

A close-up photograph of a man with a full, dark beard and long hair. He is wearing a dark, ribbed button-down shirt. He is holding a glass of whiskey in his right hand, which is visible in the upper left corner. He has a tattoo on his chest and another on his left arm. The background is dark and out of focus.

Violent
GOD

THE DEFIANT GOD BROTHERHOOD 1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SARAH BALE

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**A secret society so powerful, it can give you everything you
desire. Imagine what it can take away...**

I've done my duty as the perfect daughter.

Agreeing to marry a man I can't stand.

Slowly becoming someone I hate.

I long for a knight to save me.

Instead, I get the devil himself.

They call him the Violent God.

And now, I know why.

He kills without question.

Does what it takes to protect horrible secrets.

Always dutiful to The Brotherhood.

Even if it means destroying us.

But I won't let him, or his brethren, break me.

I've survived too much...

And now, there's another life to protect.

Only, those who stand between us will stop at nothing to see
the Violent God fall...and take me down with him.

CONTENT WARNING:

This book contains situations that readers may find offensive or triggering, including the death of a parent, mentions of child abuse and spousal abuse, and mafia themes (violence).

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Skin and Bones - David Kushner
Baby I'm Yours (slowed) - Roeinon
Heaven – Matt Bomer
Daylight – Shinedown
Wrong Side of Heaven – Five Finger Death Punch
Love on the Brain – Rihanna
Unstoppable – Sia
Beautiful – Michele Morrone
Marry You – Donald Glover
Pain – Three Days Grace
Inside Her Head – Bryce Savage
Desire – Meg Myers
Mastermind – Taylor Swift

*To all the girls who watched The Skulls and had two thoughts.
One, Joshua Jackson's character should have stayed in the
Skulls. Two, what would a secret society look like when the
members were in their 40s.*



THEN*Isabetta*

“Nonna, please take your medicine.”

My grandmother shakes her head, her short, white curls shaking with the movement. “They’re trying to poison me, *amorina*.”

“They’re not. They’re trying to help you. Please take it.”

She eyes the plastic cup the aide is holding like she still doesn’t trust him but tosses the pills in her mouth, swallowing. The aide lifts his eyebrow and Nonna huffs before opening her mouth to prove that she did indeed swallow the pills. I mean, the aide’s not wrong to ask for proof. I’ve seen her act like she’s swallowing pills and then spit them out when she thinks no one is looking.

Without her medicine, Nonna’s moods become unpredictable at best and the nursing home she’s in has made it clear that if she becomes...uncontrollable again that she will have to find a new place to live. She likes it here, so I try my hardest to make sure she does as she’s supposed to. A dull ache forms behind my eyes. I don’t even want to think about having to find her a new place to stay.

It’s something no one my age should have to worry about, but I’m the only person who looks after or even cares about Nonna.

The aide says, “Thank you, Mrs. Angelo.”

Nonna huffs again, and the aide and I share a smile as he leaves.

“How are you feeling today?” I ask as I take a seat next to her bed.

“Bah. The same. These fools don’t know what’s wrong with me or how to fix me.” She looks somewhere over my shoulder. “I’ll be glad for the day that I see my dear Tommaso, which is soon, I hope. Maybe tomorrow if I’m lucky.”

My grandfather passed away before I was born, but I’ve heard about him my entire life. And Nonna has said the same bit about hoping to see him tomorrow for just as long.

“How was school?”

“Fine.”

Her gaze narrows, as if she doesn’t believe me, which is fair since I’m lying. School was anything but *fine*. It was miserable, just as it’s been for the last three and a half years. Thank god I graduate in May. Only seven more months... I snort softly to myself. It’s best not to think about the actual time until I’m free of that place. It’ll only depress me, and god knows I have enough to be depressed about as it is.

“Are those girls still giving you a hard time?”

“No.” *Yes.*

She sits, though it’s a struggle. “I can call the school and speak to your principal.”

“Nonna, it’s fine, I swear.”

“What does your father say about it?” Before I can answer, she waves her hand. “Never mind. I probably don’t want to know the answer to that.”

Nonna has never liked my dad. Both she and my grandfather were against my mom marrying him, but Mom was pregnant with me and wanted to make sure I grew up with two parents in my life, the same way she did. Only, she didn’t plan on dying right after I was born. I sometimes wonder if she would still feel the same way knowing how things are now. That my father hates me and drinks because he says I look too

much like her. That he spends his money on booze leaving me to work two part-time jobs after school just to make sure the bills are taken care of. That I hate my life...

I smile convincingly, a skill I learned a long time ago, and say, "Nonna, I promise school is fine."

"If you say so."

She must be tired because she's willing to let me change the subject.

"I heard from my cousin in Rome. She said you can stay with her when you visit."

This time my smile is real. "Really? That's great!"

Nonna is sending me to Italy when I graduate, so I can see where my mother's side of the family came from. She's paying for everything because otherwise I wouldn't be able to go. I only wish she could go with me.

As if sensing my thought, she says, "These old knees aren't what they used to be, or I'd be right there with you, showing you my favorite places to eat. Did you find your mother's camera?"

I didn't, but only because my father probably pawned it off years ago.

"No, but I can use my phone."

"It's not the same, *amorina*. You need to hold the camera in your hands and *feel* as you take the photo." She looks somewhere behind me, as if she's remembering. "Your grandfather was gifted, just like you. He, too, could see things that no one else did."

I've seen some of my grandfather's photos, and she's not wrong. They're stunning. There's no way I'll ever be as good as him, but it's nice that Nonna thinks I am. I reach into my bag, pulling out my phone so I can show her a picture I took on the way to school when I notice the time.

"Oh no! I'm late. Vinny is going to kill me."

“You tell that boy to call me if he has a bone to pick. I’ll put him in his place.”

I snort because I know she’s serious. Vinny is one of the most feared men in our neighborhood, and Nonna might be the only person who can put him in place.

Leaning over, I kiss Nonna’s wrinkled cheek. “I love you. I’ll see you on Monday after class.”

“I look forward to it, *amorina*.”

As much as I wish I could see her over the weekend, I have shifts at Vinny’s salon during the days and then at his Italian restaurant in the evenings. God knows I need the extra cash right now. My father blew his last paycheck, and we have bills that are overdue. Trying not to feel down, I gather my things and leave Nonna’s room. I’m lucky that she’s able to stay in such a nice place. My grandfather left behind a lot of money when he passed and Nonna was smart and invested it. I’m mostly just glad that my father doesn’t have access to it. He’d gamble and drink it all away, and then she’d be out in the streets.

Sometimes I feel guilty because I don’t tell Nonna how bad it is at home. I’m lying to her, even if it’s indirectly. Like, if she knew I needed money, she’d give it to me. But I know my father would get his hands on it and keep on until there was nothing left. So it’s best that I say nothing. Besides, I’ve survived this long. I can survive a few months longer. Because as soon as I can, I’m going to move out of his house and never look back.

Outside, I shiver as I wait for the bus. I should have brought a jacket, but I’m trying to enjoy the last bit of warmth before fall moves into Brooklyn, which will happen soon since it’s mid-October. I might regret this decision when I leave Vinny’s shop, since it will be after dark. I just hope I don’t cross paths with my father. He’ll be in a mood since it’s his payday and he won’t have a check to spend. Even though it’s not my fault, he’ll find some way to blame me. If he’s feeling foul, he might even take his fists to me. I rub my arm. It healed

months ago, but sometimes it still aches, like now when the weather is about to change.

I'm frowning as I step into Vinny's salon. The bell above the door dings, and Gia, my other tormenter, sneers when she sees me, which is really just icing on the cake at this point. I know Gia because she went to the same high school that I attend, though she graduated two years ago. I hoped and prayed that once she graduated, I wouldn't have to see her again. She told everyone she was going to Europe to model. Guessing that was a lie since she's at the salon almost as much as me.

I have to bite back a groan when she taps her long, red acrylic nails on the glass countertop. She was supposed to be off today. What in the heck is she doing here?

"You're late."

Jesus. Can't I catch a break?

I glance at the clock on the red wall behind her. "I'm ten minutes early."

She hums. "Definitely late. I'll make sure Vinny knows, too."

Vinny is her uncle, so it's not like he's going to take my side. Okay, that's not fair. He *might*, but I won't hold my breath. Any time Gia gripes, he does whatever it takes to get her to shut up, which is usually giving her what she wants. I'm sure if I made a big enough stink, he'd take my side, but it's just not worth it. Unlike Gia, I have actual problems.

