Flashing my eyes back to the detective, I give him a quick jerk of the chin. “Keep me informed when you learn the date of their release. That’ll be all for now.”

He gives a sharp nod and turns on his heel, departing without a word.

Glancing at my watch, I check the time. The dons should already be waiting for me. Rising from my desk, I head back out the door and down the hall to my larger meeting room. Johnny and Rasco give me a double-door entrance, and all eyes turn to me as I stride purposefully toward the head of the table the eight dons sit around.

“I’m glad to see you could all make it,” I observe dryly, though I wouldn’t have minded removing someone’s ear today. I’m more than ready to inflict some pain and share the wealth.

Settling into my seat, I study the men before me, gauging the atmosphere of the room. The tension is palpable, and more than one face seems ready to challenge me if I give them the opportunity.

“Well, I didn’t have anything better to do today,” Don Fiore states glibly, drawing my eyes to him as he leans causally on the arm of his chair two seats down. “And besides, we get free alcohol.” He raises his glass of whiskey in a toast, his eyes dancing as he tempts me to teach him a lesson.

I ignore him, fighting my urge to be a hothead when an iron fist is what I need to maintain control of these men right now. “I presume you’ve all heard about what took place at the mayor’s charity ball last night, if you weren’t present for the event—”

“Oh, we’ve heard,” Don Fiore pipes up again, this time volunteering himself as the man I’ll be making an example of today. “You must be starting to lose your edge, Don Moretti, if you could so easily be shot in the heel by an old dog like Don Guerra. He’s past his prime, and yet he got the drop on you and your men.”

A ripple of murmured humor passes around the room, and before it can get out of hand, I lift my fingers from the arm of my chair, a silent signal to my right-hand man. I’m not in the mood to be lenient, as Don Fiore quickly finds out when Johnny’s knife leaves his pocket in a flash.

The blade draws a quick, clean line across the don’s cheek before anyone sees it coming.

Immediately, the room falls deathly silent as all eyes turn to Don Fiore and the blood that starts to trickle down his face.

“The fuck?” he screams, slapping his palm to his cheek in an effort to slow the bleeding.

“You’ll keep your mouth shut until I give you permission to open it, Don Fiore. Unless you’d like a matching scar on the other cheek.”

The subtle dissent that had clouded the room a moment ago vanishes as the other dons straighten in their chairs, their eyes casting nervously toward Johnny and Rasco now. My authority reinstated, I settle back in my chair, interlacing my fingers as I consider the men before me.

“Let’s talk business, shall we?” I offer as Don Fiore whimpers silently in his chair. “Depending on how things go with the Guerra family, I may be calling upon you to provide the numbers necessary to wipe his family out.”

“Your alliance is finished, then?” Don Valencia asks.

I turn my gaze sharply in his direction, and he swallows hard. But the question wasn't meant to be impudent. I can see the fear in his eyes. At least I've managed to teach *one* family a proper lesson in my time since meeting Tia.

"That depends on how stubborn Don Guerra proves about making a claim to the territory he owns... and how much he likes keeping his head on his shoulders."

The room is utterly silent, all eyes unblinking as they wait for what I'll say next.

Leaning forward to place my elbows on the table, I state, "In light of last night's events and some apparent fallout"—I cast my eyes to Don Fiore, who flinches visibly—"I will require a confirmation of loyalty here and now. And with that, I want to know the number of men your family can provide should this conflict become a war."

Again the room is still, not a single movement stirring the charged atmosphere.

"Don Fiore, shall we start with you?" I suggest, a cool smile spreading across my face as I meet his eyes once again.

I can see the war waging behind his eyes, the utter contempt he feels for being forced to kneel before me. But after a nervous glance in Johnny's direction, he rises from his chair to approach me.

Johnny and Rasco stand as silent angels of death, ready to cut any man down who doesn't prove their loyalty. So, when I turn my chair to face Don Fiore, he bows low before me, pressing his forehead to his knee in supplication.

"I can give you fifty strong men," he assures me.

A solid number, though not his entire force. But I'll accept it. I won't need every man to crush Don Guerra. Not with eight other dons backing my already considerable army.

"Good, now get out of my sight. And get that cheek fixed up. You're a mess."

The murmured laughter this time comes at Don Fiore's expense. No one wants to be on the receiving end of my wrath,

and they would far rather turn on the man before me than raise any suspicion against them.

Johnny hauls Don Fiore to his feet with one arm and shoves him roughly toward the door. The humiliated don stumbles and then departs quickly as soon as he's regained his balance.

Don Amici takes his place, kneeling to the side of the blood-stained carpet where Don Fiore bowed. "My men are yours to command, and I can offer fifty as well," he says.

A far more generous offer from the smaller mafia family, and I can tell my point has been made. "Very good, Don Amici. I will use them wisely."

Each head of the eight prominent Piovosa families kneel before me to reaffirm their allegiance. The only one missing is Don Guerra, and had he not made the terrible mistake of betraying me, he would have been here to accept their fealty at my side. I wouldn't have made him bow before me.

But now, if he doesn't, he will die.

TIA



The grounds are crawling with Leo's men, and after what Luigi said, I have no doubt they're on the lookout to ensure I stay on the Moretti property. So I bide my time, watching surreptitiously from the balcony until I spot my chance.

Easing over the railing, I shimmy my way toward the drainage pipe that runs down the wall outside our bedroom. This feels even less like a good idea than the time I climbed down the ivy lattice outside my window at my parents' house.

But at least the drainage pipe isn't all rusted and falling apart like the wood lattice, and it holds my weight as I try to slide down it to the garden below. My heart flutters uncomfortably as it brings with it a sense of vertigo I never used to get with heights. I don't doubt that has something to do with the near-death experience I had not so long ago—followed by the dream just earlier today that made me relive that terrible moment.

Keep it together, Tia, I scold myself, and I ease myself down the narrow pole until I'm just a few short feet above the ground. The gravel crunches beneath my feet as I turn and crouch, looking to see if anyone noticed my grand escape plan.

So far, so good.

An ironic smile curls my lips as I get a powerful sense of *deja vu*. This is exactly how things started on the night I snuck out of my parents' house and met Leo. Only this time, I'm going in the opposite direction—and in the broad light of day.

Holding my breath, I hide behind a bush as I near the front of the house. Leo's driver is busy polishing the black Escalade that sits in the drive. The same one that brought me home from the charity ball, from the looks of it.

Several more men stand sentinel at the front door, their dark suits and sunglasses making them look very much like men in black as they wear stony expressions. Chewing my lip, I consider my options for getting out unseen. It doesn't look good, seeing as it's a long straight shot down the drive and impossibly high walls to climb at the estate's boundary line.

Leo's driver sets aside his soapy water, tossing the sponge back into it as he vanishes into the garage, perhaps for the hose or some wax or polish. And by the grace of god, it's at that exact moment that Trudy, one of Leo's maids, opens the front door.

"Sandwiches, fellas?" she offers with a cheery smile.

And as they turn to engage her, I take what might be my only opportunity. Staying in a crouch, I sprint quickly behind the fountain at the center of the driveway. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder to make sure no one's still looking before I bolt toward the trees that line the drive.

Sucking in deep lungfuls of air as I reach the first towering tree, I press my back against it and dare to peek around the bark to see if Trudy or the men noticed me. But they seem to be in some kind of debate about the sandwiches she brought them.

And Leo's driver strolls nonchalantly from the garage, whistling as he totes the hose behind him. The hardest part is over, and I take several steadying breaths before I start to leapfrog from one tree to the next, clinging to the shadows and taking my time so as not to draw attention to myself.

Lucky for me, the front gates are wide open, as they have been every time I've passed through them. I'd always imagined that was because I was with Leo—or coming during a party when almost anyone was welcome.

But now I wonder if they might not remain open unless there's a specific reason to shut someone out.

Once I hit the street, I can finally breathe easier. I pick up a steady pace as I head into town and toward my old family home. It's across the small downtown of Piovosa, about an hour's walk, and it feels good to stretch my legs.

Finally, I reach the long driveway leading up to my family's historic house. I can just make out the eaves over the treetops from the start of our winding drive.

"Don't fucking move."

"Put your hands up!"

The chorus of threatening commands stops me in my tracks, and I obey on instinct as I stand stunned. Men armed with guns step out from the brick walls surrounding my family's property to level them at me through the gates.

"I'm just here to see my family," I say, stunned by the hostile greeting.

My family must be on guard if the gate is being manned, even in the middle of the day.

"Tia?"

One of the men lowers his gun as he recognizes me, and I roll my eyes as I identify my cousin Vinny.

"Who put you in charge of front-gate security? Father must be pretty desperate," I tease as he gestures for the other man to lower his gun.

"Nah, he didn't put me in charge, but I guess we need all hands on deck right now." Vinny drags one side of the gate open just enough to let me in.

Slipping inside, I press a quick kiss on his cheek as he closes the gate again.

"Don't call up to the house. I want to surprise my sisters, okay? Or will I have more armed gunmen ready to mow me down just for breathing air the wrong way?"

“It’s probably better if I call ahead,” Vinny says. “But I’ll let the guys know you’re here to surprise them. I’m sure they’ll be willing to keep a secret from your sisters at least.”

My joke was an attempt to lighten the mood a little, but tensions are clearly high if everyone here is so jumpy, and it makes me realize that the line I’m walking might be a very thin one.

“Thanks, Vinny,” I say, giving him a quick wave as I head down the drive.

Bennie and Matteo are far more friendly as I reach the house, each giving me a warm welcome with a smile. Then I slip inside, heading straight for the library, where I know Maria will be doing her afternoon studies.

Opening the door just a crack, I peer inside to get my sister’s attention. And like a magnet drawn to its polar opposite, Maria’s eyes shift over her tutor’s shoulder to find mine. Anna, Vienna, and Sofia, on the other hand, stare with glazed eyes out the window, fiddle with their notebooks, or focus on their studies, none noticing my appearance.

“Excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom,” Maria says immediately, cutting off her tutor midsentence as she rises from her chair. Leaving our three younger sisters to occupy the teacher, Maria rushes out into the hall and pulls me into a fierce hug.

“What are you doing here?” she says excitedly, keeping her voice low so as not to attract her tutor’s attention and earn a scolding.

“I came to talk to you,” I say, trying not to sound too anxious. “Can you spare a minute?”

“Please, take me all afternoon,” she pleads, twining her fingers with mine as she leads the way toward her room.

We settle onto her bed, and it feels so nice to be back in the familiar home of my childhood, sharing a moment with my closest sister and confidant. Though Maria’s been making a point of visiting me at the Moretti estate, I have a feeling that’s

all going to change now that our families are feuding once again. Only this time, I'll be stuck behind enemy lines...

Except Leo doesn't really feel like the enemy anymore.

"How are you? Is everything okay?" Maria asks, her eyes worried.

"What have you heard?" I ask, surprised that my sister would know anything when my father always made a point of keeping us in the dark when I lived here.

"Nothing, really. I just figured something must have happened at the mayor's charity ball from the way our parents came home last night. And I know you and Leo were supposed to be there. I've been hoping you would call. Father's been in meetings all morning over whatever happened, and Mother's been unusually tense." Maria glances toward her bedroom door, as if expecting one or the other to come barging in at any moment.

Things must be very tense to have Maria so on edge, but all I feel is relief to know that Maria didn't have anything to do with Father's plans. In the back of my mind, I've been plagued by the thought that Maria knew and hadn't warned me.

"Oh, Maria, it was terrible. I guess Father learned about Leo's intention to use the ball to get in close with the mayor and make a business arrangement as his security. He sent a bunch of armed men right through the front doors to show Leo up, had them attempt to steal the silent auction items, shot Don Moretti, and then let themselves get captured to antagonize Leo into threatening them."

I shake my head, hanging it as I consider just how horribly I played into my father's hands. "Of course, I knew nothing about it, so I tried to protect Maury when Leo pulled a gun on him—"

"You what?" my sister demands, her face suddenly furious. "Tia, you're pregnant—not to mention my sister, who I happen to care for very much. You can't be putting yourself in danger like that."

“Leo wasn’t going to shoot me, Maria. He wouldn’t.”

Maria falls silent, though her eyes are still filled with worry.

“That’s not the point, though. Father planned it all and brought Mayor Romney in right as Leo was threatening to put Maury in his place. And, of course, Maury couldn’t keep his mouth shut, so he was antagonizing Leo into it, all but declaring open war between our two families.”

Shocked and suddenly nervous, Maria asks tentatively, “What do you think Leo might do? Will he hurt our family?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, my fear tightening my chest once more. “I tried my best to reason with him, but he’s furious. And I don’t know what else to do. Maybe if I could appease Leo, we could find some way to stop both sides, but he clearly doesn’t trust me anymore because Father told him I was in on the plan to betray Leo. And then, of course, it didn’t help my case when I followed that up by pleading for Father’s life.”

Maria swallows hard. “Well, maybe it’s not as bad as you think. He let you come see me, didn’t he?”

Biting my lip, I shake my head. “Actually, he took my phone and didn’t even want me to leave the house. I had to sneak off the property and walk here. I don’t know that I’ll ever get Leo to trust me enough to talk him down—and even if I do, how can I trust that Father won’t try something rash to provoke the issue further?”

With that determined look on her face that I love so well, Maria presses her phone into my palm. “Take mine. I can get a different one, and that way, we can stay in touch. We’ll work something out,” she assures me. “We always do.”

Her almost-childlike conviction fills me with deep affection. Maria might be my younger sister, but she’s the only person who has never failed me. She’s the only one I can always trust. I pull her into a fierce hug, feeling much better if for no other reason than that I got to see her.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“Always,” she assures me, giving me a tight squeeze in return.

“I should probably get going,” I say reluctantly.

Maria nods. “I’ll call you soon,” she assures me.

Pressing a kiss to my sister’s forehead, I rise from her bed and slip back out of her room. Closing the door behind me, I turn—and stop dead in my tracks as I come face-to-face with the last person I want to see.

“Father,” I breathe. My heart breaks into a sprint. *Did he overhear my conversation with Maria?* My stomach knots at the possibility that I’ve just done it again—unwittingly said something that jeopardizes Leo. Because my father looks far too pleased to see me.

“Tia, this is a pleasant surprise,” he says, his eyes dancing wickedly.

TIA



“**Y**ou wouldn’t come for a visit and deprive your dear old dad of the pleasure of a hug, would you?” Father asks, pulling me into a bear hug.

Stunned by his uncharacteristic display of affection, I stumble into the embrace, my heart twisting as my emotions suddenly go to war with one another. Once upon a time, I would have coveted a hug from my father. I cherished any sign of affection, any indication of worth that he sent my way.

Now, it feels fake, almost manipulative. And I’m near desperate for him to release me.

Holding me at arm’s length, he looks at me with unbridled warmth, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

“Come have a chat with me, Tia. It’s been too long,” he insists, pulling me beneath one arm as he gives my shoulders an affectionate squeeze.

He leads me back down the hall and into his office, where I’ve never been allowed before. It’s a richly decorated room, with leather upholstered chairs, an ornately carved mahogany desk, and beautiful oil paintings of English fox hunting scenes showcased in elegant gold frames.

He closes the door behind us, and my pulse flutters uncomfortably. Like a mouse caught in a trap, I wait to see what my father could possibly want from me after everything he’s done.

“Sit, Tia,” he insists, gesturing to a chair on the near side of his desk as he rounds the rich mahogany surface and settles into his wingback chair. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you.”

My stomach drops. *How can he finally be saying everything I ever wanted to hear growing up, and now it only makes me want to squirm?*

“When Maria told me you were looking for ways to overthrow Leonardo Moretti, I knew something I’d always suspected—that you’re too smart to simply be sold off as some dolt’s wife. I made the right choice marrying you to the Moretti heir because only you are strong enough to stand up to him, to use your intellect to search for his weaknesses.”

Leaning forward in his chair, my father looks upon me with a sense of pride that wrings the happiness from my heart. “Together, you and I can put an end to the Morettis’ reign of terror.”

I never should have come home. Nausea rises in my throat as I realize just how terrible the idea was. I hadn’t dreamed my father would have the time of day to corner me. Especially when Maria said he’s been in meetings all morning. I just wanted to see Maria. And now I suspect I’m about to learn how deeply I will come to regret my decision.

“You should start spying for me, Tia,” he states, cutting to the chase as his voice drops with excitement. “Feed me any useful information so we can wipe out the Morettis once and for all.” His smile is conspiratorial, like he’s certain that’s why I came here in the first place.

Horrible, violent guilt rises up inside me, twisting my body into knots. I shouldn’t be here. I don’t want to spy for my father. I’ve already lost everything because of him. Leo and I might never recover after what happened. And it’s my father who’s driven a wedge between us. Time and again, he’s moved me like a chess piece across a board, forcing me to abandon whatever attachments I’ve made, whatever hopes I’ve dared dream of.

I thought his final move was sacrificing me to Leo. To ship me off to our worst enemy to save our family. And even there, he's managed to obliterate the relationship I was starting to build with the husband I was forced to marry. A man I never dreamed I could love and yet somehow do.

"How can I possibly spy for you when you threw me under the bus at the charity ball? Leo doesn't trust me anymore because you said I gave you inside information." Despite my best efforts to hide it, my voice is laced with hurt.

It doesn't matter how ruthless my father has proven to be. I still want to mean something to him. And it still brings me pain to confront him about using me—abandoning me even. He's the one man I'm supposed to know will protect me. For the longest time, I truly believed he would. But lately, it feels as though he's either trying to punish me or that he feels no concern for me at all.

As if sensing my distress, my father's face softens, his eyes warming with fatherly affection. "Tia. You're more convincing than you give yourself credit for. I have full confidence that you'll win the Moretti boy back over. You've only been married a few short weeks, and from what I saw last night, you had him eating out of your hand. Don't worry, my child. Together, we will rid Piovosa of the plague his family has become in this town."

Only I'm also part of that family now.

Rising from his chair, Father comes around his desk to pull me up from my seat, and he grips both my shoulders warmly. "I'll be in touch," he assures me. Then he pulls me into a hug once more. "I'm so proud of the woman you've become. I couldn't ask for a better daughter."

A knot forms in my throat, and I hate that his words mean so much to me.

They shouldn't. Not after all he's done.

Not after he's utterly betrayed me.

"I need to get back," I murmur, fighting the tears that choke me.

“Of course,” my father agrees.

He walks me to the door; his tone is affectionate as he keeps the conversation light. And as I walk back down our drive, I feel horrible for an entirely different reason than when I came.

Once again, I’m faced with choosing Leo or my family, and from the sounds of it, Father has no intentions of backing down from this fight. He’s going to get everyone killed. He can’t possibly think he can overthrow the Morettis.

And nothing I do will change that.

Even if I were willing to spy on Leo for my father—which I’m not—the small bit of intel I managed to pick up last time wasn’t enough to destroy Leo. It didn’t even get him arrested. *How can my father possibly think he’s done anything but put a target on his back?*

Trudging down the streets, I head back into the historic downtown of Piovosa. I barely notice my surroundings as I think about everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours. I don’t want to betray Leo again. I can’t.

Against all odds, I’ve fallen in love with him. I can’t hurt him.

But I don’t want my family to die either.

My thoughts turn to Maria, Anna, Vienna, and Sofia. So sweet and still innocent. I hate that I can’t protect them. And I’m terrified that what my father’s doing is going to put them in worse danger.

Fighting the urge to cry, I force myself to focus, to consider what I can do to fix this awful situation. *So much violence. So much death. And why? So, one man or another can claim possession of the town we live in?*

Lost in thought, I pay little attention to where my feet are carrying me. They know the way. But when a car screeches to a halt beside me, my heart plummets. I freeze like a deer in the headlight as I sense danger.

Then, my heart stops entirely as I recognize the canary-yellow Ferrari.

The passenger door pops open, revealing Leo's thunderous expression.

“Get in,” he growls.

LEO



Tia hesitates as she stands by the car door, seeming to debate whether it's safe to get in. Considering I'm livid right now, I suppose her instincts aren't entirely unfounded, but I'm not in the mood to fuck around.

“Now, Tia,” I command. It infuriates me how rarely she seems to listen to me—or obey.

She flinches, her brown eyes widening as she takes a step back. “I'd rather walk, I think.”

Why she's walking through downtown Piovosa in the first place when she's supposed to be confined to the Moretti estate confounds me. But her statement reminds me of how she walked down the street, her shoulders slumped, her face troubled.

I don't like what her emotions might mean. And I certainly don't like that she seems to be headed back home—which means she reached whatever destination she had in mind when she snuck out.

As much as I want to put the past behind me, I can't trust that Tia's motives aren't against me—she's clearly as rebellious as ever since she made it off the estate, even though I had men watching the exits. She might have run straight home to Daddy to discuss their next strategy.

The possibility puts a knot in my gut.

“I don't give a fuck what you'd rather do right now. I'm taking you home. Now, get in.”

Tia's chin juts up ever so slightly, and I know that unless I intend to run her down, I'll have to take another track if I want to get her in the car.

"Please, Tia," I growl, biting back my frustration. "We should talk."

Trapping her lip between her teeth, Tia hesitates another moment before grasping the passenger door and sliding into the car. She closes the door behind her but keeps her hand resting on the handle, as if ready to flee.

Throwing the car into gear, I peel away from the curb with squealing wheels.

Silence chokes the air as I turn toward home, obliterating the speed limit in my frustration.

"If you weren't carrying my child, I would spank your ass raw for so blatantly disobeying me," I state flatly as I white-knuckle the steering wheel.

When I glance in Tia's direction, she's pale, seeming horrified by the idea.

"Would you really?" she breathes. Her dark eyes peer up at me through her lashes, the fear in them like a punch to the gut.

How is it that I'm the one who feels bad when she's the one in trouble?

Sighing, I debate internally. In the past, I would have punished her without hesitation. I would have stripped her naked, spanked her ass red, and left her tied to the bed until she learned her lesson. The thought of it makes my balls ache, and my cock start to stiffen.

But now, even though the thought of it turns me on, I'm not sure I could handle Tia roughly. She's created a soft spot in my armor, and guilt eats me up just thinking about laying a hand on her.

Blowing through a yellow light, I cross Main Street and barely tap the breaks when our turn arrives. Tia braces in her seat, keeping her eyes locked on me, though she vibrates with tension.

“No, I probably wouldn’t,” I state darkly, glaring daggers at the road ahead. “But if you keep pushing your luck, I won’t make any promises. I didn’t earn my reputation by showing patience. Or leniency.”

Tia looks away, falling into silence once again.

“But that’s not the point, Tia,” I press, determined to get to the bottom of this. “How did you even make it off the property? I put extra guards on duty to make sure you stayed put.”

“You have no right to keep me locked up there,” she snaps, her face coloring as she matches my glare.

We come to an abrupt halt as I stop at an intersection to allow several uniformed school children to cross. Then I floor it once more, my temper making my movements unnecessarily aggressive.

“Well, I can hardly trust you when it’s your family I’m on the brink of war with. And you keep pleading for their lives, for fuck’s sake—as if your father didn’t just break our alliance and betray me. Which you *were* a part of, in case you forgot.”

“I didn’t know!” she shouts, her eyes blazing as they burn a hole through my temple.

“And yet here you are, disobeying my wishes once again,” I murmur, keeping my voice steady despite the rage thrumming through my veins.

I take another sharp turn without slowing, and Tia simply holds on.

“Because it’s entirely unreasonable to expect me to be alone in that house—where no one will talk to me—after everything that’s happened! I did that the entire night, Leo. I sat and waited for you to come home. But you didn’t, and it was torture.”

“I did come home,” I counter flatly.

“Yeah. And you insulted me. We argued. I *thought* we made up. But as soon as I said something you didn’t like, you stormed off without even the decency to warn me you were

confining me to the house! Now you're angry because I need someone to talk to?" Frustration darkens Tia's porcelain face. "How are we supposed to move forward if we don't have trust?"

"I hardly think you're in a position to preach about trust after what happened, and now you're the one challenging that trust by running off the first chance you get."

"That's so unfair," she hisses, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Is it?" My volume never rises, but the anger bubbling beneath the surface does as I voice my suspicion. "Tell me then, did you sneak out to see your family today?"

I take my foot from the gas, finally slowing so I can truly read Tia's face. And my heart sinks at what I see. Her shoulders slump, her eyebrows pressing into a pained expression that borders on guilt. And in that look, all my fears come to life.

"Yes. I went to see my sister," she explains, her voice wobbling dangerously.

Like that's supposed to make me feel any better. "The same one you passed information to when you were planning to betray me?" The accusation in my tone is blatant as I grip the steering wheel more firmly and compress the gas pedal once more.

"It wasn't like that!" she shouts, the argument escalating again.

"When?" I sneer. "Just now, after you already know what comes of talking to Maria? You can't possibly be naive enough to think that things will end differently this time around."

"Can't I?" she counters belligerently. Then she bites her lip, as if realizing she's just inadvertently called herself naive.

I meet Tia's gaze with a fierce one of my own. "You deliberately disobeyed me. You went to the house of a man who wants to destroy me. You spoke to the person responsible

for destroying my plans with the mayor. I can't believe you think you have a leg to stand on right now."

"They're my family, Leo. You can't possibly expect me to turn my back on them because of what my father's done."

"Why not?" I demand. "I'm your husband. Your father gave you to me under the guise of trying to form an alliance. He used you without a second thought for your safety. Meanwhile, I'm the one who scaled a cliff to save your life. I'm the one prepared to care for you and our child. And still, you think you owe *them* loyalty?"

"I just went to see my sister," she whispers, her tone wounded.

"Yeah, well, from where I stand, that's not much better since she's as blindly obedient to your father as you are."

The hurt that flashes across Tia's face almost makes me feel bad. Almost. But I'm so angry, I can't help but speak the brutal truth.

Rather than argue with my statement, she shifts topics this time, crossing her arms as she glares out the windshield once more. "It's inhumane to expect me to just sit in that big house all day, staying silent and doing nothing. And I can't help it that you happen to hate the only people I know and love. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Not fuck me over?" I growl, jerking the steering wheel with unnecessary force and skidding onto the gravel drive leading up to said house. Loose rocks crunch beneath the tires, and I slow to avoid spinning out as we reach the fountain at the courtyard's center.

Pulling to a stop, I throw the car in park and turn to look at Tia. But her hand is on the handle, and her door is open before I can say a word. I catch a glimpse of tears glimmering on her cheeks before she flees up the front steps and vanishes inside.

Sighing heavily, I get out and close my door. I follow her up the steps at a slower pace, glowering when I find Luigi with a stunned expression on his face. He seems surprised to have found her outside.

“My wife is to be watched twenty-four, seven until the Guerra conflict is resolved,” I growl.

“Yes, sir,” he agrees, straightening stiffly before following me inside.

“I’ll be in my office, cleaning up this mess. Tell Rasco and Johnny to find me there as soon as they arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

I don’t know what Tia might have said to her sister today, and I don’t have the time to focus on that now. All I can do is hope that it wasn’t enough to throw a further wrench in my plans because I have too much on my plate already.

With my father in the hospital, I’ll need to take up his responsibilities as well as my own, which means I need to restructure. It’s time for Johnny to step up.

Tia will just have to wait, and she better fucking be here when I’m ready to speak to her.

TIA



Collapsing onto the bed, I consider just how terribly things have fallen apart in twenty-four hours. Last night, I was dancing in Leo’s arms, happier than I ever imagined I could be. And today, it feels as though our marriage is more contentious than ever.

“What have you done, Tia?” I breathe, rolling onto my back. Sniffing, I wipe the tears from my cheeks as I stare up at the ceiling.

I feel terrible because, as much as I want to deny it, Leo’s right. It was a mistake to visit Maria. Not because my sister would do anything to hurt me or the man I love, but because I just can’t seem to stop screwing up.

And once again, I’m keeping something from Leo—that my father wants me to spy on my husband to help further the Guerra rebellion.

I won’t do it. I’m done feeding the conflict between our families.

But is that enough? Or is staying silent a betrayal of a different sort?

I’m not sure. All I know is that holding my tongue might hurt my husband, but saying something will surely condemn my family to death.

I wish I hadn’t given my father the ammo to hurt Leo in the first place. I hate that we could have had peace—that Leo seemed open to the idea of working together—but my

conviction to punish him from the start killed that possibility stone dead before it even had a chance.

And when I finally decided to put down my torch, my father chose to pick it up and shatter the trust between our families out of pride.

I never dreamed that Leo could be the more reasonable of the two. After years of hearing what a terrible person Leonardo Moretti was—and then experiencing it on the night I met him—I was so confident that destroying him would be the right thing.

But now it's clear to me that good and bad, right and wrong, are about as easy to distinguish as a rock sunk in the mud. Because the man I trusted to know these things has fallen so far in my esteem and in a terrifyingly short time. It guts me to know my father is as guilty of treachery and wanton violence as the man he's accused it of for years.

Still, in the car, I couldn't tell Leo about my father's plan to use me as a spy—even after Leo asked directly if I went to see my family. Because, despite everything, it terrifies me to think of giving my husband another reason to kill my father.

Releasing a heavy sigh, I comb my hair back from my face with my fingers.

Maybe Leo's right to suspect me. After all, I couldn't just manage a simple visit with my sister without getting myself into trouble. And now my father thinks he can manipulate me into betraying Leo once more.

Perhaps it would be best to cut ties with my family completely, to end communications with Maria to avoid making things worse. But I desperately want to find a way to make things right without shedding Moretti *or* Guerra blood. And my sister is the only person I trust to help me.

Sitting up, I pull my sister's phone from my pocket and stare down at the lock screen. It's an image of us together, my arm wrapped around her shoulders, our cheeks pressed together as we smile at the camera.

I recognize it from a few years back, when we were just messing around in our family's garden. My heart twinges to know that's the photo she chooses to keep on her phone. *If I can't put my faith in Maria, then who can I trust?* I've always believed in her more than I've even believed in myself. Together, we'll figure something out.

And hopefully, after the dust has settled, Leo will forgive me for keeping this one last secret from him.

Creeping over to my bedside table, I open the drawer and place Maria's phone at the very back. Covering it with the bits and bobs that roll freely around the tiny space, I tuck it away in case I need to communicate with her.

Then, I turn my attention back to the door of our suite.

Somehow, I doubt Leo intends to discuss things further. But once again, I feel trapped in limbo as I think about where we left things.

I hate it.

I hate knowing that Leo doesn't trust me anymore.

I hate that he has a reason to.

And I hate that, despite how much I love him, this rift between us might not be something I can mend. Not without losing my family.

I shouldn't have yelled at him. And I don't hate him—not even a little. I just desperately wish I didn't have to choose between him and the people I love most in this world.

Still, I have to fix what's broken between us.

At least I have to try.



LEO DOESN'T JOIN me for dinner when I come down at six thirty, and the dining room feels oppressively empty without him. I pick at the meal of roasted chicken breast on mashed

potatoes with asparagus, then finally call it quits when my anxiety leaves me too unsettled to eat much of anything.

I head back to our room to resume pacing, much like the night before. But as the night goes on, I think I might just go crazy if I have to spend another sleepless night waiting for Leo to come home.

Yanking the door open, I pad barefoot down the hall in search of Luigi. As if magically summoned, he appears around the corner a moment before I reach it. Stopping short, he draws himself up to his full height as I narrowly avoid slamming into him.

“Pardon, signora,” he says as my palm flies to my heart.

His tone is wooden, and I suspect that’s in no small part because I slipped out of the house this afternoon, right under his nose, when he told me to stay put. He likely got in trouble with Leo for failing to stop me.

“How are you always so quiet?” I ask incredulously, giving a breathy laugh to ease the tension. “One of these days, you’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“I’ll endeavor to make my presence better known,” he says, seeming to find my joke unamusing.

“No, no. It’s fine,” I assure him.

“Are you going somewhere?” he asks pointedly, his eyebrow raising in silent accusation.

“No, I...” Heat colors my cheeks as his mistrust hits home. “Sorry. I was just looking for you. I hoped you might tell me when my husband will be home.”

“He’s already here, signora,” he says frankly, and the statement makes my stomach drop.

Does that mean Leo’s avoiding me? It’s nearly nine o’clock. He’s already missed dinner. Perhaps he did so intentionally so he wouldn’t have to face me. Tears sting the back of my eyes at the thought of him choosing to stay in a guest room rather than talk to me. “Oh. I see. Thank you,

Luigi,” I breathe, turning back toward our room to hide my pain.

“I believe he’s in his office, signora,” he states, stopping my retreat. “If you wish to speak with him...” he adds.

I quickly turn to face the butler and think I catch the slightest glimmer of compassion in his eyes. “Thank you,” I say more emphatically this time. I give his forearm a quick squeeze before brushing past him, my heady relief wiping away my composure.

It’s pathetic, really, how desperately I need things between me and Leo to be okay. Not so long ago, I wouldn’t have cared what he thought of me. I’d planned on suffering in silence until the day I could be free of him—if that day ever came. Now, I just wish we could go back to the fleeting happiness we’d found.

Rounding the corner to the hall with his office, I take a deep, fortifying breath. The thought of approaching him after the way we left things in the car makes my heart beat faster. I know I need to be the one to start this conversation, and yet it’s incredibly nerve-racking.

I pause in front of his office door, trying to collect myself and my thoughts. I can hear low voices through the solid wood, which only intensifies my anxiety. I’ll be interrupting something. Perhaps I should come back later.

But I’m not sure I’ll have the nerve to try again.

Raising my hand, I rap my knuckles against the door before I can talk myself out of it.

“Come in,” Leo commands, his deep baritone distinct.

Biting my lip, I obey, turning the handle and pushing the door open.

Sharp hazel eyes find mine as Leo watches me from behind his desk. He looks powerful and dangerous, a king without mercy. And at the same time, he’s devastatingly handsome. The dark curls that fall across his forehead, his proud lips surrounded by a five-o’clock shadow that’s more prominent now than I’m used to.

Despite the chaos around us, Leo looks as striking as ever.

Two of his men who were working security at the ball stand before him. Both are tall and muscular, and they turn to look at me, stepping aside as I dare to cross the threshold. I don't know what they might know about me. But they were there when I stopped Leo from killing my cousin. And now they both watch me with curious eyes, their opinions inscrutable.

"We'll finish discussing this in the morning," Leo says curtly, drawing their eyes back to him.

He excuses them with a jerk of his chin. And they respond immediately. Both men give a slight nod of respect, first to their boss and then to me, before they slip silently from the room. The door clicks softly closed behind them as Leo turns his eyes to me once again.

It's a small gesture, sending his men away rather than making me wait. But putting my concerns before whatever their meeting was about means a lot to me. It makes me feel like I made the right decision to seek him out.

And at the same time, it makes my stomach tremble to be alone with him.

His gaze is guarded as he studies me, wordlessly questioning what could be so important that I feel the need to interrupt his work.

I know I need to start the conversation. But now that we're in the same room once again, I'm not sure I can face him. I don't know that I can say what needs to be said. My nerves are so intense, I'm struggling to find the words I chose just moments ago.

What if I make things worse?

That seems to be all I've done since the charity ball.

My lips part, but I falter, my eyes dropping to the floor as heat rushes to my face.

I can't do it. I seem to have completely lost my voice.

LEO



Tia's clearly uncomfortable. She stands before me, her head bowed, her cheeks flushed with emotion. But what she sought me out to say, I don't know because she seems lost for words. The frustration of her outburst in the car appears to have dissipated.

Instead, she almost looks contrite.

And though I have countless responsibilities weighing me down right now, if she's ready to talk, I want to hear it.

Unable to sit still and watch her struggle any longer—and need to rid myself of the tension that's been plaguing me since our argument—I stand from behind my desk and round it to stop in front of her.

“Speak, Tia,” I command, cupping her chin and guiding her eyes up to meet mine.

My heart squeezes when I find sadness there—not the hatred she professed to feeling this morning. Not the anger she unleashed in the car. Fresh tears pool along her dark lashes, threatening to spill over at any moment.

And despite all my frustration, all the anger over her father's betrayal, and the hurt of knowing Tia played some part in that, I hate to see her look so hopeless.

“I'm sorry, Leo,” she murmurs.

My eyebrows raise in astonishment, and I study her conflicted expression. An apology is the last thing I expected after our heated discussions surrounding her family. And

despite my frustration with her stubborn inability to see them for what they are, my guard lowers at the genuine look in her eyes.

“I lost my temper when I found out you took my phone away,” she explains. “I felt trapped, and I acted rashly. But I should have talked to you—like I wished you would have talked to me.”

My lips part as I release a heavy breath, but Tia rushes on before I can explain.

“I know why you did it. I handled things terribly this morning. I can hardly fault you for getting mad or reacting the way you did. But I can’t stay locked up here forever. I’ll go insane. But I swear you have my heart. I know I messed up, and I won’t make the same mistake again.”

Silence falls between us, and a single tear streaks down Tia’s cheek as she looks up at me imploringly. An iron fist closes around my heart, crushing the last of my fury.

Brushing the moisture from her skin with the pad of my thumb, I murmur, “Why are you crying?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you over this.” Tia’s voice hitches, revealing the pain within.

The cold ball of tension that’s knotted my stomach all afternoon releases all at once. And my heart swells at her sweet attempt to fix things between us.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, I pull her close. And as my fingers comb back into her thick locks, I kiss her tenderly. This woman is a salve for my soul. She puts me back together and tethers me to reason when I can’t anchor myself.

I know being with me isn’t easy—least of all when her family and mine have been at each other’s throats. But still, Tia hasn’t given up. And it moves me that she wants to keep me in her life.

When our lips meet, she melts into me, her hands sliding up my chest to rest upon my heart. And she kisses me like she never thought she would get to again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t speak to you about it beforehand. I’m not... a naturally trusting person, and the entire situation has me on edge. I don’t want to put you in a cage, Tia. I won’t indefinitely, but I think it’s necessary until I can get things back under control. I don’t trust your father. He’s proven perfectly capable of using you for his own benefit, and I want to keep you—and the baby—safe.”

Tia snuffles, the tears running more freely down her cheeks now, and the sight of her tears wring my heart.

“I don’t like isolating you, but I don’t know what else to do. You and Maria unwittingly became a part of a bigger plan, and that could happen again with how Don Guerra is acting. Even if I can trust you, I can’t take that chance.” My tone is imploring because, despite my confidence that it’s the right decision, I know what a difference Maria has made for Tia’s happiness.

She nods, the simple gesture easing the tension in my shoulders. Then she leans forward to rest her forehead against my chest, the hopeless gesture breaking down my defenses.

“Is there any way you can find it in your heart to spare my family? I know you need to reassert your authority, but it will break my heart if you kill my father.”

Her voice is soft, vulnerable. And it moves me deeply.

Sighing, I cradle her in my arms and press a kiss to the crown of her head. “I’ll think about it,” I promise.

Tia lifts her head to gaze up at me, then she rises onto her toes to kiss me—a silent show of gratitude that I can taste on her lips. And though we’ve kissed a hundred times before, this one feels more meaningful somehow.

It’s sweet and tender, yet quickly builds into something more passionate. Because as furious as I’ve been with Tia, as deeply as she’s hurt me, I don’t want to lose her either. And in this kiss, I can feel the rift between us mending, the distance vanishing.

Tia’s arms snake around my shoulders, pulling me closer. I go willingly, curving around her body as I hold her tight. Her

lips part, granting me better access, and I delve between them to stroke her tongue with my own.

Tia gasps, her muscles tightening as her fingers comb into my hair, and she tugs lightly even as she deepens our kiss.

It feels so good to touch her. To reconnect with her physically.

It's not just the passion of making up after a fight.

This is Tia and me walking through the fire so we can meld our souls together.

"Please don't hate me," Tia breathes against my lips.

"I could never hate you," I assure her, reclaiming her mouth with more insistence.

This precious woman in my arms is the best part of me. She makes me want to be a better man. And nothing she could do will change that. Because her heart is so good. I could forgive her anything.

It's not her fault who her family is. They're just lucky she's so loyal. Only Tia could make me reconsider my path of destruction. And for her, I find I would do almost anything.

Her touch is addictive; her kiss is a drug that sets my body on fire. And though I have a lot to accomplish before my responsibilities are done, I don't care.

Bending, I scoop one arm beneath her hips and spin her, shoving aside the items on my desk so I can set her on its surface. Tia gasps, our lips separating as her ass finds the cool mahogany beneath her. A breathless smile breaks across her face.

Wrapping her fingers around the collar of my shirt, she pulls me to her with gusto. I step forward, spreading her knees as I take her face with both hands. Her brown eyes find mine, a passion in them that makes me yearn to touch her. To find that deeper connection I feel every time I'm with her.

Leaning in, I consume her lips with greed.

She kisses me back just as hungrily, her tongue darting between my teeth.

Grasping her jean-clad hips, I pull her to the edge of the desk so I can grind forward against her. Tia whimpers, the sound making my cock throb to life.

“God, you’re fucking *irresistible*,” I groan.

She nips my lower lip in response, and her legs wrap around my hips, her ankles hooking behind me. “Come to bed?” she breathes, kissing me sweetly in an effort to entice me.

Not that I need any encouragement.

But I shake my head.

Tia draws back, her brows pressing into a worried frown, but before she can get too far into her head, I grasp the back of her neck and growl, “I intend to have you right here on my desk.”

A violent shiver ripples through Tia, and her lips part in a sensual gasp. Then she’s shoving my suit jacket over my shoulders, silently commanding me to take it off. I shrug out of it, tossing it aside without a care.

Tia’s nails graze my throat as she grabs my tie, loosening it with a determined tug. At the same time, she pulls me forward to kiss me like our lives depend on it.

Sliding my hands beneath her shirt, I guide the soft fabric up her body. She lets me strip her willingly, raising her arms over her head as I remove her blouse in one fluid motion. She’s so trim and soft, the modest swells of her breasts rising with each breath as I admire her delicate lace-wrapped skin.

I pause to revel in her beauty for a moment, captivated by her effortless perfection. And when I look up, she’s watching me with fire burning in her eyes. Planting my hands on either side of her hips, I lean in to claim her lips once again. As soon as they meet in a searing kiss, she grasps the front of my shirt and rips it open. Buttons ping across the room.

I growl, my cock pressing adamantly against my zipper now. I fucking love this fiery side of her. It turns me on like nobody's business. And even if my wife can be a stubborn, rebellious pain in the ass, when it comes down to it, I'd rather have this bold, fierce goddess than a meek, simpering girl who won't fight for what she believes in.

Tia guides my shirt back over my shoulders, and I toss the ruined fabric aside. Then I wrap one arm around her waist. With the other, I reach behind her to sweep my desk clean.

"Leo!" she gasps, looking at the mess of papers and office supplies that litter the floor. Then, a breathy laugh of surprise bubbles up past her lips.

"What?" I ask playfully, leaning in to press kisses to the soft skin of her neck.

Tia groans appreciatively, tipping her head as she leans back on her palms, granting me better access. Reaching behind her, I unclasp her bra and slide the thin straps down her arms. Then my fingers go to work on the button of her jeans.

Stealing one last searing kiss, I place my palm over her heart, and my body throbs to feel its frantic rhythm. It doesn't matter what's been said or done. Tia's body will always tell me the truth, and the erratic flutter of her pulse confirms she wants me as much as I want her.

Pressing gently against her chest, I break our kiss as I lie her back across my desk. And Christ, she looks beautiful with her milky skin against the dark wood, her back arched, her taut nipples on display.

"I might just have to make you a permanent addition; you make my desk look so much more appealing to use," I tease.

Then I yank her jeans down over her hips, stripping her naked.

TIA



My heart hammers at the lust in Leo’s eyes, and as I lie across his desk, naked and entirely exposed, I’m equal parts relieved and aroused. Despite arguing, Leo and I seem capable of finding our way back to each other. Even through the challenges we face.

Not many couples have to confront the issues threatening to drive a wedge between me and Leo. And when it’s a question of life or death—literally—our disagreement felt insurmountable. But with Leo’s promise to try and spare my family, suddenly, things don’t feel so hopeless after all.

And while we’re far from through this mess, I can sense the barriers between us melting away beneath the heat of our connection.

I breathe heavily as Leo licks and sucks his way up my inner thigh, igniting my excitement and making my core throb. Hot breath whispers across my clit, and I moan as he tempts me with bliss, only to leave me hanging, desperately craving his lips.

“Are you ready for me, love?” he teases, his hazel eyes glinting as he stands tall to look down on me.

My heart skips a beat as he removes his belt with a snap. Then his fly zips open, and he shoves his pants down.

“Yes,” I breathe, nodding emphatically as my core tightens.

Grasping my thighs, Leo pulls me to the edge of his desk and wraps my legs around his hips. Then, his silken tip strokes between my slick folds to find my entrance. I'm so wet with excitement that he slides inside me with one powerful thrust, and I cry out as pleasure crackles up my spine.

"*Fuck, Tia,*" he groans, falling forward to brace his palms against the desk.

I love the way he says my name, as if calling upon a deity.

My chest heaves as air races past my lips. Gripping his arms to anchor myself, I tighten my legs around him, pulling Leo deeper into my depths. We groan together, and as he starts to rock in and out of me, he dips his shoulders to capture one nipple between his lips.

I gasp, my back arching as electric bliss raises goosebumps across my flesh. My clit throbs, and I climb quickly toward release. Each penetrating thrust sends me into a frenzy, my nerves tingling with anticipation.

My hips roll instinctually. Finding Leo's rhythm, I grind against him, seeking even more friction. A growl rumbles from his chest, making my stomach quiver. And when he presses inside me more adamantly, I reach my climax within seconds.

I sob as euphoria floods my body, washing away my troubles as it sweeps me into sweet oblivion. And when Leo's chest finds mine, pressing me against the solid desk, I greedily capture his lips.

His cock continues to drive into my depths as my walls pulse, gripping him forcefully and begging him to follow me into this heavenly escape.

"Good girl," he murmurs against my lips.

The praise fills me with intense satisfaction, and I'm shocked at how rewarding it is to know this is what Leo wants. I can hear it in the low rasp of his voice—he's savoring my pleasure. And that draws out the throbbing release, leaving me panting and breathless in its wake.

My legs tremble, suddenly weak in the aftermath of my powerful orgasm. I can feel Leo's lips curl into a smile. Then his arms snake beneath me, lifting me from the desk. My feet barely touch the floor before he's turning me to face away from him.

Hands sliding down my arms, he guides my palms to the smooth surface, silently telling me to brace against it. Then he scoops my hair over one shoulder so he can feast on my neck. Heat gushes through my core.

He presses a knee between my thighs, spreading them. And when Leo's silken head finds my entrance from behind, I'm so wet, the arousal drips down the inside of my leg.

"You're so fucking sexy when you're turned on," he growls.

"Yeah?" I whimper needily.

"Yeah." He nips my earlobe, his chest pressing lightly against my shoulder blades as he wraps his body around mine.

Then, grasping my hips, he pushes inside of me once more. The force presses me forward into his desk, and I brace more firmly against him. Pushing back, I relish the way his thick girth slides in and out of me. And every time he fills me, his hard tip finds that spot that drives me wild.

I'm still reeling from my first orgasm, but I can feel a second one quickly building deep inside my belly. I love the way Leo claims my body, the way he demands my pleasure and knows exactly how to get it.

I don't need to have known another man to realize that Leo is a master. He owns me, body and soul, in the only way I could ever want to be possessed.

"Oh, god!" I gasp as his powerful thrusts drive me toward the precipice.

"God has nothing to do with this," he growls. "Say my name, Tia, and I'll let you come."

"Please, Leo," I moan, beside myself at the dangerously low, seductive sound of his voice.

His hands slide up from my hips, exploring my stomach before finding my tender breasts. And as he palms the swollen flesh, his fingers and thumbs lightly pinch and roll my nipples. They're still sore from my pregnancy hormones, and even the little bit of attention blasts through me in a heady combination of pain and euphoria.

Sobbing as my clit throbs, desperate for release, I arch back against Leo, filling his hands. My hips tip, allowing him to penetrate me deeply. And I come hard as his cock buries inside me.

Air hisses between his teeth, and his lips close over the tender skin behind my ear. Sucking it brutally into his mouth, he works my body, kneading my breasts as he pounds through the throbbing spasms of my climax.

My knees tremble, my breaths shuddering from me as I milk his cock again and again. Still, he doesn't slow. I ache to feel him come inside me. I crave the satisfaction of knowing he's as well-satiated as I am. And at the same time, I never want this to end.

I can barely stand; I'm so weak with relief, and as my legs buckle, Leo's arms catch me.

"You okay, love?" he asks, his fingers splayed across my chest and abdomen as he holds me firmly against him.

I release a breathy laugh. "More than okay. My legs are just jelly."

Chuckling darkly, Leo releases a low hum of appreciation. Then he lowers me onto the desk until I'm bent over it, my breasts pressed against the hard surface with my ass on full display. Strong hands slide languorously down my back, following the curve of my waist and hips.

I reach across the flat top to grasp the far edge of Leo's desk and gratefully press my feverish cheek to the cool surface. From this angle, Leo's erection feels that much bigger, and I moan as he rocks inside me.

"Fuck, you feel amazing," he rasps.

“Mm-hmm,” I whimper, my clit pulsing as the blood surges through my sex.

I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve come since Leo came home early this morning, and I’m starting to feel it in the ache between my legs. But it feels so good; I don’t want him to stop.

And when Leo reaches around to play with my clit, I absolutely lose my mind.

The cry of ecstasy that bursts from me is long and mewling, a groan that I try to muffle with my shoulder against my lips.

“Don’t you dare hold back,” Leo commands, his fingers tangling in my hair to gently force my head back.

His hold leaves me feeling shockingly vulnerable, like I’m utterly at his mercy. And the thrill of how he controls my body intensifies my excitement. Because even as he dominates me, he’s demanding my pleasure.

His fingers circle and flick my clit, his cock driving inside me to find that spot that makes me quake. And the light tug at the roots of my hair launches me into ecstasy.

“Come with me,” I plead, my walls tightening around him in anticipation.

Leo groans, the sound carnal and on the brink of agony. He releases my hair, collapsing forward until his body brushes lightly across my back.

“As you wish,” he breathes against my ear.

I turn my head to find his lips and capture the full lower one between my teeth as I find my release. And as I clamp down around his cock, it swells and stiffens. His hips jerk forward, slamming against me, and he grunts as hot seed pours inside me.

Clit pulsing against his fingers, walls fluttering around his hard length; I come with him simultaneously, relishing how perfectly in sync we are.

Tingling euphoria washes out to the tips of my fingers and toes. And as we still, I can feel the strength of Leo's heartbeat pounding against my spine. Hot breaths pass between us as I release his lip. And when I open my eyes, his hazel gaze is alight with passionate emotion.

"Out of all the women in the world I could have been stuck with, how did I get so fucking lucky to get you?" he breathes.

I smile playfully, though I can't help the hint of sadness that tightens my chest. "I suppose you'll just have to learn to take the bad with the good."

Releasing a breath through his nose, Leo leans in to brush a kiss across my lips. "It'll all work out in the end."

I sure hope so. Because I can't stand the anxiety of having so many things that are precious to me on the line. "I love you, Leo," I murmur, a knot forming in my throat.

"I love you too, *bella mia*," he assures me, collecting me in his arms.

He presses a last kiss to my temple, then eases out of me, leaving a hollow ache in his absence. Stepping back, he reaches down to pull his pants back up around his hips. Taking a shuddering breath, I wait until I'm sure I've regained my balance, then I stoop to collect his shirt and belt.

With a coy smile, I slip into the buttonless button-down and close the flaps across my chest. Leo's eyebrow quirks, his lips twisting with amusement as I use his belt to fashion the shirt into a makeshift dress.

"I take it you'll be keeping that?"

Dipping to gather my pants and shirt, I give a light, "Mm-hmm."

Leo chuckles, shaking his head as he scoops his suit jacket up off the floor. He hands it to me without a word, and as soon as I take it, he pulls my hips to his.

"Go get ready for bed. I'll join you shortly," he promises.

Rising onto my tiptoes, I lean in to steal a quick kiss.

Then I turn and slip through his office door, feeling lighter than a feather.

LEO



In the early hours of the morning, I rise from my deep pool of troubled dreams, feeling as though I haven't slept a wink. It's dark still, the sky outside our bedroom window an inky shade of blue with only a hint of light blossoming along the horizon.

Reaching to the bedside table without disturbing the pillow Tia's made out of my chest, I check the time. Five thirty. I don't need to be up for another half hour, but I can't go back to sleep. Every time I do, I find Don Guerra kneeling before me, the barrel of my gun pressed to his forehead. Or worse, Tia covering him protectively with her body.

"I'll never forgive you," she says in my dreams, her flat, hate-filled voice haunting my waking thoughts.

Still, my desire to crush the man responsible for all this havoc is almost unbearable. The only thing keeping Don Guerra alive is his daughter. And I'm plagued by the possibility that I could lose her if I follow through with what needs to be done.

This conflict between our families could drive a wedge between me and Tia that I might not be able to overcome. Until now, I've never thought twice about making a decision to better my standing as the leader of the Morettis. That's the premise Piovosa was founded on, for Christ's sake. It's how every great family has made their name in our mountain town.

But with Tia's happiness at stake, I find myself debating what the right path might be. *Can I put the Guerras in their*

place, like I ought to, if it means Tia will hate me? I'm not so sure.

I look down at her tranquil face, her cheek resting on my pec as if it were her safe place. My heart throbs whenever I think of hurting her. All I really want to do is spend my time giving her pleasure.

Running the pad of my thumb along her cheekbone, I savor her silky skin and trace the soft lines of her features. *“Bella mia.”*

Tia hums, her lips curling into a soft smile, though she doesn't seem to wake. Instead, her hand searches blindly for mine. When I give it to her, she rolls over, turning her back to me as she pulls my arm around her shoulders like a blanket.

A chuckle rumbles in my chest at her sleepy insistence that we spoon. I hold her like that for several minutes, soaking up the warmth of her back against my chest. My cock is already at full mast, pressing between her cheeks as she pushes her hips back until she finds me.

Christ, she turns me on. Even when she's not trying. Lifting onto my forearm, I press my lips to her shoulder and slowly work my way up the curve of her neck. Tia gasps, her hips rolling with dreamy arousal. But her eyes stay closed, her face soft in her sleeping contentment.

I should let her rest. She's nearing the end of her first trimester, after all, and I imagine growing a life has to be taxing work. But I want to spend my spare minutes giving her pleasure, soaking up her smiles while I'm still worthy of them.

Easing away from her, I slink beneath the covers. Then, gently grasping her knee, I slowly guide her legs open until she settles onto her back. She murmurs something unintelligible, making me grin.

And resting her knees on my shoulders, I lean in to lick her perfect pink slit.

Sweet tang coats her folds as I repeat the gesture, then wrap my lips around her clit and start to suck. Tia groans more audibly now, her thighs tensing as her hips roll. I hum

appreciatively at the sexy motion, my cock twitching at the unmistakable sign of arousal.

“Leo,” she moans, and I don’t know what would please me more—that she’s dreaming of me while I’m going down on her or that she’s awake and clearly wanting me.

The groan that follows sends a jolt of anticipation straight to my balls. Gripping her hips more firmly, I circle her clit with my tongue. Then I release it to press my tongue inside her wet entrance.

The covers fly back past my head, and without pausing in my tantalizing breakfast, I look up the length of Tia’s blue silk nightie to find her sleepy, lust-filled gaze.

“Morning,” I breathe playfully across her sensitive flesh.

She whimpers, her head falling back onto her pillow as her fingers curl around our sheets. “Wake me like this every day?” she begs, her voice breathy and oozing with need.

I chuckle, licking her slit once again and relishing the way she squirms beneath my hands. Her legs quiver, and her fingers comb into my hair, giving it a light tug that both arouses me and silently guides me upward.

Pressing a last kiss to her clit, I obey, stalking up the length of her body until my hips settle between her thighs.

Our lips meet, and my cock throbs as we share the taste of her pussy, which lingers on my tongue. When Tia moans greedily, I deepen the kiss and find her breast with my palm. Kneading the supple flesh, I tease her nipple into a hard point. Then, I slowly make my way down the soft fabric until I find the hem of her nightie.

She lifts her hips, allowing me to guide it up around her waist. And after sitting up to let me strip her, she goes to work removing my boxer briefs. Her eyes light with anticipation as my cock springs free, and when I ease on top of her, she wraps her arms around me.

Today, rather than the frantic sex that comes after an argument, I take it slowly.

Hooking her knees with my elbows, I spread her legs, guiding her thighs open and her feet up to my shoulders so she's fully exposed. Then I line up with her entrance and push inside her one inch at a time.

Gasping, Tia grips me tightly, her walls spasming as I fill her like we have all the time in the world. Her fingers press into my back muscles, sending tingles up and down my spine. And when I'm buried inside her to the hilt, I pause to appreciate the soft moan that escapes her lips.

I rock slowly inside her, savoring the pleasure of our bodies intertwined. Each motion arouses me further, the way she arches her back, her hips shifting as her legs flex. The friction combined with the magnetic connection between us makes the soft intimacy of making love all the more powerful.

It feels so good to please Tia, I can hardly contain myself. My instincts urge me to drive harder, to take her with all the passion building in my chest. But each euphoric movement is so potent, that I don't want to change a thing.

"You feel so good," Tia breathes against my lips, voicing my thoughts.

A rumbling confirmation rises from my chest as her soft words turn me on to the point of leaving me speechless. For her sake, I want to last all fucking morning. But right now, I'm so aroused I could come at any moment.

"Oh god, Leo, you're gonna make me come!" she gasps, the sound tortured.

Her back arches, her breasts pressing into my chest, and the feel of her hard nipples grazing my skin sends me over the edge.

"Fuck," I grunt as the pressure building at the base of my spine explodes.

Closing my lips on the tender skin behind her ear, I suck as I bury myself inside her and release my seed in several throbbing bursts. Fireworks light the inside of my eyelids as I come hard and fast, and I groan as Tia whimpers. Then her pussy clamps down around me like a vise.

It feels insanely good to have her gripping me, milking every last drop of my cum inside her body. And she trembles beneath me, her shuddering breaths raising the hair on the back of my neck.

Sex with Tia has always been beyond pleasurable. But this nearly drives me out of my mind. She's so sinfully sensual, so soft yet passionate. I could live to be inside her, to feel her euphoria and know that I'm the master of her ecstasy.

Her fingers stroke lightly up and down my spine, sending tingling relief through my chest and core as I breathe heavily, relishing her supple warmth beneath me. Slowly, I release her legs, letting them settle onto the bed.

And rising onto my forearms, I peer into her captivating onyx gaze.

“Good morning,” she responds finally, a sultry, satisfied smile gracing her luscious lips.

I chuckle, leaning in to kiss her gently. Continuing the attention, I kiss a trail down her neck and between her perfect breasts, drawing soft, melodic laughter from her as she combs her fingers into my hair.

I don't stop until I reach her stomach, where the sweetest hint of a baby bump has started to develop. Curious if I might hear anything, I turn to rest my ear over her navel. And though it's silent, I can bring forth with perfect clarity the sound of our baby's heartbeat on the ultrasound machine.

It makes my chest ache with joy to know Tia's carrying our child. I'd never realized it could mean so much to me. Of course, I'd imagined I would have a wife and family someday. Eventually.

But how I got to have Tia as that wife—to know this tiny, innocent being is what brought us together—makes me want to shower our baby with all I have to offer. I will cherish her with every fiber of my being.

My lips curl into a smile as I realize I've started to think of our baby as a girl by default—because that's what Tia believes it is.

“Good morning, *amoruccio*,” I murmur against Tia’s creamy flesh, covering her tummy with one palm and splaying my fingers as if to cradle our unborn child. “I know it’s not time just yet, but I can’t wait to meet you.”

I glance up at Tia and find her eyes shining with a love that melts my heart. I press my lips to her belly again and turn my attention back to our child. I don’t know if the baby can even hear me, but I like the thought that she might grow familiar with my voice, that she might get to know it even now.

“You’re so loved, *piccola*. And you’re so blessed, do you know? To have a mamma like yours. Will you help me look after her?”

Tia tsks, her fingers combing through my hair affectionately.

“We’re going to spoil you rotten. And give you lots of brothers and sisters to play with. Would you like that, *principessa*? A big family of our own?”

A family that will bring us together even if our families can’t find peace.

“You want lots of children?” Tia asks softly, reclaiming my attention.

I look up to meet her eyes and find them glimmering with tears. The emotion in them tugs at my heartstrings. “I’ve always thought it would be nice to have siblings, so I pictured having more than one.”

It was lonely growing up as an only child—especially after my mother died. And Tia seems so close to her sisters, I assumed she would want that for our own family. But suddenly, I wonder if I’m wrong. Maybe she doesn’t want children. It puts a knot in my stomach to think I’ve taken that choice from her. I won’t be like my father, so driven to have heirs that I’m willing to put Tia’s health or happiness on the line.

“Do you not want that?” I ask, fighting to keep the disappointment from my voice.

TIA



Watching Leo speak to our unborn child fills me with warmth. His sweet profession of love brings tears to my eyes. It fascinates me that he can be so brutal at some moments and so tender at others. And seeing the vulnerability in his hazel gaze now, as he waits for my answer, rocks me to my very core.

I captured a glimpse of his fatherly devotion the day he saved my life—when Dr. Luca performed an ultrasound to check on our baby’s health, and Leo heard its heartbeat for the first time.

But now, the flicker of anxiety that he quickly masks reveals a hope for a family I hadn’t realized he possessed. Until now, I hadn’t fathomed that Leo even thought about wanting children. I felt thrust upon him, a responsibility he accepted and a bride he was coming to terms with.

Suddenly, I feel so much more precious—like I’m the prize this unexpected baby has brought him. And I’m bearing the gift he craves most in this world.

“I want lots of children,” I confirm tearily.

Leo releases a heavy breath as if in relief. Then he shifts to hover over me once again. “Then why are you crying?” he asks, his tone a blend of affection and incredulousness.

I laugh as a tear leaks from the corner of my eye, and I brush it away impatiently. “I don’t know. Because I’m pregnant? And hearing you talk to our baby made me so happy.”

Leo chuckles softly, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’ll have to remember that,” he promises and leans in to kiss me passionately.

I hum with appreciation, savoring his affection and wishing he might spend the morning in bed with me. “What are your plans for the day?” I ask when he finally breaks the kiss.

“Business,” he says simply. Then he presses a kiss to my forehead and rolls out of bed.

Trying not to feel the slight of his notably vague answer, I pull the sheets protectively up around my body and watch him stalk confidently toward our bathroom.

“Are you going to visit your father?” I try for casual, though the topic somehow feels off-limits—like I’m treading into personal territory where I don’t belong. “I haven’t had the chance to, and I would like to check in on him. If I’m allowed.” I swallow hard, my eyes dropping to the bed as my heart beats harder.

Leo pauses in the doorway. His body of Adonis looks glorious in his naked perfection as I dare to glance up through my lashes. And when our eyes meet, he seems to soften.

“I’ll swing by to pick you up later in the afternoon. We can go see him together.”

I smile in relief, the anxiety melting from my shoulders. I’m grateful that he’s willing to let me out of the house—even for a little while—and I’m glad I’ll get to see Don Moretti. The fact that he’s in the hospital because of my family has set like a burning coal at the back of my mind. “That sounds great.”

With a single nod, Leo turns and vanishes into the bathroom, leaving me to settle back into my pillows. As the early-morning sun filters in through the window, it leaves me feeling warm and more at ease than I would have thought possible just twenty-four hours ago.

We might be far from on stable footing, but at least it feels like Leo and I are back on the right path. I hate that mistrust

still lingers between us. But I get the sense that we have a good chance of mending things because we both want that.

Covering my belly with my palms, I silently thank our child for bringing us together against all odds. And for the first time, I feel like Leo and I can really get through this—we can get through almost anything—because this baby is what matters most.



WHETHER IT'S the result of such taxing events and a roller coaster of emotions over the last forty-eight hours or the fact that Leo and I have found our way back to each other and I can now feel more at ease, I sink into a peaceful sleep before he's even out of the shower.

He must have chosen to let me rest because the next thing I know, it's well past midday. I stretch across the bed, relishing the slight ache in my muscles and between my thighs from having enjoyed so much time with Leo.

Sighing in my contentment, I take a moment to relive my favorite parts of our intimacy. And at the top of the list is Leo pressing his ear to my belly and talking to our baby this morning.

Humming blissfully, I roll out of bed, take a shower, and brush my teeth. I get dressed to be ready for the hospital whenever Leo comes to pick me up. Then I head to the kitchen to satisfy my rumbling stomach.

That's where Luigi finds me a short time later, the remains of a sandwich clasped between my fingers.

"Master Leo is here to take you to the hospital, signora," he says, his back straight, his shoulders in their customarily stiff position.

"Thank you, Luigi," I say, hopping up from my bar stool and cramming the last of my sandwich in my mouth before rounding the counter to quickly wash my hands.

Then, I head straight for the grand foyer with its mirrored wall and crystal chandelier. Leo's waiting for me there, that poised intelligence on his face as he stands nearly in the same spot where I first met him. He still cuts the same daunting figure as he did that night—his demeanor is commanding, powerful, and it makes my pulse quicken with nerves.

But now, I know a hidden side to him, a softer one that's capable of melting my heart.

“Ready?” he asks, his hazel eyes seeming to catch even the slightest details.

“Mm-hmm,” I say, my heart fluttering as I stop in front of him, and his eyes drop to my lips.

A smile curls the corners of his mouth, and he reaches up to cup my chin. Then his thumb brushes my cheek, and I watch as he draws the digit to his mouth and sucks. “Peanut butter and jelly?” he asks playfully.

Heat radiates through me, and I scrub at the side of my mouth with my palm. “With pickles,” I admit, perfectly aware of how strange the pregnancy craving must sound.

Leo chuckles, reclaiming my chin, and this time, he tips it up to kiss me full on the mouth. “Come on. Let's get going. The hospital called to tell me my father's awake. I'm sure he'll be glad for the company.”

Taking my hand, Leo interlaces our fingers and guides me out into the warm summer sunshine and down to his Ferrari.

“Are you going to drive like a maniac again?” I ask suspiciously, my stomach fluttering as he opens the passenger-side door.

“Do you want me to?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow.

“Maybe not.” I press a palm to my stomach protectively, and his eyes capture the gesture before softening.

Wordlessly, he leans in and kisses me again. Then he waits as I slip into the car and closes my door for me.

It's a quick drive to the hospital, and Leo leads me to the ICU. It doesn't pass my notice that the name Moretti is printed

above several doors leading to various wings of Piovoza General. I hadn't realized they must have poured a good deal of funding into the hospital, and it warms my chest as I glance surreptitiously up at my husband from the corner of my eye.

Two rather intimidating guards stand outside Don Moretti's room, and Leo greets them by name before ushering me inside. There, a nurse hovers over Leo's father, helping him find a more comfortable position.

"Thank you," he says gruffly, excusing her as his eyes land on us. "Leo, good. You're here, and I see you've brought your lovely wife to visit me."

"I hope that's alright," I say, striding forward as the nurse departs with a polite nod.

My heart squeezes as I settle into the chair beside his bed to take his hand. I'm shocked to see the state Leo's father is in. Leo had said he got shot, and I knew he was in the hospital, but he's hooked up to chords and beeping monitors, and he looks rather sickly and wan.

Though roughly the same size as Leo, he looks as though he's lost weight even in the last few days—likely from the stress of his surgery. His skin hangs loosely from his usually quite handsome face.

And he looks as though he's aged overnight. With the same Roman nose and angular jaw as his son, I'd always thought he would be a good representation of what Leo might look like twenty years from now. But today, his black hair is far more gray, the lines on his face more prominent, making him look closer to sixty. It troubles me to see the powerful don in such a haggard state.

"How do you feel?" I ask, my concern seeping into my tone as I squeeze his palm and meet his amber gaze.

"Fine, fine," he growls. "It'll take more than the bastards you call family to kill me."

Embarrassment radiates through me, heating my cheeks, but I'm glad to see Don Moretti's strong enough to throw a punch, and I laugh. "Glad to hear it," is all I can think to say.

Leo's hands fall on my shoulders and give a soft yet reinforcing squeeze. "Have you spoken with the doctor?"

"Sounds like they took out all the lead and stitched me up as best they can. Where do things stand with the mayor?"

"Shot to hell after things went sideways at the charity ball. I don't imagine that relationship can be mended, so we'll need to change our course of action."

"Plan B, then?" Leo's father asks.

Their intentionally vague language feels pointed, though Don Moretti never acknowledges me. I try not to let it feel personal. We're in the hospital, after all. There could be countless reasons not to discuss business in this current setting.

"And the police?"

"I've got it under control. Johnny's taking over a few of my less pressing responsibilities, so I can act as don until you return."

"Good." Marco Moretti sinks back into his pillows, the tension seeming to ease from his shoulders at the rapid-fire exchange.

And suddenly, it hits me that I don't think I've ever witnessed Leo and his father share a tender moment. Even now, when the don has only just woken from a near-fatal bullet, they're talking about the family business. Leo spent the entire night in the hospital, waiting to hear if his father would survive surgery. And now that he has, it's just back to life as usual.

It's as if their rule is Leo's sole connection to his father, the only reason they communicate.

It breaks my heart.

Thinking back to this morning, I recall how Leo spoke so lovingly to my tummy. How he promised to spoil our baby and give her a big family—and assured her that she was so deeply loved.

I hope we can break out of our parents' mold. I want to raise our child with open affection and kindness—and maybe even set aside the ambition of ruling over territories to teach our children that there are more important things in life.

We stay with Don Moretti a little longer as he and Leo discuss the family business and their plans moving forward. And when we leave, Leo assures his father he'll be back as soon as they've made headway.

Leo places his hand on the small of my back as I rise, and he guides me into the hallway and past his father's silent sentries.

"Thanks for letting me come see him with you," I murmur, wishing I could have done more.

"I'm glad you wanted to." He presses a quick kiss to my temple, and then he pulls me closer as a mischievous grin spreads across his face. "Since we're out, are you up for another stop?"

My stomach somersaults at the playful question. "Sure. What did you have in mind?"

He winks, sending my nerves into a tizzy. "It's a surprise."

LEO



Taking Tia into the heart of downtown Piovosa, I pull up to the curb in front of Arthur Mae’s—a designer boutique known for fine women’s apparel. Rounding the front of my car, I open the door for Tia and offer her a hand.

She accepts it with a smile and continues to scan the street in search of where our adventure will lead. When I turn toward the boutique, Tia glances up at me in surprise.

“We’re going shopping?”

“You’ll need a dress for where we’re going next,” I hint.

Excitement colors her cheeks as her smile grows. Yes, this was a good choice. Getting Tia out of the house was necessary to salvage our relationship. Because while I can’t trust her to her own devices completely, I don’t want her to feel like a prisoner, either.

I may have a thousand and one things on my mind right now, but it’s worth taking some time out of my schedule to see her smile.

The bell over the door tinkles softly as we enter, and a tall blonde strides forward with a red smile to greet us. “Welcome to Arthur Mae’s. Can I help you find anything today?” Her eyes flick between us before settling on me.

“We’re here to pick out a nice evening dress for my wife,” I say, letting my hand rest on the small of Tia’s back.

“Of course.” The blonde nods politely and turns her attention to Tia. “You look like a size four. Do you have any

style preferences you would like me to pull from the rack?”

“Um...” Tia glances up at me for guidance.

“Let’s have some fun. Why don’t you bring her some fashion week favorites? We’ll peruse in the meantime.”

“Very good,” the boutique employee says, getting to work.

“I have plenty of nice dresses at home,” Tia points out as we find a rack of elegant evening gowns—some with lace, others with sequins or frills, all with chic patterns meant to flatter the wearer’s figure.

“Yes, but I owe you one,” I state simply. I still regret letting my temper get the best of me and releasing it on the stunning black dress Tia wore to the charity ball. It’s ruined beyond repair, and while it’s just a dress, I did appreciate the way it hugged Tia and accentuated her curves.

“You don’t owe me anything, Leo,” Tia insists, her voice quiet. From the expression on her face, I know she’s thinking of my father sitting wounded in the hospital. It’s the same troubled guilt she wore when we first entered his room. She’s bearing the responsibility for what her family has done.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pull her back against my chest and press a kiss to her neck from behind. “I can buy my wife a pretty dress whenever I feel like it. But if you’re going to disagree with me, I could just have you wear nothing at all.”

Tia gasps. “Leo!” she scolds, turning in my arm to smack my shoulder.

I chuckle, leaning in to steal a kiss.

She kisses me back, her body pressing against mine as her fingers comb into my hair. Then, she breaks away to turn toward the rack once more. “What about this one?” she suggests after a moment, pulling out a sunshine yellow silk dress with an open back.

“Definitely,” I agree.

I take it from her, allowing her to keep looking while I pass her selections on to the blonde stylist. Once Tia’s had a

chance to search the store, she heads into the dressing room. I settle onto the blush couch that forms a semicircle around the trifold mirror and circular stage for shoppers to stand on and get a look at their outfits.

“Would you like a glass of champagne while you wait?” the blonde offers as Tia gets to work in the changing room.

“Yes, thank you.”

One by one, Tia comes out of the dressing room to show off her possibilities, her smile radiant as she admires the fine options she and the stylist have picked out. It’s a good variety, each showcasing her beauty in different ways—a long-sleeve black velvet bodycon dress that barely reaches mid thigh with keyhole cutouts that draw my eyes, a red lace-bodice off-the-shoulder dress with frilly layers of fabric that form a tapered skirt, a nude halter-neck dress with beading that glints and catches the light at the slightest movement.

But the sunshine-yellow silk mermaid-cut dress with a scooping neckline and a two-inch train is by far and away the winner. I nearly spit my champagne when she exits the dressing room in it.

Tia looks absolutely breathtaking. The soft fabric almost glows, its color contrasting beautifully with her dark hair. I can tell she’s without a bra from the way her taut nipples raise the fabric, and my cock throbs at the thought of undressing her at the end of the night.

“I think this is the one,” she says, stepping up onto the pedestal and twirling to reveal the low-cut back. Then she levels me with an excited twinkle in her eyes as she looks for my approval.

“Definitely that one,” I agree.

Finishing off the last of my champagne, I pass the glass to the blonde who’s been helping us and rise to stand behind Tia so I can admire her fully. Before she can turn, I snatch the tag and remove it pointedly.

“This dress looks like it was made for you,” I murmur, finding Tia’s eyes in the mirror as my hands rest on her hips.”

Her cheeks color to a striking shade of rose, and I press a kiss to her temple.

“We’ll need a pair of heels to match,” I say to the sales associate, passing her the dress’s tag.

She nods and departs without a word, returning with a pair of gold heels a moment later.

We leave the store a short time later, Tia’s casual outfit packed in a bag and her new dress sheathing her body. The sun hangs low in the sky, intensifying the golden glow of Tia’s outfit.

“Hungry?” I ask, tossing her bag into the back seat of the car.

“Starved,” she admits, sliding into the passenger side.

“Good.”

I take us to the Sky Lounge, one of the nicest restaurants Piovosa has to offer, with a view that’s to die for. Built on the top floor of the Grand Hotel, its walls are made entirely of glass, offering a 360-degree view of the city below and the mountains that loom in the distance. We ride the elevator up in silence, though anticipation crackles between us.

And Tia’s eyes light up as soon as the doors open to the rooftop lounge. She openly admires the fine dining establishment, her gaze traveling around the room. A pianist sits in front of a baby grand that occupies one corner. White tablecloths decorated with fine china fill the space. And chic, glimmering wishing ball lights are strung from the ceiling like stars to create a romantic, ethereal atmosphere.

“This place is magical,” Tia observes.

“Have you never been here before?”

She shakes her head mutely, continuing to appreciate the view. I’m somewhat surprised, considering how wealthy her family is. This seems like it would be a prime spot for Don Guerra to take his family. Then again, he is notorious for keeping his daughters sequestered away. And my family does

frequent the Sky Lounge—which would make it less appealing to someone who so blatantly considers me an enemy.

We stop in front of the host stand, and the host greets us with a polite bow.

“Signor Moretti. Signora, welcome to the Sky Lounge. Your table is ready for you if you’ll follow me.” He gestures in the direction we’re heading, his demeanor as slick and put-together as his glossy black hair.

I would expect nothing less from the finest dining establishment in Piovosa.

The host pulls out a chair for Tia, and we settle in at the table that sits next to the window.

“What’s good here?” Tia asks, lifting the heavy menu with its classy leatherbound leaf.

“Everything,” I admit. “But if you like lamb, their medallions are the best.”

“I’m tempted to try it... since my morning sickness seems to be clearing up.”

I give her a cheeky smile and nod toward the high ponytail she’s pulled her hair into for tonight. “And if you do get sick, you won’t even need me to hold your hair back this time,” I tease.

Tia’s light laughter warms my chest. “Well, I suppose that means I *have* to get the lamb,” she jokes right back.

“Good. Are you ready, then?”

“I suppose I am.”

She sets down her menu as I signal the server nearest us.

“We’re ready to order,” I state as soon as the server arrives.

“Of course, Signor Moretti. What can I get you this evening? We’ll start with an appetizer of olive tapenade and the salmon croquettes. Then my wife would like the lamb medallions. I’ll take the Maine lobster along with sides of the grilled vegetables, potatoes au gratin, and beetroot salad. A

glass of your sauvignon blanc for me as well. Anything to drink, Tia?"

"Water's fine," she says, and though I can't see it with the table standing between us, I know she shifts her hand to cover her belly.

It's an affectionate gesture, one I don't think she even notices she's doing half the time, and it makes me smile. When she first refused a drink I offered her, at the time, I'd thought she was doing it to be dramatic—to call attention to the condition she's in. And maybe, at the time, that was her point. But now, when our eyes meet, her smile is warm, almost shy even, like our child is a secret we share together.

"Anything else for you?" the server asks.

"That'll be all," I say and barely notice as she takes her leave. Then I extend my hand across the table, offering it palm up.

Tia takes it, resting her palm in mine and brushing her fingers across my wrist.

"You know, you can drink something besides water—tea, juice; I'm sure they could whip up some kind of fruity virgin cocktail," I point out.

"But I'm not a virgin anymore," she stage-whispers with mock incredulity.

And though the joke is terrible, I can't help but laugh.

"So, how was your visit with your sister yesterday?" I ask.

Tia's shoulders tense visibly, her hand twitching subtly against my palm. She's uncomfortable with the topic I picked—either because she thinks it's a touchy subject or they spoke about something she thinks I won't want her to have discussed. Fighting my suspicion, I keep my face passive. Because I want to get past the tension between us, not relive it.

"Honestly, not what I expected at all," she admits, her teeth worrying her lower lip.

"How so?" Curiosity piqued, I try to keep a tight rein on the questions that burn inside me. This dinner isn't meant to be

an interrogation.

Tia shrugs. “Well, everyone was on guard. The gates were closed, the men armed. I don’t know. It was just... tense and different. But Maria and my sisters seem good.” She smiles, her eyes shifting down to our hands as her nails lightly graze my wrist. “I feel lucky that my little sister is also my best friend. She was ready to blow off her studies for the afternoon to hang out.”

“What did you two do?”

“Just talked.” Tia rushes through her next words as if to explain herself. “You know, just about sister stuff and how weird things were around the house after the ball. My parents hadn’t told her anything, so she was just as baffled by it all as I was.”

I study the blush that colors her cheeks, and rather than press her for details, I lift her fingers and brush their tips with my lips. “You know, I still haven’t heard you play,” I state, my eyes shifting to the baby grand piano in the corner.

“And you’re not about to,” she assures me, blushing even further.

“No? Come on, Tia. I want to hear what these beautiful fingers can do,” I urge, lightly running the pad of my thumb over her knuckles.

Tia smiles bashfully, tucking her chin as she shakes her head. “I don’t play in front of crowds.” Her eyes scan the busy restaurant, her cheeks growing an impossible shade of red.

Chuckling, I let her off the hook. “Fine. But you’ll play for me at home?”

She nods, her shoulders relaxing as her dark eyes meet mine.

A moment later, our food arrives, and as we dig into the appetizers, Tia moans with appreciation.

“This is so good,” she groans, around a mouthful of salmon croquette.

“Keep making those noises, and I might have to make a different kind of meal out of this evening,” I warn playfully, letting my eyes trail appreciatively down the low cut of her dress to her breasts.

“You are incorrigible,” she says, making me smile when her scolding tone is punctuated with a grin.

It’s fun to tease her and nice to keep things light between us after the conflict and tension of the past few days. With enemies on all sides and my father in the hospital, I need a break from the suspicion and stress. And Tia brings a sense of comfort I seek.

“Your entrees,” our server says, breaking the moment between us.

Tia and I lean back, allowing our table to be filled with the beautifully plated food.