"Some of the stations need to be swept, and the laundry is behind."

And why is that, I wonder? Could it be that she has been talking instead of doing *her* job? As the receptionist, she's also supposed to keep the laundry going while my tasks include sweeping and washing client's hair in the back room far, far away from her.

"I'll get right on that."

"The bathrooms need to be cleaned, too."

My jaw aches from gritting my teeth. “Okay.”

That’s not technically my job, either, but I know better than to argue. Gia smirks at me as I pass, and I’m careful not to step too close to her. She’s tripped me or ‘accidentally’ bumped into me before, and I wouldn’t put it past her today.

In the employee break room, I put my bag in my locker and grab my apron before closing the metal door and locking it. The vibe back here differs from the client’s area. There’s a counter with peeling brown plastic with a coffeepot and microwave. More often than not, the microwave is dirty with food splattered on the inside. A table with four plastic chairs sits in the middle of the room on beige tiles that are cracked and long overdue to be replaced. Those chairs have seen better days and there’s no way I’d sit on one because there’s a good chance it might break.

The long wall has green lockers that look similar to the ones at my school. When I first started, I didn’t lock my locker and learned the hard way that there was a reason everyone else did. Losing the fifty bucks in my bag was a blow for so many reasons. It made me not trust my coworkers, which really sucked since I like most of them. The real kicker is that I can’t even say Gia is the one who took the money because there are a few people in the salon who are just as sketchy as her.

Tying my black apron over my clothes, I make my way to the utility closet to get the cleaning supplies. I loathe cleaning bathrooms, so I might as well get that over with now. I make sure the men’s bathroom is empty before entering. The men’s is usually the worse, with lots of pee splatters on the floor and wall behind the toilet. Thankfully, it’s not too bad. God knows I’ve seen worse. I shudder as I remember. There are just some things that can’t be unseen.

The women’s bathroom takes a bit longer to clean, but only because Vinny likes to provide feminine products for anyone who needs them. The same goes for the unisex bathroom. I finally finish restocking everything and go back to the utility closet to get my broom and dustpan.

The salon has thirty stations, a smoke lounge, and two private rooms that are used for waxing customers. Each space has either red or black walls with black tiled floors. Most of the employees will clean their own stations, but a few of them like for me to do it because they think it makes them look more important. Thankfully, all I have to do is sweep up any hair on the ground. Sometimes a stylist will ask me to take dirty instruments and sanitize them, which I don't mind doing.

By the time I'm finished sweeping the floors, my back is aching. When I walk back to the closet to put away my broom, I spot Gia leaning against the counter, talking to a male stylist she has her eyes on at the moment. He seems to be into it, though, leaning into her as much as she leans into him. I just don't get what guys see in her. Maybe they don't stick around long enough to see her rotten personality. That has to be it.

She glances over his shoulder, spotting me. The smile on her face is anything but kind as she says something to him, and they both laugh.

She calls out, "Isabetta, you should really take better care of yourself. No one wants to see a sweating mess when they come here. They expect high-end services."

I could point out that I'm sweating because I've been working for the last hour, but I don't dare say anything. Gia is the type of person who will go low to win a fight, and that means bringing up my weight. I know this because she does it at least once a week.

Forcing my lips into a smile, I pass her and drop my broom off in the closet before heading to the area where the shampoo stations and laundry are. The area is thankfully clean, only because Carlo is the other person who works back here, and he understands what it's like to clean up after others. Sadly for me, he's not around today because he was going to see a show in the city with his boyfriend. If he was here, we'd grab a bite to eat after work. When I think about it, Carlo is my only friend. I don't even have friends at school.

Going to the dryer, I empty the towels into a basket and then grab the wet towels from the washer, tossing them into

the dryer. I add dirty towels to the washer and then start both machines. It's not hard to keep the laundry caught up, it just takes a good system. Grabbing the basket, I carry it to the counter next to the shampoo station and dump the towels out so I can fold them.

Laundry is cathartic for me, allowing me to get lost in my thoughts. Sometimes, I dream about what kind of photo I could be taking if I wasn't stuck at work. Other times, I think about problems I'm having with schoolwork. I rarely think about my dad while I'm here, but I'm not as lucky when it comes to freaking Gia. If I'm feeling ornery, I like to imagine what I'd say to her if I wasn't scared of retaliation. Like today, for example. If I didn't need the money, I'd tell Gia what I think about her.

I'd tell her that being slender shouldn't be the basis of her entire personality. I'd ask her what has hurt her so badly that she has to make fun of others. I'd tell her she doesn't have to be mean. That it's okay to just be herself.

I'm getting worked up to the point that hot tears fill my eyes. With each towel that I fold, I slam it on the counter.

"Easy, *Dolcezza*," a deep voice says from behind me. "I'm sure the towels didn't mean whatever they did to anger you."

Spinning, I come face to face with the most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life. He's older—in his thirties, if I were to guess. He towers over me by at least a foot. Tan skin. Dark eyes that are full of sin. Dark hair that's longer than most men I know wear. A beard that is well maintained. He's wearing a tailored black suit that fits his muscular frame perfectly and screams two things. Money and power. Two things I've learned are never a good thing, especially in this neighborhood.

"Can I help you, sir?"

His lips lift and I get a glimpse of his white teeth. "You are Isabetta, no?"

He says my name in perfect Italian, and I have to resist sighing. Gah. He makes it sound so pretty and sophisticated.

Not like the morons at my school. I realize he's waiting for me to answer, so I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

"That's me. I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"No, you don't know me, but I was told you were the one who would wash my hair before Vinny cuts it."

Jeez. I'm so stupid. This is literally what I do at the salon—wash people's hair. Like, what did I think he wanted with me?

"Right." I clear my throat and motion to the shampoo station. "Please have a seat."

He lowers himself into the black leather chair, leaning back so his neck sits perfectly in the neck rest of the sink. His legs are so long that he doesn't need the footrest extended. I try not to notice how the material of his pants pulls taut against his muscular thighs and fail miserably.

"Not to rush you, *Dolcezza*, but I have things to do today."

My gaze snaps to his face where I find him looking up at me with a wicked glint in his eyes, as if he knew what I was thinking moments ago.

"Sorry. Would you like to be rubbed?"

His eyebrow lifts, shock etched on his face. "Pardon?"

Kill. Me. Now.

"Uh, the chair has a built-in massager. Would you like it on?"

He snorts. "No, *Dolcezza*, I don't want to be *rubbed*."

Is it possible to die on the spot? Because I'm pretty sure I'm **this** close to it.

Clamping my lips together so I don't say anything else embarrassing, I turn on the water, letting it warm.

Most clients close their eyes as I wash their hair, but not this man. No, his eyes stay open and sometimes we make eye contact. Each time it happens, heat licks my skin. My only saving grace is that he doesn't try to make small talk. He's

thankfully silent as I wash his thick hair. Gah, even his hair is nicer than most of the men who usually visit Vinny's salon. My fingers glide through the silky strands. He lets out a throaty moan when I grip the hair on the back of his neck, tugging. Clients seem to love this and he's no exception.

I'm almost finished when he speaks.

"Vinny said you could clean up my beard."

Freaking Vinny.

"I can get Gia to do it. She's much better."

As much as I hate to give her credit for anything, she *is* better.

"The brunette at the front door with fake tits?" He shakes his head. "No. I want you."

Heat courses through me. *If only...*

"I haven't done very many of these," I warn. "So if you walk out of here missing half of your beard, then it's on you."

His lips twitch. "I trust you."

Vinny taught me how to do this after a bachelor party booked with the shop, and he realized he didn't have enough people who knew how to give a proper shave. Instead of telling the client no, he made each staff member attend a workshop that he held on a Saturday evening to learn the art of shaving.

It was one of the most terrifying things I've ever done.

I'm still having similar feelings as I reach for the hot towel and put it on the man's neck. While he relaxes, I pick the shaving cream I'm going to use. The line that the shop carries is fairly basic, but I pick the one with the spicy scent that I like. Reaching for the now cool towel, I remove it.

"You said just clean it up?"

"Yes."

Nodding to myself, I apply the shaving cream on his neck. Opening the straight razor, I inhale before running it along the

man's neck in a smooth upward stroke. This is the terrifying part. Like, this man's life is literally in my hands. If I press too hard, I'll cut him. And the razor is sharp enough that it will slice through the skin like a knife through butter. I swallow and it's audible. The man doesn't tell me to stop, so I make my second stroke. A few moments later, I'm finished, he's not bleeding, and I didn't do a terrible job. I exhale softly. Yay to me.

Looking up, I find he's watching me.

My cheeks are warm as I say, "You're done."

"Mirror?"

How can he make one word sound so yummy? Nodding, I grab the bubblegum pink mirror and pass it to him. His lips twitch as he looks over his beard.

"Very nice."

Just when I thought I couldn't melt any more...

"I'm glad you like it."

He moves from the chair, standing. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out his leather wallet, opening it. Holy moly. There are several hundred-dollar bills in there! My gaze jumps away. I don't want him to think I'm eyeing his cash or anything. Not in this neighborhood where something like that can get you jumped or even killed.

"This should cover it."

I risk a glance at him to find him holding out cash toward me. Oh my good god! He's holding five hundred dollars!

I have to clear my throat twice before I can speak.

"You don't pay me, sir. You pay Franny or Gia at the front desk."

"This is a tip for doing such a fine job." He leans in and says in a low tone. "Even if I didn't get rubbed."

A nervous laugh bubbles past my lips, but I manage to say, "I really can't take that. It's too much."

I want to take it. God, there's so much that I could do with five hundred extra dollars, but I know it's not right. He must sense my debate, because he gives me a cheeky smile as if to say, 'you know you want it'. I shake my head and take a step back, putting distance between us.

"I really can't."

He hums under his breath. "I think you may be the first woman who's turned down easy cash."

I don't know if I should be insulted or not, so I choose not to be.

"I'm not most women."

"No, you most certainly are not."

The air between us is so thick that it's almost tangible. I catch my bottom lip between my teeth—a nervous habit that drives Nonna crazy. She says it's unladylike.

The man moves closer, reaching out, rubbing his thumb over my lip.

"Let's try a different approach. Let me take you out for dinner after my meeting, *Dolcezza*. We can get to know each other a bit before I take you to my hotel."

I'm so hot that I want to fan myself.

This Adonis wants to take me out to dinner? And then to his hotel? I don't have a ton of experience...or any at all, really, but this has to mean he's into me, right? Right?! Shaking my head, I let out a self-deprecating laugh.

I'm about to tell him how crazy this is when Gia walks in. She looks at the two of us, likely noticing how close we are. When her full lips curl into a smile, I know this isn't going to end well for me.

"Mr. Moretti, I must apologize for Isabetta. She has a history of throwing herself at our clients."

The man—Mr. Moretti—glances at me before saying, "I don't recall asking your thoughts."

Gia moves closer.

“I just thought you should know...” She touches his arm.
“Because Isabetta is only seventeen...”

Her voice trails off, and I watch as his dark eyes widen in horror. I could tell him I turn eighteen next week, but I know it won't matter. Because the truth is, I *am* seventeen. Instead, I say nothing.

He turns to Gia. “Are you the one who I pay for my services?”

“I am.”

He gestures for her to walk, and she takes off, swaying her hips with each step. He takes a step to follow her and stops.

“Buy yourself something nice with this,” he says over his shoulder as he drops the cash onto the counter.

I can only watch in silence as he leaves, hating the sadness that settles deep in my chest when he's gone. It feels like I've lost something special that I'll never get back. I guess that's the story of my life. At this point, I really don't know why I'm surprised when things don't go my way.

NOW



Alessandro

The man's screams echo off the walls of the small barn outside Palermo, Sicily. We're far enough out that no one in town will hear, but, damn, it's annoying.

My second in command, Hector, shakes his head, laughing.

"Dammit. You were right. He didn't last long before pissing his pants."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out several bills, handing them to me.

"Thank you," I answer as I tuck them into my back pocket.

"This ought to be a reminder not to make bets with you."

"But then how would you get free drinks when we're finished?"

"True." He glances at the man tied in the chair before us. "Shall we end this?"

"Let's give our friend here one last chance to make things right. So, *amico*, are you ready to talk now?"

He nods. "*Sì!* I'll tell you everything I know."

"I thought you might. Where's the money?"

"It's in an account." He rattles off the number and gives me the access code. "My boss said the money is going to be

moved in the morning. I don't know where it's going after that, I swear!"

"Very good. Did you remember your boss' name?"

This is the third time I've asked and I'm starting to get pissed that he won't answer. Surely, he knows how this ends. If he doesn't give me a name, I'll torture him until he finally caves. I'm getting a name. One way or another.

He pales, making the blood splatters on his face stand out in stark contrast.

"I...I'm a dead man if I tell."

"You're a dead man if you don't," Hector points out.

Well, he's dead either way, but hope is an excellent motivator when a person has nothing left to lose.

He finally nods, giving us the name we've been waiting for. Shock is etched on Hector's face, but I suspected as much. I've been in this game a long time, and only someone with immense power can pull off a stunt like this.

"Thank you, *amico*. You've made this much easier for us." I pull my pistol from the holster. "Unfortunately for you, you stole from the wrong group of people." I shoot him once right behind the eyes and turn to Hector. "Ready for that beer?"

"Damn. Not even going to let his body hit the floor?"

A loud thud behind me has me raising my eyebrow, letting Hector know that I was right. Again.

Hector snorts. "After you, boss."

We pass the clean-up crew on our way out. The man I killed won't be missed, but I always tie up all loose ends. It's what makes me the best at what I do.

"Not going to comment on the name he gave us?"

I reply, "Nope."

"Of course not. Where are we off to next?"

"You mean after the drink?" I snort. "We're going home, my friend."

Hector says, “Let’s skip that drink, then.”

“In that much of a hurry to get home to your wife?”

Hector recently married his longtime girlfriend and they’re already expecting a child. If Hector didn’t love working for me so much, I might actually be worried that he’d pick them over me and the Family.

Hector answers, “You’ll understand one day.”

“Never.”

The choice isn’t up to me. Something I foolishly agreed to when I was younger and didn’t know any better. Thank god the Brotherhood seems to be fine letting me live my life as a bachelor, because a wife is the last thing I need.

Hector slaps my shoulder. “Good thing I’m having enough sex for the both of us.”

That has me laughing. “We both know that’s not true.”

Because while I have no intentions of getting married, I’m certainly not celibate. Quite the opposite.

“Let a fellow dream. So, can I call the airstrip and tell them to fuel up the jet?”

“Yes.”

Because I’m ready to go home, too.

Ten hours later, the jet touches down in Las Vegas. Hector’s wife is waiting for us on the airstrip and jumps into his arms when he steps out. I have to sidestep them just to get to my waiting SUV. Knowing them, they won’t even make it to their vehicle before he’s fucking her.

Ah, young love.

Inside the SUV, I catch up on emails that piled up while I was out of the country. While I love going to Sicily, it always reminds me of a life that I no longer have. A life that I rarely allow myself to think about. What good does it do to wonder what could have been? I made my choice and now I must live with it. My grip tightens on my phone. It doesn’t do any good to dwell on shit that can’t be changed. As my dear

grandmother used to say, *tale padre, tale figlio*. I was destined to make the same mistakes my father did. The only difference between us is that I didn't get myself killed. Fuck. I need a drink. Thinking of Sicily, my dear grandmother, and now my fucking father? What's next— dreaming of my mother, god rest her soul?

I huff out a laugh as the SUV arrives at the Grand Towers. When I moved to Vegas years ago, I was lucky enough to get in on investing in the development. The best part of the deal was that I got a penthouse suite. While most units in the building only have a few bedrooms, mine has six as well as five bathrooms, a private gym, a study, a library that I don't use enough, and a view of the Strip that is worth millions on its own. There's even a business center in the building where I can conduct meetings when I don't feel like going in to the office. Of course, that's only when I'm dealing with the legal side of things.

The thought has me smiling as I exit the SUV, making my way inside the lobby. In the elevator, I go through a mental list of things I need to do before I go into the office. Shower. Send my bloodied clothes off to the cleaners. Contact the Elite Members. I scrub my hand over my face. I'd rather hop on another flight and be out of the country for a month than to have to call those fuckers. Talking to them reminds me of how I felt trying to talk to my father—it's unpleasant and often leads nowhere. But it's my job to report on what I found in Sicily, so that's what I'll do.

And then I'm telling them I'm going on hiatus.

My leather boots make no sound on the hardwood floors as I enter my penthouse. My live-in maid and chef are both off, since I wasn't supposed to return until tomorrow, so I'm on my own. I welcome the peace. Sometimes it feels I never have a moment to myself.