“Enjoy.” Our server departs with a polite bow, and I watch as Tia picks up her fresh set of silverware to cut a delicate bite of the lamb.

“Mmm,” she groans, her body crumpling as her eyes sink closed with pleasure.

“That good, is it?” I tease. “You’re starting to make me jealous.”

“You want a bite?” she offers, her innocent gaze finding mine.

“I’m not jealous of the meal,” I murmur darkly, finding her knee beneath the table and slowly working my way up her thigh.

Tia gasps and bites her lip as her eyes sink closed once again. “*Leo*,” she breathes. But I can tell she likes it by the way she squirms beneath my palm.

Chuckling softly, I creep slightly higher. “What? You’re enjoying your meal. Why shouldn’t I?”

The heat in her gaze when she opens her eyes makes my body ache with need. And when I smile wickedly, she releases

a quivering breath. Removing my hand, I focus my attention back on my untouched lobster.

“I just wanted to make sure the lamb wasn’t the only thing at the table that could make you moan.”

Tia laughs, though the fire lingers in her eyes. “You didn’t already know?”

I just wink and pop a bite of claw meat in my mouth.

“Well, if it isn’t Leonardo Moretti.” The sultry voice to my left sets my teeth on edge in an instant, and I turn my head to find Elena Pacenti standing beside me, her faithful sidekick, Monica, just a stride behind her.

“Elena, what a pleasure,” I say, though my tone would suggest it’s anything but.

I should have known we might run into her. As a spoiled little princess, she frequents this restaurant because her uncle used to own it, which in her mind means she’s halfway to owning it herself. But clearly, she doesn’t understand the rules. Don Fiore might have laid claim to this restaurant before me, but now that he’s under my authority, *I* own the Sky Lounge.

“It’s been too long, Leo,” Elena purrs. Her manicured hand rests on my shoulder like a claw as she unleashes a flirtatious giggle.

“Have you met my wife, Tia Moretti?” I ask pointedly, gesturing to Tia. Of course, she hasn’t. I didn’t invite Elena to the wedding because I would have much preferred never to have to see her again.

“Charmed, I’m sure.” Elena hardly spares a glance over her shoulder at Tia before turning her eyes back to me.

Same old Elena, as promiscuous and blatantly flirtatious as ever. It was a mistake sleeping with her for the short time I did several years ago—and not just because she’s the niece of that sleazeball Don Fiore. She clearly hasn’t put our time together behind her, but I know better than to think she’s just after sex. It seems her intent tonight is either to make Tia jealous or land a place as my mistress.

Hell would have to freeze over before I'd consider that.

“What do you want, Elena?” I shrug her hand off my arm and focus on my food to make it clear I would rather be thinking of anything but her answer.

“Can't a girl come say hi to her ex-lover?” she pouts innocently.

From my periphery, I catch Tia's eyes snap up to look at me before quickly shifting to the pain in my ass that stands by my side.

Elena's definitely trying to cause problems. As for her reasoning, I don't really care. If she doesn't fuck off real fast, I might just have her removed.

TIA



“Well, you’ve done that,” Leo points out casually, wiping his face with his napkin and tossing it onto the table.

“I just thought you might want to show me another unforgettable night...”

The words are like a knife to my gut. Suddenly, the hand that this strikingly well-endowed woman placed on Leo’s shoulder holds even more meaning. The flirtatious hint I picked up on before was actually so much more. She’s not just flirting; she’s laying claim. Right here in front of me.

And her impressive amount of visible cleavage, combined with the way Leo’s gaze rakes up her body to find her face, leaves me feeling utterly inconsequential.

“Unless your wife has you on too short a leash. But as I recall, commitment’s never really tied you down before...” she taunts playfully, daring him to prove her right.

Great. Now, she’s using me as a prop to seduce my husband. The oxygen vanishes from my lungs, leaving me light-headed and reeling. I should say something—speak up for myself, but I can’t seem to move my lips. Because she makes a fair point. *Why would Leo want to stay faithful to me when he could have a woman who positively oozes sexuality like this one?*

“I have a real nurse’s outfit now if you’re into that kind of thing as well,” the voluptuous woman hints, fluttering her

lashes and twirling a lock of her bleach-blonde hair. “I’ll even let you tie me up like you used to,” she offers.

Tie her up? What does that even mean?

She glances more pointedly over her shoulder at me now, her condescending gaze assessing me in a flash and finding me wanting. “You know, in case you want to *spice things up*.”

She looks at me like I’m some kind of child. And because no one would openly insult Leo’s wife for fear of the repercussions, her tone says what her words won’t: “*I bet she lies there like a limp fish just performing her wifely duty.*”

I can tell she thinks I don’t know how to please him. That I’m grossly inadequate in the wake of her sexual prowess. Pursing her pouting lips, Elena turns her attention back to my husband, seeming to confirm I’m a waste of her time and attention.

It leaves me feeling small and utterly unremarkable. And a crushing realization hits me that she could be right. *What if I don’t know how to please him properly?* It wasn’t Leo’s choice to be with me, after all. He was forced into marrying me. He could simply be going through the motions because I’m carrying his child, and it’s his duty.

I can’t breathe. Violent insecurity takes me hostage, freezing me to the spot.

“That’s enough,” Leo growls, rising from his seat. His voice holds a hint of warning as he leans in close enough to Elena that he could kiss her.

My heart hammers as the image flashes into my mind, and I feel sick to my stomach at the thought. Like the coward I am, I drop my gaze to my lap, too terrified to witness something that painful. I can’t watch any longer.

“Get her out of here. Now,” he commands, the fury in his tone an unexpected salve to my painful sense of insignificance. Whether or not he liked tying Elena up or seeing her dress up as a sexy nurse when they were *lovers*, it seems he’s not in the mood for her now.

But like a parasite, doubt continues to plague the back of my mind.

Elena scoffs. “You can’t just have me *removed*. This is my uncle’s restaurant,” she insists.

“Not anymore,” Leo states flatly, his voice dangerous enough that it makes my heart skip a beat. “Don Fiore gave up his claim on this place the day he bent the knee to *me*.”

Elena gasps as two men grasp her arms and guide her toward the elevators, her dark-haired shadow of a friend scuttling quickly behind. Across from me, Leo settles back into his chair, replacing his napkin on his lap.

Still, I can’t seem to look at him. My stomach’s in knots over the confrontation, and I don’t know what to make of it. Of course, Leo would have to defend my honor in a place like this. I can only imagine how much attention that whole interaction has drawn to our table, but I don’t want to glance up and find out.

Instead, I curl in on myself, wishing I weren’t so young, so inexperienced, so flat-chested and plain. Heat pools in my cheeks, and ridiculous tears sting the back of my eyes as I wonder how much truth might be in that woman Elena’s words.

“Do you want to go home?” Leo asks gently.

Like the coward I am, I nod, failing to meet his eyes. A sinking disappointment settles in my gut as he gestures for the check. This night started off so well, but now, I don’t think I can get myself back on track. Because once again, I’m left wondering if the only reason Leo wants me is our baby.

It’s stupid and childish to wish it were more than that. After all, I know it’s the only reason we got married in the first place. I should be grateful that we’ve made as good a connection as we have. *But what if I’m not enough to keep him satisfied? What if he gets bored with me and finds someone else who can meet his needs properly?*

One server wraps up our food as another closes us out. And we’re heading out the door within minutes, Leo’s palm

resting on the small of my back, steering me with one hand as he carries our to-go containers with the other.

The image of that woman's hand on Leo's shoulder, the way she flirted with him like I was little more than a fly in her hair, obscures my vision. They clearly have a history together, one more colorful than the relationship Leo and I share.

I let him guide me toward the exit now, my thoughts plagued with a fresh kind of doubt than I'd considered until tonight. *Am I not enough to please Leo? Does something about me make him want to hold back?* She spoke about letting him tie her up like it's something she knows he enjoys. And I can't decide if the thought of bondage terrifies me or if it just hurts because he hasn't once suggested doing that to me.

I'm so lost in thought, that I hardly notice where I'm going. And I don't see Mayor Romney step from the elevator until I nearly slam into him. I startle, looking up into the mayor's kind eyes before spotting his wife at his side.

"Tia," the older politician says, his rich voice drawing me from my thoughts.

"Mayor Romney, Signora Romney, what a pleasant surprise," I say breathily, flashing a smile I can't quite put sincerity behind.

"Is it?" he asks, the discomfort apparent in his and his wife's face as they stand awkwardly between us and the elevator.

Belatedly, I realize the question implies Leo set this whole dinner up in the hopes of running into them—another plot to work the situation to his advantage. They both look strained as they avoid Leo's eyes as much as possible. And I glance back at my husband, nervous he might have a murderous look on his face at the slight.

But on the contrary, he looks impressively passive, his expression polite and calm.

Trying to pull myself back together after the awful confrontation followed by this rather uncomfortable encounter,

I laugh nervously. “How are you? H-How did the charity end up? Lots of generous donations, I hope.”

That only seems to increase the strain between us as Mayor Romney’s lips grow white from how forcefully he presses them together.

“How are you, Tia?” Signora Romney asks, drawing my attention to her. “Have you been well? Safe?”

The question is rather pointed and openly suspicious of Leo once again. My stomach knots.

“Oh, yes. Of course,” I say, giving a breathless laugh as my cheeks warm. “I’m great. Never better.”

But the mayor’s face would say he’s anything but convinced. “I didn’t much like the way we left things the other night. I should have done more for you, my dear. And if you need, I’m here to help,” he offers. “You have a safe place with us.” His eyes shift to Leo for only a second, but I can see the underlying tension. His conscience warring with his sense of self-preservation.

I’m mortified.

Clearly, the mayor’s esteem for Leo has plummeted—and I’m partially to blame. I don’t doubt my father will have taken every opportunity to whisper poison in his ear as well. Whatever rapport Leo and Mayor Romney had developed has been shot to hell. Guilt gnaws at my stomach, knowing my family is to blame.

Still, I can’t deny a small part of me is tempted by the mayor’s offer. Because accepting his help would remove me from my position between a rock and a hard place. I can’t stand being in the middle of the conflict, forced to choose the man I love or my family.

But if I take myself out of the equation entirely, no one will be present to mitigate the damage. They could utterly annihilate each other. And that would be far worse.

“Thank you. That’s very generous...” I breathe. “But I assure you it isn’t necessary. I’m perfectly safe—and happy—with Leo.” My voice comes out choked, the tumult of emotion

from dinner combining with my stress as it forms a lump in my throat. I try to swallow it down as I keep the smile plastered to my face.

A tense pause follows.

Then Signora Romney clears her throat. “So, I hear congratulations are in order. You’re expecting a child?”

The heat in my cheeks intensifies as I think about how long we’ve kept that secret from the sweet couple who have been so kind to us—me in particular. So many lies. So much deceit. I hate it.

“We are,” I say. And finally, my smile becomes genuine as I rest my palm on my stomach. “I have to admit, I’ve always loved children—probably from growing up with four younger sisters. So, I look forward to having one of my own.”

“You’re quite young to be starting a family, though, aren’t you? And so soon after the wedding. One could start to wonder if you might not have been... forced.” His eyes cast suspiciously toward Leo once again.

Oh dear god, this night could not get any worse.

“*Luke,*” Signora Romney hisses, a blush coloring her complexion. “That is entirely inappropriate. Tia’s allowed to start a family whenever she’s ready for one, and they’re married, for god’s sake.”

But the mayor’s eyes remain locked on Leo, the silent judgment cold and unyielding.

Leo tenses beside me, and I don’t doubt that his patience for the Romneys is at an end.

“I’m sorry, *Honorable Mayor,* but what exactly are you trying to imply?” Leo asks, his voice ice-cold but controlled except for the inflection he puts on the honorific.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it,” I say quickly, grabbing Leo’s hand. “Will you please excuse us?” I ask the Romneys as politely as I can manage. Then I haul Leo past them into the open elevator they were blocking. “It was such a

pleasure to run into you again,” I assure them as we turn to face each other.

A second later, the doors close, dousing us in silence.

I have no clue what Leo might have said if we'd stayed, but truth be told, I'm impressed by the amount of restraint he showed to take as many low blows as Mayor Romney dealt in such a brief exchange.

And now that we're alone in the elevator, I can feel the fury roiling through him, like a volcano about to burst.

LEO



Tia startles beside me as I close my door with unnecessary force.

“That pompous, self-righteous ass! Who does he think he is, offering you protection from me?” I slam my palm into the steering wheel as I release my full wrath now that we’re alone in my Ferrari. “He has no clue how little power he has in this town if he thinks he can waltz into that restaurant and take you from me like that,” I snarl, wrenching the car into gear.

But in my periphery, I catch Tia’s hand gripping the side of her seat, and it reminds me of her request earlier this evening for me not to drive like a maniac. Taking a deep breath, I bring my temper down just enough to stay within reason of the speed limit. Then I pull out onto the street.

“*Are you safe?*” I mock the Romneys, sneering. “Like I’m some kind of brutish beast that doesn’t know how to contain myself around the mother of my child.”

From the corner of my eye, I catch Tia’s shoulders curling in slightly, and that infuriates me all the more. I know that Tia likes the Romneys and that her connection to me will only strain that relationship. Still, I can’t believe how blatantly the mayor shat on me.

He all but dared me to take him on. No doubt he’d be happy to slap me in cuffs at the slightest provocation right about now.

“Acting like I have nothing better to do than plot ways to run into him accidentally. He’s flattering himself. But to

suggest that I would not only lay a hand on you... to imply that I knocked you up against your will and am forcing you to have our child..."

The words catch in my throat, strangling me as they make me sick to my stomach. I know I've done some horrible things. I know I haven't treated Tia as well as she deserves. But I would never fucking rape her, and if the mayor didn't have his head so far up his ass, he would know that.

A blind man could see what Tia means to me.

And it pisses me off that he would insult what little honor I have by accusing me of hurting her.

"I could kill the fucking bastard just for thinking it. He can take his sanctimonious act and shove it right up his ass. 'I'm here to help.' I have no doubt he's eating up whatever shit your father's been spouting about me to him since the ball."

How else would Mayor Romney have come to such a sick conclusion about Tia's pregnancy?

As far as I'm aware, the only information the mayor has received about it was from Don Guerra. It's not a far stretch to think Tia's traitorous father twisted the truth to make me into an even bigger asshole in the story of how Tia and I got married.

Isn't it just fucking rich that Don Guerra would make it sound like I forced Tia into this marriage? He's the one who suggested it! No, demanded it even. And while I stepped up to fix my mistake, he's been using her compromised state to manipulate things every step of the way.

With the mayor convinced I'm not just a violent, power-hungry villain but also some kind of sick fucking rapist, Don Guerra now has the law eating out of the palm of his hand. He didn't just steal my plan. He used it to turn the tables and take the mayor right out from under my nose.

It was a masterful play, really. One that's sending aftershocks rippling through my reign well after I thought his cards had been laid down. Now more than ever, I'm going to

have a hard time subduing this rebellion without facing legal implications.

I'm so worked up, that my breathing is labored, my teeth clenched as I work my jaw. I pull up outside the front of our house. And with Herculean effort, I loosen my grip on the steering wheel to throw the car in park.

I kill the motor.

Only then, in the still silence that follows, do I realize Tia hasn't said a word since we left the restaurant. I glance toward her, and it doesn't look like her mute state is about to change. The wind vanishes from my sails as I see the pain on her face, the way she studies her hands in her lap like there's something about them she could change if she looks hard enough.

"What's wrong?" My stomach knots as I turn to face her fully. "Did I say too much? I know the Romneys are your friends—even if their sense of loyalty isn't for shit."

Tia shakes her head, but she doesn't expound on the gesture.

And my heart stops at a sickening realization. Tia didn't argue with the mayor when he suggested I forced myself on her. And she didn't say anything when I revisited the subject during my verbal rampage.

In her mind, is that what happened?

I can't voice the deep concern that suddenly rings like a bell inside my head.

I didn't take her against her will, but I did manipulate her that night. I used her in a power play against her father. And I've come to hate myself for it. If I could, I would rewrite history to wipe away the cruelty I showed her.

But at the same time, I wouldn't want to change a thing if that meant losing Tia. Because the blessings that have come from my shameful behavior are too profound.

It brought Tia and me together.

And we're going to have a child because of it.

But what if, up until now, she's pretended to be okay with what happened in order to survive? She's admitted to doing that once before. How can I trust that she didn't do it a second time?

Tia did hesitate when the mayor offered her his protection. It was the smallest fraction of a second, and I thought she was just caught off guard by the offer. *But what if she was weighing the odds of him successfully ridding her of a man she considers her abuser?*

“Tia?” I rasp around the iron fist, gripping my chest. “Talk to me. Please.”

Again, she shakes her head, refusing to look at me.

My heart throbs as I wonder if I'm ever going to get past this nagging doubt. This fear that she'll only ever see me as a monster. That I *am* a monster. Because if she believes it of me, I'm in very real danger of it being true.

“Is this about what Mayor Romney said?” I press, unable to ask her point-blank but unwilling to let it go until I have an answer. “Do you *want* his protection? Because if you feel like I've forced you...” The words strangle me, and I choke as I struggle to make myself finish. “I won't stop you if you want to leave.”

Tia's head snaps up at that, her eyes finding mine, and my stomach drops as I brace for her to tell me that's exactly what she wants.

“What? Leo, *no*,” she says vehemently. “We already talked about this. The past is the past, right? You forgave me, and I forgave you. I don't need the mayor to protect me from you.”

The vise around my chest releases, draining me of the pain that was too close to unbearable. “Then what?” I insist. “Whatever's bothering you can't possibly be worse than that.”

“I can't stop thinking about what that woman said, okay?” she snaps, her defenses flying up as an angry tear trickles down her cheek. She brushes it away impatiently as she turns to glare at her reflection in the windshield.

“What are you even talking about?” I ask, baffled. “What woman? Alicia Romney?”

“No! The one that was ready to bend over and have you fuck her right there on our dinner table!” she shouts.

Stunned speechless, I sit frozen for a moment, trying to think up an appropriate response. In truth, I got so worked up about the mayor and his veiled accusations, that I completely forgot about Elena.

In my mind, she was nothing more than a nagging insect that interrupted our nice night. I hadn't imagined Tia could be bothered by her petty insults. I thought we left because Tia was embarrassed I made such a scene out of kicking Elena out.

“Tia, Elena means nothing to me. She's in the distant past. You shouldn't waste two seconds thinking about her,” I insist, reaching across the console to take her hand.

It's soft and warm—just like Tia—and I squeeze it comfortingly.

“She just likes to stir the pot, but I assure you, seeing her again was as unpleasant for me as I imagine meeting her was for you.”

Tia nods, then looks down at our linked hands. Silence pervades for another moment, telling me she's not done doubting herself.

“What did she mean about you tying her up?” she asks, blindsiding me once again.

Fuck, this night just won't quit.

TIA



I can tell my question was not what Leo expected. His jaw drops, his lips parting as if he has no clue how to answer me. But I can't stop thinking about what Elena said. It takes me right back to the first night I met him. Those girls standing inside the doorway at his house party, talking about how Leo fucks like a god.

I thought I knew what they meant. But now I can't stop thinking that there might be a whole different side to Leo that I've never seen. *And what does that say about me?*

That Elena knows about it and I don't, makes me wonder what I'm lacking. I pull my hand from Leo's as ridiculous rejection lances through me. He's said everything I should want to hear—that she's in the past, that he doesn't want her.

But that doesn't necessarily mean he'll ever want me like he wanted her at some point.

Leo's fingers go to his temples, and he massages the spots. "I assure you, you don't need to know," he states finally, dropping his hands to look at me.

That only makes me more curious. "Will you do to me what you did to Elena?" I press. Now that we're talking about it, I'm burning to know what it is for myself.

"Absolutely not," he states flatly, shutting down the discussion before it's even begun.

The conviction in his tone stings. It shouldn't bother me this much—knowing that he has a sexual history with

someone else and doesn't want to do those things with me. But I can't help feeling like it's because I'm missing something he needs. Maybe it's the curves. "Why not?" I demand. "Am I not old enough or fun enough or experienced enough for you?"

I've never told Leo that the first time we slept together, I was technically still underage. Just shy of my eighteenth birthday, I'd lied because I didn't want him to think of me as a child. And after Mayor Romney's comment tonight, I don't know that I'll ever be able to admit it. But now it's coming back to haunt me—to think that my age or immaturity might be too unappealing.

"Are you joking? No, Tia. It's none of that. Fuck, knowing you'd never been with a man... it only made me want you more. And knowing that I'm the only man who's ever had you—the only one who ever *gets* to have you? That's hot as hell."

My heart flutters at his words, but he still hasn't answered my question. "Then why?" I ask, my frustration fueling my tears.

"For starters, it's because you're pregnant. And you're my wife. I intend to treat you with the respect you deserve."

"So tying women up is meant to degrade them?" I press.

"It's not—" Leo snarls and scrubs his face with his palms. "No, I wouldn't do it to degrade women. It's just... rough. And you seem to beat yourself up well enough without me adding that kind of play in the bedroom."

"I do not beat myself up," I snap, crossing my arms.

"Can we please not argue about this?" he asks, his tone agonized.

"But what if...?" Tears sting the back of my eyes, and I look away to avoid showing him my fear.

"What if what?" Leo presses when I don't go on.

"What if you get bored with me?" I breathe, turning reluctantly to meet his eye.

Leo's eyebrows press together in an expression of disbelief. He chuckles. "That's what you're worried about?"

“I mean, why shouldn’t I be? The only reason you married me was because I got pregnant,” I point out.

“And that makes me the luckiest bastard on the planet,” he says. “Man, she really got into your head, didn’t she? I could kill Elena for making you doubt yourself. But seriously, Tia, don’t let her fuck with you. You’re too good for that.”

The fire in his voice warms my chest, and slowly, the doubt starts to melt away. “Thank you,” I murmur.

I offer an apologetic smile, and he returns a soft one as he tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear.

“So, are you just completely unbothered by our chance encounter with the Romneys?” Leo’s hazel eyes search mine. “Because thinking about it still makes my blood boil.”

It’s a clear change of topic, meaning the discussion about tying me up is over. I sigh, trying to let go of my curiosity—and the jealousy I hate to admit to—as I focus on what’s bothering Leo. He put it aside to deal with my issues. Now, I can do the same.

Interlacing our fingers, I give his hand a squeeze. “What the mayor said was uncalled for. I’m sorry. But things will blow over. Even if the confrontation was uncomfortable, it probably helped that they saw that I’m safe and happy. It doesn’t matter to me that they found out I’m pregnant.”

“Even if your father starts confirming it happened out of wedlock?”

“It’s not like we can do much about it if he does. Is it bad that I’m just kind of relieved people know now? Even if there will be whispers about my age or how quickly I’m having a baby, they can’t prove it. And hopefully, no one will be counting the months by the time she’s born. I hate keeping secrets, and it feels like that’s all I’ve been doing lately. So, even though I hate how brutal the mayor was to you, I hope it will at least help everyone move on.”

Leo’s shoulders seem to relax at that, and he raises our interlocked fingers to press a kiss to the back of my hand. “Thanks for being a voice of reason.”

I smile softly. “Thanks for talking to me about everything. And for pulling me out of my emotional tailspin.”

Leo chuckles. “Ready to head inside?”

I nod, and we slip out of the car simultaneously.

Luigi is at the door, opening it for us as soon as we reach the top step of the grandiose front porch.

“Have our bags brought in, please, Luigi,” Leo says, following me into the entry.

“Of course, sir.” The butler gives us a polite bow.

Making my way across the entry, I head down the hallway toward our room. Halfway there, I note that Leo still hasn’t caught up. Glancing over my shoulder, I find him admiring me openly, his eyes shifting from the open back of my dress up to my eyes as he flashes me a daring smile.

“Just wanted one last chance to appreciate your new dress,” he says, his low rumble sending a shiver of anticipation through my core.

A grin breaks across my face. “It feels even better than it looks,” I tease, running my hands down the soft fabric and over my curves.

Leo growls playfully and takes three long strides to close the distance between us. Pulling me into his arms, he spins me around and claims my lips, kissing me fiercely. His hands roam over my hips and ass, and he hums with approval.

“It is soft,” he admits, smiling against my lips.

“Too bad I have to take it off,” I breathe.

“I don’t know. I have a sneaking suspicion that, as good as it looks on you, it might look even better once you’re out of it.”

I laugh softly and press gently against his chest to put some space between us. Then, turning, I step out of his grasp and send a coy grin in his direction.

I slip inside our suite a moment later, leaving him to follow.

Leo enters, sliding the bolt home as he watches me pull my hair from its high ponytail. I shake out my long tresses, going for sensual as I let them cascade over my shoulders and down my back. Residual waves of uncertainty ripple through me, but I fight through them, determined to put my best foot forward and prove I can be seductive, too.

Then I turn to face him. Reaching for the ribbon at the nape of my neck, I slowly undo the bow, holding my halter top closed. Air hisses between Leo's teeth as I let the soft fabric fall open, revealing my breasts. The silk whispers past my hips without any encouragement, and in an instant, I'm naked except for my strappy golden high heels.

Leo's eyes travel down my body an inch at a time until they land on the small triangle of hair at the peak of my thighs. "You weren't wearing any underwear? All night?" he rasps.

Trapping my lip playfully between my teeth, I shake my head. "Not since Arthur Mae's."

I hoped it might turn him on, thinking about me out in public with him, wearing nothing beneath my thin dress. And I'm not disappointed as I watch his expression turn carnal. The prominent bulge that presses against the zipper of his slacks confirms my plan worked.

My core tightens in anticipation of having him inside me. And the anxiety that had riddled me after Elena's comments vanish beneath the heat of his gaze. Maybe I'm young and inexperienced, but Leo's definitely not bored with me. And I want to learn all he'll teach me because I never want this overwhelming, magnetic attraction between us to fade.

Stepping out of the yellow silk pooled at my feet, I approach him slowly. He watches every step I take, his eyes predatory as he waits for his prey to draw near. I reach him, resting my palms on his strong pecs, and lean onto my tippy-toes to kiss him softly.

"Yeah, I definitely like it better when you wear your dress like this," he murmurs jokingly.

Arms snaking around my waist, Leo pulls me flush against his body, letting his hands explore the naked flesh of my back. The warmth of his palms soaks into my skin, raising goosebumps in their wake and stealing my breath away.

“You’re fucking irresistible,” he growls, kissing me firmly as one hand tangles in my hair.

My stomach quivers, and I melt into him. I relish the way he touches me, taking his pleasure and turning himself on at the same time as he awakens my need. Gripping his tie, I tug our lips together more adamantly. And when his lips part mine, our tongues tangle in a passionate kiss. It feels so good to be with him, to be bound to him in every humanly way possible, and to know he wants me.

But still, I’m dying to know what I’ve been missing out on. I want him to do to me what he’s done to women before. I want to know what it’s like to be tied up. And more than that, I want to know why Leo thinks I wouldn’t like it.

“Leo,” I breathe between kisses as his caress grows more adamant.

“Hmm?”

“Please, will you tie me up?”

LEO



My muscles stiffen at Tia’s request, my fingers pressing into her soft flesh.

And when she leans back to peer into my eyes, her onyx gaze is soft and pleading.

It’s one thing to tell her that I won’t do it when she’s fully clothed, and I’m under control. But right now, with Tia naked and practically begging to be tied up despite my objections, she’s impossible to resist. I can’t deny her anything.

Sighing, I close my eyes and press my forehead to hers. “Okay,” I murmur reluctantly.

“Really?” she gasps, her excitement bubbling to the surface as she kisses me fiercely.

Still, I’m not about to do to her exactly what I’ve done to girls in the past. Because she has no clue what she’s asking. Those girls had experience. They’d been to gentlemen’s clubs, had plenty of sex, and understood bondage, domination, and punishment.

Those women entered into our physical relationships willingly and with an understanding of what it meant. But Tia’s coming from a completely different background—one that didn’t start off on the right foot between us and even now leaves questions lingering.

I fear she might not be ready for the darker shades of sex. And the last thing I want to do is break Tia or have her find

she's in over her head. I sure as hell don't want to hurt her—or our child.

Not that I've taken things to the extreme before like some men do. I'm of the mind that it's better to maintain a balance between pain and pleasure. To be the master of both. But I've also never tried bondage with a pregnant woman before. And I don't want to make a misstep.

Not with Tia. Not ever.

But I can't deny Tia when she pleads so sweetly. She speaks to that animal instinct inside me that wants to claim her for my own. Stealing my resolve, I draw a distinct line in my head. Tonight, I will not cross it. I'll explore it a little bit and see if Tia even likes it.

Breaking our kiss, I command, "Leave your shoes on and lie on the bed."

She releases a shaky breath, her full lips parting as her eyes go wide with surprise. She didn't think I would bend on this. But she does as I said, turning to step away from me. I watch her hips sway as she goes. God, but my wife is perfect. I can hardly blame Elena for being jealous of her. That's all her act was at dinner—envy in its greenest shade.

And if this is what Tia needs to realize how desperately I crave her, then I'll give her a peek into my less respectable world. Loosening my tie, I follow Tia with my eyes, and as she crawls across the sheets, I shrug out of my suit jacket.

"Put your hands above your head," I instruct, drawing my tie from beneath my collar and dropping it on the foot of the bed.

Tia obeys, seeming to willingly accept my domination. Settling back onto the mattress, she lets her long dark locks fan around her as she crosses her wrists above her head. Her pose is soft and sensual as she tucks her nose beside her elbow to watch me from one thickly lashed, dark, seductive eye.

"Like this?" she asks as I unbutton my shirt and strip out of it.

"Perfect," I murmur.

Picking up my tie from the bed, I swiftly form two loops with it. Slipping one around Tia's wrist, I guide the fabric around the bedpost before threading her other hand through the second hole. Then I pull it tight.

Tia gasps at the soft snick of fabric growing taut, and when she flexes her arms, she has only the slightest freedom of movement.

"Now you're mine to do with as I please," I promise, leaning over her to brush my lips across hers.

"Aren't I always?" she breathes, her gasps quickening as I run my hands down her arms, lightly tickling her before I find her breasts and palm them.

I chuckle darkly. "The point of tying someone up is so they can't stop you from taking what you want, Tia," I instruct.

That seems to give her pause, and her breaths hitch nervously.

Kicking off my shoes, I join her on the bed.

Her lips part, her chest rising and falling more adamantly now, and I catch the slightest flicker of apprehension in her eyes. I will definitely have to take baby steps with her. She's had a lot of freedoms taken away from her in life. I won't let her pleasure during sex be another one. Not if I have a say about it.

I want to be the kind of man who's worthy of worshiping her body, so I can't push things too far. "If you want me to stop at any time, you tell me immediately, Tia," I command.

She gives a jerky nod.

"I want to hear you say it."

"I'll tell you to stop if I don't like it," she promises, her cheeks flushing a seductive shade of rose.

"Good." Slowly, I work my way down Tia's body with my hands, relishing the way she squirms beneath my touch. I keep my fingers light, tickling her flesh and raising goosebumps across her soft skin.

Tia moans as I reach her thighs, and I guide them apart. Grasping her knees, I bend them, propping her feet on her heels as I spread her legs in a sexual pose. With her glorious pink folds on full display, my cock throbs and strains against the zipper of my slacks.

“You really are fucking perfect, you know,” I growl, lying along the length of her side.

Leaning in, I steal a tantalizing kiss, and Tia’s tongue strokes mine eagerly. I reluctantly break the kiss to bring two fingers to her mouth.

“Suck,” I command.

And when she wraps her lips around my fingers, it makes my balls tighten and my cock ache. I watch her for several seconds, arousal crackling through me like an electric wave. Then, I slowly withdraw them to place my hand at the peak of her thighs.

Tia cries out, her head tipping back as I lightly stroke her clit with my saliva-slicked fingertips. And when I circle her sensitive button, her legs start to quiver.

“That’s it, pet,” I murmur. “You like that?”

“Yes,” she gasps, her back arching as she strains against the tie holding her to the bed.

“Tell me what you like,” I demand, touching her more adamantly.

“Mmm—I like it when you touch me,” she moans.

“Touch you like this?” I ask, removing my fingers from her clit to give her taut nipple a quick pinch.

Tia yelps, her body jerking as she nearly jumps out of her skin, and when our eyes meet, I smile at her wickedly. She’s breathing hard and fast, her dark eyes dilated with excitement, and yet she looks stunned by my teasing.

“You’ll have to get more specific,” I state pointedly, pulling her body back against mine and spreading her legs once again.

She resists me a little this time, her muscles tensing almost as if of their own accord. But when I find her clit, she relaxes, melting into the bed once more. Eyes fluttering shut, she licks her lips, then tries again.

“I like it when you touch my clit,” she breathes, her cheeks darkening a shade and making my pulse pound.

I could get used to hearing dirty words from my innocent young bride, I think. And watching her blush as she voices her desire only makes her more appealing.

“Good girl.” I reward her by sliding two fingers inside her entrance. “And this?”

She’s already slick with arousal, and I love the way her hips roll in her desperation for relief.

“Yes!” she cries, her body quivering as her muscles strain with need.

“Yes, Master,” I correct, stopping my movements abruptly.

Tia’s agonized moan tells me just how close she was to release, and her breasts heave, her eyes glazed with lust as she looks up at me in confusion.

“If you want me to tie you up, then you’ll treat me with respect, my pet,” I explain patiently, allowing her frustration to build as I ease her into the concept of punishment.

Edging is a gentler way of compounding pleasure through withholding rather than the more blunt contrast of pain through discipline. But the thought of calling me master seems to trigger a rebellious spark in Tia’s eyes, and she presses her lips together in silent protest.

“Does that mean you intend to disobey me?” I taunt, stroking my fingers through her folds and giving her clit a gentle flick.

Tia gasps, her back arching as her muscles tense from the unexpected sting. But when I press two wet fingers against the tender nub, she moans like I’ve just given her the best sex of her life.

“Does that feel good, Tia?” I murmur as I nibble her ear lobe.

And as she shudders violently, she nods.

“Then call me master and ask me to let you come.”

Tia whimpers, her natural sense of pride getting in the way of her ability to submit to me. And I fucking love her for it. This is why she’s so much better than the women I’ve been with before. She doesn’t want anyone to own her, and she’s willing to fight for her self-worth. Even if it’s simply to stand her ground about using a term she doesn’t like.

In my past life, I might have been tempted to break her. To see it as a challenge of wills that I had to win. I would have explored what it would take to make her bend to my command. But tonight, we’re taking it slow, and I don’t want to snuff out Tia’s fire—or even diminish it. Not when I have a lifetime to learn just how much fun we can have.

The danger of letting Tia enter this realm is that I *want* her to enjoy it. Because I would love nothing more than to torture her into bliss. Maybe that does make me sadistic. But I don’t revel in her pain. I want her to draw pleasure from every second of this. Still, I love the power it gives me over her euphoria.

That, I do want to own.

“Tell me I’m the master of your pleasure, and I’ll make you come harder than you ever have before,” I whisper in her ear.

I’m softening the edge of her submission as I tempt her with an offer she can’t refuse. And I watch as the defiance wars across her features, then dissolves.

“You are the master of my pleasure,” she admits, her words breathy and seductively genuine.

Humming my approval, I lean in and kiss the remorse from her lips. At the same time, I slide two fingers deep inside her, curling them to stroke her G-spot. With the heel of my palm, I massage her clit, stimulating her at the same time as I finger her.

Tia's chest heaves, her lips greedy as she strains against my tie. Then she cries into my mouth as her pussy clamps down around my fingers. Throbbing and twitching to life, her clit and walls pulse around me. I don't stop. Fingering her adamantly, I demand every last drop of pleasure from her. And it seems there's no end to her release.

Continuing to writhe and pant beneath my touch, Tia grips me again and again. And her sensual sounds make my cock throb impatiently to be inside her.

"Are you ready for more, pet?" I tease, kissing a path along her throat as the aftershocks of her orgasm finally start to subside.

"Yes," she mewls.

"Then, get on your knees," I command. And slowly, I withdraw my fingers from her pussy.

Her eyes follow my movement, and as I wrap my lips around the slick digits to suck them clean, Tia releases a lusty gasp.

TIA



Though my hands are tied, I still manage to roll onto my stomach and rise onto my knees as Leo orders. My arms stretch far above my head as I settle into a child's pose, resting my forehead on the sheets. But my body's still reeling from the intensity of my orgasm.

The torture of Leo's teasing, of having him stop multiple times to make me bend to his will, only seemed to compound the pleasure—after frustrating me to the point of wanting to scream.

Humming his approval, Leo runs his hands over my body, following the dip of my waist to the flare of my hips. Then he leans down and bites my ass. Literally bites it, his lips soft as his teeth pinch the flesh and make me yelp. At the same time, goosebumps explode across my skin, and my clit throbs with need.

Then the bed shifts as he rises from it, his touch suddenly vanishing.

I shiver, the absence leaving me craving him. Straining against the soft silk of the tie he bound me with, I raise my head to look over my shoulder for him. His back is turned, giving me a rare peek at the intricate tattoo that fascinates me every time I see it.

Covering the entirety of one shoulder blade and running down his spine, it looks like the inner workings of a clock, with multiple cogs of various sizes. Each cog is different, some basic and utilitarian, others as delicate as lace. The two

largest cogs dictate the artwork—one a compass whose magnetic needle is off center to point directly at his heart, and the other is a shattered clock face with cracks obscuring several of the Roman numerals. Above the clockwork, scrawling cursive read, “*Tempus non est hostis, sed directionis defectus.*”

Time is not the enemy, but rather lack of direction.

Knowing Leo more now, being familiar with his singular drive and laser focus, I understand better the meaning behind the words. His ambition is inexhaustible, and his vision is resolute.

He digs in the dresser for a moment, and when he turns to meet my eyes, his lips curl into a smug grin. He caught me admiring him.

“I hope you got your fill of looking, pet, because now it’s time to take away your sight and see how much more you *feel.*” He raises the silky-looking black fabric in his hands as he prowls closer.

And when he reaches the bed, he hooks my chin with a finger to steal one slow, scintillating kiss. Then he releases it to cover my eyes with the slip of cloth. My heart kicks up a notch instinctually.

Being bound and blindfolded is equal parts thrilling and unnerving. And suddenly, I’m forced to trust Leo with whatever he decides to do next. Because I won’t see it coming.

Strong fingers stroke my skin, making my pulse race and my lips part as my lungs work erratically. I catch the soft sound of a zipper opening, and my core tightens with anticipation.

Back arching, I quiver, intensely aware of the slick arousal wetting my folds and the inside of my thighs. Then powerful hands grip my hips, raising them off my heels and repositioning me so my butt is in the air, my legs spread. My cheek settles onto the sheets between my arms.

“Stay right there,” Leo commands, his low voice hoarse in the best kind of way.

Then one warm palm comes to rest on the small of my back, and his other hand reaches between my legs to find my clit. I gasp as electric pleasure crackles up my spine, and my hips shove back in response, making the silk tie bite into my wrists.

Why that would turn me on, I don't know, but it does.

As quick as a flash, his fingers leave my clit, and he brings his hand down to slap one of my ass cheeks hard enough to make a loud snap. I yelp, jerking forward at the sudden sting. Then his palm is there, calming my angry flesh as he kneads it softly.

“What did I tell you, pet?” he murmurs, his voice gentle.

“T-To stay,” I stammer, my heart in my throat and my stomach trembling.

But already, the pain is gone, replaced by a warmth that flows through my veins like caffeine, awakening my senses.

“Let's try that again, then, shall we?” he teases. His fingers brush across my flesh until he finds my slick seam once again.

And this time, when his fingers touch my clit, it takes all my self-restraint not to jump out of my skin. I'm shockingly sensitive. Even the lightness of his caress makes me throb and twitch. But I don't dare move.

Instead, I whimper as my legs start to quiver.

“Good girl,” he praises, making the hair along the back of my neck rise. And as he circles my clit, my muscles spasm euphorically.

My core aches to have him inside me. And his hand on the small of my back reminds me not to move, though I desperately want to lean into him. To find relief.

“You want me to fuck you, Tia?” he asks low and soft, his voice tempting me.

“Yes,” I moan, my walls tightening. Excitement zings up and down my spine.

“How badly?” he presses, his fingers more adamant now.

“I’ll do anything,” I whimper, going along with this new kind of dirty talk that’s lighting my skin on fire. He’s making me answer him during sex and saying what I want him to do; *voicing* what turns me on is both nerve-racking and thrilling.

I like it.