After showering and dressing, I decide to call the Elite Members now instead of later. Blanc, the head Elite Member, answers on the first ring.

“Moretti. This is a surprise. We weren’t expecting to hear from you until tomorrow.”

“Job finished early. Are the others on the call?”

There’s a rustling, and Blanc curses under his breath. A soft feminine voice that’s most definitely not his wife speaks in the background, trying to help him. I file that bit of information away. Never know when it might come in handy.

He snaps, “I got it!”

I bite back a grin. Blanc is older than shit, so it’s no wonder he can’t figure out how to add other callers to the call. A moment later, the other four Elite Members are on the line.

“Moretti has news,” Blanc says.

“The accountant is dead. He gave me a name and the account where the money is. I’ve already had my people move it back to the Brotherhood’s account in Switzerland.” I add, “I assume our next move is to go after him.”

Him being the man who dared to steal from us.

“No,” Blanc says. “Going after him will bring too much attention to the Brotherhood.”

Zhāng, the second in command, says, “I disagree. Even the Crown can’t protect him. Not from this.”

Smith, Jones, and DeLeon are silent as Zhāng and Blanc go back and forth. A dull ache throbs behind my eyes. Fucking hell. I need a drink. Once one is in hand, I take a long sip of the whisky, letting it burn a trail down my throat.

Finally, Zhāng concedes. “We’ll let this go. For now. But if he does it again, he’ll pay with his life.”

“Agreed,” DeLeon says. He then clears his throat. Twice. “Gentlemen, while we have Moretti on the line, I’d like to bring up a different...*issue*.”

My jaw tics. If this fool tells us he’s gotten involved in another situation with an underaged child, I’m going to kill him myself. Slowly and painfully.

Blanc sighs. “What have you done now, DeLeon?”

Apparently, I'm not the only one who's tired of DeLeon's shit.

"Nothing. Well, that I know of. I, uh, received a letter in the post today. I thought little of it until I opened it. It seemed very normal, you see. I wouldn't have opened it if I had known what was inside."

Smith exhales loudly. "For the love of god man, spit it out. Some of us had to get up in the middle of the night for this call and I don't want to wait for you to yammer on while trying to get to the point!"

I grin. Smith just moved up a few slots on my list.

DeLeon says, "At first glance, I thought it was blackmail. There was a, uh, very detailed list of things I've done over the years."

"How detailed?" I ask.

"Ten pages front and back."

"Were there names?"

"Names. Current addresses. Statements. Photos." His voice rises a notch with each word.

"Sounds like blackmail to me," Jones says.

"They said they were going to kill me!" The words rush out of DeLeon's mouth. "Whoever sent the letter didn't ask for money. They only said that I should repent before I died." He swallows audibly. "They also said I would be dead before my next birthday."

Which is in two weeks.

I say, "Read the letter to us in its entirety."

He does, from start to finish.

There's a long pause when he's done.

"Jesus," Jones mutters. "No wonder they want you dead."

I rarely agree with Jones, but I agree with him on this. If DeLeon didn't have the Brotherhood protecting him, he'd

already be in prison or dead for the sins and crimes he's committed.

DeLeon asks, "So...what are we going to do?"

Hell no. *We* aren't doing anything. This doesn't fall under my jurisdiction.

"Gentlemen, as much as I'd like to sit here while you figure this out, I must bow out, as this is beyond my pay grade. In fact, I'm taking a hiatus. This is my official notice."

"But—but it does affect you, Moretti!"

I snort. "How in the hell do you figure?"

"Because if I die, you're next in line to become an Elite Member."

Fucking hell.

Taking my silence as weakness, DeLeon continues, "If you don't help, then one might wonder if you're behind the letters. You have the resources..."

My jaw tics. I will not take his bait, but I'm also not going to sit here and take his shit.

"Several members have the same resources that I do, DeLeon. You planning on bringing them in on this as well? Hell, while we're at it, maybe we should hold a special meeting. Call Rule 47 into act."

DeLeon won't walk out of that room if Rule 47 is invoked. All of his sins would be laid out in front of the entire Brotherhood, and he would be killed. The Brotherhood may have rules I don't agree with, but this isn't one. Justice would be served by taking DeLeon's life and all would be well in the world.

"Now let's not—"

"I'm not finished, you piece of shit. As for your other allegation, I'm fully fucking aware that I'm next in line for a spot on the committee if someone dies. Just as Henderson, Carter, Santos, and anyone else in line is aware." I pause to catch my breath. "You've dug yourself into this grave, quite

literally it sounds, so you can find a way out. If this is the last time we speak, then I hope you rot in hell.”

Someone covers a laugh with a cough, and not very well at that.

“As I said before. I’m going on hiatus. Don’t call me unless there’s an act of God.”

Zhāng replies smoothly, “As is your right, Moretti. DeLeon, you best get your affairs in order unless you can figure this out in two weeks. Gentlemen, I’m signing off.”

Not wanting to get caught in the aftermath of this, I end my call, too. Unsurprisingly, Blanc sends me a text before I drop my phone.

BLANC

You sure you don’t want to help DeLeon? Letting him die means your entire life changes.

Strange that you’re worried about someone as terrible as DeLeon. One might wonder if you’re scared you might get a similar letter.

Is that a threat?

An observation.

Glancing at the clock, I see it’s noon on the east coast. In my office, I lift the secure line and dial the one man I trust on this earth. Brooks Henderson.

He answers with a grumble. “This better be fucking important.”

“Someone sent DeLeon a threatening letter. Said he’ll be dead before his birthday.”

“And I give a fuck because?”

“Damn, you’re grumpy in the morning.”

“Don’t act surprised.” There’s rustling, as if he’s throwing back his bedding. “There. I’m up. Now, there must be a reason you called. And don’t tell me it’s because you’re worried about DeLeon.”

“Hell no, I’m not worried about him. After hearing that list, I think whoever kills him will be doing the world a favor.”

“What’s the issue, then?”

“We both know I’m next in line.”

“And there it is.”

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t be worried if our places were reversed.”

“You’re right,” he agrees. “I would be worried. But why worry now? He’s not dead. And whoever is threatening him probably just wants money. Watch. In a few days, he’ll let everyone know he paid someone off and that will be that.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. “You’re right. Thanks for listening to me.”

He snorts. “Any time, fucker. Now, I’m going back to bed.”

He ends the call, and I stand, looking out my window at the Vegas strip.

Brooks is right.

This will all blow over in a few days.

*Alessandro*

Brooks and I stand next to each other as the metal coffin passes us to its destination at the front of the church. The Brotherhood's logo is stamped on all sides, paying respect to a fallen member. What a fucking joke. I have no fucking idea why DeLeon's family wanted the coffin carried in, like he's some kind of hero. They clearly don't know shit about the man they're proclaiming to love so much or they're damn good actors.

Across the aisle, Blanc meets my gaze, his jaw clenched. It takes everything in my power not to crack a smile.

"You may be seated," the pastor says to the congregation.

The wooden pews creak as everyone sits. Someone coughs and I think I hear someone sniffing from his family's row. His wife, Missy, sits tall and stoic, dressed in all black. Her two teenaged children are on either side of her. The sad truth is they probably didn't know what a monster he was. There's no way his wife didn't know, though. She'd have to be living under a rock or turn a blind eye at every moment not to know.

"Brother DeLeon was a good man who left this earth too soon..."

Just like that, I zone out.

The last two weeks have been chaotic. Despite telling the Elite Members that I was on hiatus, they each reached out until I agreed to assist in finding whoever was threatening DeLeon.

Each made points that I couldn't ignore. He, of course, wasn't any help. Which is why I can't say that I feel bad about failing an assignment.

DeLeon is dead, and the world is better off.

Except that creates a big problem for me. One I didn't plan on having to deal with for at least ten more years.

Brooks nudges my side and mutters, "Stand up, fucker."

I rise to my feet as DeLeon's family makes their way out of the church. Thankfully, we're not required to go to the graveside service. Unfortunately, something much more unpleasant is about to occur.

Once it's socially acceptable, Brooks and I make our way outside. The Texas heat and humidity makes my suit cling to my skin, but my misery is short-lived as I slide into my waiting SUV. Brooks gets in next to me and we're off. He's silent, looking out the window, so I do the same, letting myself get lost in my thoughts.

Forty-eight hours ago, I was working in my office when my assistant buzzed my direct line. She said a letter had been dropped off, and that it looked important. Unease had filled my gut, but I didn't jump to conclusions. Not until I saw the cream envelope with a red wax seal.