“I’ll make a deal with you, pet,” he says, removing his fingers from my clit and leaving me moaning with frustration. “You tell me how many times your perfect ass can handle a spanking,” he purrs, his hand petting the flesh he’s referring to with such tenderness. “And that’s how many times I’ll let you come tonight.”

Why is it so sexy when he talks about letting me come?

Maybe it’s the way he says it, like it’s some kind of sacred vow. But it makes my insides knot to think about the stinging pain of his last spank. *How much of that could I take?* An orgasm per spank is a pretty tempting offer. And the way his palm keeps tickling my skin makes me want him all the more.

“Three?” I venture, my heart racing.

I can almost feel his smile in the way he massages my flesh. “Don’t move,” he reminds me darkly.

His hand lifts, and my insides turn to mush as my anticipation leaves me a quaking mess. I squeal as his palm connects with my fresh butt cheek, but this time, it doesn’t hurt as bad. Probably because I was expecting it.

In fact, as soon as the smarting burn subsides, an aching intensity trickles into my core. Suddenly, I’m intensely aroused. I never imagined I could want to be spanked, but as Leo lifts his hand again, a throbbing anticipation replaces my anxiety.

I whimper when his hand finds the same spot on my first butt cheek, and I shudder violently in my effort to hold perfectly still. But rather than trying to run away from the punishment, I find myself dangerously close to rocking back against him.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy,” he growls. “You like it when I spank you, don’t you?”

A soft mewl issues from my lips, and my cheeks flame to admit it. But yes, I definitely like it.

“You didn’t answer me, pet,” he warns. Rather than punishing me, though, he stroked two fingers between my folds. “*Fuck, Tia,*” he groans.

I know. I’m practically *dripping*, I’m so turned on.

“I think I might just make you come if I spank you again,” he teases, his voice laced with anticipation. “You ready, my pet?”

“Yes,” I breathe, quivering with need.

He kneads my flesh as if warming me up for the next spanking, and when his palm vanishes, my heart skips a beat. The sound of flesh on flesh is sinfully exciting, and to my utter astonishment, the pain that lances through me blasts inside my core.

I didn’t think he was actually serious about making me come. But as my orgasm sweeps through me like a hurricane, I sob with pleasure.

And when Leo thrusts inside me a moment later, I lose my ever-loving mind. His fingers brush lightly across my twitching clit, sending zings of electric euphoria out to my fingers and toes. My walls throb and pulse around his hard length, gripping him forcefully.

The ecstasy that consumes me now is different from any I’ve experienced before. It’s so intense, it makes me want to cry. Even the slightest movement sends me into twitching convulsions, and fresh waves of pleasure rip through me until black dots dance across my vision.

“Good girl,” Leo purrs, and I’m quickly starting to love the way he praises me.

It’s so commanding, possessive even, like I’m truly a pet he’s training—molding to suit his needs. It should leave me feeling degraded, like I’m little more than property. Instead, it makes me feel like he’s teaching me exactly how to satisfy him for a lifetime.

Those fears and insecurities that had plagued me after Elena's comments now seem almost laughable. Because I can feel how much he wants me in the steel of his erection. I can hear the pleasure I bring him by taking him inside me.

If *this* is what Leo likes, then I'm more than capable of handling it.

In truth, though it's sexy in a very different way than when he makes love to me, this is just as pleasurable. And the thrill of it adds a fresh flavor that makes me giddy. With the blindfold, all my remaining senses seem to be on overdrive. And my skin is so sensitive, I feel as though a feather might sear my flesh.

But I want more.

My hips roll of their own volition, my belly pressing down toward the bed as I grind back against Leo. And this time, he doesn't punish me. Instead, his chest finds my back, one palm resting beside my breast as he envelops me. And as he thrusts inside me, his fingers play me like an instrument.

I've barely finished coming, and yet, I'm already on the brink again. My body's exhausted, trembling uncontrollably at the way he demands my pleasure.

"My sexy, beautiful little pet," he breathes, his lips trailing kisses down my spine. "I want to own every inch of you."

"Yes," I whimper, my hips bucking against him, deepening the penetration and making my core throb.

"Say my name, and I'll let you come," he commands, nipping the flesh along the curve of my neck.

"*Leo*," I moan. "Please let me come. I wanna come." I'm on the verge of whining in my needy state, but my words seem to turn him on as he stiffens further inside of me, swelling until I think I'm going to burst.

"Come for me, *bella mia*," he commands, and the familiar term of endearment suddenly feels so much more potent.

I'm his beauty.

I'm his.

I cry out as he traps my clit between his finger and thumb, pinching and rolling it so it's almost painful but so entirely pleasurable that I launch into oblivion. Sobbing with the strength of my throbbing release, I arch into him. And he groans, the sound deliciously agonized—like I'm torturing him as much as he's torturing me.

My muscles relax as I slump onto the bed, my body spent from the overwhelming stimulation, the most powerful orgasms that I've ever experienced. And above me, Leo chuckles, the sound soft and dark.

“A deal's a deal, love,” he murmurs in my ear. “I promised you one more orgasm.”

I whimper, unable to imagine I could possibly come again. But when he nips my ear lobe, my walls still tighten around his hard length.

Then he reaches up, his fingers soft and dexterous as they loosen the tie, holding my arms above my head. Sweet relief washes through my shoulders and down to my fingers as soon as I'm free.

I hadn't recognized the lack of blood flow getting out to my extremities until now. But my arms drop heavily to the mattress, a sense of tingling bliss racing across my skin. It's like that strange feeling just after the pins and needles subside once your foot's gone to sleep. Not quite painful anymore and still aching with pleasure.

Strong arms wrap around me a moment later, and as gently as one might carry precious cargo, Leo turns me over, letting me sprawl on my back.

“Are you up for more?” he teases softly, guiding the blindfold up off my eyes when I can't find the strength to do it myself.

“Mm-hmm,” I moan contentedly, and though I'm weak with the heady cocktail of my bliss, I lift my head off the bed to steal a kiss.

A low rumble vibrates from Leo's chest into mine. And he settles between my thighs, guiding his silken tip to my

entrance with ease. I wrap my legs around his hips, my heels pressing into his skin as I encourage him to take me exactly as he pleases.

And when our eyes meet, he eases inside of me at a tantalizingly slow pace. The fire in his gaze lights my soul ablaze, burning away any last flickers of doubt that Leo might not want me. No one could fake the ravenous desire he levels me with now, and deep satisfaction consumes me to know he feels it, too. This overwhelming attraction, a connection that steals my breath away and makes me question my sanity.

“Don’t look away, Tia,” he breathes. “I want to see it in your eyes when you come this time.”

I shiver beneath him, and as the strength comes back to my arms, I wrap them around him, pressing my fingers into his muscular back. Our heavy breaths mingle, warming the air between us.

The tension builds deep in my core, and tingling pleasure zips up my spine. “I’m going to come,” I gasp as the familiar sensation floods my body with warmth.

Leo’s hips rock into me more adamantly now, and as the tendons in his neck strain, his muscles bunching and flexing with breathtaking strength, I know he’s right there with me.

“Oh god!” I gasp, and he grunts as he slams inside me.

Hot cum pours inside me as my walls throb and pulse. And the heat of arousal in Leo’s gaze turns my insides to mush. Our simultaneous release is so insanely erotic. But watching the euphoria in his eyes is out of this world.

My aftershocks continue to roll through me long after he’s stilled, his cock buried in my depths.

Pressing the sweetest of kisses to my lips, Leo eases out of me. And when he collapses onto the bed beside me, I scoot closer. Pulling me against his side, he holds me as we catch our breath.

I rest my cheek on his chest, running my fingers through his soft chest hair and savoring the way his skin feels with my senses so heightened.

“Well?” he asks after several silent moments. “What did you think about being tied up?”

The question is soft, almost playful even, and it warms my chest. “I liked it... a lot,” I confess. Then I tip my chin up to meet his eyes. “Why were you so adamant about not doing it before?”

Conflict flickers behind his hazel gaze and his brows press together, confirming it. “Our relationship is just so different than any I’ve had before. I’ve never cared for another woman as much as I care about you. I’ve never worried I might push things too far because one woman was just like the next for me. Then you came along. And we didn’t exactly start off on the right foot, so once I realized how badly I screwed up, I didn’t want to do anything that might set us back. I didn’t want to introduce any kind of play that might make you feel more trapped than you already are...”

The pain in his voice breaks my heart, and I rise onto my elbow so I can look him more fully in the face. “I don’t feel trapped, Leo,” I promise adamantly. “At least not in our marriage. Yes, I might hate being confined to the house, but I want to be with you. And I trust you.”

His eyes soften, and he pulls me close, to kiss me passionately. “I would never do anything to hurt you,” he murmurs against my lips. “You’re quickly becoming the center of my universe.”

His words melt my heart, and I claim his lips, pouring all my love and devotion into the kiss. Then I snuggle close to his chest once more, nestling into his arms. And I’m asleep before my eyes can even fully close.

LEO



Memories flood back to me as I stand inside the cottage on the outskirts of my family's vast property—the fateful day Tia went wandering in the woods and happened upon me executing one of the Valencia men who thought they could skim off the top and I wouldn't notice.

My eyes scan the trees through the window, like I might find her hiding there, waiting for me to commit my next atrocity. But not today. I've tasked Trudy with keeping Tia fully occupied and within eyesight for the entire day—even if it means allowing Tia to get her hands dirty.

My lips twitch with amusement as my trip down memory lane takes me to those first few days of marriage, when I found Tia elbows deep in the dirt alongside Old Man William and his wife, who I pay handsomely to maintain the gardens. My wife is a force to be reckoned with.

Which is exactly why I stand here, in the old cottage that has seen countless deaths, waiting for Johnny, Rasco, and their soldiers to deliver to me the Guerra men who were just released from PPD custody first thing this morning.

Though it goes against my principles and instincts to do so, I intend to grant Tia's family mercy in the hopes that a show of faith will ease the tension in our quickly crumbling alliance. And it's the perfect time to do so.

Tia's cousin Maury will be among them because the official statement says his prints weren't matched to any of the guns my men apprehended at the ball. And seeing as it was the

word of my disgraced men against the Guerras, the push to convict was not overly strong.

“Get your fucking hands *off* me!” someone snarls on the far side of the front door, alerting me to their arrival.

A second later, Maury himself is the first man through the door, as Johnny uses the guy’s head to open the door when he proves unwilling to cooperate. And though I’m not here to escalate the situation, I can’t help but smile as Tia’s cousin releases a spew of curses in Italian that could make a sailor blush.

He’s going to have a lump on his head tomorrow.

“Morning, boss,” Johnny greets me as several more men file into the room.

And when the Guerra men see me standing, waiting for them, watching with a steady gaze, fresh panic flits across their faces.

“Fuck,” Maury grunts as he’s forced into the lineup before me. And though he seems determined to keep a stoic expression, I can see the sweat break out across his brow.

“Gentlemen, how kind of you to join me,” I say casually, smirking.

I scan their ranks, gauging the different reactions to their situation. I’m pleasantly surprised to find most of them look ready to shit themselves. That’s good. Fear is how I’m going to get my point across if I intend to grant them mercy. Not to mention, I always enjoy the sense of power it gives me to make a grown man cry.

Tia might have made me soft. She’s made me question my morals and the concept of violence just for the sake of violence. But that doesn’t mean I can’t revel in the victory of making my enemies cower before me. And if I can’t make this alliance work, then that’s exactly what these men are to me.

“I asked my men to bring you here today so we could have a little chat. Because I think there’s been something of a misunderstanding between us. Our families are supposed to be allies. That fact was set in stone the day Don Guerra gave his

eldest daughter away at our wedding. And because of that fact, I'm willing to give you a second chance. I'm willing to overlook your attempted robbery and blatant sabotage at the town hall if the man responsible for shooting Don Moretti will step forward."

Thick silence weighs heavily in the room as several men exchange confused glances.

Then Maury scoffs. "What, you think we're idiots? We're not going to fall for your false promises. You intend to kill us all."

Leveling him with a flat gaze, I keep my voice low and deadly. "You're questioning my honesty when your don agreed to peace between our families just weeks before you opened fire on my men?"

You could hear a pin drop in the stillness that follows.

And only after Maury swallows visibly do I continue. "I assure you that Tia is the only thing protecting your scrawny, unworthy necks right now. I'm only willing to give you a second chance—something I never give—because against all odds, Don Guerra has raised an angel of mercy who's convinced me to spare her family."

The stunned expressions that greet me now are nothing shy of awed. And another look passes between the Guerra men as they silently debate whether they could possibly have heard me correctly.

"Oh please," Maury sneers, though it's notably quieter this time, as if he's not sure he wants me to hear him say it.

"Shut the fuck up, cous," the man next to him snaps.

The energy in the room shifts as the rest of the men seem to turn against Maury, leaving him alone in his bullheaded stubbornness.

"So, is anyone willing to claim responsibility for shooting Don Moretti?" I turn my eyes to the rest of the men, pausing briefly on each face to see if I can read the guilt in his eyes.

But before I make it down the entire line, one man shuffles forward. Sweat dampens his hair and trickles down his temples, and he's shaking from head to toe. Still, he dares to meet my eyes, and I can see the truth before he says a word.

"My bullet is the one that hit him," he breathes and gulps.

I nod, rather impressed by his honesty when it's clearly taking every ounce of his courage to do so. "Thank you for your honesty," I say calmly. "I genuinely hope you're as strong as the man you shot." Reaching casually inside my suit jacket, I draw my .45 caliber, aim, and punch a bullet through his gut.

"What the fuck!" Maury bellows as the man drops to his hands and knees, blood spurting from his lips.

He groans, collapsing to his side as he curls around the wound, holding his stomach.

Chaos erupts, and the Guerra men seem to forget their sense of self-preservation. They bellow, their faces livid as more than one calls me a liar. My men quickly get them back under control, forcing several to their knees when they try to fight.

"You said you'd show us mercy!" one man shouts, his fists balling as he glares me down.

"I showed you more mercy than I've ever shown traitors like you before. This is more mercy than I give men who think they can steal from me," I point out, gesturing to the injured man with the muzzle of my gun. "And maybe if you fuckwads stop pointing fingers and shouting, you might be able to get your friend to the hospital in time to save his life."

Astonishment mingles with fury as they fall silent once more. And with a jerk of my chin, I signal my men to release them. They scramble to collect their wounded companion, and hoisting him between them, they rush out the door in search of medical aid.

"Johnny, see them off my property, will you? I don't want anyone sticking around."

"On it, boss," he agrees, gesturing for his men to follow.

They filter out, leaving only Rasco behind to share the sudden silence.

I stare down at the pool of blood forming a fresh stain on the old and rotting wood floor.

“Bold move. You think it’ll work?” he asks after a long pause.

“I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” I ask, giving him a bitter smile.

In truth, if I could have gotten away with it, I might not have shot anybody. I was most tempted to shoot Maury, but as he’s Tia’s cousin, that would have been a bigger risk.

Instead, I tried the eye-for-an-eye strategy. At least that gives the message that anyone who hurts my family will face serious consequences. I just hope it doesn’t leave anyone thinking they might take a second shot at it. That’s the danger of being merciful. It could come back and bite me in the ass.

But if I truly want to remove the cancerous source of rebellion, I would have to kill Don Guerra. And I made Tia a promise.

I just hope I haven’t fucked myself over in my attempt to protect our relationship.

“I’ll get this cleaned up,” Rasco says, nodding to the bloody floor where my eyes are fixed.

I nod. “Good.” Wrenching my gaze from the evidence of my brutality, I stalk from the cabin.

Rather than heading back toward the house, I exit through the back door and find the path of Tia’s flight when she ran from me several weeks ago. Why I’m driven to relive that day, I don’t know.

Perhaps to remind me of what I almost lost and why I chose to do things differently this time around. As I walk, I ponder. What I said to Tia the other night wasn’t an exaggeration. It seems my world has truly shifted to center around her. I want to make her happy. I want to do what’s best

for our child. And with that seems to come far more soul-searching than I've ever done before.

I play back the scene from inside the cabin in my mind. To my surprise, I find I genuinely hope the man I shot survives. Even if he put my father in the hospital, he was just following orders, and it took serious guts to own up to it. They all clearly thought they were going to die, so stepping forward was an act of bravery that gave his companions the chance to survive. And in the end, I would rather be able to reward that kind of honesty—not punish it.

Even if the guy does manage to get the medical treatment he needs, it doesn't make me feel less guilty for shooting him—a new emotion I know my father would disapprove of. And that, I think, is where Tia's influence has impacted me most.

Wouldn't it be the day if I could rule without the blood and death?

My feet carry me into the clearing, and my heart skips a beat to see that same ledge I watched Tia vanish over. I've never been so scared in my life.

I was terrified I'd lost her.

And I never want to feel like that again.

So this plan had better work. Because even if it's a Hail Mary—completely outside the book of strategies my father has drilled into my head over a lifetime—it's the only way I can think of that might reinstate order without taking Tia's family from her.

But if I'm wrong, I'm fucked.

TIA



I jerk awake from my reclined position in bed, my heart breaking into a sprint at the unfamiliar music issuing from somewhere to my right. I must have fallen asleep reading.

It's no wonder, considering Trudy suddenly became a slave driver this morning, asking if I would help in the kitchen because two of her girls called in sick at the last minute. I didn't have the heart to tell her no, so I swore her to secrecy because I have no doubt Leo would have a fit if he heard I was helping the help again.

But by the time Trudy finally relieved me of my kitchen duties, I'm not ashamed to admit I was beat. I wanted nothing more than to curl up with a good book, which I've grown more accustomed to filling my days with lately.

And now, as I sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, it takes several beats of foggy-brained confusion before I realize the sound that woke me is my sister's ringtone. Her phone is buzzing inside the drawer beside the bed.

I scramble to answer it before the staff hears the music and realizes I have a device I'm not supposed to possess.

"Hello?" I murmur breathily, nearly dropping the phone as I bring it to my ear.

"Tia? Are you alright? Why do you sound like you've been running?"

Maria's warm voice is laced with concern, but it fills me with happiness. God, I miss her.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I assure her. “I was just napping, and the phone startled me.”

She chuckles. “Okay,” she concedes. “But how are you? Is Leo still keeping you under lock and key?”

She sounds adorably offended for me, echoing my frustration when I rebelliously decided to go see her after I first found out I was under house arrest.

“Well, I’m still supposed to stick to the house, and I’m pretty sure he has Luigi watching me closely. But he’s taken me on a few field trips to give me some variety and make it less painful, and he promised it’s temporary—just until things calm down.” I fiddle with my paperback book, flipping haphazardly through the pages as we chat. I lost my place when I dozed off. I’ll have to find it again later.

“I’m glad to hear it, but I miss you. I wish we could hang out again.”

Maria sounds sadder now, and it wrings my heart. I don’t like to think of my little sister feeling lonely. She has our three youngest sisters there with her, of course, but they’re not quite old enough to have the kind of heart-to-hearts Maria and I are used to.

“I miss you too,” I confess.

What I wouldn’t give to live in a world where it wouldn’t be a capital offense to spend time with my sister. And, of course, our isolation has nothing to do with anything she and I have done wrong. Just a bunch of power-hungry men tearing the world apart to get what they want.

Strangely enough, I don’t quite put Leo in that category in my mind.

Yes, he’s who has stirred up all this unrest over the past five years. But he just seems... different in my mind somehow.

A silly thought, I know.

“How are things at home?” I ask, worrying my lip as I think about how I left things with our father.

“Tense. A lot like how it was when you came to visit. I don’t get the feeling that Father’s going to just let this blow over, and Mother’s about as cryptic as a sphinx.”

That makes me chuckle. Leave it to Maria to bring fantasy into the conversation. “Have you had any inspirational ideas on how we can calm things down between the families yet?”

“No,” she says morosely. “It’s not like Father is any more willing to speak with me about his plans than he ever has been. And he’s caught me trying to listen in twice. He threatened to whip my hide if he catches me doing it again. Can you imagine that? Mortifying.”

Heat crawls into my cheeks as I think about the spanking Leo gave me not so long ago. It’s entirely different, I know. I’m sure if our father actually decided to punish Maria, it would hurt a hell of a lot more than what I got, and Maria would not enjoy a second of it. But still, it makes my heart flutter as it brings Leo’s fiery gaze to my mind’s eye.

“Well, definitely don’t get caught,” I say, wishing I could give better advice.

“Have you had any luck with Leo?” Maria asks.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I feel like I’m making a bit of headway, but he refuses to discuss business with me now. Even when we went to see his father in the hospital, they were practically speaking in code.” My stomach sinks to think about it. I hate that I’ve made myself more of an outsider in Leo’s regard—even if he’s trying to forgive me for what happened.

And yet here I am, on the phone with my sister he’s told me to refrain from speaking to until he has things under control again.

“Well, maybe that’s just because you were in the hospital, right? It’s not like they can discuss that kind of stuff in public,” my sister suggests hopefully.

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, grateful that she’s trying to encourage me, even if I’m confident that’s not the case. Because Leo’s been intentionally vague at home as well.

“But you really haven’t picked up on *any* news?” Maria presses, her tone shifting to disappointment. “Not even his next move or if he’s going to just wipe our family off the face of the earth?”

An odd, tingling sense of foreboding ripples up my spine at Maria’s choice of words. Not the question about our family getting annihilated but the way she referred to it as “his next move.” Maybe it’s nothing, but for the first time, I wonder if I ought to be talking to my little sister.

I thought if I was careful—if I was intentional about what I told her so she couldn’t accidentally give my father valuable information—I figured Maria could still be a safe confidant. I still doubt my sister would intentionally betray *me*. Still, if our father coerced her into getting information from me, that would create the link my father needs to make me his spy.

It wrenches my gut to think that Maria could be lying to me. But it’s not entirely out of the range of possibilities that our father convinced her to do so, in order to ensure our family’s survival. She’s sixteen, for Christ’s sake. He can’t possibly think she’s old enough to bear that kind of responsibility.

I feel bad enough for having put the burden of creative brainstorming on my sister. Our father wouldn’t bring her into his whole twisted plan of deceit. *Would he?*

My thoughts send me back to the conversation I had with Leo after I snuck out to visit Maria—what he said about my father. “*He used you without a second thought for your safety... And still, you think you owe them loyalty?*” He’s not wrong. I know that. I can see it more objectively when he could be doing the same thing to my sister.

But what turns my stomach is the knowledge that, in Maria’s shoes, I very easily could have been convinced to pass information for my family. I was willing to marry a monster for them when we get right down to it. Of course, Maria could be capable of betraying me if Father talked her into it. He’s very persuasive when he wants to be. And she’s two years younger than I am.

And she's all alone in that big house, trying to be the adult while our father rips apart the universe because he doesn't want to share his power with the Morettis.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes as I realize just how dangerous this conversation might be.

Dangerous because I could easily say something to get Leo killed without meaning to.

I can't bear the thought of it.

And I refuse to let that guilt fall on Maria if she is trying to get information from me.

"Tia?" Maria says, alerting me to the fact that I've been in my head for far too long. She's picked up on my distraction.

Suddenly anxious to get off the phone, I scramble for an excuse. "I think someone's coming," I whisper around the massive lump in my throat. "I've got to go. I love you." I don't wait for her response. Quickly hanging up, I throw the phone onto the bed like it's some kind of explosive device.

What was I thinking?

This is exactly why Leo doesn't want me speaking with my family. And while I can't stand the thought that Maria might not be a safe confidant anymore, perhaps Leo was right. I should cut ties until he's resolved the conflict between our families. Because the last thing I want to do is unwittingly hurt Leo again.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I pull myself back together.

Then I snatch the phone up off the bed and stash it in my bedside table once again. I just hope my instincts aren't leading me astray. My gut tells me Maria wouldn't betray me. But my head says it's more than possible, and I don't think I can take that chance.

"God, what is wrong with me?" I breathe, burying my face in my hands.

I comb through our very brief conversation in my head, trying to think if I said anything I might regret. I think I'm

safe.

Flopping back onto the bed, I rest my palms over my belly. “Baby, don’t ever let me do something stupid like that again, okay?”

My lips quirk at the irony that I’m now requesting emotional support from my unborn child. But thinking about her helps ground me. She helps me see what’s most important in life. And as much as I’m going to miss Maria, talking to my sister is not the highest priority right now. I can set aside my personal wants and needs. I can support Leo’s request.

And I will find a way to end this conflict. Even if I have to do it on my own.

LEO



It's already well past noon, and my head is throbbing when my office phone rings. I pick up without checking the number, rubbing my tired eyes.

The hours I'm putting in are not sustainable, but even though Johnny's doing his best to pick up the slack, with my father in the hospital, I'm working two jobs while my family is running on high alert trying to quash any sign of residual unrest caused by Don Guerra's actions. And all while under Mayor Romney's microscope.

I rest the phone against my ear. "Yeah."

"Signor Moretti, a Don Giuseppe Guerra, is on the line for you," Anita says across the line.

Immediately, I'm wide awake, adrenaline thrumming through my veins at the unexpected call. "I'll speak with him," I assure her.

"Yes, sir," she agrees.

Then the phone clicks, alerting me that she's transferred the call.

"Don Guerra, what a pleasant surprise," I state dryly, fully trusting that this is about the man I shot this morning. My stomach knots as I wonder if he's not calling to inform me the man died. I don't relish the guilt that follows.

"I'm sure it is," he says, his voice surprisingly devoid of bitterness. "A surprise, that is, considering I hadn't planned on making it myself until very recently."

“Why are you calling?” If he’s going to play the gentleman, I suppose I can play along and see what the hell he wants.

“I had hoped you and Tia might be willing to sit down to dinner with me and my wife. You can choose a restaurant—one that would be considered neutral ground—if that’s what you would prefer.”

That’s just about the last thing I ever would have expected him to say, and I pause a beat as I consider what the possible implications could be. My greatest concern is that it could be a trap, and if it is, that would put Tia right in the middle of something dangerous—possibly even deadly.

“Dinner. And when did you intend for this dinner to take place?” My language is stiff with my tension, and I grip the receiver convulsively.

“Tonight, if you’re free.”

That puts me slightly at ease. If he’s going to let me choose the venue and he intends to meet tonight, he won’t have time to plan anything very extravagant in the way of an ambush. Especially if I choose the right venue and don’t tell him until the last minute.

“I’ll speak with Tia and get back to you about a time and place,” I say.

“Very good,” he agrees amiably.

And once again, my suspicion spikes. “May I ask what changed your mind?”

“I’m sorry?” he asks, for the first time seeming caught off guard by my question.

“You said you hadn’t planned on making this phone call until recently. I was just curious what changed.”

The line goes quiet for a beat, and I quirk an eyebrow.

When the older man speaks again, I could almost believe it’s with a hint of apology in his tone. “It has come to my attention that you had it within your power to kill several people who are important to me today... and you chose not to.

And I think it's time we sat back down and had a candid conversation about where things might go between our families moving forward."

Interesting.

If Tia's pleas for mercy on her family actually prove beneficial, I just might have to buy her a private plane or a castle in Europe. Maybe a Greek island.

"I look forward to it." I keep my voice even, as indifferent as I can manage.

But as soon as I hang up, I'm out of my chair, slinging my suit jacket over my shoulder as I head for the door. It takes no time at all to get from Club Divino back home, and after a brief conversation with Luigi, I head straight to the library, where he assures me Tia's been for the last hour.

"Tia," I call as I fling open the double doors.

My voice echoes around the vast room, and a startled yelp from the second floor directs me to her exact location. As I stride across the mosaic decorating the marble floor, my lovely wife appears at the railing above me.

"Leo? You're home early. Is everything alright? Is your father...?" Her face pales as if a horrible realization just hit her.

"Fine—he's fine. At least he was a few hours ago."

Her shoulders sag with relief, and she moves toward the stairs, following the railing to stay within sight as I move to meet her halfway.

"So, why are you bursting in here like the house is on fire after you told me you wouldn't be home until late?" Her bare feet pad softly down the steps, and as she reaches the bottom one, I snake my arms around her waist, pulling her close as she stands at eye level.

"Your father called and invited us to dinner. Tonight," I state, reading her expression closely. "What do you think? Do you want to go?"

Tia bites her lip, her expression shifting to nervous in a flash. “Did he give a reason?” she asks tentatively.

“When I asked, he said he wanted to discuss how our families might try moving forward from here.” I leave out the reason behind it because, while what I did today would be considered mercy in my book, I’m not so sure Tia would see it that way. Better to wait until I know if the man lived or died. Then, I can face the consequences.

Her eyebrows press together in the sweetest look of hope and anxiety.

“Is that a yes?” I press. “You know your father best. And what I care about most is your safety, so if it could be an ambush, I’ll go alone.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. It *could* be an ambush. But that’s why I think it’s better if I do go. He would be less inclined to spring a trap if it could hurt me. Still... I don’t know. I don’t want to give you a false sense of security.”

The flicker of pain in her eyes tells me all I need to know. She can’t trust her father anymore—like she used to. And it makes her sad to know her worth in his eyes might be far less than she would hope for.

Trapping her chin between my finger and thumb, I press a soft kiss to her lips. “I appreciate your honesty, and I promise I’ll take every precaution to ensure we don’t get caught unprepared.”

Tia nods, relief washing across her face.

We’re on a team now, working together, and I sincerely hope that with Tia by my side, I can actually rein in this rebellion without having to make it a bloodbath.

I leave Tia to get ready, knowing that if I join her, I’ll be too easily distracted. Instead, I spend the next several hours discussing with Johnny and Rasco where would be the best venue to have this dinner—somewhere private enough that we can have the conversation Don Guerra’s proposing, public enough that he won’t be able to kill me without witnesses, and in a location that we could both consider neutral.

It proves a hell of a lot harder to do than I would have anticipated. Finally, we land on Belladonna, an Italian restaurant that technically resides on the border of both our territories and has managed to avoid falling under either Moretti or Guerra rule because it opened shortly after the announcement of my engagement to Tia.

While neither of us have claimed it, which makes the restaurant a rare neutral point, it's also rather something of an unknown layout—one I've never been in myself. But Rasco and Johnny have agreed to scout ahead, get a lay of the land, and post several of our men at tables throughout the restaurant in case we need backup.

By the time I call Don Guerra back, I've given him little more than an hour to get ready for the time I suggest. That doesn't seem to faze him, which, once again, gives me hope that his invitation might be sincere.

Finally, I head to the private suite Tia and I share so I can change.

She's already dressed by the time I walk in, her hair done, and she's putting the finishing touches on her makeup. When she turns to me, she gives me a nervous smile, but she looks positively radiant.

"You look stunning in red," I observe, admiring the cherry-red, velvet cowl-neck dress with ruched stitching along the sides.

It hugs her curves perfectly before reaching down to her knees. She's painted her lips to match, making them even more irresistible than usual.

"Thanks," Tia says, blushing a rosy pink.

I change into a simple black suit, picking a crimson tie to match my eye-catching wife. Then we take the Escalade, riding with Johnny and Rasco, along with two more who are locked and loaded and going to be waiting on standby.

Tia observes them without comment, but I can see the recognition in her eyes. If things go south, she could easily lose someone she loves tonight. And as selfish as it might

sound, I don't intend for that to be me. And it sure as hell won't be Tia or our baby. Belladonna has a nice interior, with an exposed brick wall running the length of the restaurant on one side. Black-and-white pictures of Venice decorate the walls, giving the space a perfect taste of the culture Piovosa was founded on.

Don Guerra and his wife are already seated at the table my men reserved for us specifically. Johnny notified me that they were here early on the drive over. And while that gives Don Guerra the advantage of choosing the seat with the best vantage point, I can hardly blame him. After all, he's sticking his neck out, and I gave the don no time to form an escape plan, let alone an ambush.

Still, he's here, and I'll take that as another good sign of his intentions.

"Tia!" her mother says warmly, rising with Don Guerra and rounding the table to pull her daughter into her arms.

Rather than happy, Tia looks genuinely troubled by her mother's display of affection, and her anxiety is setting me on edge. *Did I talk Tia into doing something she has a bad feeling about?*

This is why I've never made alliances before. They're too fucking stressful. My father's number one rule—trust only myself. He didn't even include himself in that circle. And he sure as shit never trusted anyone completely—probably not even me.

But the smile Don Guerra turns on me now is one genuine enough, it could almost convince me. "Leo, thank you for agreeing to this dinner," he says warmly, clasping my hand. "And, Tia." He beams at his daughter. "You look lovely tonight."

"Thank you," Tia says, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

Maybe the tension I read in her body language was residual stress from the anticipation of what might come. But as I pull a chair out for her, she settles into it with a soft smile, her eyes meeting mine with warmth.

“The girls send their love,” Francesca Guerra says, turning her eyes to Tia.

The hint of a blush colors her cheeks, catching my interest, and then she smiles. “Please tell them I love them and miss them.”

A young server sidles up to the table, her eyes round as they bounce between me and Don Guerra in apparent recognition. “Good evening,” she stutters. “Can I start you all off with some drinks?”

“I think a bottle of wine for the table, if that works for you.” Don Guerra’s eyes find mine, politely deferring to me.

“That sounds great. Perhaps a Brunello di Montalcino?” I suggest. “And water for the table.”

Tia flashes me a shy smile of appreciation, and I must be going soft because that’s all it takes to make me want to kiss her. But not tonight. Not right now, when we’re sitting down to dinner with her parents and a conversation that could dictate the future of our families for generations to come.

The server departs with a nervous bob, and I turn my attention back to the man sitting across the table.

He clears his throat and turns his attention to his daughter. “So, Tia, have you heard what happened to the Guerra men who were released from jail this morning?”

Mother. Fucker.

TIA



Leo stiffens beside me, the tendon in his jaw jumping, and my stomach drops as his hands fist beneath the table. His visceral reaction to the question leaves me uncertain as to whether I actually want to know what happened to my father’s men. To Maury and Angelo. My cousins might be hotheads, but I still grew up with them. I still love them.

While I was thinking I might be getting through to Leo, was he out executing my cousins?

It takes all my discipline to maintain eye contact with my father. “No, I hadn’t heard yet. What happened?”

“Seven of them were released, including your cousins Maury and Angelo...” he explains, his eyes bright with the anticipation of telling a secret that wasn’t his to tell. “Apparently, most made it home safely. But one man got shot. News from the hospital is that his wound seems to mirror the one Don Moretti endured at the charity ball.”

My father’s eyes flick to Leo then, a silent challenge for Leo to deny it—or to take responsibility. He’s the one who did it. I can see it written in the tension of his shoulders. Still, Leo’s face is as passive and calm as always. That mask sends chills up my spine.

“He was taken to the hospital?” I ask, carefully wading through my father’s manipulation to see the full picture.

“Yes, he was rushed straight into surgery,” Father says gravely. “From what I hear, they had to remove the man’s liver.”

I honestly don't know whether to be horrified or elated. It makes me sick to think that I would consider hearing only one man in surgery is good news. Still, I'd half-anticipated that every single man would be dead and buried in some unmarked grave—vanished the moment they found their freedom.

“I'm sorry to hear about the man who was attacked. Has he made it through surgery?” I ask tentatively.

From the corner of my eye, I catch the slightest shift in Leo's frozen posture.

“I believe so, though he'll be in the ICU for some time.”

“Well, I'm glad to know Maury and the others are okay,” I murmur.

Leo's come a long way from wanting to kill everyone involved in the charity ball incident—including my father—to putting just one man in the hospital. And while I hope for the day when I won't have to think about the violence or bloodshed between our families, I can dare to believe that he's trying to minimize my pain.

Reaching beneath the table, I rest my hand on Leo's knee in an effort to subtly show him my gratitude. To demonstrate I'm by his side. And though the shift is nearly invisible, I can see the tension wash from his shoulders. Leo's fist relaxes as he takes my hand in his, interlacing our fingers.

My heart warms at the display of affection. And for the first time, it feels as though he's drawing strength from my presence. We're a team, and he's using my support to stand firmly on his path.

“I'm glad to hear he survived,” Leo says, giving my hand a squeeze, though his eyes remain on my father. The simple gesture tells me his words are sincere.

“Thank you.” My father's gracious nod is timed perfectly with the server returning with a tray of water and a bottle of wine.

“Here we are,” she says, her hands still shaking, though she seems to have regained some composure after the somewhat star-struck response she had when she first came to

the table. “Waters for you,” she explains unnecessarily, giving away her nerves as she sets them down around the table. “And our 2016 Biondi-Santi Brunello di Montalcino.”

She shows the bottle to Leo, who nods approval before she opens it to pour a taste.

“That’ll be fine,” he says, and she pours three glasses.

“None for me,” I pipe up before she can pour a fourth.

“And are we ready to order?”

“We might need another minute,” my mother pipes in, ever refined and tactful. “But perhaps we’ll start with the bruschetta.”

“Of course,” the server agrees with a nervous little half-bow. Then she slips away.

“So, what’s good here?” my father asks, picking up his menu.

Leo smirks. “I don’t actually know. I’ve never been here.”

That draws a chuckle from my father. And though I don’t quite see why the comment is funny, it eases the pressure building from the rather tense subject of my father’s traitorous men.

Air rushes from my lungs in relief as I release a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. And the tension seems to vanish as we carry on as if this is just another ordinary dinner. By some miracle, the situation seems to have simply resolved.

My lack of response to my father’s gossip and Leo’s composure seem to have formed a solid wall that can’t be brought down.

We did it.

Leo and I.

We formed a truly united front, and it feels amazing.

I lift my menu, scanning the options, and by the time our server returns, we’re all ready to put in our order. Leo’s thumb

brushes the back of my knuckles beneath the table as he raises his wine glass.

“To family. And second chances,” he says.

“*Saluti*,” my parents agree in unison, and I raise my water glass to join in.

The moment is poignant, and it marks a transition in the night. Leo’s establishing that he would prefer to let bygones be just that. He’s willing to forgive my family’s treachery if my father will stop antagonizing him. For my sake, Leo is willing to establish peace. And that level of devotion and sacrifice takes my breath away.

“So, Don Guerra, I believe you invited us here tonight to discuss where our families might go from here,” Leo states calmly, his expression cool and poised as he follows his statement with a sip of wine.

“Yes. I think enough damage has been done on both sides. We keep fighting, and for what? No one wins when death is the consequence.”

My father’s words strike at my heart. That’s the kind of statement he might have made when I was growing up that truly earned my respect. I’ve always known him to be a diplomatic man. A man who could recognize the big picture and see what solution would work best. It’s why I trusted him when he told me that marrying Leo was the only way to protect my family and my child.

“Well put,” Leo says, and though my heart is pounding, he seems as calm as if they were discussing the weather. “Which is why I think we can agree to let go of the past and come to an accord that will suit us both.”

My father nods, his dark eyes thoughtful. “I imagine you’ll expect some concessions...”

I can hear the undercurrent of the words he’s not saying: *after our betrayal*.

A smirk curls the corners of Leo’s lips, and he glances around the restaurant. “Yes, perhaps we can agree that I’ll take

Belladonna into my fold. I quite like the ambiance, and I hear the food is amazing.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor. Leo’s actually teasing my father. I imagine he genuinely would be happy to claim another of Piovosa’s restaurants. Still, the concession is practically a nonentity in my father’s regard. He would be a fool not to take the deal if that’s all Leo wants.

My father’s expression remains passive, his face giving away nothing. But he studies Leo with a newfound consideration. I don’t think, even in his wildest imaginings, my father would have expected such a reasonable offer.

Before he can give an answer, Belladonna’s front door swings open with force. For a split second, I fear this might be the ambush Leo assured me we would be prepared for. Because this evening has been going too well.

Then one of Leo’s men strides through it, his expression dark as his eyes focus on our table. He crosses the room with long strides, drawing the attention of other patrons in the restaurant.

When he reaches our table, he doesn’t waste time with formalities. Instead, he bends to whisper in Leo’s ear. Leo’s hand tightens around mine convulsively, sending a jolt of anxiety into my gut.

His face goes from passive to furious in an instant, and without a word of explanation, he releases my hand to rise. Leo’s man straightens at the same time, his face a mask of steely resolve.

“Leo?” I ask tentatively, my heart fluttering.

Rather than look at me, Leo steps behind my chair and pulls it out for me—while I’m still in it. “We’re leaving. Before I do something I regret.” The cold statement strikes fear in my heart, and I look up at his thunderous expression.

Stunned by the sudden shift, I rise to stand beside him. “What’s wrong?” I breathe.

Leo’s gray-green eyes look carved from granite as they focus on my father. And yet his voice is as low and steady as

ever. “My father is dead.”

LEO



“So help me god, if you knew—if you had any hand in this—I will skin you alive and mount your head on a pike so I can display it in the town square. I’ll carve the word ‘traitor’ into every single Guerra’s forehead so people will know what you are,” I state coldly, my gaze boring into the don before me.

Then I turn and steer Tia from the restaurant as gently as I can muster. But my blood is boiling, and my hand twitches toward the gun hiding beneath my suit jacket. I’m confident that Don Guerra is tied to my father’s death somehow. He only asked us to dinner as part of his plan to kill Don Moretti. I’m sure of it.

The car is waiting for us right outside the door, and Tia climbs in without a word, her face pale and grave as I settle onto the seat beside her.

“What happened?” she breathes as the door closes behind Johnny, who slips into the third row. “Your father was getting better every day. I thought the doctor said he was out of the woods.”

“He did say that,” I growl. Riddled with fury, I turn a condemning gaze on her. “I have no doubt this is murder, Tia. And you can bet that your father did this.”

“How did he die?” she whispers, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

Tia falls silent, and I can feel her eyes on me as I scowl out the front window as we race toward the hospital. My father shouldn't have died. He was strong. He was recovering, so why would he die unless it was an act of vengeance?

And to think Don Guerra sat down to dinner with me. He looked me in the eye and gave a speech about how no one wins when death is the consequence. All the while, he was probably laughing to himself, knowing that my father would die tonight.

I could kill the bastard with my bare hands.

I likely would have if Tia weren't sitting right there beside me. Still, I was sorely tempted to shoot him. But I couldn't kill Don Guerra right in front of her. Not her father. Even if Tia found it in her heart to forgive me, she would never recover from that kind of trauma.

Still, the fury that rips through me turns the world red.

I've known grief in my life. I cried the day my mother died—and my baby brother along with her. But this is different. This is murder, plain and simple, and I will slaughter the men responsible. I don't care if it's Tia's father this time.

No one says a word as we drive toward the hospital. And with Tia in tow, as soon as we pull up to the curb, I storm to Piovoza General to demand what happened.

"Where is Dr. Ellis?" I snarl, slamming my hand down on the reception counter.

The woman sitting at a computer behind it squeaks as she jumps back in her rolling chair. "H-He's... I-I d-don't know," she stutters.

"Who can we speak to about Don Moretti?" Tia asks, her voice soft as she rests a calming hand around my elbow.

"Signor Moretti."

Dr. Ellis's direct tone cuts through my anger, and I turn to face him. He looks troubled, his brow furrowed, though his graying hair and white lab coat are in as impeccable order as they have been every time I've spoken with him.

“What happened?” I demand. I ball my hands into fists to stop their shaking.

Dr. Ellis shakes his head. “I’m not entirely confident. Don Moretti looked perfectly healthy this morning. His charts would indicate a steady improvement, and I found no outward signs of distress. As of now, I’m unsure of what to make of your father’s sudden turn.”

The doctor’s tone is baffled, intensifying my unrest.

“As of now, his cause of death has been ruled as a heart attack, but the inflammation and extreme nausea that preceded his cardiac arrest are more in keeping with a severe drug allergy. When he was admitted, we were told that he has no known allergies to antibiotics. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I confirm, my suspicion rising. “I want a full autopsy performed. I assure you, Doctor, this was murder, and I want to know exactly how my father was killed.”

Dr. Ellis looks stunned by my statement, but he doesn’t attempt to sway me one way or the other. “I already ordered one, considering his death was so sudden, and some symptoms are not in keeping with those of a heart attack. But this could be an accident—or simply his body developing an autoimmune response that his heart simply couldn’t handle after such a serious surgery. Your father was old enough that any operation would incur some heightened risk.”

“I want to be informed as soon as the results come in,” I state, brushing off his attempt to placate me. He can pretend all he wants that this was some fluke, that my father simply couldn’t hold up to the surgery. But I know better. My father was very healthy and as stubborn as a mule.

He didn’t just die.

I’m sure of it.

“Of course.” Dr. Ellis gives a nod. “We haven’t moved him yet if you wish to go see him.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Tia murmurs beside me.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the doctor says, then he hesitates, his eyes shifting back to me. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He can shove his apologies up his ass. I want answers. But I bite my tongue and thank him before placing my hand on the small of Tia’s back and steering her toward the ICU.

The stench of ammonia burns my nose as we enter the sterile hallway, and Tia’s heels rap noisily against the floor as we make our way toward my father’s private room. Levi and Cane stand guard at his door, their expressions sullen, hostile even.

And when they see me coming, both stiffen, standing to attention as they brace for my approach.

“What the fuck happened?” I growl. “How are you two still alive when my father lies dead in the room you’re supposed to be guarding? Did you fall asleep on the job?”

Levi shakes his head, his eyes flashing with distress. “We’ve been standing guard since noon and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just nurses coming to check on him. He was awake and talking an hour ago—going on about the hospital food, in fact, threatening to pull funding if someone didn’t get him a proper meal.”

Combing my fingers into my hair, I pace the hallway in front of his door. Whoever did this was sneaky. They made it past my men without raising any suspicion, which means either my men are lying and failed to do their duty—or the person responsible knew how to get into the room undetected. Both seem equally unlikely.

“Do you want to go see him?” Tia asks, her touch featherlight as it finds my shoulder.

No. Because I know that seeing him will make his death a reality. Just like it did when we visited my mother’s body. But I don’t have the luxury of denial right now.

If I’m going to take my revenge, I need to see what the men responsible did to the man who gave me life.

I nod and turn toward the door to my father’s hospital room. Tia’s right behind me, a silent shadow as we enter the

hauntingly still space. It sounds like death in here. The utter lack of hospital noises—the beep of the heart monitor, the hiss of machines, my father’s labored breathing. It’s all gone now.

His body lies flat in his bed. Someone took the time to close his eyes, and as I approach, I find he looks relaxed. Peaceful even. He could just be sleeping.

But the waning color of his cheeks tells me otherwise. The lack of movement in his chest.

I stand over the man who raised me, looking down on his lifeless body. And all I feel is rage. We might not have had a conventionally close relationship. But my father has been my one constant in life since the day my mother died.

He’s the one who drove me to become great, to see the potential in the world around me. He taught me what it means to be strong. He showed me how to play the game. And he unleashed me on the world without a second’s hesitation.

He believed in me. He believed in my vision.

And without his support and guidance, I wouldn’t be half the man I am.

My father was a great man in his own right. And now he’s dead because some bastard betrayed me. Again.

“I’m so sorry, Leo,” Tia breathes beside me.

I scarcely feel her hands as they wrap around my right arm as if to comfort me. And though she’s soft and warm beside me, no amount of the body heat radiating from her seems capable of chasing away the ice in my heart.

“I’m going to paint this town with the blood of my enemy who did this,” I declare. “This means war.”

We stand in silence for a long moment, looking down at my father’s lifeless face. And fissures slowly creep through my chest and threaten to shatter my mind. I never imagined his life could end this way. I honestly hadn’t even considered his death before now.

Even though I know the dangers of our chosen path, my father always seemed untouchable. Invincible.

“Let’s go home,” I state flatly, my voice bled dry of emotion.

“Okay,” Tia murmurs.

My men are gathered in the hallway outside the hospital room. And their eyes shift to find me as soon as we step into the fluorescent lighting. None say a word.

It’s a grim procession back to the Escalade and a silent ride home as I contemplate what I’m going to do about Don Guerra. I can’t let him live—not after this.

But with the hate in my heart after seeing my father’s lifeless body, I know that killing Tia’s father will break us.

She won’t forgive me.

And I can’t forgive him.

TIA



Leo's losing it. I can see the madness flickering behind his eyes. A deadly wrath that could blow a hole through the center of our world. His stony silence is almost more terrifying than the deadly threats he made at dinner and the hospital.

And now, more than ever, I don't doubt the violence in his heart.

"I want every Guerra man you can get your hands on rounded up and detained until further notice," he states, making my stomach plummet. "I intend to start questioning them first thing in the morning. I want to know who's responsible, how they did it, what they ate for their last meal before they made the gravest mistake of their life."

The barked orders Leo gives his men as we pile out of the Escalade are met with immediate confirmations. And they melt into the night, leaving me alone to weather the hurricane of emotion brewing around my husband. It would seem no one is prepared to question him in this frame of mind. Not even I can find the strength to deny him.

My heart aches to see him in such a state of turmoil.

This man, who has shown such calm composure no matter the circumstance.

Right now, he feels as though the slightest disturbance might make him snap.

I follow him down the hall to our room, intensely aware of the walls he's building around himself—protective barriers that will hold him in one piece. And keep me out.

I close the door softly behind us, finally alone with him after what feels like the hardest night of my life. I'm terrified to think he might be right about my father. It breaks my heart to imagine he's manipulated me once again.

But more than that, I wish I knew how to soothe Leo's suffering. Because I can tell that beneath all his anger, he's in pain from his loss. I want to be here for him. I just don't know what I could possibly say that might console him.

His movements are jerky as he loosens his tie. Shrugging out of his suit jacket, he gives me a brief glimpse of his shoulder holster before that, too, is set aside. And all the while, he keeps his back to me, hiding the stormy expression I know is on his face.

Slipping out of my heels, I pad softly across the room to him. It hurts too much to stay away. To watch him hurting and do nothing. "Leo," I ask tentatively, my voice small and uncertain. "How can I help?"

I place a hand on his shoulder, willing him to turn toward me so we can face this together.

He whirls, and my heart stops at the sudden hand around my throat. The snarl on his lips is almost as terrifying as the wrath in Leo's eyes, and he completely blindsides me as he steers me backward until I'm pinned against the wall.

"Did you know?" he growls, the accusation in his tone making my stomach tremble. "Were you in on it this whole time?"

For the first time, I feel Leo's underlying potential for violence directed my way.

It's terrifying.

Cold adrenaline floods my system, making me shake uncontrollably.

“Leo, you’re scaring me,” I gasp, tears stinging my eyes as my heart stutters.

And though the hand around my throat isn’t hurting me—he’s not choking me in any way—I still can’t breathe as my terror grips me, making me freeze.

The fury vanishes from Leo’s face in an instant, horror and regret replacing it immediately as he seems to come back to himself. “*Fuck*,” he hisses as he withdraws his hand like my skin suddenly burned him. He steps away from me like he doesn’t trust himself to be so close.

In the next moment, he slumps into the overstuffed reading chair that sits in the corner. And to my astonishment, he drops his head into his hands and starts to cry. It’s the soft, broken sobs of a man who’s lost his way. His shoulders shake with silent grief, tearing at my heart. Pain rolls off of Leo in waves, a torture that frightens me as much as it makes me want to cry.

Sitting gingerly on the floor by his feet, I want to comfort him, but I’m scared to touch him. Like one might approach a wild animal caught in a trap, I watch closely, creeping nearer but not daring to come the whole way. “Leo?” I murmur tearfully.

He pulls himself together quickly, lifting his head to look at me with bloodshot eyes. “I’m so sorry, Tia. I didn’t mean... I never should have touched you like that. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I feel like I’m going insane.”

“You’re not,” I assure him, though I’ve had that very thought myself. I could see it in his eyes earlier. I should have known he might be dangerous. But I’ve never genuinely feared for my life like that before. Not even after I witnessed him blow a man’s brains out in the woods.

That day, I thought he might kill me if I didn’t run. But it would be a logical decision, a painless death brought on by my being in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Feeling his unbridled rage as he held my life in his hands just now?* He felt wild and powerful enough to rip me to shreds.

Now, he just looks agonized for having touched me in his crazed state. “I don’t know who to trust anymore. I’ve lost the one man I could rely on to be honest with me—even if he knew I wouldn’t like the answer. My father was the only person who truly had my back...” He swallows convulsively, hanging his head as his curls cascade over his forehead. “But it’s no excuse for handling you roughly. If I hurt you...” He holds his hands palm up, looking at them like they, too, have betrayed him.

My heart throbs, and I quickly brush away the tears that threaten to escape my eyes. “You didn’t hurt me,” I assure him. “Just scared me, is all.”

He nods, his face filled with remorse.

“Leo, you can trust me,” I promise, scooting forward on my knees until I’m mere inches away. And though it makes my heart race, I tentatively reach for his open palm. “I love you, and will never do anything to break your confidence again. I swear I didn’t know.”

Our palms meet with a jolt of electric tension, and my stomach flip-flops with anxiety.

Then Leo’s hands softly enclose mine, holding me like he would an injured bird he wants to protect. His hazel eyes raise tentatively to meet mine, and in their depths swirls a tumult of emotion.

“Would you say that even knowing I intend to kill your father?” he asks softly, his low voice agonized. “Because I’m confident that Don Guerra had something to do with my father’s death. And this time, I will not show mercy.”

I know I can’t ask it of him again. If my father really did have a hand in Don Moretti’s death, then nothing I could say or do would possibly be enough to earn him another chance. I’m not sure I would want to if I knew for a cold, hard fact that it was true.

But after dinner with my parents tonight, I’m not so certain.

My father's words sounded genuine. They sounded true to who my father used to be—that man who could see reason and rule with respect and mercy. And when Leo said Don Moretti had died, my father didn't gloat.

He actually seemed... surprised.

Stomach in painful knots, I dare to beg for my father's life one last time. "Will you at least wait for the autopsy? To get the full story? It could be a coincidence."

"It's not," Leo states firmly. But still, his eyes soften as he searches my face. "But if that's what it will take for you to make your peace with my decision, I'll wait for the autopsy. Then I'll get a confession from your father before I take his life."

His words send a shiver down my spine, but I'm grateful he's willing to compromise enough to give it time. Maybe he's right. Maybe my father is just a villain, a power-hungry monster who would kill a man who's defenseless and bedridden in the hospital. But I hope not.

For my sake and the sake of my four younger sisters, I hope that kind of cruelty doesn't run in our blood.

And what would be far worse than having my husband kill my father, is wrongfully executing him for a crime he didn't commit.

How could we come so close to peace once again, to have it snatched away at the last minute?

It feels as though this tug-of-war between my love and my loyalty just might rip me in two before the fight is over.

LEO



Tia stands before me in a modest black dress, her makeup soft and minimal—likely to avoid smudging during the challenging and probably tearful day ahead. Her onyx eyes focus intently on the knot of my tie—black like the rest of my suit to match the solemn occasion.

It's not the funeral, not yet. That won't come until after the morgue has released my father's body. Which they won't do until the autopsy is complete.

No, today is a time-honored Piovosa tradition in which any mourning friends and family will stop by the house of the grieving family to pay their respects. I fucking hate it.

I'm dreading the hours of tears—crocodile and genuine—that will come flooding through my front doors, invading my privacy as they assess my own level of pain and grief.

So, rather than dressing myself today, which I'm perfectly capable of, I let Tia do the finishing touches for me. Her fingers are soft yet confident as they straighten her perfect Windsor knot. Then she smooths the soft fabric with her palm and peers up at me through thick lashes.

"I love you," she murmurs, her voice and expression demure.

My fingers tighten reflexively around her hips, and I lean in to press a kiss to her forehead. These last two days have been nothing shy of torture. And her presence is the only thing that has kept me together, kept me grounded.

“Ready?” I ask, my voice rough with strain.

She nods, looping her arm with mine and keeping pace with me as we exit our private room. The halls are empty until we reach the main foyer. There, servants bustle to get ready in time. There’s much to be done—food to prepare and set out, cleaning, appropriate mourning decor to be hung.

Tia and I reach the drawing room, where guests will filter in and out before gathering in the ballroom for refreshments. Rasco is already there with several of my best men. But not Johnny. Because I refuse to release the Guerra men until I find the culprit, and I want my right-hand man to have his eyes on them until that time.

My men stand protectively behind us, ready to mow down anyone who thinks they might use this sacred rite to target me. The mourning service is a time when everyone is supposed to set aside their conflicts, lay down their weapons, and honor the dead. But considering my father’s murderer is a sneaky coward that would kill him in his hospital bed, I’m not taking any chances.

Not with my pregnant wife by my side.

Taking up our post in front of the mantel, Tia and I face the door. Without a word, she laces our fingers together, lending me silent comfort in our final moments of peace.

Then, the mourners start to arrive. Each household bears gifts of consolation—enough bottles of wine to drown our sorrows and drive us into an early grave, countless tokens of affection, homemade cookies, pies, and sugary treats.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” they say.

“What a terrible tragedy.”

“He died before his time.”

“What an influence your father had on this community.”

“He will be missed.”

Countless words meant to honor the dead and soothe my grief. Time and again, I shake hands and say thank you. And

when my voice fails me, Tia does it instead, offering gratitude for people's heartfelt words and kind gifts.

But subtly, I'm studying their faces.

Rather than allowing the hollow pit in my stomach to consume me, I'm secretly hunting for the one responsible.

And the truth is, any one of the people who filter through my home could have had reason to want my father dead. The dons who have all bent their knee to my family each make their appearance.

None seem to hold genuine remorse about my father's passing.

Not a surprise, considering they chose to give up their power and higher station as a last resort.

But it's so many countless people, they start to blend together. Their faces and words all hold the same emptiness. They're going through the motions, but none of these innumerable people loved my father.

He wasn't one to inspire love.

He knew how to inspire fear.

Respect.

Obedience.

Never love. And I can see that now.

"Leo, Tia, we are so sorry for your loss." Signora Romney's voice cuts through the fog of indifference that surrounds this pointless fucking tradition, bringing me back to the here and now.

"Sincerely," Mayor Romney adds, placing a palm over his heart.

"Thank you," Tia says steadily, her tone never shifting as she says it for what must be the hundredth time.

But anger flares inside me, wiping away the dark emptiness and replacing it with white-hot rage. "Are you, Honorable Mayor? Really?" I demand. "Because, from where

I stand, it was in his effort to protect your auction prizes that my father was shot in the first place, and the men responsible were pardoned and set free within days.”

The shock on Mayor Romeny’s face is worth the scene I’m making. And frankly, I don’t care. I’m so sick and tired of men like him looking down their nose at me, pretending I’m the villain, the mad beast that should be brought to justice, when he’s in a position of power that could do something about it. And still, he turns away.

“Funny, isn’t it? That the same day those men were freed, my father ended up dying mysteriously—though the doctor assured me he was well on the road to recovery. That hardly seems like the lawful protection, the justice you so vehemently spout. You accuse me of violence, of taking the choice about a man’s life into my own hands, and yet, Mayor, it would seem to me that you’re just as guilty of permitting it as the rest of them.”

Gasps echo around me. And from the corner of my eye, Tia pales visibly. But she doesn’t let go of my hand. She doesn’t step away from me. We’re in this together, and I can feel her pride growing as I speak my mind.

Signora Romney, on the other hand, looks on the brink of fainting, her fingers pressed to her lips in stunned mortification. But I’m not done just yet. Today, I free myself of the shackles that bind me to this twisted town’s double-standard idles.

“In my eyes, your *law*’s leniency against the Guerra men you set free is the reason my father is dead. So, while you condemn me for what I did at the charity ball, make no mistake, I hold you personally responsible for killing Marco Moretti.”

Stunned by my accusation, the mayor gapes openly, his face turning a dangerous shade of puce. “Forgive me,” he sputters in clear discomfort.

Taking his wife’s hand, he leaves quickly, pulling her behind and offering their sincerest apologies to anyone they

pass in their haste. For a lingering moment, no one says a word.

Beside me, Tia squeezes my hand, and I turn my head to meet her gaze. Tender understanding greets me, and for the first time today, I feel the familiar knot of grief tightening in my throat.

“Breathe,” she mouths subtly, pulling her full lips into a soft smile.

I do as she says, releasing the tension on a heavy breath, then clear my throat.

The procession takes a moment to start again, the guests seeming hesitant to approach after the intensity with which I confronted the mayor. None of them wish to face the same wrath.

Not that they would.

Because I don't see a single Guerra face among them.

It's hardly a surprise, considering most are being detained at one of my properties in the warehouse district on the outskirts of town. Likely, the few I haven't caught are worried I would take advantage of their presence and take them into my custody as well.

Even Don Guerra stays away, though I haven't given orders to have him hunted down just yet. Another confirmation of his guilt in my mind.

It's an exhausting day, and well into the evening, by the time the mourning service has finished and the final well-wisher leaves. The social gathering took place over the span of several rooms, and aside from a small break in which Tia and I had time to feed ourselves, we've been on our feet and conversing with all the people who came to pay their respects.

“Thank you, Rasco,” I state, excusing my extra contingent of men who have stuck to us like glue for the entire day.

“Sir.” He gives a slight bend at the hips, before signaling the rest of his men to follow him from the room. And though

they haven't said as much, I know my men are the rare few who understand the significant loss of our don.

He might have taken a back seat in the day-to-day affairs of our family's operation. I might have been spearheading our drive for more territory. But he was a leader who commanded respect, who steered this family toward success even before I became his top general and the weapon that brought us to new heights.

The door clicks shut, finally leaving me and Tia completely alone. Groaning, I sink onto one of the drawing room couches, utterly spent. Planting my elbows on my knees, I let my head sink into my hands.

Tia's black satin heels and crimson-painted toes come into view a moment later. And her delicate pianist's fingers comb lightly through my hair. Resting my hands on the backs of her thighs, I tip my head to peer up at her. And as her soft caresses ease my ragged soul, I pull her forward to rest my chin upon her stomach.

Gentle fingers trace the purple bruising beneath my sleepless eyes, and her brows press together in concern. "What can I do to lighten your load?" Her voice is low and intimate, steeped in loving distress.

"Make me forget," I rasp. "Just for a few hours. I'm so tired of thinking, of reliving my regret."

"What could you possibly regret? If it's giving Mayor Romney a piece of your mind, I think you were perfectly entitled after everything he's said to you."

I shake my head no. That's not what plagues me. "If I'd been the ruthless leader my father told me to be, if I'd adhered to the lessons he taught me, then maybe he would still be alive." I let most of the traitors who betrayed me walk away with little more than a slap on the wrist. And now my father is dead. I should have killed them all.

Confusion lingers in Tia's eyes, her delicate eyebrows buckling further into a frown. She parts her lips as if to ask what I mean, but I'm done talking. I don't want to think. Every

time I do, I'm left with a deep pit in my stomach, an agonizing guilt over what I could have done that would have prevented my father's death.

All I want to do right now is distract myself with Tia's loving perfection. To think about something good and pleasurable—and it's going to take something as all-consuming as Tia to grant me peaceful oblivion.

Rising from my chair, I follow the lines of Tia's curves, feeling them as I scoop her into my arms. She gasps, her breath catching audibly as she wraps her legs around my waist. Her dress slides up around her hips, offering me more of her creamy thighs. And I relish their softness.

She feels so warm and alive—the opposite of what this day has brought—and my need for her intensifies. I crave the confirmation that she's still here with me. That I haven't lost everything now that the man who served as my rudder is gone. The chaotic waves of emotion toss me about, like a ship caught in the storm. But Tia anchors me, her sure embrace making my heart pound.

I'm alive.

She's alive.

And she's looking at me like she would give anything to ease my pain.

I love her for it—I love her with a deep, desperate kind of need that overcomes my grief. I seek that feeling like a heat-seeking missile, determined to hold onto it for as long as I can. I don't want to think about my dead father or the person responsible for murdering him.

All I want to think about is Tia. Her soft brown eyes are wells of deep compassion, beckoning me in, inviting me to lose myself in her. Sudden, ravenous hunger consumes me.

And I kiss her passionately, claiming her lips like my life depends on it.

Most definitely, my sanity does.

My hands travel up her thighs, kneading them as my fingers slip beneath the soft black fabric of her dress. And when I palm her ass, Tia shivers against me, awakening the fire inside my chest.

I'm alive. She's alive. The child we made together is still growing in her belly.

I repeat it like a mantra in my mind.

The thought is somehow comforting. That I can pass on my father's legacy. I will make our empire something greater than he could ever have dreamed. And I'll do it with this sensational woman I have wrapped in my arms.

TIA



Heat floods me at Leo's passion. And the way his hands explore me leaves no room for confusion over what he meant by "make me forget." It doesn't matter that my feet are aching from being on them all day. I don't care that I could have fallen asleep hours ago; I'm so tired.

Fire races through my veins at his touch.

But we're still in the drawing room, where any number of people might walk in on us accidentally. And the thought of getting caught in the heat of the moment makes me pull back.

"Leo, not here," I breathe, glancing nervously toward the door as he carries me past it and across the room to the table laden with gifts. "What if someone comes in?"

His lips continue to claim mine, unwilling to let them part for more than a few words at a time.

Flustered, I start to breathe more quickly, my chest rising and falling erratically. But he simply sets me on the corner of the table, keeping my legs firmly around his hips as he kneads my thighs.

"No one will disturb us," he assures me, trailing seductive kisses down the side of my neck. "The staff know better, and I want you right here. I want you now."

My core throbs at his sensual words, his intense need turning me on. And though my stomach quivers at the thought of anyone seeing me in some indecent pose, I allow myself to release my inhibitions.

Arching my back, I reach Leo's lips once more, and I kiss him with searing desire.

A groan echoes up his hoarse throat—an aftermath of too many hours of grief and hosting. I gasp and nip his lip as I start to take his request seriously. He wants to forget. He needs some relief from the heavy weight I see him struggling under.

I never thought of Leo as breakable.

To me, he's always been something of a god.

Cold, powerful, untouchable. But I know better now.

He's just as human as the rest of us, which makes his vulnerability all the more precious to me.

Gripping his hips with my thighs, I keep him close as I open the buttons to his suit coat and shove it over his shoulders, then down his arms. At the same time, his fingers hook beneath the shoulder of my boat-neck dress. He pulls the collar aside to suck my skin between his teeth, creating a hickey almost instantly. Arousal floods my panties, soaking them in a matter of seconds.

I moan, my fingers working more frantically to remove the tie I so carefully knotted for him this morning. Something about the balance in removing the dark mourning clothes I helped him into feels cathartic.

Like I'm removing the layers of grief with each item of clothing.

When I make it down to the bare skin of his torso, I run my hands over his rippling muscles, savoring the way they flex and bunch. Goosebumps rise beneath my touch. Pressing my palms to his chest, I guide him back from the table, taking charge as I let him lay claim to my lips.

Then I slowly sink onto my knees before him. His hazel eyes burn with desire as I peer up the length of his body. And at the same time, I unbuckle his belt. It doesn't take more than a moment to open his pants and guide his black slacks and boxer briefs down around his ankles.

Eye to eye with his swollen erection, I grip the base firmly. And with more confidence than I had from the limited experience of my past, I ease his hard tip between my lips.

Leo groans, his hands finding the table behind me for support as I open wide to avoid catching him with my teeth. Then I slowly move my head forward and back, stroking the base of his cock with my tongue.

“*Fffuck*, Tia,” he hisses, his eyes sinking closed.

And when his hips start to move with me, I take slow, steady breaths to allow him deeper down my throat. My heart flutters at the way he fills me, my stomach quivering with anticipation.

My panties are wet with my need, but I can wait.

Leo’s fingers comb into my hair, taking control of the motion, and it’s equally thrilling and nerve-racking.

“Take off your dress,” he rasps, his eyes burning with lust as he watches me swallow him again and again.

Reaching behind me, I ease the zipper down my back and shrug out of the black fabric. Guiding it down my body, I leave it in a heap around my knees.

Leo withdraws from my mouth and, in a flash, scoops me up off the floor, depositing me back on the table. His hands are all over me, exploring every inch of my flesh like this is the first time he’s ever seen it. As if I’m something new and wonderful, he wants to know in detail.

And each blistering touch sets my body on fire.

His lips claim mine with a greed that makes me ache.

The passion between us borders on desperation, and yet, he’s just as careful with me as ever. Like he doesn’t trust himself to behave.

“I won’t break, Leo,” I promise, pulling him more adamantly against me.

And the low, feral snarl that issues from his lips makes me giddy with excitement.

He lays me back, sweeping aside more packages to make room for me. His lips ravage my chest and breasts, capturing my nipples between his teeth and teasing them with his tongue. Then his hands find my thighs, and he hooks his elbows under my knees.

With a tug, he brings me to the edge of the table.

And thrusts inside me without hesitation.

My back arches off the hard surface. My nipples throb, they're so tight, and while I try to consider what it might sound like to the staff if I cry out, I can't seem to stop myself.

"Play with yourself, Tia," he commands, rocking inside me with purpose.

I shiver at the rasping hunger in his voice, and watching his face as I guide my hand between my thighs, I find my clit. Electric pleasure lances through me, and when I tighten around Leo's hard length, his eyes ignite with lusty passion.

"You feel so good," I whimper, daring to speak without prompting.

Leo groans, his fingers pressing harder into my flesh as his pace increases, escalating the intensity. My walls throb, stretching around him until I feel so utterly full and deeply satisfied.

"God, I want to fuck you all night," he growls.

I whimper, nodding at the seriously tempting thought. And my clit twitches beneath my fingers, sending a tingling euphoria across my stomach and chest. My eyes roll back in my head as my breaths quicken. Excitement climbs steadily inside my core, releasing fresh waves of arousal to coat my soaking folds.

Leo hisses, his muscles flexing, jaw clenching to maintain control, and I can't hold on any longer. My orgasm blasts through me, an explosive release of pressure that makes me twitch and shudder against the cool wood table.

My fingers slip from my clit as I ride the wave of euphoria. And I throb around his hard length, begging him silently to

join me in my bliss.

Groaning, Leo falls forward to brace his palms on the hard surface. It brings my legs up, spreading my thighs and changing the angle in which he enters me. Every time he rocks into me, he finds my clit, and his chest brushes across mine, building exhilarating friction.

“You’re so deep,” I gasp, my eyelids flying open as the new intensity only increases the pulsing aftershocks of my release.

Leo slows, hesitating as he seems to take my words to mean it’s *too* deep, and I nearly lose my mind.

“Don’t stop!” I plead. “God, I want it all. Please, please, please,” I mewl.

He grunts, his powerful penetration resuming, and I sob with pleasure.

“Fuck, you’re sexy when you beg,” he growls.

My core flutters at his words, and my pulse races at the meaning behind it. I don’t know how, but something about getting tied up seems to have unlocked a new kind of communication between us. A sexual freedom that fills me with a fresh and unexplored desire.

Leo is a god. When he lays claim to my body, he does it with a confidence and an artistry that couldn’t be described as anything less. It doesn’t matter what he’s doing to me. It doesn’t matter how he takes me.

He brings my soul to life.

He turns our bodies into one.

And right now, I need this deep, unbreakable connection as much as I think he does.

Grasping his neck, I lift myself, intensifying my stretch as I kiss him fiercely. His lips move with mine. And when he traps my lower lip, giving it a playful nip, I nearly come undone.

Combing my fingers into his hair, I give his curls a soft tug. And I'm rewarded with a low and agonized groan.

"Fuck, I'm gonna come," he rasps, his hips jerking forward.

"Mm-hmm," I whimper, too close to the edge to form a coherent thought.

"God, I fucking love you," he growls.

His passionate profession melts my heart. And sends me into oblivion. I clamp my mouth to his, and my euphoric cry vanishes down his throat as I come hard. Arousal gushes from me, running into the crevice between my butt cheeks. My pussy clamps down on his throbbing erection, guiding him deeper into my depths, ready to hold him there until kingdom come.

Leo groans, his hips thrusting forward until he's buried inside me to the hilt. And I can feel the warmth of his own release as he fills me with his seed.

Deep, pulsing satisfaction courses through my veins as I breathe heavily. But I refuse to let go of his lips. Instead, I cling to him, relishing our closeness as he traps me against the drawing-room table.

Slowly, the throbbing aftershocks subside, and I collapse back onto the table. Leo hovers above me, his arms caging me as he gives me the first honest smile since his father died.

"I love you too," I breathe, running my fingers through his hair.

A soft chuckle rumbles from his chest, and Leo leans in to brush a playful kiss across my nose. "I know," he teases.

I smack his shoulder lightly with the back of my hand, and he eases my legs back down onto the table, letting me relax. Then he slides out of me, leaving an aching hollowness in his wake.

"Put this on," he instructs, leaning over to collect our clothes and passing me his suit jacket.

I smile, liking his bossiness as he dresses me in his clothes. Sitting up, I accept the coat and slip my arms into the too-long sleeves. When I button it, the fabric closes just above my belly button, leaving me with a dangerous amount of cleavage.

As Leo straightens, he brings his pants back up, and a lewd smile curls the corners of his lips as he admires me openly. “I don’t know. I might just make that your new dress requirement. It suits you.”

“Was that a pun?” I ask in mock horror.

God, it’s good to hear him laugh. It lifts the dark emotion from his posture for just a moment and fills my heart with warmth. We can get through this together. Grieving just takes time.

“I suppose it was,” he agrees. Then he scoops me into his arms, leaving his shirt and tie and my black dress carelessly strewn across the floor.

“Shouldn’t we collect those?” I ask, my cheeks warming. “Otherwise, people will know what we did.”

Leo’s eyes glimmer with unapologetic arousal as he carries me like a bride, leaving the clothes behind. “I assure you, after the sounds you were making, they already know.”

“Oh my god,” I whisper, burying my mortified face in his shoulder.

Again, he chuckles, making my heart flutter.

“This is our home, Tia. And you’re my wife. We have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Somehow, that eases my embarrassment. He’s right. I should treat this like my home—even if that means finding the courage to get a little wild—because this is where I belong. And astonishingly, though I’ve only lived here a short time, in some ways, it feels more like home than the house I grew up in.

I contribute a significant part of that to Leo. He’s become my safe space in a way I never would have imagined. In his

arms, I feel warm and wanted and loved. A smile graces my lips as something occurs to me.

“What?” Leo asks, glancing down at me from the corner of his eye.

“Nothing. Just... you still carry me around even though my ankle’s fully healed.” It brings back the first time he held me in his arms, when he carried me for miles to bring me back to the house after I nearly died. “I was just thinking that your arms are starting to feel like home.”

The suspicious smirk washes from his face, replaced by a deeper emotion that makes my heart palpitate. And Leo pauses to kiss me as he holds me close.

It’s a momentary connection before he starts walking again. But the tingling pleasure that lingers on my lips makes me smile.

“Well, since it’s so familiar...” he teases as we reach the door to our suite. Then he lowers me just enough so I can reach the handle.

I turn it, swinging the door wide, like I’ve done countless times.

He carries me straight to the bed. But rather than laying me down softly, like he did when my ankle was sprained, this time, he throws me onto the mattress, giving me a moment of airborne weightlessness that makes me squeal.

His dark chuckle sets me alight. And before I can sit up, he falls on top of me, his hips spreading my knees as he settles between my thighs. Kissing me soft and slow, Leo trails his hand down my body, feeling the exposed skin of my chest before reaching inside his suit coat to cup my breasts.

I gasp as fresh excitement makes my walls tighten with need. And when he releases the jacket’s button, exposing my body once again, I’m eager for round two.

“Please, Leo,” I murmur, testing out my new toy.

“Please, what?” he breathes against my lips.

I can feel his erection swelling against his slacks.

“Make love to me? I’m begging you. I want you so bad.” I trail my hands down his chest as I say it, reaching the button of his pants.

His tortured groan vibrates through me, lighting a fire in my core.

“Why do your pleas turn me on so *fucking* much?” he rasps.

I could almost mistake him for being angry if I didn’t know better. And because I’m having fun making him forget about his loss, I bring my lips close to his ear.

“Because you like to please me.”

LEO



I wake to the sound of a bird whistling outside our balcony doors. As I rise from my dreamless sleep, feeling rested for the first time in days, I find Tia nestled in my arms. Her soft skin is warm and inviting against mine, her naked body molding perfectly against mine as I spoon her.

Last night was what I needed desperately, and though that heavy blanket of loss settles over me once more, I feel as though I can carry it far more easily after the respite.

I brush my lips across the curve of Tia's neck, and she releases a warm, contented hum.

"Morning," she murmurs sleepily.

Rolling until her shoulder finds the center of my chest, Tia smiles up at me with dreamy bliss. And god, but what I wouldn't give to spend the day reliving our exhaustive amounts of sex from last night. But I have a schedule to keep.

Leaning in, I capture her lips in a slow, sensual kiss, silently telling her all the things I intend to do to her when I'm finished with my work tonight. Tia's delicate fingers find my wrist as I cup her cheek with my palm.

Things aren't going to get any easier until I've received the autopsy results and resolved the rebellion that's been causing so much trouble. Still, I'm sure about one thing again—I can trust Tia. She's shown nothing but compassion and concern for me. She's stood by my side—even showing me support when it's her family I'm fighting.

And I love her for it in a new and fathomless way. It seems every time I think I'm starting to grasp my feelings for Tia, she finds another way to unlock a deeper affection within me.

With considerable reluctance, I draw back, breaking our kiss so I can look into her onyx eyes. "I have to go," I murmur.

Tia's lips curve down in the softest of pouts, her disappointment apparent, though she's trying to hide it. "Okay," she agrees.

Then she lifts her head off her pillow to steal another kiss.

I chuckle softly as our lips linger. I don't know if she's trying to tempt me to stay, but it's working. If I don't stop now, I might not win this battle of wills. I stroke my tongue between her lips for one last tantalizing kiss. Then, with a groan, I force myself to move away.

Rolling away from her, I climb out of bed before I can change my mind and head straight for the shower, ready to take a cold one that will help me get my head in the game. Still, I can't help but steal a glance back at her as I reach the archway.

Tia smiles coyly from the bed, her lower lip trapped between her teeth as she modestly holds the sheets up around her breasts. She leans casually on one elbow, looking entirely too enticing. The slight color in her cheeks tells me she's been watching me, thinking about my erection that's unavoidable when I sleep with her naked body pressed against mine.

I have half a mind to invite her into the shower with me, but I don't have the time. I already slept past the time I should have been ready and out the door. Thankfully, I'm my own boss, so the people I need to speak with will just have to wait. But authority requires discipline, so I turn without a word to clean up.

It's a quick and rather unenjoyable luke-warm shower, and by the time I step back into the bedroom to get dressed, Tia's out of bed and wearing her silk robe—the one that comes down just low enough to reach the tops of her thighs. It rises

slightly, teasing me as she reaches up to casually sort through her outfits hanging in the walk-in closet.

Forcing myself to look away, I head to the dresser and pull out a pair of boxer briefs. Removing the towel wrapped around my hips, I toss it aside and don my underwear. She heads to the dresser a moment later, standing beside me as she pointedly opens her lingerie drawer and starts to riffle through it.

To avoid temptation, I switch places with her, heading into the closet and picking out a suit at random. Donning my pants, I then turn my attention to my dress shirts and grab one off its hanger.

“I was thinking maybe I should find something fun to wear for tonight,” Tia says playfully as I shrug into it, leaning against the closet threshold and giving me a proper view of how loosely she’s tied the front of her robe closed. The collar is open nearly to her navel, showing off her creamy chest and just barely hiding the dark circles of her nipples. But I can see the hard points pressing through the shiny fabric. “You know, something you could look forward to.”

She steps out of the closet, allowing her hips to sway with purpose as she approaches me. The girl I married has become a woman before my eyes. Her innocence is gone, and she’s been replaced by a seductress who knows just how to turn me on.

All my hard-one control is undone in an instant, my cock swelling in my briefs as she stops in front of me, peering up through her thick, dark lashes.

“Or maybe I’ll wear nothing and see if you come home sooner,” she says cheekily, running her long, delicate pointer finger down my chest. Then she grants me another coy smile.

She’s teasing me, and I fucking love it. Because once again, she’s trying to lighten my load, this time with a bit of levity.

Before she can slip away, I grab her, spinning her in my arms. She releases a giddy shriek as I bury my lips against the

curve of her neck, nipping her playfully.

I tickle her ribs, letting my fingers play across them as I refuse to let her escape. “I *dare* you to go an entire day without clothing. I won’t be able to think about anything else,” I say darkly, my cock pressing adamantly against her back to prove my point.

Tia gives a rare, girlish giggle that contrasts her usual poise and maturity. But it would seem she can’t help herself now, as she’s trapped in my iron grip and at my mercy. She’s ticklish, and, for some reason, discovering that feels like stumbling upon a hidden treasure.

My first meeting of the day might just have to wait longer for me after all.

“Leo, stop!” she squeals between bursts of laughter, squirming in my grip until her robe starts to fall open.

Fuck, I ache for her, and I savor the way she dances against my body in her effort to flee my fingers. Her ass presses back against me, turning me on more as she tries to wiggle free. And again, despite the ragged hole in my chest, I find myself unable to stop smiling.

An odd, unfamiliar buzzing cuts through the warm sound of her laughter, and I frown. Pausing our game, I straighten as I listen for where it’s coming from. It’s persistent, a nagging vibration that continues in a steady three-beat pattern from somewhere beside the bed.