I told her to cancel the rest of my meetings and reached for the envelope before she had even left. The first thought I had was that it was ironic that the Brotherhood was sending such an important message in such a cliché method. A text would have been a lot faster and a hell of a lot more secure.

I waited a beat longer before grabbing the silver blade sitting on top of my desk, slicing through the top and pulling out the letter written by hand on equally thick paper.

Moretti,

*Elite Member DeLeon has perished, leaving
his spot on the council vacant. Services will be*

held on Thursday, and you are required to attend. Your induction ceremony will be held after, welcoming you as our newest council member.

Sincerely,

The Defiant God Brotherhood

The paper crumpled in my grasp.

Fuck.

DeLeon was dead.

Blinking, I realize we're almost at the estate owned by the Brotherhood. The paved road winds through the massive property, leading us far from prying eyes. Foolish men have tried to get a closer look over the years. None lived to tell their tales.

The mansion comes into view and a heavy knot settles deep in my stomach.

Brooks turns to me. "How are you doing, man?"

"I go back and forth."

"I imagine." There's a pause. "I have to ask. Was it you?"

"Funny. I was going to ask you the same."

"You know it wasn't me. I wasn't a fan of DeLeon, but I didn't want him dead. Did you notice Grant wasn't at the funeral?"

I bark out a laugh. "He's hard to reach these days."

"And yet I imagine he, too, got a letter. He always did think he was above the rules."

"Not arguing with you there. I bet he shows to the induction."

"You think?"

I say, “I do. He’s campaigning, and all the donors he needs will be in that room.”

That includes me now. As an Elite Member, he’ll want to count on my vote in the upcoming election.

“Have the Elite Members told you what to expect?”

“Not really. There was an old handbook—DeLeon’s, I presume—waiting in the hotel for me when I landed. It has similar rules to the ones we already follow, though there’s a section of business that I will take over now that DeLeon is gone. Other than that, the old fuckers have barely looked my way. They seem to think I didn’t do enough to save DeLeon.”

Despite what they think, I *did* try. Whoever sent the letter and then killed DeLeon knew what they were doing. No fingerprints left behind, even though the house was a mess. Clean shot right between DeLeon’s eyes. No witnesses since his staff had already left for the night and his dear family was out of town. It would have been easy to play the killing off as a robbery, save for one detail. DeLeon’s left ring finger was cut off... and shoved in his asshole—a message and a warning to every member of the Brotherhood.

“Did you read the autopsy report?”

“I did.” He grimaces. “Think the killer is someone in the Brotherhood?”

“The finger bit would suggest as much.”

“It would make more sense that the killer is among us. Which is why I’d like to point out that you never answered my question.”

“Let me put your mind to ease, then. No, it wasn’t fucking me.”

“Okay. So, what’s the plan now?”

“You believe me? Just like that?”

“You know I’ve got your back, Ace.”

I snort. This fucker. He’s the only man with balls big enough to call me a nickname from our college days. But I

believe him when he says he has my back. Just as I have his.

I answer, “Let’s see how this induction goes.”

“Deal.”

I always knew there would be a day when it would be my turn to take a seat on the council. As a Moretti, it is my birthright. But what I said earlier is also true. I’ve seen what serving the Brotherhood as an Elite Member does to a man. Which is why I need to go into this ceremony expecting anything.

The SUV comes to a stop in front of the mansion, and my door is opened. Looking up, I notice vine has grown up the side of one of the white brick walls of the house like a cancer that is spreading. Funny. That’s how I feel about the Brotherhood at times. The flowerbeds and lawn are perfectly manicured, deceiving those who enter because this place is anything but perfect.

Unpleasant memories dance through my mind as I exit the SUV. This is where my life changed nearly twenty-five years ago when I was initiated as a member of The Defiant God Brotherhood. Back then, I thought joining the Brotherhood was the best thing to happen to me. I didn’t listen to those who warned me things weren’t always as they seemed.

And, now, look where I’m at.

“Brother Moretti, it’s a pleasure to see you, sir.”

I smile at the younger man who opened my door. “I’m sorry. Your name escapes me.”

His cheeks flush. “It’s Brother Michael. Jonathan Michael. I’m a new recruit.”

“How many were in your class?”

“Eight.”

I nod. “Excellent. Come and find me later, Brother Michael. I’d like to have a drink with you before I go.”

“Thank you, sir. That would be amazing.”

He scurries to the next SUV in line to open their door, but he wears a shit-eating grin on his face. I snort softly to myself. I'm not sure I was ever that naïve when I joined the Brotherhood. No, I knew what joining meant and was ready for everything they had to offer.

I take the steps to the house, entering through the front door. Voices carry from different rooms.

Brooks joins me and says, "I need a drink before they pass out that shit they love so much. Say, see if that's something you can change, won't you?"

"I'll do my best."

I follow him to the bar, where he orders two drinks, handing me one. We tilt our glasses toward each other before tossing back the shots. The liquid burns, but it's not enough. Not today.

Needing to keep my mind off the inevitable, I ask, "How's the knee holding up?"

Brooks makes a face. "Doing better after the last scope. It pays to know people."

I glance over his shoulder. "Is Dimitri here? I didn't see him at the funeral, either."

Dimitri Santos is a world renown orthopedic surgeon, making his fame by working on athletes around the globe. He's done all of Brooks' surgeries. Hell, he's one of the few people alive that I'd trust to work on me.

Brooks says, "Haven't seen him, but you know he'll be here."

"He might not. He can afford the fine."

"We both know he's not the type to go against a summon if unavoidable."

"He hasn't been the same since Serafina..."

A shadow passes across Brooks' face. "Has he said anything to you about it?"

"Not since her funeral."

I've seen men go through loss over the years, but I've never seen anyone as devastated as Dimitri was when he lost Serafina. The look in his eyes at her funeral will haunt me for a long time. It was the look of a man who lost the love of his life and will never be the same.

"Gentlemen, the bar is closing, but servers will be around shortly with more drinks," the bartender says.

Brooks curses as we move away from the bar. Like clockwork, servers enter the room carrying trays filled with tumblers of vodka. One stops in front of us, and Brooks grabs our drinks before the man moves on. Does it matter that most of us don't like vodka? No. But it's the drink of choice of the Brotherhood, which means we all get vodka whether or not we fucking want it.

Brooks grimaces as he finishes the drink, setting the glass aside.

"Ready to do this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You going to ask them what in the fuck they're doing to protect the council members?"

I snort. "Yes."

"Good." He tugs at his tie. "God knows I don't want to get summoned next."

"It'll happen, eventually. Even if someone didn't murder DeLeon, Zhāng and Blanc won't live forever."

Brooks grabs another tumbler from a passing server, even though it's intended for someone else, and tosses it back.

"Fuck. I'm not ready for this."

My answering smile is wry. "I feel your pain."

Across the room Grant Carter enters, and men flock to his side. He does what he does so well, chatting with the surrounding people, making each person feel heard. His gaze searches the room, meeting mine. He gives me a small nod, which I return.

Brooks says, “Wonder what he’s going to do if this trend keeps on.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m not sure he can be the next United States President and an Elite Member at the same time.”

“It’s been done before.”

Four times, to be exact, starting with Washington.

Brooks looks like he’s on the verge of grabbing another drink. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

An older man approaches us and says, “Brother Moretti, it’s time.”

I nod my understanding and turn to Brooks. “See you on the other side.”

“Good luck.”

I follow the man through the side door to the chamber room, where I will wait until the other members are gathered in the ritual room. Since there are over three hundred members, it may take a moment.

The door closes behind me, leaving me to my thoughts.

Fuck.

This is really happening.

I’ve been in the Brotherhood since I was eighteen—almost twenty-five years now. In that time I’ve bled for them. I’ve killed for them. And now I join the Elite Members. I’d like to think that it’ll be an easy ride from here on out, but that would be foolish. And dangerous. These men have served together on the council for decades. They are perfectly content with the way things are, and DeLeon’s murder changes all of that. No, I don’t expect to be welcomed with open arms, especially if they think I had anything to do with DeLeon’s death. Which they do.

Three raps on the door let me know the ceremony is about to begin.

I exhale slowly.

The main door opens, and I walk into the ritual room.