Tia’s nightstand.

Tia stiffens in my arms as she hears it, too, and her sudden tension makes my stomach drop. She knows what it is.

Is she hiding something?

Releasing her, I step around Tia and head straight for the side table.

“Leo, wait,” Tia begs, her voice suddenly desperate.

And that only drives me forward.

“Please, Leo, let me explain,” she insists, grasping my arm and tugging against me as if to bring me to a stop.

But her anxiety spurs me on as it leaves a cold ball of lead in my gut. Ignoring her completely, I drag her with me as she clings to my wrist with one hand and palm with the other. Reaching the nightstand, I wrench open the drawer to find a phone—not Tia’s—buzzing across the bottom. I know it’s not hers because the case is decorated with tiny heart-shaped confetti floating in liquid.

“Leo,” she breathes, her voice horrified as I scoop it up and answer without a word.

“Hello? Tia?”

The young voice that comes across the line is unmistakably similar to my wife’s. It must be her sister Maria.

“Are you alright?” she asks anxiously. “I heard about what happened while you were at dinner the other night. I’ve been worried sick. What’s going on?”

Un-fucking-believable.

Hanging up, I turn slowly to face Tia. Rage boils up, seething from me like lava from a volcano. Her fingers release me as she takes an involuntary step back. And the tears running silently down her cheeks tell me all I need to know.

All the regret, all the guilt—all the apologies and begging and assurances that it would never happen again—and here she is, betraying me once more.

“Please, Leo, it’s not what you think,” she stutters between silent sobs. “I only took Maria’s phone so we could think of a way to ease the tensions between our families. Please, you have to believe me.”

But I’m beyond listening.

I’m so fucking furious, I could kill someone with my bare hands. Violent rage roils up inside of me, and with an animal snarl, I launch the phone across the room so hard it shatters against the far wall. “*Fuck!*” The cuss flies from my lips

before I can rein it in, my emotion erupting from me with such force I don't know what to do with it.

Tia flinches, her face draining of color as fear eclipses the concern in her brown eyes.

I need to leave. I have to get out before I do something I regret. Because I've never been so close to losing control in my life. All I see is red. My body is on fire. Passing Tia in the narrow space between her body and the patio doors, I storm across the room.

Snatching my tie and jacket off the chair beside the dresser, I leave without another word. And the small glimpse of Tia I catch as I slam the door behind me tells me she's frozen in the same place I left her.

I finish dressing myself as I walk, my thoughts too rage-driven to form a cohesive thought. I can't believe she fucking played me again. *When will I learn?* I can't trust a single Guerra. Least of all, my wife.

I JERK my tie into place, knotting it with unnecessary aggression as I take my anger out on it. Tia plays the sweet, innocent girl so well. I keep falling for it. Like a fucking idiot, I soak it up whenever she looks at me with those big brown eyes and says she's sorry. That I can trust her. Not anymore—never again.

Reaching the front door, I grab the handle, intent on taking my frustration out on the road with my Ferrari.

“Don Moretti?”

My heart seized at the name, and for a fraction of an instant, I think the person must be speaking to my father. But he's dead. And a moment later, I realize he can only be talking to me. I am now the don of our family, and the crushing realization hits home like a piano dropped from a second-story window.

Straightening, I stiffen as I face the man who said my name and find Luigi standing several paces away. He holds a

package in his hands—a shipping box about a foot square.

“What is it, Luigi?” I ask, fighting to keep my voice steady when my emotions are so willfully all over the place.

“This package just came for you, signor,” he says, closing the distance between us and extending the box respectfully. “It was delivered by a messenger and required a signature.

My suspicion rises, and I look down at the package, wondering just what someone might have sent to me. *A clue as to who killed my father and how?* I wouldn’t put it past Don Guerra to send me some mocking gift to gloat. Whatever it is, it’s best to open it now and get it over with.

No return address marks the top of the box. Only a precise, scrawling cursive indicating my name and address. The tape’s been neatly cut, but I can tell it hasn’t been opened—likely Luigi’s doing.

I break the last bit of tape keeping it closed, and open the flaps, allowing Luigi to continue holding the package. Inside, a simple white envelope rests on top of the packing wrap. I pull out the card and unfold it to find Mayor Romney’s signature at the bottom of the note.

Irritation trickles instinctively through my core. And I force it down as I read what he took the time to write.

DEAR SIGNOR AND SINGORA MORETTI,

Thank you for your generous donation, and congratulations on winning this wonderful and priceless piece of art from the charity ball’s silent auction. Though I know that the loss of a parent—especially one so sudden and unexpected—can be devastating, I hope this item can bring you some small amount of solace in your time of loss.

Regards,

Mayor Romney

PEERING INSIDE the box once more, I find the metalwork rose we bid on that night. My stomach turns at the memory—of how perfect and happy that night seemed. The rose and what it represents almost seems to mock me now.

I grind my teeth, fighting back the waves of emotion that threaten to overcome me.

“What would you like me to do with it, sir?” Luigi asks after a long pause. His ever-polite tone tells me he can see the indecision written across my face.

“Take it to Tia,” I state coldly. “She can decide what to do with it. She can throw it away for all I care.”

Luigi hides his shock well as he tilts his head in acknowledgment. “Very good, sir.”

I turn to leave once more, then pause. “And, Luigi?”

He meets my eyes, his expression passive as he waits for my next command.

“Tia’s to remain locked in her room for the day. The kitchen can bring her her meals. I want a guard posted at her door at all times. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Don Moretti,” he agrees.

“I better not find her out of her room again before I come get her,” I state, my voice flat and deadly with my not-so-subtle warning. My intense, pointed gaze that accompanies the reprimand makes it clear he won’t be forgiven a second time if he lets her slip through his fingers. I’m done being merciful.

It’s time for the world to see just how vicious I can be.

TIA



I collapse onto the bed, my heart aching as the tears come uncontrollably.

I messed up.

Big time.

And I know it.

I should have told Leo about the phone sooner. I should never have taken it in the first place. But it didn't feel like the same kind of betrayal as last time, when I was plotting against Leo intentionally. Even if I never ended up telling my father in the end, before, I had every intention of hurting Leo with the knowledge I gathered.

But this time, I hoped staying in touch with Maria might be a lifeline to bridge the gap between my two families.

I should have known better.

Even without Leo telling me how stupid I am, I sensed the danger as soon as I spoke to her. I should have told him about it the moment I doubted her.

And now, after everything that's happened, I can't even blame Leo for being mad.

My father might be the one responsible for Don Moretti's death—and once again, I've tied myself to that ball and chain and launched it over the side of my floundering ship. It's not sinking fast enough. Might as well sabotage myself to make sure I kill Leo's trust in me stone dead.

I don't think my father killed Don Moretti. He looked too surprised by the news at dinner. Then again, he's a decent actor, and I clearly can't trust my intuition when it comes to my family's motives. I'm not confident in anything I believe anymore.

Staring morosely down at my hands, I wonder how I'm supposed to recover from this newest betrayal when Leo was just starting to trust me again. I can't believe I was stupid enough to keep my sister's phone. I should have disposed of it as soon as I had an inkling that she was working to collect information for my father.

God, I hope I didn't say anything that's made things worse again.

But I didn't have to say anything, did I?

Leo already thinks I've betrayed him. And in a way, I did. Because I lied to him. I kept the phone. And I never told him about it or my father's request to spy on him.

It doesn't matter what my motivations were. Leo has every right to mistrust me.

I can hardly trust myself.

Tears trickle down my cheeks, and I sniffle as I wipe them away impatiently. I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself. I need to think of how I can make this right. If that's even possible.

My heart skips a beat as someone knocks on the door.

"Come in!" I call, and for a fleeting second, my spirits lift as I imagine Leo stepping across the threshold, coming back to talk things out.

I spin as I rise to my feet, desperate words of apology halfway past my lips.

Then the door clicks softly open, and Leo's butler, Luigi, stands in the threshold. He holds a cardboard box in his hands, his politely passive expression on his lined face. My stomach drops, and my hopes shatter.

“Signora, this arrived just a few minutes ago,” he states stiffly, extending the package to me.

And though I’m struggling to move beneath the weight of my anxiety and grief, I cross the room, closing the space between us.

“Signor Moretti said you should choose where it goes.” He hands me the package and waits, his expression carefully emotionless as he looks over my shoulder into the middle distance.

I must look like a wreck. But I wouldn’t know it by Luigi’s guarded indifference.

Suddenly nervous, I lift one corner of the box. My heart twists painfully. It’s the beautiful metalwork flower Leo placed such an extravagant bid on at the silent auction. Wrapped protectively in packing paper, I can just make out the rose’s curving stem and drooping petals. And with the tragically beautiful sight comes a wave of happy memories that fill me with despair.

The tears come again, fast and heavy, and I can’t stop them, even though I know my reaction must be baffling. Somehow, I feel like the artistic sculpture encapsulates the weight of my emotions, my sense of loss right now.

“Thank you, Luigi,” I say between tearful breaths as I work to keep it together. “I’ll keep it here with me.”

I collect the box from him and hug it to my chest, trying my best not to lose it completely. Carrying it back into the bedroom, I stare down into the box as I admire the glass-encased artwork. I set the box on the bed as I settle down beside it, at a loss for what to do next.

What I need is to speak with Leo, to find a way back to the space we were in before he discovered that stupid phone. Before everything fell apart at the seams. Instead, I have a reminder of that momentary bliss I’m not sure we’ll ever get back to.

It takes me a second to realize Luigi’s still standing in the doorway, as if waiting for me to take the time I need before he

delivers bad news.

“Is there something else?” I ask, wiping at my wet cheeks and trying to pull myself back together.

He gives a slight bow, then hesitates a fraction as he straightens. “The master also informed me you were to be locked inside your chambers for the day,” he states. “Rico will be out here in case you need anything.” He gestures to the young, smartly dressed soldier I’m sure is under Leo’s command. “The kitchen will bring you breakfast shortly.”

My lips part in stunned silence. He can’t be serious. Not *again*. *Why would he need to confine me to the room itself this time?* The answer comes to me before I can ask. Because this time, it really is a punishment.

Luigi steps back into the hall, closing the door as he goes. My heart starts to pound. And before I can unfreeze my voice to object, I hear the key turn and the bolt slide home.

“Wait!” I demand, jumping up and racing across the room to pound against the door. “You can’t lock me in here!” I shout. “Luigi!” I scream, my sobs mingling with my pleas. “Let me out!”

But it doesn’t matter. He’s already gone. And once again, I’m trapped. My eyes flit to the balcony doors. *Unless I’m ready to defy Leo and try to make another grand escape*. I know I shouldn’t tempt myself, but I can’t help wondering if Luigi’s thought to post someone out there as well.

I can’t bring myself to check.

I’ve ruined things properly now. And after what happened the last time I snuck out, I don’t think I can do it again. Even if I have a way out. This time, I’m going to accept my punishment—and hope that behaving helps bring Leo back to me.

But somehow, I doubt it.

The horrible sinking feeling in my gut tells me that my relationship with Leo might never be the same. Some lies, you can never come back from. And even if my intentions were harmless, I don’t know that Leo can see it that way.

I've once again tied myself to the family that continues to betray him. And this time, it's his father's death he holds them responsible for. Devastation weighs me down. Just last night, I was helping lift the sadness from Leo's shoulders. Today, I've made myself into the very reminder of that grief.

Forcing my eyes away from the balcony doors, I turn my attention back to the delicate glass-encased flower inside its box. I ease it slowly out of its wrapping and am once again struck by the emotional depth of the artistic metalwork.

The curving stem bears a weight that so perfectly exemplifies grief. The petals, which hold such a delicate, life-like shape, have just started to droop. But what's most devastating about the picture is the way the beautiful rose peers down at the loose petal that's already fallen. A single shell lying on the wooden base.

The symbol of loss, I can feel the flower's grief just looking at it.

And though the rose is a metallic shade of brushed bronze, it seems as real as any flower I've seen. What I wouldn't give to walk through the garden this morning, to spend some time enjoying the fresh air and freedom.

With a heavy sigh, I rest my hand on my belly, thinking of the child growing inside me. "Looks like it's just you and me," I say softly, grateful for her company if I'm going to be locked away.

Picking up the flower's case, I carry it to the dresser and set it in the center. It suits the space perfectly. But that does nothing to satisfy the questions that run through my mind incessantly, and rather than appreciate the sculpture's beauty, my eyes drop to my stomach once more.

Will Leo still be mad at me by the time she's born? Have I ruined our chances for happiness completely? All for the sake of a stupid phone.

I wish I knew a way to prove to Leo that he can trust me. It would be a considerable help if I could prove my father didn't order his to be killed. *But how am I supposed to do that?*

Not from the confines of our bedroom.

LEO



“So it was murder?” I demand, my fists clenching and unclenching as I fight to keep my temper under control.

“Not necessarily,” Dr. Ellis states, his voice carrying steadily across the phone. “But the excessive amount of potassium chloride in his system would poison a body. This could occur naturally, if the body is unable to process it. However, your father’s charts would indicate he was in good shape and showing no signs of toxicity in the days before his heart attack.”

“And there were no signs of assault? No injuries?” I hear what the doctor is saying, and still, I don’t believe it. This was murder. I can feel it deep in my gut.

“None. He looked perfectly well, aside from unusually high potassium levels. I’m sorry. I know it’s not the answer you would like to hear,” Dr. Ellis says gravely, “but as of now, I can give you no definitive conclusion, Signor Moretti, as to why his levels were so high. I assure you, I will be reviewing his case more thoroughly to better understand where treatment can be changed in the future.”

That won’t bring my father back to life, but I bite back the comment. Ending the conversation with a gruff thanks, I hang up and slump in my office chair. The doctor might not think it’s conclusive evidence, but the excessive amount of potassium chloride found in my father’s system is enough to convince me of foul play.

It just means my enemies were sneakier than I gave them credit for. Don Guerra's use of force during the charity ball had me convinced he was a hammer kind of strategist—not a chisel. Now, I'm wondering if I've underestimated him. Again.

The Guerras just might be the death of me if I'm not careful.

It seems no matter what angle I take, they prove untrustworthy.

Even Tia.

My jaw clenches until my teeth ache. I'm still not over what happened this morning. I'm done trying to protect her feelings. *How is it that every time I do, I'm the one who loses something?*

No more.

Picking up my phone, I dial Johnny.

"Boss." He picks up on the third ring, his voice charged. He's ready to go.

"Gather the Moretti men. I'm calling a meeting of the dons. I want the head of every family in the ballroom at the estate in the next two hours. This time, Don Guerra better fucking be there. I don't care what it takes. Burn his fucking house to the ground if that's what needs to happen. He will see me named don. And they will all pay homage to me as the *capo dei capi*."

And after, I'm taking Don Guerra's head.

"On it," Johnny states.

I hang up, releasing a heavy breath as I stare at the furniture decorating my office.

I'm not going to make Tia watch her father die. As furious as I am with her, I don't want to break her. But her insistence on her father's innocence, her willingness to lie to me so she can stay in contact with her family—it tells me one key thing. Her loyalty will never truly belong to me. Which means I can never fully trust her.

I don't know how I'm supposed to move forward from here.

Because her father is going to die today.

And as deeply as I've fallen in love with her, I don't see our relationship recovering from this final blow. Strength and authority through iron control. That's what my father taught me, and it's time I learned my lesson.

Tia's soft-spoken words about mercy and ruling through respect and love were all a fairy tale.

It's time for me to take my throne.

The only sure way to show the powerful families of Piovosa that I am the undisputed ruler is to kill the don who dares to question my claim.

Luigi has the house in order within the hour, and my men gather solemnly in the ballroom as the time draws close. Their energy is charged, their fierce loyalty on display as they wait for my ascension to the head of the family.

Then, the dons begin to arrive. Each bears a grave, tight-lipped expression that tells me they're resigned to their fates, though they don't relish the thought of pledging an oath to me in front of my entire family.

"Welcome," I say as the last of my men arrive, flanking Don Guerra.

From their posture, I can gather that he wasn't easy to bring in. All the more reason to make an example of him.

"In the wake of my father's tragic and untimely death, I find a new level of responsibility thrust upon my shoulders. And I assure you, I will take up my new place in this family with the proper sense of responsibility and honor. So today, I ask that you each pledge your loyalty to me. An oath that you will live and die by the gun and knife to protect the Moretti name."

A murmur ripples through the crowd, a hushed excitement. It's been well over a decade since the last don was named, and

the rite is a sacred one that binds each member's life to the family they serve.

Each of my men will do it. Of that, I'm sure.

But Piovosa has never seen one family rule over the other nine with a blood oath to bind them to their word. Until now, I have permitted them to swear loyalty and maintain their pride. That ends today. I want every man in Piovosa to hear the message loud and clear.

Live by my rules. Or die.

And from the dons faces as they come to stand along the pathway where men will line up to pledge their loyalty, I can tell they are less than excited. My lips lift into a smirk at the color on Don Guerra's face. He looks about ready to have an aneurysm.

Not yet, Don Guerra. I won't let you take the satisfaction from me. I intend to kill you myself.

Johnny steps forward. As my underboss, he has the honor of swearing loyalty to me first. "Don Moretti," he says formally, coming to one knee before me and bowing his head. "I swear to live and die by this gun and knife." Pulling each from their holster and pocket, he sets the gun on the ground before me and opens the knife. "I swear to protect the Moretti name and to serve you with honor until the day I die."

Slicing the tip of his trigger finger with his knife, Johnny then sets his blade aside to accept a small square of holy paper from Luigi. Pressing his bloody fingertip to the pristine white, he infuses the paper. Luigi sets a corner of the paper alight with his Zippo, and Johnny cups the burning slip in his palms.

"May I burn in hell if I betray any members of the Moretti family," Johnny finishes his oath as the holy paper crumbles to ash in his hands. Without a single flinch in pain, he retrieves his knife and gun, holstering them before rising before me.

I grasp his shoulders, giving him a nod of recognition.

And when he steps to my right, taking up his position beside me, Rasco steps forward to perform the same rite.

My men perform their oaths admirably. Each step before me to confirm their life-long service and loyalty. As the procession continues, I can see the color slowly draining from the dons' faces.

They're facing a far larger act of subservience. One they've never had to perform before. But Don Guerra is the one I can't take my eyes off of. I can see him squirming in his skin.

The humility of bowing before me appears to be more than he can swallow.

Perhaps he should have thought of that before he tried challenging me.

Now, rather than the ally he was supposed to be, he will swear to serve my family. Then he can beg for his life before I kill him.

The men gathered in the ballroom hold a collective breath as my soldiers finish their oaths and stand to watch Don Amici step forward.

"I'm here to congratulate you on behalf of the Amici family, Don Moretti. I have faith you will make an honorable don. As a gift from my family to yours, I would like to give you the title to my yacht moored off Santorini. I hope it will bring you enjoyment whenever your travels take you to Greece."

"Thank you, Don Amici," I state, gesturing for him to hand the papers to Luigi.

My butler accepts them, setting them aside as I keep my gaze locked on the rather frail-looking don before me. He's a shadow of the former power he used to be. His age, combined with his recent defeat against my family, seem to have worn him down significantly. Still, he hesitates to do what's right for his family now that the time has come to pledge his loyalty to me.

"And will the Amici family be pledging their loyalty to me today? Will you acknowledge me as your *capo dei capi*? Or

will you die here and now?" I keep my voice calm, my expression hard as I wait.

It was purposeful, choosing to have Don Amici go first. His family wouldn't stand a chance against mine. He was one of the earliest to relinquish his territory to me in the first place. And he's the least likely to do something rash like resist me.

And when he swears his loyalty to me, that will pave the way for others to do so as well.

But if he does choose to stand against me, I'm prepared to kill him and every last don in this room.

"Your father was a strong man," he says finally, his eyes grave. "And he has passed his iron will to you. My family and I will serve you, Don Moretti. I hope you do not take our lives lightly, as you hold them in your hands now."

The words rest heavily on my shoulders, and I respect the old don for doing what he can to protect his family—even if that means acknowledging he must command them to obey me. He gets slowly to his knees but doesn't retrieve his gun or knife, seeing as my men took each of the rival family's weapons upon entering the house.

Instead, as he swears his blood oath to me, Luigi provides him with a needle that he uses to prick his finger before staining his holy paper.

As the last of the paper turns to ash in his palms, I grip Don Amici's shoulders and help the old man rise.

"Godfather," he says formally, giving me a nod. Then he steps aside to allow Don Valencia to come forward.

TIA



I pace the free floorspace of our bedroom with measured steps, too restless to sit still or try and occupy my mind with much of anything but the troubled thoughts that continue to swirl around my mind.

I've spent the morning mulling over all the ways I've messed up in such a short span of time. In all likelihood, my family will be killed now that I've proven utterly untrustworthy. I was the one thing standing in the way of Leo before.

And it seems pretty clear to me now that he won't concern himself with how I might feel about my father's death anymore. I can't stop visualizing the look he gave me when he found Maria's phone.

The pure venom, the unbridled rage.

His anger filled me with fear-driven adrenaline. And yet, watching him walk out the door was one of the most painful things I've ever endured. Because I know it means the end for us. I've ruined what we had.

Why was I forced to choose between Leo and my family in the first place?

And now that the decision has been taken from me, I feel as though I'm going to lose them both. My anxiety creeps higher as I think about everything that's happened—how my father will likely take the fall for Don Moretti's death.

My footsteps pause as I reflect on that fact.

It does seem odd that Don Moretti would die so suddenly after he appeared to be on the road to recovery. He was always so healthy before getting shot. I find it challenging to picture him suffering a heart attack.

But that's what happened. No one can deny that.

So why is Leo so convinced it's foul play? That someone's responsible?

Because he saw his father as invincible. I can hardly blame him.

But I still can't believe my father was responsible for his death. Not because he would be incapable of murder. I've learned that much—my father is far more violent than I had ever realized. I know that now. But the last time my father betrayed me, he couldn't look me in the eye. At the charity ball, he focused his attention on Leo, even before the attack, giving me only the briefest of acknowledgments, like he thought I might read his intentions in his eyes.

But the night Don Moretti died, we managed to have a pleasant dinner. Sure, there were a few underhanded comments, but overall, I had thought my parents truly seemed ready to put the past behind them. Right up until Leo announced his father's death. And when Leo told us, my father looked genuinely surprised.

Sighing in frustration, I plop down onto the foot of the bed and bury my face in my hands.

A soft knock on the door steals my attention a moment later.

"Come in," I call.

It must be one of the servants. Leo would never wait for permission. Still, I hold out hope, my breath catching in my lungs until the door opens.

"Lunch is ready, signora," Trudy says, shuffling through the door with a tray.

"Thank you, Trudy," I say, releasing my breath as my shoulders slump.

“Don’t look too disappointed, signora. I made you your favorite sandwich—peanut butter, pickle, and marshmallow.”

Trudy looks a little green just listing the ingredients, but it does make me smile that she went to the effort. Normally, she insists I need to do it myself if I intend to ruin her sandwiches with my weird pickle craving.

“Thank you,” I say, moving to the sitting area as she sets my tray on the table.

She also brought me the Flamin’ Hot Cheetos I’ve been downing by the handful lately and a hot tea.

“Any news I’m allowed to hear?” I ask tentatively, already bracing for the lack of eye contact that’s sure to follow.

Instead, Trudy levels me with a soft, sad gaze. “From what I’ve heard, the doctor called with Don Moretti’s autopsy results.”

“And?” I press, my anxiety spiking.

Trudy glances nervously toward the door, as if she’s unsure whether she’s allowed to say anything. “The rumor is he might have been poisoned with potassium chloride. Whatever that means. But the doctor wouldn’t confirm whether that means someone tried to kill him or if it was an oversight in medical care.”

My fingers find my lips as the news stuns me. And I stare at the maid in shocked silence. I can see the pity in her eyes. If she knows the rumors about Don Moretti’s autopsy, then surely she understands the implications behind their results. This could very well mean my father will die a very slow, very painful death sometime in the near future.

The fact sits like lead in my stomach, and suddenly, the thought of eating is revolting.

“I’ll leave you to it, signora. Unless you need anything else...?” Her question trails off, her eyes offering for her to stay if I want her company.

“No. Thank you, Trudy. This is plenty,” I murmur, fighting the tears that sting the backs of my eyes.

With a slight curtsy, she scurries off, the door closing heavily behind her.

Poor Don Moretti, poisoned while he was weak and recovering in a hospital bed. I can hardly defend my father if that's the kind of game he wants to play. But I can't help a nagging suspicion at the back of my mind. Something tells me that he didn't do it—he didn't give the order to kill Leo's father.

I've learned a lot about my family in these few short months, things I don't particularly like or want to know about them. Facts that disappoint me and make me respect my father less and less. And yet, for some reason, I find it hard to believe he would do something so low as to attack the don when he was at his weakest.

Rebel against Leo? Sure, I can confidently say my father despises Leo. I spent years listening to the hate he holds for the Moretti family. It wouldn't surprise me if he chose to fight Leo's authority to his dying breath.

But my father doesn't strike me as someone who would kill the don without taking credit. And he would do it as a declaration. A blatant act of war—like he did the night of the charity ball. *But poison?* As ridiculous as it might sound, that seems beneath him.

Honestly, it doesn't even make much sense to me.

Regardless of how my father intended to kill Don Moretti, it's not like he or any of my father's men could get close to Marco. Leo had guards posted outside his father's hospital room twenty-four, seven. And the men on duty—men Leo trusted with his father's life—said they didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

It hits me like a ton of bricks then. There was no evidence of forced entry, no brute violence. If the don was murdered, it was by someone his guards wouldn't look twice at. It was someone they would grant access to without question. Dr. Ellis, or even less conspicuous—

A nurse.

With brilliant clarity, I recall the girl who flirted with Leo saying that she had a nurse's outfit—"a *real* nurse's outfit now," she said. And it would likely take someone with medical knowledge to get away with that kind of murder. To know that potassium chloride could kill a man and to know how much to give him—and how to administer it—that would make it look like an accident.

My heart hammers against my ribs as it all comes together.

Didn't Leo mention something about Don Fiore being that girl's uncle?

I was so focused on her comments about Leo tying her up and their sexual history that I hadn't really put it all together at the time. But I'm pretty sure Leo said something about how he took that restaurant from Don Fiore when the Fiore family chose to surrender to him.

My mind flashes back to those dinners from so long ago—back when my father was trying to form an alliance with another family against the Morettis. Don Fiore had always been outspoken against Leo and his grab for territory. To have to bend the knee was probably a tough pill to swallow.

And from the way Leo had Elena thrown out of the Sky Lounge, I can imagine she might be salty enough to want retribution. It's a stretch, I'll admit, but if I'm right, then I can't just sit back and let my father be tortured to death for a crime he didn't commit.

Taking a fortifying breath, I rise from my chair and turn my attention to the balcony doors once again. I know it's reckless, but this is the only real plan I have. I can't just ask Rico to let me go. And if I draw attention to myself before I make a run for it, I'm more likely to get caught.

Quickly changing into an athletic outfit of leggings and a loose-fitting tee, I then slip into my tennies and tie my hair up in a ponytail. Dressed and ready for anything, I creep out onto the patio leading off our bedroom to begin my grand escape.

My eyes flit to the spot where Leo and I had sex on our wedding night. My pulse quickens as shivers race across my

skin. At the time, I'd been utterly mortified. Now, it makes my body warm, and my panties moisten just thinking about it—how brazenly he claimed my body so everyone could hear and see. I don't care how or when Leo takes me anymore. I don't even care who sees.

So long as he still wants me, that's all I need.

How different our relationship turned out to be than what I imagined on our wedding night. Never in a million years did I picture I would be the one desperate to earn Leo's forgiveness. We've come so far from that place—where Leo married me grudgingly because he got me pregnant, and all I wanted was revenge, which I thought the arrangement would facilitate.

I've become a different person since then. In my time with Leo, I've become something more. *He's* become so much more. Together, we make something far better than either of us could be on our own.

And more than anything, I don't want Leo to do something irreversible that he might one day come to regret.

So once again, I lean far over the balcony railing to find the drainage pipe I can shimmy down. But this time, I'm not running from my father in search of who I am. I'm not escaping Leo's cage to prove to myself I'm strong enough.

This time, I'm sneaking out to try and protect the home I've built with him. And that sense of purpose makes it so much easier to ignore the nervous flutter in my gut when I look down. I ease over the concrete railing, praying I don't hurt myself or the baby being so reckless.

And a breath of relief rushes from me when my hands wrap around the drainage pipe, giving me a small sense of stability. My feet hit the gravel within seconds, and I turn to make sure no one saw me.

The garden looks utterly empty. If my plan were to simply leave the property, I get the sense that it would be all too easy. Because the grounds are hauntingly bare of Leo's typical regiment of guards. But this time around, I'm not running away.

This time, I'm in search of the very man who locked me up.

And to find him, first, I need to locate Luigi.

LEO



Don Fiore is notably reluctant to approach me—not that I can blame him with the white bandage for his stitches still covering the majority of his cheek. Still, he kneels before me like all the rest as he offers up his signature cherry-red Corvette.

“Are you prepared to pledge your loyalty to me in blood, Don Fiore?” I ask as his lips pucker, his face souring like he’s just sucked on a very tart lemon.

“Yes,” he growls, though his eyes tell me he’s anything but willing. He’s swallowing humble pie because he knows the cut will go much deeper this time if he decides to challenge me again.

Only after Don Fiore rejoins the processional do I sense Johnny relax beside me. I smirk, knowing he would have loved an excuse to take care of the piece of shit once and for all.

Each don does his duty and comes before me to present a gift and give me their oath. Each homage is no small token, the gravity of the occasion marked by the value of their offerings. I’ve crushed them all into submission, and with my rise to don of the Moretti family, there can be no room to question my authority. Now, all they can do is hope their tithe is enough.

Don Valencia offers up considerable acreage that borders mine to the south. Don Malteccino gifts me his mountain home in the Eastern slopes of Colorado. Don Vecchio grants

me a stable of horses. Don Lorena, his newly established Greek restaurant in Piovosa's historic downtown. Don Russo offers up his vineyard in Sicily.

The most generous offer comes from Don Paglia, who gifts me one of his lucrative coal mines—a meaningful present and a smart maneuver for his family, considering he has no heirs to leave the business to. It will grant his family favor down the line if he's generous now, and he knows it.

Then, it's time for Don Guerra to determine where his loyalties lie.

This is the moment I've been waiting for—the opportunity to crush Don Guerra, to declare that he has committed the ultimate betrayal and will pay for it with his life. Vindication thrums in my veins, crushing the hint of remorse that rises involuntarily at the thought of taking someone so significant from Tia.

She betrayed me, and for all I know, that small act of defiance is what made it possible for her father to kill mine.

“Don Guerra,” I state coolly as he steps forward and away from the audience gathered in the ballroom. “Tell me, after all that you've done, do you intend to stand before me and believe that I will trust any vow you care to give?”

“After all *I've* done?” he says, his voice soft, though his inflection accuses me. “This coming from a man who dragged me here today under the ruse of a ceremony. And yet it would seem you don't want an oath from me. So, tell me, why did your men take me from the comfort of my home for this indulgent ceremony?”

I sneer, the pleasure in ordering his tongue removed on the tip of my lips. But before any of that can happen, clamoring feet echo through the ballroom as Tia comes bursting in.

“Leo, wait!” she cries, her eyes wild as they search for me. Her brow is sweaty from exertion, making me wonder just what she had to do to escape her room.

My sneer bleeds from my face, replaced by sudden fury. *How the fuck did she break free once again, and why does she*

always disobey me?

It's become a guarantee with Tia. If I tell her to do anything, she will go to every length to do the opposite.

"Tia," I growl.

The knowing smirk that stretches across Don Guerra's face tells me he knows my frustration exactly. He's reveling in the karma of my rage.

"I thought I made it perfectly clear that you were to stay—"

"Please, just listen to me," she begs, rushing forward as if she's completely oblivious to the audience gathered before us. "I know about the autopsy. I know you blame my father, and if he were guilty of murdering yours, I would let you go through with it. I would not have disobeyed you again, even if that meant you killed my father." Her voice hitches on the last part, signifying the pain it brings her to think of me doing anything of the sort.

"Tia—"

"No, please!" she begs, and the passion with which she says it wrenches my heart.

It doesn't matter how angry I am with her. It doesn't matter how deeply I hate her father for all the damage he's done. I can't deny her anything when she pleads like that. I've fallen too far. I've gone soft, and now, with all my men and the most prominent dons of Piovosa to witness it, I'm going to buckle to my wife's heartbreaking entreaty.

Pressing my lips closed, I gesture for her to speak, then watch her guardedly as she closes the distance between us to grasp my hands. Her fingers are soft and warm, though they grip me with impressive urgency.

"It's Elena—" she insists passionately, her onyx eyes peering up at me as she speaks only to me now. "She's Don Fiore's niece, right? The one who interrupted our dinner the other night. I believe she's the one who actually killed your father."

“Why would—”

“Think about it. She told us she’s a nurse that night, and she was furious you had her removed from the restaurant. Not to mention, before Don Fiore surrendered to you, he was fully prepared to go to war against you. I don’t know if you’re aware of that or not, but who’s to say he’s not still fighting on a quieter front?”

Struck by her outlandish conspiracy, I find it so far-fetched, it almost has to be true. Because as outrageous as it sounds, she hasn’t said anything I disagree with. It’s not far from the kind of tactics the Fiore family has used in the past. Don Fiore has used Elena before. And after his behavior at the last meeting I called, followed by his bitterness today, I wonder if his act of disdain is something larger than I had realized.

I was so focused on Don Guerra’s betrayal, that I never broadened my focus.

“Yes, my father might have betrayed you,” Tia breathes, once again, her thoughts seeming to align perfectly with my own. “But I truly don’t believe he killed Don Moretti. And he didn’t send someone to kill him while we were out to dinner. So don’t punish him for a crime he didn’t commit.”

All eyes shift to me as Tia’s passionate speech comes to an end.

The room is deafeningly silent, not a single person stirring as they wait for my response. All I can think about is how fiercely Tia defends her father now. I wonder if she’ll ever feel so loyal to me. I doubt it, and the wave of violent jealousy that washes through me makes me want to kill Don Guerra solely out of envy. But she might be right.

So I won’t. Because as much as it hurts to find Tia standing against me for her family, I can’t deny I admire her for it. I respect her for going to such lengths to stand behind her beliefs. And if she’s right, then she’s saving me from starting a war with the wrong family.

She’s saving me from myself.

Turning slowly from Tia, I release her hands and step around her. From the corner of my eye, I catch her shoulders slumping in defeat. Soft sniffles tell me she's begun to cry. But I don't look back.

Instead, I stare Don Fiore down with a vicious gaze. "Is it true? Did your niece kill my father?" I demand.

The don shakes his head no, but something about the nervous twitching movement makes me think he's lying.

I press further, digging for the truth. "I haven't forgotten that you sent Elena to me in the past, hoping to manipulate me. You think I couldn't see through her weak attempts to control me by spreading her legs?" I scoff. "And now she's a nurse? That would make her fully capable of administering potassium chloride to my father without anyone being the wiser. So you really think you can stand there and lie to my face and dream you'll get away with it?"

Again, the head shake. I can see the sweat on his brow now, the fear in his eyes. He's guilty. And his typical arrogant bravado vanishes as he realizes there's no escape. Half-cooked excuses tumble from his lips in nonsensical gibberish.

Raising two fingers, I signal my men behind Fiore, and they grab him with iron force.

"No, wait!" the don screams as they drag him forward. "Please, please, I wouldn't... I could never... You have to believe... Oh god..." he blubbers, struggling fruitlessly as they shove him down onto his knees before me.

His cries are the only noise that fills the room. Everyone else is utterly silent. Motionless.

And though I can't show signs of weakness, I spare a glance back at Tia to see what she makes of me now. Her lips are set in grim determination, but she doesn't look like she's about to stop me.

Instead, her eyes blaze with unadulterated hatred as she looks at Don Fiore. Lingering tears still shimmer on her cheeks. But right now, she appears more like an avenging angel than anything I've ever seen.

It's fucking glorious.

And what's more, I know that the anger crackling inside her eyes is for me. That's the love she feels for me, manifesting as a blazing hatred for the man who caused me pain. Because she knows the grief I've endured with my father's death. And she wants to see him avenged just like I do.

Her eyes flick to mine momentarily, and in their dark depths, I see her desperation.

This isn't about her father at all.

This is about making things right between us.

God, I love her. Even in her weakest moments, Tia's good to the core. She makes me want to be a better person, but she also understands me. She gets that sometimes, I don't have the luxury of being good, of being *lawful*. If I want to own the town, sometimes, the traitors have to pay.

That's what her eyes tell me.

Turning back to Don Fiore, I stare down at him with cold apathy. And reaching inside my slacks, I take out my knife.

"No more lies," I warn, flicking my pocket knife open. "I'm not afraid to cut the confession from your lips if need be."

He whimpers, his face paling as he tries again to break free of my men's unyielding grip. Then he cries out when I grab a handful of his hair and force his head back.

"Okay, okay! Mercy! Please, god, mercy!" he screams in sheer terror. "I did it," he confesses. "I did—I did send Elena to kill your father. But please, have mercy. It was a mistake! I swear, I didn't..."

"Didn't what? Think you would get caught?" I sneer, leaning in closer to see if I can catch the last shreds of his sanity slipping away.

"P-P-P-P-Pllll—"

His words cut short as I straighten, and with one powerful slash, I open his throat to the bone. Right here, for everyone to see.

Gurgling chokes issue from the gaping red smile, and Don Fiore's eyes widen in horror as I let the blood drain out onto the ballroom floor. It starts in gushing waves, waterfalls that cascade down the front of his suit to pool beneath his knees. Then, slowly, the crimson liquid slows as his body runs dry.

Only after the last rattling death gasp escapes him and the light leaves his eyes do I release my grip on his hair.

And as I let his head drop forward, my men let him fall in a lifeless heap on the floor.

TIA



Stunned by the sudden, gory act of violence, I freeze, my words vanishing down my throat. I stare wide-eyed at Don Fiore's dead body lying lifelessly on our ballroom floor. His blood continues to spread around him in a haunting crimson pool, the slow, steady movement seeming to carry with it the life force that no longer resides within his limp form.

I knew it was coming—well, I knew Leo would likely kill him if he believed me. I'm grateful Leo forced a confession from him. Otherwise, I might have been overwhelmed by the guilt of wondering whether my gut instinct could be enough reason to take a man's life.

And even so, I'm entirely unprepared for the horror of it, the brutal apathy required to kill a man in cold blood. It's not the first time I've seen a man die. It's not even the first time I've watched the man I love murder someone.

But I've never seen it so close before.

And I've never seen something quite so violent.

In comparison, watching Leo shoot someone in the head was almost merciful—peaceful even. This was nothing shy of barbaric.

And like that day in the woods—when I watched Leo put a bullet in that man's brain—my body immediately launches into flight mode. My muscles tense, the air gasping from my lungs as I brace myself to run. Only this time if I do, I don't

think Leo will chase after me. And the scene I would leave behind isn't one I trust to go well without me.

As if hearing the meaning behind my thoughts, Leo's cold gaze shifts to my father. In a flash, my heart turns to ice as I realize Don Fiore's death might not have saved him after all. Leo could choose to kill my father all the same. He might still die today—right here, before my eyes.

I don't have much love left for my father. Too much has happened. And I doubt I'll ever feel the same way about him that I once did. I don't respect him; I don't trust him, like I had when I was young. But that doesn't mean I want to watch him die.

And his death would be devastating for my family. My mother and sisters would have no man to protect them—not unless Leo chose to help them. And I doubt he would be inclined to help the family of a traitor, even if that family happens to be mine.

My lips part as if to offer up some defense, some new reason why Leo should show my father mercy, but the ice in my chest seems to have frozen my lungs—and my voice right along with them.

“Well, Don Guerra?” Leo asks, his deep voice strong, unwavering. “Your time is up. I think I've given you more than enough, and I will have your final answer. Are we allies? Or are we enemies?”

After a moment of confusion, I realize Leo must be carrying on with the ceremony I so boldly interrupted. He does it with a casual comfort that would suggest he didn't just kill a man in cold blood. Crimson-stained knife still in hand, he looks closer to a butcher than the head of a prominent Piovosa family.

And yet, he's entirely calm, poised even, his authority infusing every line of his body.

He's never looked more regal than he does now.