No one would ever suspect there's a place like this nestled inside a mansion in the middle of Dallas, Texas. The circular amphitheater starts on the main level of the house and goes several stories beneath the ground. Each row has individual hand-crafted marble seats for members that are uncomfortable as fuck. The newest members sit at the top and stand as I pass, dipping their heads in respect. More men stand as I descend, heading toward the lowest level. Faces blur as I focus on my destination.

At the bottom, the room is silent as I approach the altar where the Elite Members wait.

This ceremony is simple, nothing like the initial induction ceremony after completing the hazing. I had nightmares for months after the shit they put us through, but I made it. And now I'm here.

There are five Elite Members. Zhāng and Blanc have served on the council the longest. They watch me with leery eyes, as if they can't trust me. They have to be wondering when their time is up. Jones and Smith are newer in their roles and don't have a flicker of fear in their eyes as they watch me approach the altar. In fact, Smith winks at me as I pass. Out of the four, he seems least bothered by the fact that DeLeon is dead. Something I'll look into later.

Lowering to my knees, I hold out my left hand.

Blanc, being the eldest Elite Member, stands. "Brother Moretti. Destiny called upon you to fulfil your role as an Elite Member when Brother DeLeon died."

He lifts the silver blade from the table and drags it across my palm. Blood blooms on my skin and the cut stings like a motherfucker, but I hold still, waiting for Blanc to finish.

"From this day forward, Brother Moretti will be known as Elite Member Moretti. Brothers, welcome your newest Elite Member."

Murmurs of my name are spoken throughout the room.

“Elite Member Moretti, do you vow to protect the Brotherhood with your life?”

“I do.”

Something flickers in Blanc’s eyes as I accept the new oath. Something that looks a lot like fear.

“Elite Member Moretti, you now serve on a committee that has been around longer than this country. For centuries, we have done what it takes to protect what’s ours at any cost. Today, we continue our legacy.”

Zhāng stands, reaching for the golden goblet used since the Brotherhood was founded. He takes a sip, passing it to Blanc. Each Elite Member does the same until it’s passed to me. I grip it with my left hand, letting my blood soak into the metal. When Blanc nods, I take a sip, letting the bitter drink settle on my tongue before swallowing.

And just like that, it’s done.

For the next few hours, I make my way around the room, speaking to different members. Most of them want to congratulate me, though a few duck out early. I meet Brooks’ gaze across the room, and he dips his head, letting me know he’s taking note of who’s leaving. Everyone is a suspect at this point and we both know it.

I’m speaking to Jones and Smith when Grant Carter walks up.

“Alessandro.”

“Good to see you, Grant.”

He says to Jones and Smith, “Gentlemen, can you give us a moment?”

Only Grant Carter would have the balls to ask Elite Members to step away so he can have a private conversation, but both men seem star struck as they nod, scurrying away. He waits a beat before turning to me.

“Well, this has worked out well for you.”

“The death of DeLeon? Funny. One might say it’s worked out well for you, too. If I recall, he was against you running for President.”

Grant’s lips lift in a practiced smile. “DeLeon was stuck in the past and couldn’t see the bigger picture. His death just moved things along. You and I won’t have the same problems, I presume.”

“Two more deaths and you’ll find yourself on the committee, too.” I take a sip of my drink. “If it happens soon enough, you’ll be able to use the Brotherhood’s funding to push along your campaign.”

Grant shrugs. “I welcome the continued support of the Brotherhood in any way they see fit. If you’ll excuse me, I have a flight to catch.”

Grant walks away and Brooks whistles under his breath. I’m not sure when he approached, but it sounds like he heard enough.

“Damn. I take back what I said earlier.”

“About?”

“Him not being able to do both. Dude is downright evil.”

I snort, taking a sip of my drink. “Aren’t we all?”

“Touché.” He sets down his empty glass and says, “As fun as this has been, I have some recruiting to do.”

Brooks has the unlucky task of being the Face of the Brotherhood. While we’re a secret organization, there *are* people who know about us. People who will do or pay anything to join, but don’t stand out enough to be initiated during their collegiate years. It’s Brooks’ job to draw those people in, giving them an audition with the Brotherhood and, let’s be real, encouraging them to empty their pockets for a chance at becoming a member. Even if they don’t get in, they can say they had their chance at glory.

“Where are you off to next?”

“New York. There’s some rich prick that’s been foaming at the mouth to join. Won’t stop blowing up my email and now

Zhāng is riding my dick about giving him an interview.”

“Didn’t go to college?”

“He went. He didn’t get an invite back then.”

“Let me guess. His old man died and now he has a ton of money and is willing to make a generous donation to the Brotherhood?”

“Close. He’s marrying some heiress, and her money is bankrolling this audition.”

“Wonder if she knows?”

“Probably not.” He looks me over. “You should come. It could be like old times.”

I snort. “Old times, eh?”

Old times means we’ll end the night with a woman on each arm and more booze than should be humanly consumed. We haven’t had a night like that in a very long time.

“Think about it. Might get the guy to be even more generous with his donation having you there.”

“So it’s basically a done deal, then?”

“That’s how it’s gone the last few times Zhāng has sent me out. I’m just there to seal the deal.”

I hum under my breath. “Not sure I’m a fan of that.”

“It is what it is. We all know money makes the world go round, especially in our world. Think about it. I fly out in two hours.”

“I’ll let you know.”

There are more important things I should do, so I probably won’t go. That list includes finding DeLeon’s murderer, speaking to Blanc about the duties that will be expected of me now that I’m an Elite Member, and several other things. As good as living it up one last time with Brooks sounds, I really should pass...

*Alessandro*

Brooks and I sit on his jet, an hour into our flight to New York. While it's true that there are a million other things I should do, I still agreed to go, especially after Zhāng and Blanc snuck out without saying a word to me. According to my men, both got on a jet and are headed to Europe as we speak. Once they land, I have men who will have eyes on them. Until then, there's nothing I can do even though it rubbed me the wrong way. They were supposed to brief me, not take off with their tails tucked between their legs. Again, making me wonder if they had a hand in DeLeon's death.

Brooks is working on his tablet as we chat, preparing for the meeting that will take place shortly after we land.

I ask, "What's the prospect's name?"

"Giosuè Caruso."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Brooks hands me his tablet. "Didn't for me, either. Like I said, this guy is only getting in because his bride-to-be is loaded."

There's a photo of Giosuè on the screen with a date of three months ago stamped on the bottom. He's on a yacht with two topless women. His arm is around one while he sucks on the other's fake tit.

"Which of these classy ladies is the heiress?"

“Neither. Those are hookers he paid for on a bender weekend in the South of France.”

“Does the fiancée know?”

“Doubtful. She’s kept under lock and key by her father, who’s also the one who orchestrated the marriage.” Brooks leans over, swiping the screen. “These are her financial documents. From what I can tell, her old man is marrying her off with the agreement that he gets a cut of the money, too.”

I whistle. “I’m surprised there’s this kind of money floating around, and the Brotherhood hasn’t already tried to get their hands on it.”

“That’s why we’re here, my friend, to seal the deal. She’s a real sweet thing, too. It’s a shame she’s going to end up with that prick. I can tell you right now, she’s the ‘til death’ kind of girl. Her photo is next.”

I swipe the screen and still.

That face.

A heavy feeling settles in my chest.

I’d know her anywhere.

Brooks says, “That’s our heiress. Isabetta Bass.”

“Is there a file on her?”

“Of course.”

I swipe out of Giosuè’s file and find Isabetta’s. Opening it, I skim over her info. She lives in Brooklyn in the same family home she’s lived in her entire life. She no longer works at the hair salon where we met and now spends her time working in a corporate job that pays well. In her free time, she volunteers at local animal shelters and also likes to take photos of the animals for her social media.

Typical rich girl.

I find myself disappointed in her.

Her wedding is in two weeks, on her twenty-eighth birthday. It’s also the day her inheritance becomes hers. An

odd coincidence. Too odd.

“Does she know about the inheritance?”

“No.”

“How did that happen?”

“A beloved grandmother set it up before she died. From what I can tell, she hoped Isabetta would be long gone from her father’s home before she came into that money. Makes me think her old man knew about the money and kept her close just to get his hands on it.”

“Any info on him?”

“Yeah. At the end of the file.”

I swipe to the last pages of the file.

My rage boils with each word that I read.

Dale Bass, Isabetta’s father, is a piece of shit who owes more people than he’ll ever be able to pay off in the next three lifetimes. Selling his daughter to Caruso is only buying him a bit of time, but eventually, his debts will catch up to him. I don’t give two shits about that. What has me raging is the other part where it talks about how many times Isabetta’s mother was in the hospital with suspicious injuries before she died in childbirth. The same kind of injuries Isabetta herself has been seen for.