Broad shoulders back, his head held high, Leo wears his dark curls like a crown as he peers down at my father with

easy indifference. Though it's the reason I snuck out of our bedroom in the first place, I can scarcely believe it—Leo's giving my father another chance.

And if my father's self-righteous enough to reject him now, then nothing I can say or do will save him from his own stupidity.

"We're allies, Don Moretti," my father says solemnly, and my breath escapes me in a rush as my heart jump-starts to life once again. "I have learned to respect your authority, your ability to rule, and I'm honored to have my daughter married to such a man as you. If I could give you a greater treasure than my Tia, I would do it in a heartbeat. But if I have anything more valuable, I can't name it. So request anything of me, any gift you deem more worthy, and it's yours."

Tears sting my eyes, and a knot forms in my throat at my father's heartfelt words. They strike me to my very core. And I can scarcely dare to believe he means them. Except we all just witnessed what happens to men who try to lie to Leo. So I can't imagine my father would say anything but the truth right now.

I wait with bated breath for Leo's response, any kind of confirmation that I'm a worthy gift, that he sees the value in me my father described.

But Leo doesn't look back at me. In fact, he doesn't acknowledge my father's gift at all. And it cuts me to the core as I realize that he still might not have forgiven me for hiding Maria's phone. I swallow hard, fighting back the tears as I try not to let the slight crush me beneath its weight.

Instead, I focus on Leo's commanding voice.

He presses forward with a formality that makes me realize the gravity of this occasion. "Will you pledge your loyalty to me, Don Guerra? Will you swear an oath that you will live and die by the gun and knife to protect the Moretti name?"

"I will," my father says, stepping forward and around Don Fiore's body to kneel before Leo.

My heart leaps into my throat at the sight of my father on his knee for anyone. And it strikes me then just what this ceremony is about—this is Leo’s initiation to don. Whenever a new don is named, all the men from that family gather to pledge their loyalty and swear an oath.

But that’s not quite right. Because it’s not just Leo’s men in the ballroom. No, Leo’s not just becoming a don. Only a *capo dei capi* would receive pledges of loyalty from other dons. That’s never happened in Piovosa before.

And I’m saddened because I know what this cost Leo to achieve, but I’m also immensely proud of him. Because he’s managed to form an empire not by annihilating my family but by finding a way to truly unite us.

I wonder what might come of Don Fiore’s death. I can’t imagine his family will take the news lightly. But it fills me with relief and joy to see my father has finally given up his fight. And if it took one man dying to save my family, I suppose I can thank Elena and her uncle for that.

Luigi appears beside Leo, offering him a clean towel in exchange for the blood-slicked knife still clasped in his palm. And as my father pricks his thumb with a needle, Leo wipes Don Fiore’s blood from his hands.

“May I burn in hell if I betray any members of the Moretti family,” my father says as he presses his bloodied thumb to a white paper, staining it red. Then he lights the paper on fire.

My stomach knots nervously as he cups the burning sheaf in his hands. Seeming unperturbed by the heat of the flame, he lets it wither into nothingness before lowering his arms.

Leo grasps my father’s shoulders, guiding him to his feet, and a poignant moment transfers between them. They clasp hands, breaking the tension, and the room bursts into riotous applause. Shrill whistles cut through the space as Leo’s men celebrate openly.

And in a flash, the formality vanishes, replaced by palpable relief as the ceremony ends.

Don Fiore's lifeless body remains on the floor as the guests gradually file out. And Leo exchanges words with anyone who stops to congratulate him or shake his hand. No one seems bothered by the dead traitor, or the subtle pink hue of his blood still clinging to Leo's hand as they shake it.

Feeling out of place and invisible, I watch as the large, boisterous men filter out around me. They give me a wide berth, and on the rare occasion that they meet my eyes, they nod respectfully or acknowledge me with a polite "Signora Moretti."

Still, I feel lost at sea, cast adrift in a world where I don't belong—even my father departs with only the briefest of nods in my direction. Leo is my one anchor here, the grounding force that keeps me rooted to the spot.

And his attention is focused on accepting congratulations and addressing his men, who just spent the afternoon swearing loyalty to him.

I have half a mind to slip away, and at the same time, I don't dare. Because now that I've so boldly defied him, I feel like I might lose my mind if I don't face Leo before he tries to leave.

Finally, the mass exodus ends, leaving only me, Leo, Luigi, and a few of Leo's men I've come to recognize as his most loyal.

"What do you want us to do with this one, boss?" the larger of the two men asks, nodding toward Don Fiore's lifeless form. He snorts. "Ship his head off to Elena with a note that says we're coming for her next?"

My stomach plummets at the suggestion, and I glance nervously toward Leo. This time, I won't intervene, regardless of his answer. Elena killed his father, after all. He has a right to seek whatever retribution he needs to bring his mind some peace. But I'm also of the strong belief that bodies should be laid to rest after the soul has departed. Chopping him up to send a message seems unnecessarily brutal when he's already paid the ultimate price.

“Bury his body in an unmarked grave,” Leo states casually, hardly glancing at Don Fiore’s exsanguinated corpse. “Somewhere no one will know to visit or remember him.”

The command allows me to breathe freely once more. It seems more than fair—that Don Fiore should suffer the fate of being forgotten while Leo’s father will be remembered by all. In the back of my mind, I wonder what Leo might intend to do about Elena. But I don’t ask. I’m not sure I want to know one way or the other.

“Luigi, can I trust you to see this mess is properly cleaned up?” Leo asks, gesturing toward the bloody floor.

“Of course, sir.” The butler gives a slight bow.

And as the men focus their attention on their given tasks, my husband finally turns to look at me. He approaches slowly, his eyes inscrutable. And it makes my heart stutter.

I can’t tell if he’s mad or not, but suddenly, I feel the desperate need to defend my actions. “I’m sorry, Leo. I know you wanted me to stay in my room, and now I can see why I just—I just couldn’t stop thinking about it once I heard that your father had been poisoned, and I didn’t want you to punish the wrong man once I realized what might have happened.” My words spill from me in a nervous torrent, flooding together to make one, long, unbroken sentence. I just can’t seem to stop it.

“And I know I’m disobedient—” I add. “I know I might do things you don’t like or that you disagree with—but please believe me when I say I didn’t betray you. I swear I couldn’t, and I never want ever again...”

My words die on my lips as the last bit of distance separating us vanishes. I stare up into Leo’s fierce hazel eyes, certain he’s going to scold me. To condemn me for all the ways I’ve managed to rebel against and betray him—just since we woke up this morning even.

To my shame, I’ve lost track of how many reasons he has to be furious with me.

But rather than scolding me, like I anticipated, Leo cups the back of my head, his fingers combing into my hair, and he brings his lips down to mine as he kisses me passionately.

LEO



A gasp races between Tia's lips at my unexpected kiss, and as my arm snakes around her waist, she melts into me as if my touch can ease all her troubles. Her hands find my chest, her fingers splaying across my heart like she's savoring the feel of my heart. It beats boldly for her, determined to show just how deeply I love her, how desperately I need her to love me.

I know Tia went to great lengths to protect her father and prove his innocence.

It makes me irrationally jealous that Tia would show that kind of loyalty to anyone but me.

And at the same time, she didn't just do it for her father. Her efforts also spared me a bloody and unnecessary war and a lifetime of misery. Because, despite everything, I don't want to cause Tia pain. Ever. And I know that killing her father would have destroyed the love between us, regardless of the reason behind it.

Now, I can simply be grateful that the battle is over. The man responsible for killing my father no longer stains this world with his presence. And I've done it. I've risen to *capo dei capi*, the title I've striven for since my father first put me on this path. Even if he couldn't see our family's rise to power, I can honor him with the legacy.

And now, I can do what I crave most in the world, and take the woman I love to bed.

Running my hands down her curves, I grasp Tia's athletic thighs and hoist her off the ground, wrapping her legs around my hips. Her arms twine around my neck as she clings to me willingly, our lips never parting.

Johnny and Rasco release simultaneous wolf whistles behind me, and I smile as Luigi scolds them in hushed tones. Tia laughs softly, her lips curving to match mine.

And without breaking our kiss, I carry her from the ballroom.

Fingers tangling in my hair, Tia kisses me more boldly as I make my way down the hall to our suite.

"Have I ever told you how fucking sexy you are?" I growl between kisses. "How much your intelligence turns me on?"

Tia hums with appreciation, her lips claiming mine with more force.

"Your determination makes you irresistible," I rasp as her fingers loosen my tie. "I fucking love how fearless you are."

Tia gasps as I find our door with her back, and when I grind forward against her hips, she releases a lascivious moan. My hand fumbles for the handle, and Tia pulls back as she gasps for breath.

"Leo, please forgive me for lying about the phone. It was stupid and reckless, and I see that now. Please believe me. I never intended to do anything to hurt you with it." Her voice is almost tearful, her brown eyes glassy with emotion, and it tears at my heart.

We nearly fall inside the room as I finally get it open, and I kick the door closed behind me as I carry her to the bed.

"I forgive you—of course I do," I breathe. I'm baffled that she could even still be worried about it when I can't seem to keep my hands or lips off of her.

My knees find the mattress, and I fall onto the bed with Tia, trapping her beneath my weight. She hardly seems to notice as she kisses me with renewed vigor—a silent display of gratitude that sets my veins on fire.

“I love you so much,” she whispers, her legs refusing to let me go.

“I love you, *bella mia*.” Stroking my tongue between her teeth, I taste her deeply, relishing the way her lips part to invite me further.

Our tongues tangle in a complex dance, and my cock throbs with passionate desire. How I ever got so blessed to call this captivating young woman mine, is beyond me. But I swear to all the gods and powers that be, whatever I did to deserve her, I will do a hundred times over if it means I get to keep her until my dying day.

Delicate fingers race to open the buttons of my shirt, and I cast it off at the same time as my jacket, impatient to be rid of the fabric that keeps us apart.

“Do you care for this shirt?” I ask, grabbing a handful of the loose-fitting tee she came barging into the ballroom wearing.

“Um... well, it’s yours,” she says, nibbling her lip like she doesn’t quite know the right answer to my question.

Fuck it. I’ll buy a new one. With a forceful jerk, I rip the fabric right up the center from hem to collar, exposing her lace-clad breasts in record time. Tia’s lips part, her chest heaving at the unexpected choice.

And when I lean in to kiss the soft swells of her cleavage, her back arches to meet me. The citrus spice of her scent envelops me, urging me to taste her, and I do, running my tongue between her breasts and up her sternum to her clavicle.

Tia moans, the sound vibrating in my cock and making me throb to be inside her.

Trapping the soft skin of her throat between my lips, I suck hard, eager to mark her with my ravenous lust.

“Oh god,” she whimpers, her thigh tightening around my hips as she squirms against me, seeking relief.

I love knowing that, no matter what challenges arise—no matter what obstacles come between us—Tia and I will always

find one another again. Like magnets, we're drawn to each other, unable to stay apart for long, unwilling to let our differences separate us.

And this explosive attraction seals us together, the heat melting away the space between us until we're one once more.

Sliding my hand behind Tia's arched back, I find the clasp of her bra and release it. Then I roll her on top of me so I can undress her properly.

Tia sits up, straddling me like an equine goddess as she strips the ruined tee in one fluid movement. The bra follows a moment later, exposing her perfect breasts and her taut nipples. Sitting up, I claim one with my lips as I cup her supple flesh.

She's getting bigger. It's a subtle difference, but I can feel it. Her body's changing, growing in preparation for the need to feed our child. Christ, and I thought Tia couldn't get any sexier. But feeling her transformation with my own hands fills me with a kind of wonder and love that strikes my very core.

"Leo," she simpers, her hips rolling on top of me. Then she reaches between us to find my belt.

Languishing her breasts with affection, I take my time with them, worshiping her body. And when her hand cups my jaw, guiding my lips back to hers, I kiss her lips with the same level of devotion.

Shifting us once more, I roll on top of Tia and pin her hands above her head. Then I slowly work my way down her body, nipping and sucking, kissing, and licking every creamy inch of her soft skin.

I stop at her waist to hook my fingers inside her leggings, and I ease them slowly down to her feet, where I find her pristine white tennies. For a girl who knows how to make such grand escapes, she sure knows how to keep her shoes clean of evidence.

I make a mental note to come back to that and ask Tia just how she keeps slipping past my guards. That way, I can be

better prepared when it comes to safeguarding our own daughter.

Slipping the white shoes over Tia's heels, I toss them aside. Her leggings join them a moment later, granting me the heavenly vision of Tia's naked figure. Her hands still rest above her head, her arms curving at seductive angles as she watches me through thick lashes.

And when I take a moment to admire her, she slowly bends her knees, dragging her pointed toes along the bed as she spreads her thighs. A perfect fucking view.

Quickly finishing the job Tia started, I shuck my slacks and boxer briefs, kicking my shoes off at the same time.

Then I grasp her ankle—the one I will be forever indebted to for saving Tia's life—and I press my lips to the prominent bone. It's delicate, like the rest of her, a work of art in motion, and I slowly work my way up the inside of her leg with my lips. I knead the other legs with my hand, giving her muscles my attention to ensure no small piece of her is left unattended.

A soft, gasping moan parts Tia's lips as I reach the peak of her thighs. Inhaling her heavenly scent, I release a deep breath across her slick flesh and relish the way her clit twitches with anticipation.

Stroking my tongue along her seam, I collect her juices on my tongue, savoring her tangy excitement. Tia's thighs shudder, brushing my shoulders as she works to keep her legs spread for me. And when I dip my head to press my tongue between her folds, she releases a lusty groan.

What a sexy little vixen I've married.

I love it when she's turned on.

She comes to life with a new, fearsome confidence that lights my soul on fire.

“Make love to me, Leo,” Tia pleads, her voice agonized in her need.

And though I want nothing more than to make a meal out of her sweet pussy, I can't deny my wife anything when she

begs so sweetly.

Stalking slowly up her body, I reach Tia's face, our eyes meeting as our bodies align. Tip already slick with my own excitement, it feels like heaven as I guide my throbbing erection between her wet folds.

Tia lifts her head off the bed, capturing my lip between her teeth as I ease inside of her, and we groan together as the pain-laced pleasure consumes my body. She sucks on my lip mercilessly, her teeth toying with the soft flesh but not hard enough to draw blood.

And as I start to rock inside her, she releases it to stroke her tongue between my teeth.

My cock throbs, my heart hammering an unsteady beat as I claim her body, and she claims mine. Intertwined so deeply, we can't seem to break apart; Tia and I share the same oxygen.

Her body rocks beneath me, her skin brushing against mine in her desperate search for friction. Rolling my hips, I give it to her, thrusting deep inside her to find her G-spot as I grind against her clit.

This is my bliss. Making passionate love to Tia as we renew our bond.

"Oh god, I'm gonna come!" she gasps, her fingers pressing into my back and making my spine tingle.

I feel it moments before her release—the way her walls tighten, quivering around my length. And then she explodes around me, her arousal gushing to coat my hard length as her pussy throbs, gripping me again and again.

I slow, relishing the feeling of her release as her clit twitches against my body. And as she trembles beneath me, her nipples trace an erratic pattern across my chest.

"I fucking love making you come," I breathe against her ear, and Tia whimpers as her pulsing walls respond eagerly to my voice.

I hum appreciatively, my chest vibrating against hers at the sinful sensation of prolonging her orgasm.

Tia breathes heavily beneath me, her ragged breaths turning me on to no end. And as she gradually comes down from her climax, she seems to find a new force of life. Her lips curl into a daring smile, and she hooks her legs around my hips, lifting hers up off the bed as she manages to throw off my center of balance.

In one impressive maneuver, she's on top of me again, and she reaches up to release her hair from its ponytail. Letting it cascade over one shoulder, Tia finds my hands with her own and interlaces our fingers.

Then she guides my arms up over my head, trapping me there.

"Hmm." I quirk an eyebrow in challenge, daring her to ride me while she keeps me restrained, and she laughs.

The sound is music to my ears, and it makes her muscles contract around me, urging me to come inside her.

"Fuck, Tia," I groan as she takes the challenge in stride.

Leaning heavily on my palms, she lets her hair form a curtain on one side of my face, her full breasts and pert nipples tempting me as they sway hypnotically above me. And her hips roll with seductive ease, taking me deep inside her and then easing forward nearly my entire length.

I'm not going to last long at all if she keeps this up. She's impossibly sexy to watch, and the feel of her wet depths sliding up and down my length is driving me wild. My fingers tighten around her palms as my muscles strain to hold out.

"Does that feel good?" she breathes, her voice a blend of earnest concern and needy pleasure.

"So fucking good I'm about to come," I growl through clenched teeth.

Being with Tia is a feeling beyond words. She sends me somewhere above the clouds, beyond the inky darkness of outer space. I see stars when I'm buried inside her, and I fall into their burning blaze as she sets my body alight.

"Make me come with you," Tia begs.

Fucking hell. That begging. It's going to be the death of me.

Releasing her hands, I sit up, slipping her attempt at restraining with ease. And wrapping one arm around her hips, I take control of the pace. With the other, I reach between us to find her clit with the pad of my thumb.

“Oh god, Leo!” she cries, clinging to my shoulders as her head falls back in bliss.

And as I explode inside her, Tia's pussy grips me like a vise.

We come together, the simultaneous force of our release making my cock ache and throb with each powerful burst of cum I pour inside her. Tia sobs with pleasure, her body quivering in my arms. And all the while, her core milks me, urging me deeper inside her depths.

Panting, we still in each other's arms, our lips almost touching as our breaths mingle, warming the air between us.

“Is this normal?” Tia asks breathlessly, lifting her head just enough to meet my gaze.

“What?” *The fact that she watched me kill someone an hour ago, and she's still willing to fall in bed with me?* Probably not, but that's just another reason I know I've been blessed with the perfect woman for me.

“Is sex always this good, I mean?”

I chuckle darkly, combing a strand of her raven hair behind her ear. “No, Tia. What we have is something miles beyond what the rest of the world is enjoying,” I promise on a breath.

Then I steal another fiery kiss because I'm not nearly done with her yet.

TIA



“**W**hat do you think?” I ask giddily, giving Leo a twirl as I show off my baltic blue cocktail dress with a shimmering, flower-print tulle overlay. Its deep-V neckline plunges all the way into the high waist, which masks my swiftly growing baby bump perfectly. “Good enough for the theater?”

Leo turns his attention from the mirror, where he is finishing off the knot to his double Windsor. When his hazel eyes find me, they light with appreciation. “Perfect,” he agrees, releasing his tie to wrap his arms around my waist.

He pulls me close, molding my body to his as he leans over me. And I melt into him as he claims my lips in a passionate kiss.

It’s been weeks of heavenly bliss since Leo became *capo dei capi*. And to my astonishment—and immense relief—it seems like everything has settled down, the unrest calming until I’ve started to wonder if life has actually gone back to normal. At least, this is what I hope will be our new normal.

Without the stress of constant rebellion, Leo has been home a far more reasonable amount—and we’ve found more than enough pleasurable ways to fill his free time. In the quiet moments, I can still see the sadness of his loss creeping in. But what I’ve learned in the weeks since his father died is that our baby can lift Leo’s spirits without fail. I think it helps him see that the legacy his father gave him will carry on.

A laugh bubbles up in my chest as our kiss grows longer, and I lightly press against Leo's chest, silently telling him to stop.

"Hm-mm," he mumbles against my lips, redoubling his efforts as he traces my lower lips with his tongue.

Groaning as the provocative kiss turns me on, I pull back, forcing our lips apart. "You're going to make us late," I insist, though I can hear the reluctance in my own voice.

Leo huffs, then unleashes a wicked smile. "Fine, but now that I've had a taste, I can't promise I'm going to behave for an entire production. I might just have to steal you away for a secret intermission."

Swatting his shoulder, I glare at him. "Don't you dare. My sisters are going to be there—and my parents. I would be mortified if they figured out what we were doing."

"I hate to break it to you, love, but I imagine they already know. You know, considering we've already told them about the baby..."

I love this rare, cheeky side of Leo. It's playful. Less dangerously intimidating, which is his standard MO.

"Behave," I scold with an accompanying pointer finger, practicing my mom voice. I try not to laugh at how juvenile I must sound when I can't stop smiling.

Leo captures my jaw with one hand, pulling me close as his lips hover over mine. "Point that finger at me again, and see what happens," he warns, sending a shiver of anticipation racing down my spine.

I need to keep it together if we're going to make it to the theater on time.

Releasing a shaky breath, I fight the urge to close the distance between our lips. And after a painful moment of self-restraint, Leo releases me, allowing oxygen to enter my lungs once again.

He clears his throat, as if needing a moment to pull himself back together as well, and he combs his fingers through his

hair to put it into place.

“Are you ready?” he asks, his voice husky in that way that makes my stomach quiver.

“Ready,” I say, gathering my clutch from my vanity.

He offers me his elbow, transforming once more—this time into the perfect gentleman.

The limo’s waiting for us outside, along with two of Leo’s men who accompany us as bodyguards but feel more like a formality at this point. As we ride into the historic part of downtown Piovosa, I try to sit still as my excitement gets the better of me.

I haven’t been to the theater since I was a little girl, and tonight, I get to enjoy that experience again with Leo and my entire family. I can’t wait to see what my younger sisters think of it. Maria, I know, loves the theater, but this will be a first for Anna, Vienna, and Sofia.

Warmth blossoms in my chest as I think about my sisters. I’ve been spending a lot more time with them lately. They all love coming over to the Moretti estate. And though my parents have continued to keep their distance, I’m glad that they’ve agreed to join us for dinner and a musical tonight.

We pull up outside the grand opera house, and my heart skips a beat at the sight of the building’s historic beauty. The proud stone structure has rows of columns out front, offering the front doors a large covered entrance. It gives the domed structure a Roman pantheon-type feel and makes me want to go exploring.

A small part of me wishes we had insisted on picking my family up because I would love to see my sister’s faces when they see it for the first time. I’ll just have to make sure I get a full report from Maria. Besides, my father was right. I’m sure one limo would have felt too crowded.

The car pulls up to the curb, and Leo’s men slip out first to hold the door open and scan our surroundings for any unwanted visitors. But the coast is clear, and Leo steps out next before offering me a hand.

I take it, grateful for the support in my floor-length dress and heels that are becoming more and more uncomfortable to force my feet into by the day. But I'm not about to complain. If fallen arches are the worst part of having a baby, I would gladly take it. Because now that I can feel our little girl moving, I've reached a whole new level of smitteness. They're only tiny flutters for now, here and gone in an instant—nothing I've managed to show Leo yet, but I'm trying.

Tucking my hand inside the crook of his elbow, Leo guides me up the steps to the theater, and I stare up at the ornately carved ceiling of the covered entrance.

“Tia!” someone screams, and I whirl to find little Sofia running toward me, her smile radiating warmth.

Anna and Vienna follow at a dignified pace behind her—their new display of maturity now that they're on the verge of entering their teens. But still, they beam as they reach me, and their excited giggles overcome their attempt at dignity when I pull them in for a hug.

“Are you ready for a fun night?” I ask, giving each a good squeeze.

“They haven't stopped talking about it all day,” Maria says, her eyes dancing as they meet mine.

She's matured visibly in the months since I left home, and I love to see the oldest of my younger sisters coming into her own.

“You look beautiful,” I say, gesturing to her velvet dress that makes her look old enough to be my twin.

She laughs. “Thanks. Mother let me borrow one of hers.”

“Where is she?” I ask, glancing behind Maria and not finding her or my father.

“They both went inside to get our table, but the girls and I weren't done looking at the ceiling.”

I can tell from her indulgent tone that it was mostly the girls who hadn't had enough.

“Tia, what about my dress?” Sofia insists with a pouty lip, and she spins for me to ensure I can see it from every angle.

“Very pretty,” I say affectionately. “You all look lovely tonight,” I add, giving Anna and Vienna’s hands a squeeze.

“Shall we head inside?” Leo suggests, gesturing toward the towering French doors.

Studded with Andalusian doornails, they look almost like the doors to a castle, and they remain propped open to allow guests to come and go as they please.

It doesn’t take much for Leo to persuade the girls. After they all have spent some time with him, I’ve come to the realization that he’s something of a Pied Piper—a talent that will come in handy with our own children, I’m sure. But what I love most about watching Leo with my sisters is realizing he has a gentleness with children that I don’t often get to see.

It’s that same soft-spoken tenderness with which he speaks to my belly in the early hours of the morning. A voice saved specially for the sweet, innocent children who put their trust in Leo without question.

And he loves them as much as they love him. It’s a thing of beauty, really, considering the relationship I witnessed him have with his father. I wonder how kind and loving his mother must have been for Leo to have such a tender way with children.

Whatever the reason, it warms my heart to see it—and the thrill of knowing he’s the father of my child never diminishes.

“There they are,” I say, spotting my parents at a round table in the center of the dining room that fills the lobby of the opera house.

They wave, and Sofia releases Leo’s hand to race ahead as our fearless leader.

Rising as we approach the table, my mother walks around to hug me as Leo extends a hand to shake my father’s.

“Wonderful to see you both. Tia, you’re looking well,” Mother observes, her eyes scanning down my frame to linger

on my belly.

“Thanks,” I say, cupping the small baby bump for her to see.

It’s a silent communication, one I’ve become accustomed to sharing now that all of Piovosa knows we’re expecting. While it still makes me blush when acquaintances come up to offer their congratulations and ask about the details, I’m glad my parents both seem to have fully accepted both Leo and the circumstances that brought us together.

I wouldn’t say our relationship has returned to normal. Things are always a bit more strained, less sure-footed than they once were. But I can see my parents are trying. And what matters most to me is that they no longer forbid my sisters from coming over.

Settling into our chairs, we each open a leather-bound menu to make our selection. And as everyone’s attention turns to the options before them, Leo reaches over to rest a warm palm on top of my thigh.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye and catch his playful wink.

I’ll take that as his best effort to behave while simultaneously driving me crazy.

Heat floods my body at his nearly innocent touch, and I reach down to rest my hand on top of his, interlacing our fingers as I keep him firmly in the safe zone.

LEO



It's wonderful seeing Tia so happy.

Being around her sisters lends a radiance to her already striking face, and though I can thoroughly appreciate the joy and laughter her sisters bring to the people around them, what I love most is how happy Tia is when she's with them.

"Tia, share a dessert with me," Sofia insists from her place beside my wife. Her round, pleading eyes are a force to be reckoned with.

Tia pushes her empty dinner plate away with a contented sigh. "You're already thinking about dessert?" she teases her youngest sister affectionately.

"Well, yea-ah," Sofia singsongs like that's a given.

Tia laughs. "Alright. Do you know which one you want?"

"The best one," Sofia says sagely, nodding with solemn gravity.

My cheeks hurt from the effort it requires to keep a straight face.

Maria snorts beside Sofia and buries her face in her plate, shoveling the remains of her pasta into her mouth with her fork to avoid getting a scolding from the youngest Guerra daughter.

"I like that plan," Tia agrees, her eyes glinting with silent mirth as they catch mine. In their depths, I read the silent

meaning: *I hope you're ready because these are the kinds of conversations we've signed up for.*

Her hand moves down in the subconsciously maternal gesture she's started to do more often lately. Softly stroking her belly, as if to soothe our baby, Tia grants me a glimpse of the bump that's starting to become more obvious now. Her development brings me a new level of warmth and anticipation I hadn't anticipated.

And though I never took the time to consider it before I met Tia, I've come to the realization over these past months that I'm looking forward to being a father. I can't wait to see Tia as a mother. She's going to be magnificent. Already adorable as an older sister, as a mother, she will only be more special. I can picture it.

"Tia, Leo. What a pleasant surprise."

The familiar voice turns my head just as much as the sound of my name, and Tia turns as well to find Mayor Romney and his wife standing behind us, their two girls standing one on either side.

"I didn't realize you enjoyed the theater," Mayor Romney adds with a nervous smile.

"Who doesn't love the theater?" I state passively, unwilling to relieve him of his discomfort but also ready to let sleeping dogs lie.

"What a wonderful way to spend the evening as a family, isn't it?" the mayor says, acknowledging Tia's parents with a polite nod as he rests his palm on Signora Romney's shoulder.

"It is," Tia agrees with a warm smile, and her hand finds mine beneath the table. She gives it a reassuring squeeze—or a silent plea for me to behave.

Either way, Tia has nothing to worry about on my end tonight. I'm on my best behavior.

Signora Romney shares Tia's open warmth. "And how's the baby?" Her eyes drop affectionately to the place beneath the table where she would find Tia's belly.

“She’s kicking it in there,” Tia says, and without missing a beat, Maria laughs at her sister’s terrible joke, inviting Signora Romney to do the same.

The Romneys both join in politely, the mayor’s eyes twinkling with his familiar affection for Tia.

“And you, Leo, how is the thought of fatherhood settling with you?” Mayor Romney asks, his tone polite—amicable even.

“I look forward to it,” I say, keeping it simple.

Clearly, they’re making an effort to mend fences, and I’ll do my part for Tia’s sake. But it’s going to take more than a few polite conversations to forget about the accusations the mayor threw my way.

“Leah, Hannah, have you ever seen the *Lion King* before?” Tia asks, turning her attention to the mayor’s daughters.

They both shake their heads shyly, but Sofia seems less deterred by the presence of strangers. And while she’s roughly a year older than the oldest Romney girl, I would say that only seems to bolster Sofia’s confidence.

“I haven’t either,” she admits. “But Leo says it’s a sin to go through life without seeing the *Lion King* before you grow up.”

Once again, Sofia’s grave demeanor resembles that of a sage old man imparting invaluable wisdom, though she’s not yet nine years old. Beside me, Tia struggles to muffle her laughter.

But the Romney girls seem to take Sofia’s information as important information. And they nod with wide-eyed trust before their glances shift toward me.

“It’s a good thing we’re watching it tonight, then, isn’t it?” Mayor Romney states, his eyes dancing with laughter.

The three young girls all murmur in agreement.

Silence falls, and for a moment, the Romneys linger.

Then, the mayor seems to conclude they've done a decent enough job of clearing the air for a first attempt since my father's mourning procession.

"Anyway, it was wonderful to see you all. Tia, Leo, I hope we can catch up again soon," Mayor Romney says, offering each of us his hand.

"I would like that," Tia agrees, her tone politely guarded.

But I know she misses their friendship, so once again, I bite the bullet and shake the mayor's hand.

"We'll find a time," I offer, and the Romneys' smiles widen with a mingled appreciation and relief.

"I want to come," Sofia whispers to her sister as soon as the Romneys depart.

Tia smiles affectionately and strokes her sister's hair in a maternal display of affection. "I'm sure the girls would love that," she agrees.

Sofia beams, and beside her, Maria shares a smile with her older sister.

Our server comes around a short time later to collect the dessert order, and after that, it's time for us to find our seats.

"We should be up and to the left," I say, directing the Guerras toward the box I've reserved for us exclusively.

Tia and I lead the way, her sisters jostling excitedly behind us as they argue about who gets to sit next to whom.

Pulling back the curtains to our private area, my guards quickly scan the space before stepping back to allow us to enter.

"It's my turn to sit next to Tia," Vienna whines, pushing out her lower lip as she and Sofia continue to argue about seating arrangements. "You got to all through dinner."

"But it's my birthday next week!" Sofia wails. "This is the only present I even want, but you won't let me have it."

"Girls, that's enough," Signora Guerra scolds.

“Tia, Leo, why don’t you take the front with Sofia and Vienna—if you don’t mind.” Don Guerra cuts his eyes toward his two youngest daughters. “That is if you girls can stay silent and stay in your seats. Are we agreed?”

“Yes, yes!” they chorus.

“That’s fine with me,” Tia says.

I lead the way into the row, allowing Tia to follow me so one of her sisters will get to sit by her. Behind us, Don Guerra filters into the seat behind me. Then Signora Guerra, followed by Anna and Maria.

The box seating is a cozy space and a perfect view of the stage, along with the aisles leading up to it. Beside me, Tia whispers softly to Sofia, who managed to guilt-trip Vienna into letting her sit beside Tia for the performance.

If I were a selfless kind of man, I might have relinquished my seat on the other side of Tia so both sisters could spend time with her. But tonight isn’t just about spending time with family. Tonight, I’m also following through on a promise I made to myself that I would bring Tia back to the theater now that her family no longer has her locked away.

I’m doing this so I can see the joy on her face that she hasn’t known since she was around Sofia’s age. And though I will behave myself for Tia’s sake, I refuse to go an entire evening without being by my wife’s side.

Selfish, I know.

Shoot me.

In the meantime, I make myself feel better by making a new promise to myself that I’ll bring the Guerra family back to the theater soon. That’s enough to assuage my guilt.

And as the lights start to dim, we all settle in.

Tia reaches for my hand almost without thinking it would seem. Because her eyes continue to soak up the details of the theater, even as her fingers twine with mine.

Then, the heart-stopping first notes of the performance break across the theater, and Sofia’s gasps of awe mingle with

Tia's as they both stare transfixed upon the stage. Warmth floods my chest as I take a moment to study Tia, to admire the beautiful angles of her face.

She's brimming with enthusiasm, her body almost humming with excitement as the performers' powerful voices fill the room with beautiful harmonies. Beneath us, I know the animals are just starting to slowly make their way to the stage. The hint of moisture that shimmers along the bottom row of Tia's lashes tells me she finds it as moving as she said she did the first time her parents brought her to see the show.

I should let her watch the show in peace, but I just can't seem to help myself.

Tia's so incredibly beautiful, and the captivated way with which she follows the movement with her eyes makes it impossible not to kiss her.

Lifting our interlaced hands, I twist Tia's wrist to kiss the back of her knuckles. She turns to smile at me then, and the love in her eyes fills me with a contentment that seems deep into my soul.

I lean in to press a second kiss to her knuckles, this time allowing my lips to linger against her skin. And in that instant, the joy falls from her face, replaced by horror.

TIA



Icy terror grips my chest at the sight unfolding before me—my father sitting with a pistol in hand, his eyes alight with hatred, his lips twisted in a silent snarl as he raises the gun toward Leo.

“Father, no!” I scream, the sound ripping from my chest in sheer panic. But over the production’s rafter-shaking song filling the theater, I doubt he can hear me.

I doubt anyone can except Leo, and now, as his expressive brows press into a confused frown, it’s too late. He’s open, vulnerable, utterly exposed.

My father sneers violently as he levels the gun point blank at Leo’s head. My husband is helpless, his back to my father in a display of trust that makes me suddenly want to vomit. Leo won’t have time to react. I barely have time to think, to process the horror of what I see. And this is all my fault because I’m the one who spoke up time and again in my father’s defense.

Now, I’m going to lose Leo.

Oh god, I can’t.

He’s going to die because I wouldn’t let him listen to his instincts. He told me so many times that there was only one sure way to deal with traitors like my father. And now, when I finally believe him, I can’t fix my mistake.

The world seems to pause as my father takes aim. And in that second, Leo turns slightly, confusion taking over his

handsome features as he comes face to face with the gun pointed at his head.

He stiffens, his shoulders tensing, and as Leo shifts, the butt of his gun peeks out from beneath his suit jacket. Like an invisible extension to his hand, it's always there, nestled in its holster in case he should need it. But there's no way he'll get to it in time. Not when my father's gun has already found his target and is ready to fire.

Leo's several seconds behind me in processing my father's plan.

The sound of my father's hammer clicking into place seems to echo in my head, and all I can think about is that Leo will be dead—I can't just sit by and watch it. The finality of the gun cocking spurs me into action.

Desperate to do something—anything—to deter my father, I lunge forward and snatch Leo's gun. And as I bring it out, turning to aim it at my father, to my immense relief, both he and Leo pause.

Leo stiffens beside me as my father watches me closely, disappointment and disgust raging in his eyes. And when I put my father in my sights, his hatred swells as he glares down the barrel of my gun.

“Please, don't do this,” I plead, tears stinging my eyes as my hands shake visibly. I've never held a gun before, but I've lived in this violent life long enough to know how to use one. Taking an unsteady breath, I try to settle my frantic pulse.

I don't dare look around to see if we've caught anyone's notice. I can't imagine my sisters or mother are oblivious to the exchange. My heart stutters at the thought of them in such close proximity to a loaded gun. But I don't see what I can do to change this situation.

I can't believe my father. After everything, after weeks of pretending that the storm had passed, it turns out he's just been biding his time. Again. He's just been waiting for the right moment to pounce. And he couldn't have done so if I weren't

so ready to defend him. Once again, I've become an unwitting accomplice in my father's devious plans.

Because I was hellbent on trusting him, despite the evidence warning me not to.

I chose to give him another chance.

And Leo did, too. Because he trusts me.

What a fool I've been.

Not anymore. Never again.

"Tia," Leo says calmly beside me, his voice gentle as he urges me to consider what I'm doing. But at the same time, he seems frozen in space, unable to move because the slightest twitch might trigger an unwanted result. His hands splay in surrender as he keeps his motions slow and steady. "Tia, love, it's okay. Just give me the gun," he soothes, reaching slowly for his weapon one inch at a time.

But the determined look in my father's eyes tells me Leo's dead as soon as my finger leaves the trigger.

"No!" I scream, my arms trembling beneath the unexpected weight of the gun and my body's determination to sabotage me. "Not until he puts his gun down—"

I can see the decision in my father's eyes, the fierce set of his jaw. Either he dies tonight, or Leo does. That's what his face tells me.

It was always going to come to this, wasn't it?

An ultimate choice.

A month ago, I might have found the decision agonizing. But tonight, the answer comes to me as easy as breathing.

And though I know I shouldn't, I can't help but squeeze my eyes shut as I make my choice.

Shots echo through the theater, creating a strange, haunting silence that steadily builds into chaos. Screams of recognition start to spread like wildfire through the crowd.

There's a delay between the violent sound and the music tapering off. Then panic blasts through the crowd as people duck from their chairs and start to flee the room. Only our personal box seems to remain frozen, no one daring to move or speak as we stand suspended in a moment.

As I open my eyes, all I can seem to stare at is the large and rather grizzly hole staining the center of my father's chest. Crimson blood swells out of it, saturating the fabric of his shirt and suit.

I shot him.

I shot my own father.

He looks as stunned as I feel. Lips suddenly chalky white, my father slowly lowers his gun to his side, his eyes wide. They track down, following the same steady arc as his gun's descent to land on his bloody chest. His lips part in astonishment, and for a fleeting moment, a soul-crushing guilt comes crashing down on top of me.

Then I think about the alternative ending, and my eyes track toward Leo, desperate to see that he's okay, that I didn't act too late. He's still standing, his face gloriously free of bullet holes as he watches my father in stunned amazement.

"Giuseppe!" my mother shrieks, launching her body toward my father as he sinks back in his chair.

Leo's two guards burst through the curtains, utterly useless in this circumstance, though they're here to stop this very thing from happening in the first place. But none of us knew. None of us even suspected...

The gun falls from my numb fingertips, hitting the floor with a heavy thud as sudden, dizzying revulsion sweeps through me. *I shot my father.* I can't tell if I'm going to be sick or faint. But as I watch the life drain from his eyes, I wonder if it might not be both.

His head slumps forward, his chin hitting his chest as he releases one last rattling breath. An innocent trickle of blood runs from the corner of his mouth. And suddenly, the world

spins around me. A kaleidoscope of color and sounds as the floor tips beneath my feet.

“Tia!” Leo’s deep, horrified voice calls to me, inviting me to stick around just a little longer.

But I can’t seem to determine what way’s up and what way’s down. My head lolls dangerously, growing heavy in an instant, and my brows press into a frown as I find I have a surprising lack of control over my senses.

I must be going into shock.

Strong arms wrap around me, and as they catch my limp body, I realize I was falling.

“No, no, no, Tia, no!” Leo screams as he lowers me gently to the ground.

And for the first time in my life, I hear fear in his voice.

It terrifies me.

I fight to control my heavy head as I search for Leo’s face, needing its familiar strength for comfort. A frigid cold seeps from the hard floor into my body, settling deep inside my bones. But Leo’s warm, solid chest cradles my shoulders, supporting my back as one strong hand cups the back of my head.

He’s so strong, so immovable.

And yet, when I peer into his eyes, I can see that same fear in his voice reflected in their hazel depths.

“Please, Tia. You’re alright. You’re going to be alright,” he insists, his eyes shifting down the length of my body.

I follow his gaze, trying to make sense of what’s happening. Somewhere behind me, I can hear my sisters softly sobbing. I want to turn and comfort them, but I can’t take my eyes off the blood staining Leo’s palm. He’s covered in the terrible crimson liquid.

Oh god, I wasn’t fast enough.