The disappointment I felt moments ago turns into loathing... for myself. I shouldn’t have been so quick to judge her.

Brooks says, “Caruso has just as many shady dealings, though he’s a bit better at keeping it hidden. We’ll have to do a lot of clean-ups if he actually gets in.”

“Why in the fuck does the Brotherhood want this fucker to join? And don’t say it’s the money. We all know there are workarounds.”

Like marrying her off to a current member who’s single. Hell, I’m the only Elite Member who isn’t married... why not me?

I still at the thought, liking it more than I should.

“He either knows someone or has something on someone.”

I grunt.

“Why are you so interested in this? There are worse men who are already members of the Brotherhood. Is this because you’re on the council now?”

“I know her.” At his confused look, I clarify, “The heiress. I met her by chance ten years ago.”

He whistles under his breath. “She must have made quite an impression if you’re still getting worked up over her.”

“She did.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

His gaze searches mine. “I’ve got your back, Ace.”

Brooks and I enter the restaurant where we’re meeting Caruso. He’s picked a well-known steakhouse, trying to flaunt his wealth. No, not his wealth. Isabetta’s wealth. My fist clenches at my side as we approach the table where he sits.

He quickly stands when he realizes we’re there. There’s nothing remarkable or outstanding about him. He’s nearly a foot shorter than me, with dark hair that’s cut short and yet still somehow greasy. He wears designer clothes, but I can tell right away that they’re older, because he can’t afford to buy new wardrobes each year. His face is puffy because of all the booze he drinks. I know this because I’ve learned everything I could about him on the plane ride. And I don’t like a single thing about this fucker.

“Brooks Henderson! A pleasure to meet you in person.” Caruso’s gaze darts to me. “I didn’t know you were bringing a friend.”

“This is Mr. Moretti, an Elite Member. He was in town, and I thought it would be nice for the two of you to meet.”

If Caruso knows who I am, it doesn't show on his face.

He holds out a hand. "Nice to meet you, Moretti."

"Mr. Moretti," I correct.

His cheeks flush. "Right."

A server appears at that moment, bringing another chair so the three of us can be seated.

Caruso gestures to his wine glass that's nearly empty. "Would the two of you like something to drink?"

"Macallan neat," I tell the server. "81, if you have it, and we'll take the entire bottle."

The server's eyes widen. "I'll see what I can do, sir."

Brooks snorts and says, "I'll have what he's having."

Caruso clears his throat. "Never had that one before. Is it any good?"

"The best."

He calls after the server, "I'll have one, too."

Brooks says, "So, Caruso. I read in your file that you've wanted to be a member for a while now. Can you tell us why you want to join?"

I've only sat in on a handful of interviews like this, and the answers are usually the same. They want to join because they know someone who is allegedly in the Brotherhood and want to follow suit. Or their family member is a member. Basically, anything to achieve eternal glory or some shit like that. What I'm not expecting is what comes out of Caruso's mouth.

"Seems like a great way to get easy pussy." He laughs loudly at his own joke. "I'm mostly kidding."

"What's the real answer, then?" Brooks asks.

"I like the idea of having so much power that people fear me."

I lean forward, holding his gaze. "Do you fear me?"

"No."

What a fucking fool.

I smile. “Then what makes you think you’ll strike fear into others?”

Caruso doesn’t have an answer to that. His mouth opens and closes a few times, reminding me of a fish.

A fish I’d like to stomp.

Our drinks and bottle of Macallan are delivered, and Brooks takes a sip of his before saying, “What Mr. Moretti is trying to say is that the Brotherhood is more than striking fear into people. We are the ones that make the world go round. Without us, civilization as we know would cease to exist.”

I snort softly into my drink. God, the Brotherhood knew what they were doing when they put Brooks in this role. He’s good at selling this shit. Better than me, that’s for sure.

But Caruso is eating it up, nodding. “Right. That’s why I want to join. To be a part of something like that.”

Brooks says, “Glad to hear it. Now, we’ve reviewed your financial documents. Everything appears to be in order, but we’ll need to make sure that the marriage between you and Ms. Bass happens before we can offer an invitation to join.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. It’s a done deal.”

“How did the two of you meet?” I ask.

I know, but I want to hear his version.

“We’ve lived in the same area for years. We were classmates, though she was a few years behind. Never hung out much until her father approached me a few months ago.”

“Why is that?” At his look, I clarify, “Why didn’t you spend time with her until a few months ago?”

He makes a face. “She’s a fat thing. Not my normal type. But she has so much fucking money that I guess I can look past all that. Besides, once we’re married, I’ll make her lose weight or threaten to leave her.”

My grip is so tight on my tumbler that I’m surprised it doesn’t break.

Caruso doesn't seem to notice and finishes his drink, waving the server over to pour him another. Fucking dick won't even pour his own drink?

He asks, "How often does the Brotherhood meet?"

Brooks answers, "It depends. Usually quarterly, though, the Elite Members meet more often. We also hold a holiday party where our families are encouraged to attend and a charity event that the wives host."

Caruso laughs loudly. "Pass. I can barely stand spending time with her once a week. There's no way I'm lugging her to a party."

I wonder how many people I would have to pay off if I killed this fucker right here, right now?

Brooks meets my gaze, lifting his glass to his lips. I don't miss the smirk.

I say, "You know, joining the Brotherhood is something that shouldn't be taken lightly. Once in, the only way out is death."

"I'm ready to take that dive, Mr. Moretti. Besides, it's not like I'll really have to die, right?" He laughs, as if he already knows the answer.

Brooks shoots me a look, as if to say, 'what the fuck'.

"Has Brooks explained what the Brotherhood requires of its members?"

Caruso has a confused look on his stupid face. "Requires? Is it more than the initial payment to join?"

Brooks takes over. "Yes. Most members are chosen in their collegiate years. The selection process is thorough, ensuring the Brotherhood can survive. For that to happen, members must offer a variety of...skills."

"I'm not sure I follow."

Brooks says, "If you become a member, you will pay the Brotherhood ten million dollars upfront."

"Right. I understand that."

“We will also ask other things of you.”

“You lost me again.”

I lean forward, tipping my glass toward Caruso. “What do you think I do for the Brotherhood?”

He eyes me. “Well, you’re an Elite Member, so I’d guess you make decisions for the entire society.”

“I became an Elite Member days ago when one of the Elite Members was murdered.” His eyes widen, but I’m not done. “What do you think I’ve done for the Brotherhood for the past twenty-five years?”

“Uh, I’m not sure.”

I lean in even more. “I’m the head of the *Cosa Nostra*. That means I’m *Mafioso*, friend. Understand?”

He pales. “I...yes. I understand.”

“Good. Now, tell Brooks what you can bring to the table for the Brotherhood.”

“My, uh, my Uncle Vinny used to run the neighborhood I live in. I do it now, so I can do it for the Brotherhood.”

I scoff before I can stop myself. “You’re sitting in front of the head of the fucking Moretti Mafia and the Face of The Defiant God Brotherhood and think we’d be impressed that you manage a single neighborhood?”

Brooks swoops in. “What Mr. Moretti means is that you must do whatever is asked of you for the Brotherhood. If you don’t have a skill, we will find something for you. You’re making a generous donation to join. If you can guarantee that you’ll be able to make the same donation yearly, then that might be enough. If you can’t...”

Caruso pales even more. We’ve all seen his financial documents. He’ll never be able to make that kind of donation every year because Isabetta’s money won’t last that long and he’s not smart enough to make that kind of money in his lifetime.

“I’m willing to do anything they ask of me.”

Brooks says, “Good. If you go back on that vow, the Brotherhood will remove you.”

And, as we’ve established, the only way out is death. Even if he thinks we’re joking, which we’re not.

The rest of the meal is spent making small talk. Caruso orders three more drinks before the meal is finished. When the bill comes, Brooks and I stand.

“Thanks for dinner, Caruso,” I say. “We’ll see you at your wedding.”

“You will?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

I mean that.

Before we walk away, I get the satisfaction of seeing Caruso see the total of the bill. His cheeks turn bright red as he looks up at the server in horror.

Brooks laughs under his breath as we leave. “Bet he’ll never forget this moment.”

“Bet he’ll never look at a glass of Macallan the same again.”

Because this meal just cost him nearly 400-K.

Brooks and I make our way outside to the waiting SUV. I’m dialing Blanc before we leave the curb, putting the call on speaker phone so Brooks can hear.