“Are you hurt?” I gasp, grasping his palm as I try to process what’s going on.

His hand is on fire, searing-hot, and I wonder if a fever is common for a gunshot victim. Then my eyes land on the red stain slowly spreading across my cobalt-blue evening gown.

“Call a fucking ambulance!” Leo bellows to someone behind me.

Heavy footfalls grow steadily softer.

And as my vision starts to swim, the realization hits me that I’m the one who’s hurt. Pain blasts through my core, as if spurred to life by the realization. I groan, protectively curling around my injury. But every small movement sends a wave of nausea blasting through me.

“Stay with me, Tia,” Leo pleads, and it terrifies me to see tears streaming down his cheeks.

“I’m right here,” I promise in my pain-laced daze.

Lifting my hand, I wipe the tears from his cheek. My stomach knots when I leave a crimson smear in my wake. *So much blood. Where can it all be coming from?* Panic follows a moment later as I look down to realize I’ve been shot in the abdomen. *I don’t know where exactly, but does it really matter?*

A thought so horrible I scarcely dare to think it rises unbidden from the depths of my subconscious. But as my vision starts to fade to black, it’s all I can think about. *What if the bullet hit our baby?*

Leo’s bloody hand presses against the saturated hole of my dress once again, trying to slow the bleeding. And the pain sends a fresh wave of nausea through me.

I want to throw up, but I’m so dizzy, I can’t determine which way I should turn.

Then, a still, heavy darkness envelops me.

TIA



A steady beep drags me slowly from my heavy, dream-filled sleep. The images that flash behind my eyelids are haunting, troubled ones, scenes full of blood and violence—some at Leo’s hands, others at my own.

And always, the crimson liquid stains our palms, reminding me of what we’ve done.

It takes several moments for me to realize the beeping I hear isn’t an alarm telling me to wake up. It’s a heart monitor, and the beeping intensifies as I drag my heavy eyelids open to find myself in a hospital room—the same one where we visited Leo’s father.

Every inch of me feels like I was in some kind of car wreck, and I slowly turn my head as I try to make sense of what happened.

Leo’s asleep in the chair beside my bed, his neck bent in an awkward position, as his body tries to find a way to recline in the seat that’s too small to accommodate him. He looks ragged and pale, his chin unshaven like he hasn’t shaved in days.

My heart aches to see him in such a state.

Trying to sit up, I release a pained gasp as my side throbs. And I clamp my palm over the source of the agonized heat radiating through my body.

Leo’s awake and out of his chair in an instant, his hazel eyes troubled as he hovers protectively over me. “Lie back,

Tia,” he insists, his strong arms relieving me of my weight as he eases me back onto the pillows.

He reaches down to press a button, and the hospital bed releases a quiet hum as it shifts into an inclined position. “Better?” he asks, adjusting the pillows beneath my back with an astonishing amount of care.

“Yes, thank you,” I rasp and clear my parched throat.

“Water?” he offers, reaching for a cup and straw on my bedside table.

“Thank you,” I say again, reaching for it gratefully.

“The nurse said to take it slow at first,” he instructs before he relinquishes custody.

I groan, my eyes closing as I drag several mouthfuls through the straw, quenching the raw ache in my throat. And when that small exertion leaves me panting, I have to grasp my side once more.

Careful hands ease the cup from my grasp, and I open my eyes to find Leo’s expression stormy. He sets the cup within easy reach, then settles back onto the chair beside me to watch me closely.

“How long was I out?” I ask, trying to piece together why I’m here. A flash of the cliffside behind Leo’s property appears behind my eyes, my mind racing to fill in the blanks. But that can’t be it. So much has happened since then.

“Three days. You were rushed into surgery the first night. Dr. Ellis worked on you for hours...” Leo’s voice catches, and his head drops, his eyes finding the floor.

Tears sting the back of my eyes at his clear pain. But I still can’t recall why I was in surgery.

“What happened?” I ask softly.

Leo’s bloodshot eyes lift to find mine, and his brow buckles in concern. “You were shot...”

Like a trigger word, it all comes back in a flood of memories, and my heart stops. “Is the baby okay?” I ask

before he can say more.

My hand flies to my stomach, and I panic when I don't feel her soft kicks.

"She's fine. You're fine," he assures me quickly, rising from his chair to settle me back against my pillows once again. "You both made it," he confirms, allowing the air to fill my lungs unencumbered once again. "Doc says the bullet lodged in your pelvis but managed not to splinter the bone or cause damage to any major organs. A minor miracle—his words, not mine."

Relief floods me in a powerful, tingling wave, and I slump heavily against my pillows.

"And my sisters?"

"All fine. They're home, safe and sound, with your mother. A bit shaken up, if I'm being perfectly honest, but they seemed pretty good when they left last night."

"They were here?" I don't know why that surprises me. Maybe I assumed my mother wouldn't want to see me after what happened...

"Yeah. They've come to see you every day. I send a car to pick them up. But they go home every night to sleep."

I nod. "That's good." And I don't mention the silent statement that comes with his information. My sisters might not hate me for what I did, but my mother hasn't come to see me. She won't forgive me for what I've done.

Letting my head fall back as tears blur my vision, I stare up at the sterile white ceiling and face the darker reality of what happened at the theater. "I killed my father," I murmur, dreading the confession too much to say it louder than a whisper. My tears fall freely now, as I struggle with the conflicting emotions of guilt and mourning.

"You saved my life," Leo corrects, his warm hands enveloping mine, and he presses a kiss to my knuckles before covering them once again. "You nearly lost your life in the effort," he adds.

And his tender tone eases the guilt that knots my stomach.

“How could you be so stupid, Tia? So reckless?” Tortured eyes find mine as Leo scolds me softly. “My life will never be worth yours. Do you understand me?” Rising from his chair, he leans in to kiss me passionately, his lips claiming mine with a desperation that tells me just how close he came to losing me.

I feel even more awful knowing how hard it must have been to go through this alone. Just weeks after his father died in a similar situation.

No wonder Leo looks sleep-deprived.

I’d wager he’s refused to leave the hospital at all, knowing how conniving his enemies can be. And while it breaks my heart to see him in such a worn-down state, it fills me with a sense of warmth and safety to know he wouldn’t entrust anyone but himself with my well-being.

Leo’s thumbs wipe the tears from my cheeks. And he draws back just far enough to look into my eyes once more. “Promise me you’ll never do something that stupid again,” he murmurs.

Giving a watery laugh, I nod.

“I want to hear you say it, Tia,” he commands.

“I promise I won’t do something that stupid again,” I repeat. Though, if he means to imply that I’m not allowed to save his life, that promise I cannot keep. But I don’t need to start an argument by hashing out the details of our agreement.

And Leo relaxes visibly, bringing me relief as he smiles for the first time since I woke. The gesture brings some much-needed color back to his cheeks, and his eyes soften beautifully.

Pulling myself together, I give a wry chuckle as I search for a way to bring some levity into the situation. “You know, my life has become much more of an adventure since I married you,” I observe cheekily, casting him a sidelong look.

Leo laughs, and the warm sound fills the room as it makes my heart flutter. I blush as the monitor rattles on me, and both our eyes shift to watch the beeping lines spike dramatically. Leo looks at me in silent question, and my blush intensifies.

“I love hearing you laugh,” I confess.

His grin broadens, and he steals another quick kiss, seeming to find pleasure in this newly discovered power dynamic.

Then, he settles back into his seat with a contemplative expression.

“What?” I ask, picking up my water glass and sipping from it again.

“I was just thinking that if this is the kind of thing you qualify as an adventure, I’m taking them all off the list,” Leo states definitively. “I’ve nearly lost you too many times, and I would rather you hate me from your room locked in a tower than see you in a hospital bed again.”

Warmth floods my body at the thought, and my stomach gives a nervous flip-flop. I would never survive being trapped like that. But I don’t actually think he means it. Still, I agree, “Moving forward, maybe our adventures can be a little bit more tame.”

Leo nods, then slowly, the smile fades from his face as he grows serious again. “But are you really okay, Tia? I know it had to be hard doing what you did. Even if you did it to protect me...”

Leo’s words trail off as he searches my face with gentle compassion, and I know what he’s asking without him having to come right out and say it.

I can’t seem to help myself as a fresh wave of guilt consumes me. Tears pool in my eyes and trickle from the corners as I drop my eyes to the blankets covering my legs. “I think what bothers me most is how easy it was,” I confess, and I feel like a terrible person as soon as I say it.

“How easy?” Leo repeats, his confused frown urging me to explain myself. Rising from his chair, he settles onto the bed

beside me and collects my hand in his, the gentle gesture supportive.

“When it came down to it, I knew I had to choose between you or my father. I can see now that it was a choice I was always going to have to make, but as sad as it makes me, it was my father who gave me that ultimatum. Not you. Not me. He forced my hand when I was fighting so hard to keep you both...”

Silence stretches between us as Leo waits patiently for me to finish. And I take several halting breaths as I pull myself together.

“I guess what makes me feel most guilty isn’t the choice I made—but how little effort it took to make it. He’s my father. He’s been the only man in my life whom I thought I could trust. He raised me, cared for me, and protected me when I was growing up. And still, I knew as soon as I saw the gun in his hand.”

“Knew what?” Leo asks, his low murmur soothing the guilt that gnaws inside me.

“It had to be you. If it was him or you, I got to keep. It had to be you. I would make the same decision a hundred times over if I had to. Because I love you, Leo. I love you more than life itself.”

Leo looks utterly shattered as I start to cry. With a delicate touch that defies his powerful body, he collects me in his arms. “I love you, Tia. God, I love you so much. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I thank my lucky stars every day for the night you stumbled into my life.”

His words are so genuine, his touch so tender that they fill me with deep emotion, and I pull back just enough to peer into his passionate hazel eyes. Just then, a persistent little nudge sets butterflies loose inside my belly, and a relieved laugh bursts from me as our little girl gives me her first reassuring signs of life since I woke. It would seem she’s feeling rather left out.

“What?” Leo asks, a grin stretching across my face as he studies my expression.

With a watery smile, I take Leo’s hand and press it to my belly.

Warm devotion transforms his chiseled features. And he lights up in awe as he peers down at my stomach. “That’s her?” he breathes, bringing his other hand down to more fully cover my belly.

Our little girl gives a powerful kick in response.

“That’s her,” I confirm as his jaw drops.

And with one hand firmly glued to my belly, Leo reaches up to grasp my neck as he kisses me with fierce joy. This is the kind of love I’ve always dreamed of, the kind of passionate devotion I never imagined I could find in my family’s crazy, twisted, violent world.

And yet, somehow, against all odds, I found Leo.

With him by my side, I feel like I’m strong enough to face anything that might come our way. With Leo, I’m ready to conquer the world.

EPILOGUE

TIA



I know I promised Leo we would start picking adventures that wouldn't land me in the hospital. But six months later, here we are again, and I'm trying to breathe through it as gripping pain tightens my back and core in an overwhelming contraction.

"Ffffuck!" I groan, falling into Leo's pattern of explicit language as I fail to ride out the forceful cramping sensation with dignity.

"Can't you do anything to help her?" Leo demands, glaring accusingly at my OB.

"Leo, calm down," I command, gripping his hand with more force than necessary. "I'm fine. Women do this all the time. Right, Doc?" I say, breathing heavily as I peer up at her through sweaty strands of hair.

"That's right," she says encouragingly, peering up at me from beneath the modesty blanket. "Remember to think about your breathing."

I nod, collapsing back against my pillows as I work to control my frantic breaths.

"You're doing great, Tia," Maria says beside me, ringing out a washcloth so she can lay the cool, damp cloth against my brow once more.

On my other side, my mother assesses the situation with a calm that I would usually reserve for Leo. But he's too busy hovering protectively over me, his face a mask of agonized

self-flagellation over the part he played in bringing about my current state of pain. It's comically endearing to see the hardened criminal that is my husband falling apart over childbirth. But here we are.

Meanwhile, I'm more than a little grateful my mother has decided to start coming around more. Maria's my best caregiver, but my mother is my grounding force right now. She did this five times, and she knows just what needs to happen to see me through it.

"How much further?" she asks now, as Dr. Trista settles the blanket back in place and rises from her rolling stool.

"Two more centimeters to go. Not long now," she assures me. "Your contractions are going to start coming more quickly now, like we talked about. That's a good thing. It means we're right on target."

I nod as a fresh wave of pain steals my breath away. Grasping Leo's hand, I redouble my efforts to breathe properly as he lends me his strength.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes to check again," Dr. Trista states. Then, with a polite nod, she departs.

"Maria, do you think you could get me some more ice?" I ask, wanting a minute alone with my husband before the real work starts.

"Of course," she agrees, scurrying toward the door without hesitation.

My mother knows with just a look. "I'll be just down the hall," she says simply before slipping through the door and closing it.

I turn to Leo as soon as she's gone, and my heart swells at the look of devastation on his face.

"What can I do to help?" he implores me desperately.

"Stay with me?" I suggest and swallow hard as a fresh wave of pain knots my stomach.

"I'm so sorry, Tia," he groans, dropping his forehead onto our clasped hands in a show of supplication.

“Hey.” Combing my fingers into his soft curls, I give a tug, lifting his face so he has to meet my eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize for knocking me up,” I tease, trying to keep things light.

“But you’re in pain! And it’s my fault.”

“As I recall, there were two of us involved in what happened that night,” I point out dryly. “You’re giving yourself way more credit than you deserve. Now, quit beating yourself up. I’m going to need you in proper shape when it comes to welcoming this baby into the world.”

Leo nods and rises from his chair to steal a kiss. Then his hand rests softly on my now earth-sized belly. Maria’s joked on several occasions that the doctor might be wrong—that I’m actually carrying twins. And secretly, I hope she’s wrong because I can’t imagine having the strength to deliver two babies today.

The simple weight of Leo’s palm on my belly brings a shocking amount of relief, and I let my head fall back on the pillows as I try to catch my breath.

“You never cease to amaze me, you know,” Leo states, his voice sounding far calmer now that I’m not red-faced and moaning in pain.

Lifting my head, I meet his eyes and smile. “Just wait. One of these days, you’ll have all my tricks figured out.”

Leo chuckles, soft and dark. The sound dies on his lips as I pinch my eyes closed and grip his fingers through another wave of pain. But this one’s less overpowering. Instead, it feels like a deep ache announcing what’s coming.

We sit together in companionable silence for a long time—long enough that I’m confident my mother intercepted Maria to tell her to hold off on the ice. Which I’m grateful for. As much as I want and need my mother and sister here with me, spending time with Leo calms me down. And as the contractions grow stronger and more frequent, Leo caresses me gently, his touch easing my pain.

“Hoooo,” I gasp, sitting up suddenly as I’m struck with a powerful urge to push.

“What?” Leo asks, immediately on high alert. “Do you need Dr. Trista?”

I nod. “I think it might be time.”

Leo’s out of his chair and at my hospital door in a flash. Moments later, my mother and sister pile back into the room, cup of ice chips in hand.

The calm before the storm is over as their entrance begins a flurry of activity in my room. Leo arrives with Dr. Trista shortly after. And with a quick assessment, she agrees it’s time. Standing by my shoulder, Leo lends me his hand, absorbing my pain as he remains by my side. And after several exhausting hours of breathing and pushing, breathing and pushing, I finally give birth to our little girl.

Her first angry wails as she enters the world bring tears to my eyes, and Leo’s shine in wonder as he watches the doctor take her to clean and examine her, then swaddle our little girl in a blanket.

“Congratulations, mom and dad. You’ve successfully given birth to a very healthy seven-pound-eight-ounce little girl. Would you like to hold her?” Dr. Trista offers to Leo when she’s finished counting all the necessary fingers and toes.

He gives my shoulder a squeeze and leaves my side to go collect our baby in his arms.

My heart swells as he gathers her from the doctor. Pride eclipses Leo’s masculine face as he takes our baby girl in his arms for the first time. With slow rocking steps, he carries her back to me and my mom and sister like our baby is the most delicate, breakable piece of china he’s ever seen.

“Look who it is?” he murmurs, settling beside me on the hospital bed to show off our daughter.

“Miss Angelica Rose Moretti,” I breathe, my heart bursting, I’m so happy.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Angelica,” Maria says quietly, pulling down a corner of the blanket to admire her tiny fingers and plump cheeks. “I’m your Auntie Maria.”

“Congratulations, Tia,” my mother says, her typically reserved demeanor replaced with a rare warmth. It would seem my daughter has carried on the tradition of melting people’s hearts without any effort. My mom presses a kiss to my sweaty forehead and combs the hair from my brow. Then she smiles at my husband. “You too, Leo. I’m so happy for you. She’s a beautiful little angel.”

“Thanks, Mama,” I murmur as fresh tears sting my eyes.

Finished washing her hands, Dr. Trista congratulates us once again before excusing herself and quietly slipping from the room.

Then it’s my mother’s turn to collect Maria and steer her toward the door. “We’ll go grab a cup of coffee and give you two a moment,” she says.

I smile gratefully and turn my attention to Leo and our baby once more.

“You ready to hold her?” he offers.

“I thought you would never ask.” I laugh.

He carefully transfers her into my arms, then he wraps one arm around my shoulders, the other beneath my arm to hold me and her at the same time.

“She’s perfect, isn’t she?” he asks in wonder, peering down at our little girl like he’s never seen anything so precious.

“Yeah,” I murmur, resting my head against his shoulder as I admire her button nose and O-shaped lips. “Thank you, precious girl,” I murmur, running the back of my knuckle over her soft cheek. “Thank you for making me the happiest woman in the world.”

My heart is so full of love, I can’t seem to find the words to express it. I have everything I could ever want, right here in this bed with me. And I credit the tiny sleeping baby in my arms for almost all of it.

She brought me and Leo together. She uncovered a softer side to him I might never have known otherwise. She kept me sane with her company over the most challenging months of my life. And now she's here, blessing me with her presence. My tiny guardian angel that feels like a gift made for me.

I've never been happier. And knowing that I get to share this happiness—this life—with Leo is better than I ever could have dreamed.

Leo's cheek rests lightly on my head, his hand leaving my arm so he can gently stroke Angelica's soft head.

"Thank you, Tia," he murmurs, and he presses a kiss to the crown of my head.

"For what?" Tipping my chin up to meet Leo's gaze, I search for the answer.

"For making me so happy. For being everything I never knew I needed in life. For giving me a daughter to love and cherish."

"And spoil rotten?" I add.

He chuckles. "And that."

"You're welcome," I breathe, and I brush my lips across his in a sensual kiss.

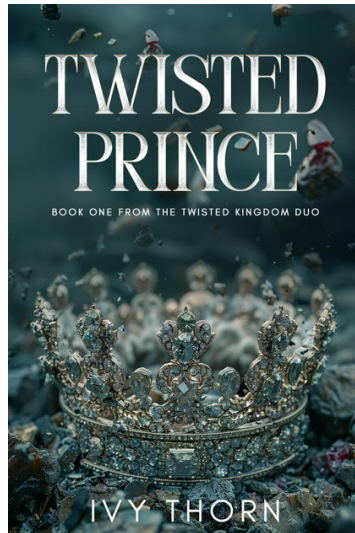
Cupping my cheek with his palm, Leo returns the kiss, deepening it as he holds me close.

This is true happiness.

This is my bliss, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I've found my happy ending in none other than Leonardo Moretti's arms.

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CHAPTER One

Gleb

I TOLD myself I wouldn't keep going by the girls' safe house, but I can't seem to stop myself. So, at the end of my day, on the way home from Pyotr's house, I walk right past my Harlem apartment building and keep going to the end of the block. I head down and around the corner to the five-bedroom home the girls rented together just half a mile from my place.

It's not far out of the way. And stopping by puts my mind at ease.

Traipsing up the steps of the girls' redbrick Harlem home, I don't even have to knock before my man Igor opens the door.

No doubt he saw me coming. He's used to my visits by now.

"Come for your daily inspection?" he jokes in Russian as soon as I step inside. "Here to make sure I'm still doing an adequate job?"

The door shuts softly behind me, and he throws the bolt home.

"Making sure I don't find you napping again," I say dryly, though the only men I'm willing to station here are men I know I can trust to be on their best behavior and fully alert.

"Hey, I was just resting my eyes and training my other senses," he teases.

"Do training on your own time. I find you looking all relaxed like that again, you better have a bullet between your eyes." I'm not one for humor—especially when it comes to my job. And in my eyes, protecting these women falls squarely on my shoulders because my *pakhan* assured them they have the protection of the Veles.

"Sure thing, boss," Igor says, the grin dropping from his face.

I give him a curt nod before I stalk past him down the hall, heading toward the kitchen, where the girls often seem to gather. The somewhat shabby furnishings of the rental house give the space a warm, familiar, almost homey feel. And though I know Pyotr offered to house the girls in a finer, more comfortable location, I can respect the girls' determination to stand on their own two feet—well, ten feet collectively.

Considering Mikhail has agreed to Pyotr's ceasefire, I suppose the level of protection I've ordered for them isn't entirely unnecessary. I shouldn't be so hard on my men for getting comfortable when the girls have likely completely fallen off Mikhail's radar.

But as much as I respect my *pakhan*'s efforts to find a peaceful resolution to our conflict, I don't trust the Zhivoder leader. And I'm not willing to gamble the girls' safety on the word of a sadistic madman like Mikhail.

I've known men like him my whole life. And if he's agreed to a ceasefire, it's only because it offers him some hidden advantage. I've told Pyotr that, but I'm afraid my young *pakhan* still has hard life lessons to learn. Not everyone can be as cynical as I am. Especially at my age.

So rather than argue with my boss, for now, I will continue to stick Igor and a handful of my men with the role of babysitter to the five remaining women we rescued from Mikhail's clutches. Unlike the dozens of other girls we hauled from that delivery truck, these five had no home to return to after we freed them, and I don't want them accidentally falling back into his hands.

Not that I imagine Mikhail would find them valuable enough to go to the trouble of hunting them down. But since the girls have gotten jobs and moved away from the Veles house, my intuition hasn't stopped tingling.

And I learned long ago to trust my gut instincts.

If I can thank my father for one thing, it's the training he's instilled in me so deeply that, in many ways, I'm more of a fine-tuned weapon than a human being. So when my senses tell me something's wrong, I listen. Which is why I find myself dropping by every day to check in on them. I've scoped the girls' safe house countless times since they moved in, but I can't shake the feeling that they're in danger.

Laughter from the kitchen catches my ear, and like a moth to the flame, I'm drawn toward the vibrant sound. I'm starting to wonder if the nagging sensation in my gut has more to do with my attraction to Mel than I'm willing to admit. Something about her captured my attention from the moment I laid eyes on her.

I will never forget that night, weeks ago, when my men and I raided the Zhivoder shipment of trafficked teenage girls coming in from Colorado. I can't scrub from my mind the horrible, terrified, drug-addled state Mikhail's men had put the girls in to subdue them.

And yet Melody, so vulnerable and entirely incapacitated, still managed to present such fierce defiance. The tongue on

that woman could make a sailor blush. I found her captivating, her strength inspiring. Like a warrior princess, she was fearless despite her dire circumstances.

And now I can't seem to get her out of my head.

I should.

She doesn't deserve to be dragged into my fucked-up life. She's just eighteen—eight years younger than I am, which is practically a lifetime for a woman that age. Not to mention she's had enough trauma in the hands of Mikhail's men. I don't need to punish her further by subjecting her to my world of violence and crime.

The sight of cheap particle board cabinets painted a soft mint green greets me. They line the outdated kitchen, and as I round the corner, stepping onto the black-and-white checkered floor, three sets of eyes look up at me. Three matching smiles accompany the sparkling gazes, and I can tell I've walked in on something exciting.

“Ladies,” I greet, meeting Mel's, Annie's, and Tiffany's eyes each in turn.

“Hey, Gleb,” Tiffany greets me, her fingers doing their signature move as they twirl the ringlets of her kinky blond hair.

But my eyes don't linger on her. Instead, they shift to track Mel's frantic movement. She scoops the papers scattered across the kitchen table into a messy pile and shoves them unceremoniously back into a manila envelope.

“You're not going to show him?” Annie asks, her brown doe eyes widening in disbelief.

“Show me what?” I gently prod the dark-haired, russet-skinned Hawaiian beauty demonstrating a rare case of bashful energy.

“Nothing,” Mel says, hugging the envelope to her chest, her chin tipping up defiantly.

Her oval face and delicate nose, which emphasize her prominent tear-shaped eyes, all come together to create a

convincingly innocent look I don't trust for a second. Narrowing my eyes, I watch her expression closely, assessing the hidden emotion that tells me she doesn't want me to know whatever it is she was showing the girls.

"Oh, come on, Mel. Show him!" Tiffany insists, snatching the envelope from her grasp before Mel can stop her.

"Tif!" Mel objects, launching her upper body flat across the table to try and grab it back.

And though I know better than to look, I can't stop my eyes from dropping to her perfect jean-clad ass bent over the hard surface for me like a gift from the gods. I give her gorgeous figure a moment of admiration before forcing my eyes back up to the commotion.

To distract myself from unwanted thoughts, I snag the envelope from Tiffany and dare to slip my fingers inside the opening. "Keeping secrets, Mel?" I ask, my voice dropping into a dangerous octave.

"Give it back!" Mel squeals, leaping up off her chair with such impressive dexterity that I barely have time to react.

Stepping back until my hips find the formica counter, I hold the envelope high above my head to keep it out of reach.

A terrible decision really.

In her desperation to reclaim it, Melody doesn't hesitate to close the distance between us. Leaning into me, she stretches one arm to its full length as she rises onto her toes.

In a flash, I'm intensely aware of her firm, warm body pressed against mine, the way her breasts smoosh adamantly against my ribcage to create a hint of cleavage. The sweet vanilla scent of her perfume fills my nose. Her proximity overwhelms my senses, leaving my stomach in unexpected knots as my heart skips a beat.

"Gleb, please!" she begs, her tone somewhere between laughter and whining.

Though I'm insanely curious to know what she doesn't want me to see, I can't handle the feel of her body pressed

against mine for much longer. My cock's already starting to harden.

Mel's hands tug fruitlessly against my raised arm, and I lower it to put space between us. She stumbles back, seemingly caught by surprise at my sudden readiness to return her envelope. I itch to reach out and steady her, but I've already pushed my luck far enough for one day. I shouldn't be risking contact with Melody at all. Not when I find her so dangerously intoxicating.

"Thank you," she says breathlessly, tucking a strand of thick black hair behind her ear.

She accepts the envelope when I hold it out to her.

"Ugh, you two are ridiculous," Tiffany says, slumping in her chair as if put out by our behavior. "I'm going to get ready for work. Come on, Annie. You better get ready, too, if you want a ride."

They stand together and head toward the hallway I just came from.

Hesitating in the doorway, Tiffany turns to look at Melody. "Just show him, Mel. You should be proud of yourself. It's a major accomplishment."

Her words have me burning with curiosity as she vanishes, leaving us alone in the kitchen.

Silence fills the space, followed by an awkwardness that stems from my inability to be alone with Mel without wanting to do dirty things to her. Fighting against the baser urge, I pull myself together.

And when I turn my eyes back to Melody, I'm surprised to find a tentative look on her face. Trapping her full lower lip between her straight white teeth, she looks up at me through thick lashes with eyes so dark they're almost black.

When it comes to Mel, I've learned to expect obstinate, outspoken, and bold. This newfound shyness unsettles me as much as it awakens a strangely protective instinct deep inside my chest.

CHAPTER Two

Mel

THAT WAS PROBABLY THE NICEST, most supportive thing Tiffany has said to me since we met, and it means a lot.

Should I tell Gleb?

I am really excited about the modeling gig I just found out I landed, and Gleb will find out eventually. Better to just get it over with and hope he doesn't try to stop me. Biting my lower lip, I hunt down my nerve as I look up into his seafoam green eyes.

God, it's hard to focus when he looks at me like that. And as he stalks toward me, my heart flutters with nervous anticipation. Only Gleb can move without making a single sound.

It's almost unnerving, and yet, his fluid, graceful prowl is so natural to him that I can't help but admire his stealthy poise. The sight of his dangerously attractive, almost feline, angular features and striking green eyes steals my breath away in an instant.

I don't usually find men so appealing. Just as the mouse doesn't find a house cat particularly pleasing to the eye. But Gleb has tall, dark, and handsome down pat, with a flourish of dark, brooding savior complex to top it off.

It certainly doesn't hurt his case that he's the one who saved me from a lifetime of servitude as some sick bastard's sex slave.

"Show me what, Melody?" he asks, his silky-smooth Russian accent and soft, even voice sending goosebumps rippling across my flesh. He never calls me by my full name.

"If I show you, will you promise not to get mad?" It's a cheap trick, I know—getting him to promise without knowing

what he might get mad about. But all I can think about is how much trouble I'll be in.

Because Gleb is going to be furious when he finds out what I've done. *Lie low. Don't do anything that might draw unnecessary attention until the danger has passed.* Those were his only instructions. *And what did I do?* Apply to a top modeling agency that could potentially put me on the cover of a very prominent New York magazine, not to mention the very public New York modeling scene. I know he won't like what I did, so I'm hoping my trick will help soften the blow.

His angular brows dip, forming sharp downward lines that confirm his suspicion. "Why would I get mad?" Gleb's eyes narrow, his perceptive gaze penetrating my soul with ease, and I feel as though he already knows what I'm hiding but is waiting for me to say it.

"Just promise," I plead, my heartbeat quickening as a frozen knot of anxiety drops into the pit of my stomach.

"Okay. I promise I won't get mad." His tone is dry, a sure sign that he's laughing at me—at least on the inside. I have yet to hear Gleb actually laugh. And after what I'm about to tell him, I know today won't be the day either.

Still, it makes my palms sweat.

I shouldn't care so much about what a man thinks. I generally *don't* care about what men think of me. But with Gleb, I can't seem to help but want his approval. It's probably just some kind of trauma survivor's complex—my gratitude over him saving me has amplified to an unhealthy degree so it feels like I have a massive crush on him.

All I know is that the inexplicable devotion I feel toward him has had me tangled in knots for weeks. But that doesn't explain why my stomach flutters every time he enters a room.

And I hate the thought of disappointing him far more than I should.

Which is why I really don't want him to know what I've done.

Because he hates it when I question his rules or challenge his decisions. I would know. Because I do it a lot.

“Well, remember how Silvia’s photographer friend Dani came by the house a while back? And we did a photoshoot?”

Gleb follows my movement like a silent shadow as I return to the kitchen table. Reluctantly, I open the manila envelope to pull out my photos as I go.

“Yes?” he says, his answer coming out more like a question. Then his eyes fall on the headshots I spread across the table once more. I can read the riot of emotion that flickers in their depths. Yet his face remains still, serene, like the surface of lake that mirrors the sky, not giving anything away.

Swallowing hard, I press onward. “Well... she might have suggested I try sending these into a few agencies—to see if I could get some kind of fashion or modeling opportunity out of them.”

Gleb’s eyes snap sharply up to meet mine, and I can see the anger in them despite his promise.

Still, I forge ahead, knowing it’s better to rip the Band-Aid off than to drag this out any longer. “I have my first professional photoshoot next week,” I whisper, my voice almost apologetic, though I’m not sorry for my success. I just don’t like disappointing Gleb, and I brace for the full force of his wrath after having confessed my defiance of his wishes.

“And this is going to help you keep a low profile how?” he asks, his voice as smooth and undisturbed as the glassy surface of a mountain lake. Then he releases an aggravated sigh, his first true expression of the frustration that I know lies within. Closing his eyes, he massages his temples, as if searching for the excessive amount of patience it takes to deal with me.

“Gleb?” I say tentatively, leaning closer as my anxiety consumes me. I hate when he closes his eyes because they’re the only way I have an inkling of what he’s really feeling. And right now, I’m not sure if I’ve taken Gleb to the end of his rope and should perhaps consider running.

Not that he's ever laid a hand on me or has even hinted that he might. But I've learned the hard way that men are not to be trusted—regardless of how considerate they might pretend to be at first.

Gleb's eyes snap open, finding mine with a terrifying intensity that makes my stomach tremble.

"You promised not to get mad," I remind him, my last wall of defense before I really do make a run for it.

"I'm not mad," he growls, his tone suddenly gruff. And for a fraction of a moment, I think he might reach out and grab me. Then he shoves his hands into the pockets of his dress slacks as if to keep them occupied until he can calm down and control himself. "I suppose I'm proud of you for being bold enough to follow your interests."

Am I going crazy, or does he actually sound like he means it? That's not at all the reaction I was expecting. "Really?" I blurt, unable to contain my disbelief.

Maybe I got myself all worked up for nothing. Maybe I misunderstood Gleb's warning—or maybe he came by today to tell us that the danger's passed. That Mikhail Sidorov won't be coming to collect his *stolen goods*, and we don't have to keep hiding. I hadn't even thought of that possibility.

"I just wish you might have picked something that didn't entail risking your life," Gleb states. He keeps talking, but all I can hear is that he's *proud* of me. He's not mad. He thinks I'm *bold*.

And suddenly, I can't help the giddy excitement that bubbles up inside me. I want this modeling opportunity so bad. It's the first thing I've dared to dream of accomplishing for myself. And the only thing that stood in my way of being ecstatic about it before was worrying that my decision might cause more trouble for Gleb. He's already under enough stress.

Overwhelmed by the sudden and intense relief that floods my chest, I release a girlish squeal and fling my arms around

Gleb's neck to say thank-you. Only, in my excitement, I don't think it through.

And rather than just the hug I'd intended, our lips meet in a full and entirely-too-enthusiastic kiss. A jolt of attraction blasts through me, leaving my lips tingling as if they'd been zapped with an electric shock.

But what I feel more powerfully than that is the way Gleb stiffens, his shoulders tensing beneath my arms as his back becomes an iron rod of discomfort. I've completely crossed the line. In my excitement, I didn't think twice about how my unhealthy crush might make me act foolish in front of him.

And now I've gone and kissed the one man who's shown me nothing but respect and consideration. Shame and remorse flood my chest. Tears sting my eyes as I step back, feeling ridiculously rejected by Gleb's response.

"I'm so sorry," I say, my skin heating with embarrassment. "I shouldn't have done that. I just..." God, I've ruined everything.

I can't even bring myself to meet Gleb's eyes, and my horror intensifies as I realize I'm starting to cry. *What is wrong with me?*

I don't stick around to find out what stupid thing I might decide to do next. Turning tail, I flee so I don't have to face Gleb. After that rash, adolescent display, I don't know that I'll ever be able to look him in the face again.

"Mel!" he calls after me, confusion and conflict in his tone. He's probably reluctant to explain why he doesn't want me or why I shouldn't go around kissing him like that.

I dash from the kitchen, making a beeline for the stairs, intent on reaching my room before Gleb can see the tears streaming down my cheeks. I slam my bedroom door behind me and lean against it for good measure. Not that I think he would chase me all the way up here. Hell, he's probably just grateful we don't have to have that awkward it's-not-you-it's-me conversation.

I can't believe I just kissed him.

And though I'm mortified, now that I'm alone, I can't help but press my fingers to my still-tingling lips. He's the first man I've actually *wanted* to kiss, and the experience was so different from any of the other kisses I've had in my life, it doesn't even fit in the same category.

Now that I've done it, now that I've shattered that boundary Gleb has so carefully enforced, I don't know that I can go back to the way things were.

Despite my overwhelming embarrassment at his rejection, I want to kiss him again.

I can hear the muffled sound of Gleb and Igor talking, then the door closes as Gleb leaves. A hint of disappointment works its way into my belly. A small part of me had hoped he might follow me upstairs and tell me he changed his mind. That he does want me.

But it would seem not.

Why is unrequited love so painful?

Maybe it's part of what they call growing pains. But at eighteen, I would think I might be past the worst of life's hard-learned lessons. Then again, because of my past, I suppose I'm a late bloomer when it comes to romance or crushes.

I was too young to care for boys when my dad sent me to Colorado to live with my uncle. And what I experienced there made it very hard to look at boys the same way. So my feelings for Gleb are a first. I feel like I'm back in that awkward tween space where I don't know how to behave.

But crying over his rejection won't make me feel any more mature. So, taking a deep, steadying breath, I wipe the tears from my cheeks and determinedly refocus my attention. I can keep myself busy to take my mind off the mortifying scene that just happened. Since my next serving shift isn't until tomorrow morning, I can get some work done around the house.

Heading to my closet, I pull out my plastic hamper of laundry and prop an edge onto my hip. Then I head back out

of my room, toward the stairs and the laundry room one floor below.

Through the wooden spindles of the railing, I spot Igor, the handle of his gun casually protruding from the back of his pants as he stands guard near the door. He has his phone pressed to his ear, listening, and after a moment, he answers in muted Russian.

Then, a rap comes at the front door.

My stomach drops, my heart rate picking up as I hope for a fleeting moment that it might be Gleb coming back, that maybe he's had a minute to think about the kiss I sprung on him and he's reconsidered what he wants to do about it.

Igor raises his voice, speaking in Russian to the person outside, his lips curving into a smirk. But when no one answers, he quickly gets off the phone, slipping it back into his pocket. A moment later, his brows press into a frown as he stares more pointedly at the door.

My steps falter as he says something with a tone of clear warning this time, his hand moving to his gun in his waistband. The moment of silent stillness that follows makes my heart skip a beat. Then an ear-splitting report of machine gunfire fills the entryway.

Holes blast through the wood door, obliterating the lock and traveling upward in a quick line that pummels Igor before he can move. His body twists and jerks with the force of the bullets impacting his chest.

He stumbles back, blood bursting from his lips, and I cover my mouth to muffle the scream that threatens to escape. Annie and Tif don't seem to consider the danger of making their presence known though. Both let out terrified shouts somewhere down the first-floor hallway.

Then a foot slams into the bullet-riddled front door, smashing it open so hard that the damaged knob puts a hole in the wall behind it.

I have mere seconds to act before whoever the intruder is finds me in the stairwell. It takes all my willpower to tear my

eyes from the devastating sight of Igor slowly sliding down the wall, a last gurgling breath escaping his lips.

I don't have time to think about him now, don't have time to mourn.

Spinning as swiftly and as silently as I can, I race back upstairs and into my bedroom at the far end of the hall. Setting my laundry down as silently as I can, I ease my bedroom door closed. Then I search frantically for what to do next.

I can't climb out the window. The two-story drop could easily break a leg, and then where would I be? My eyes land on my open closet, and I race across the room to slip inside. Pulling the folding doors closed behind me, I can see using the filtered light pouring between the slats as I crouch low on the floor.

It's a tactic I used often when I was a child and my dad came home drunk. I can only hope the intruder is as belligerent and oblivious as my alcoholic father was. But somehow, I doubt it, and that makes this a hundred times scarier.

Beneath me, I can hear heavy footsteps and the rapidfire of machine guns—more than one. Annie's voice carries through the floor, her terrified pleas wrenching my heart.

It's horrible.

The cold, apathetic Russian man that replies triggers memories of those dark, terrible days and nights spent scared out of my mind as a transport truck carried me and several dozen girls, including Annie and Tif, across the country to an unknown destination. I thought I would die in that truck. By the end, I almost welcomed death.

I can't do it again.

My mind flashes to Gleb, the man who saved me from that horrible fate, and I quickly reach into my back pocket to fish out my phone. Adrenaline makes my fingers shake as I search for his number—the one I've never used but that he gave me in case of an emergency.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Tif screams below, and the muted scuffle that follows makes my stomach knot.

A second later, I hear a resounding thwack, followed by something hitting the floor.

Who are these people? Are they Zhivoder men coming to reclaim us, like Gleb warned they might? That’s why he’s been so insistent on a twenty-four-hour guard stationed at our house. Little good that did.

Tears sting my eyes as I think of Igor’s lifeless body propped against the wall. The moisture blurs my vision, and I quickly blink it away as I find the number I’m looking for and hit call.

Please, pick up. Pick up, pick up, pick up! I’m terrified he might try to avoid me now because of my brazen kiss. *What if he doesn’t answer?*

Annie and Tif both release terrified screams as fresh machine-gun fire erupts through the house, turning my blood cold. A heavy thunk follows, telling me another of our guards has likely fallen. I hold my breath, fighting the urge to cry as the sound of a body dragging across the floor synchronizes with Annie’s terrified wail. A sob escapes me before I can trap it, and I clamp my hand over my mouth and nose to stifle the sound.

Right now, I would do just about anything Gleb told me to. Because I never want to suffer the horrible fate I faced before he saved me.

But my hope slowly slips away as the phone just keeps on ringing...

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