“This better be important,” Blanc answers. “I’m jet-lagged and about to go to bed.”

“I just came from an interview with Brooks Henderson.”

Blanc hums. “And?”

“And what in the fuck are we doing letting pieces of shit like Giosuè Caruso into the Brotherhood?”

“Pieces of shit like that, as you so eloquently put it, are how the Brotherhood can payroll several things.” He pauses, inhaling deeply before continuing, “In fact, I’d wager you yourself have benefited from pieces of shit like that.”

“Thought you gave up smoking,” I answer, calling him out on his long inhale moments ago.

“Watching a man you’ve worked with for over fifty years turn up murdered with his finger shoved up his ass makes one realize what’s important. If I’m going to die, then I’ll die with a cigar to my lips.”

“How poetic. Does that mean you’ve received a letter that I need to know about?”

Blanc sighs. “Listen. I understand that this one might not be the best fit for the Brotherhood, but Zhāng asked for Caruso to be invited to be a member.”

“What does Caruso have on Zhāng?”

Because that’s the only thing that makes sense.

Blanc says, “I don’t know and don’t want to know. He asked, so we’re going to make it happen.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he agrees. “Now, I’m going to get off here and enjoy this glass of brandy with my cigar before I call it a night.”

He ends the call before I can reply.

Brooks says, “I hate to say I told you so.”

I tap my fingers on my thigh, thinking. “Does Grant still have connections to his old job?”

“Considering the Fraternal Order of Police is backing him and his campaign, I’d say it’s a safe bet. Why?”

“Because I need to do some digging without the Brotherhood catching wind.”

“Got it. What about the wedding?”

“What about it?”

“Are we really going?”

My lips lift in a slow smile. “Oh, we’re going.”

And then Giosuè Caruso is going to find out why they call me the Violent God.

*Isabetta*

Gia walks a circle around me, her high heels clicking on the wooden floors of the bridal salon. My teeth grit, the sound grating on my nerves. I swear to god, I'm about ready to take her shoe and hit her over the head with it. It would serve two purposes. One, I wouldn't have to hear her heels on the floor. And two, I wouldn't have to listen to her speak. Ever. Again.

Gia stops, looking me over. She hasn't changed much over the years. The only thing that's different is that her tan is darker and the scowl on her face is more pronounced. She's still mean as ever, and today she's in rare form.

"No. This isn't right. My brother's wife cannot walk down the aisle looking so...*fat*."

And there it is. The dig at me and my weight.

I say, "Gia if this is boring you, feel free to leave. I'm fine on my own. As for my weight, I'm not fat and I don't appreciate you speaking about me like that. I'm curvy and proud of it. If that bothers you, then I *insist* that you leave."

Oh, she doesn't like that. Not one bit.

She answers, "Now, we both know my dear brother asked me to be here. He knows you don't have style and there's no way we're going to let someone like you ruin our family's good name."

Her family's good name? My god, she acts like she's part of the royal family.

“I’m sure these ladies are more than capable of helping me find the right dress.”

“I’ll stay.” She turns to the associates. “Now, let’s find a dress that will make my brother proud.”

The women from the shop murmur their apologies and rush to the long rack, pointing at various gowns. Gia gives me a small smirk before crossing the room to the bar, where she tops off her flute of champagne. She’s on her phone a moment later, typing away with that same smirk still on her lips. I can only assume she’s texting her brother, telling him her version of this little encounter. And he’ll believe her. He always does.

I bite back a sigh and step off the small stage where the bride can show off her dress to her loved ones.

Loved ones. What a joke.

Giosuè insisted that his other half—his twin sister and my personal nightmare—have a say in the wedding. A wedding I don’t want. A wedding that I can’t stop no matter how hard I try.

Tears threaten to fall as I enter the dressing room reserved for the bride, closing the curtain behind me. I’ll only have a moment of peace before someone barges in to help me out of the gown.

There’s a dull ache behind my eyes that hasn’t gone away since my father came home a month ago, telling me what he’d done. That he was in financial trouble, and I was the only one who could save him. When I asked what he had done, he wouldn’t answer, but said there was a solution. That I marry Giosuè and then all would be saved. I thought he was kidding. He wasn’t. Even now, I keep hoping this is some kind of sick joke.

I meet my gaze in the mirror, hating what I see. My dark blonde hair is pulled back in a high ponytail because I knew I’d get hot today. Loose tendrils stick up here and there, proving, yet again, that I’ll never be as perfect as Gia. Something Giosuè feels the need to remind me of. Often. Almost as often as he brings up my weight. My gaze moves

down, taking in my reflection. The dress I have on at the moment reminds me of something a princess would wear. Strapless bodice with a sweetheart neckline and a fitted skirt that would rustle around my ankles if I danced.

As a kid, this is the kind of dress I imagined wearing for my big day. As an adult, I know I'm too curvy for something like this. That it's not right for my body type and that's fine. I just wish I was doing this on my own or even with friends who could help me find the perfect gown. Not that I think I'll find the perfect gown. This marriage is a joke, so why on earth would I *want* to find my dream dress? It's the lack of friends that hurts the most. When did I stop having friends? It wasn't sudden, not that I can remember at least. No, it's something that crept up on me.

Hot tears fill my eyes again and I wipe them away before they fall.

“Knock, knock. Are you ready to try on the next one?”

I force a smile, turning. “Yes.”

The attendant enters carrying a dress that's hideous. I mean *hideous*.

“Your sister-in-law wanted you to try on this one. She said you need to get out of your shell and live a little.” She says the last bit with a wink, like we're co-conspirators.

The dress is everything that I don't want. It's low cut, form-fitting, and isn't even true white. No, it's more of a light yellow that can't even be called pretty. The bodice and skirt are covered in rhinestones and sequins, making it look gaudy and cheap. I don't even know if Gia could wear this dress and make it look good.

“I don't want to try this one on. Please bring me the white gown that I picked out.”

The woman's gaze darts to the curtain and her voice lowers. “Please try it on. She's threatening to tell my boss that I'm not doing my job.”

“That's ridiculous. I'll tell them that you are.”

“I don’t mean this the way it’s going to sound, but it won’t matter. Mr. Caruso is the one paying for the gown...”

So it’s his opinion that matters. Or, in this case, Gia’s opinion.

I bite back a sigh and say, “Well, it’s not like I have to get it just because I try it on, right?”

****Two weeks later****

My steps are slow and calculated as I make my way down the aisle, mostly because this dress is so tight that I can barely walk. The shapewear I’m wearing under the dress cuts into my skin, stopping me from catching my breath. Each inhale reminds me that my chest is tight. Each exhale is nothing but pain because of all the rhinestones. Fitting, really. Because this relationship has been nothing but painful.

My father tugs on my arm, making me walk faster, which, again, is difficult. He’s smiling like he’s the proudest father ever. What a freaking joke. He’s only happy because as soon as I say, ‘I do’, Giosuè is going to write him a check for the money he owes. I glance at my dad out of the corner of my eye. He’s so good at fooling everyone around him, but I’ve seen the real monster that lies within. He glances at me, as if sensing my gaze, so I look away.

Our last conversation is too fresh in my mind, and I can’t keep the mask on when his words are dancing around my mind.

Words that were meant to barb, which they did.

“Second thoughts?” my father scoffed. “Isabetta, you’re lucky he wants to marry you.”

“What you mean is you’re lucky. You’re the one getting something out of this.”

His gaze narrowed. “Careful, girl. I’d hate for you to run into a door so close to the wedding.”

What he really meant is that he would hit me if I didn’t stop talking. My stomach dropped and I took a step away from him.

Just in case.

He smiled.

“You’re going to marry Caruso. That’s all there is to it.”

“But—”

He moved in, crowding me until my back was pressed against the living room wall.

“Who else is going to want someone like you. Hmm? I’m all ears. From what I can see, not one man has shown interest in you. Not that I blame them.” His gaze roamed down my body. “You’re fat. You don’t take care of yourself. No man wants you at his side and if they do it’s because they’re getting something out of marrying you.”

His words reminded me of something he’d never answered.

“And what is Giosuè getting out of marrying me, father?”

“None of your god damn business. Now, drop it. If you don’t, then you can’t say I didn’t warn you...”

Blinking, I swallow down the bile that’s threatening to creep up my throat. The church is packed, but I don’t see a single person I know. Who are all of these people? I know it’s not all Giosuè’s family. So are they work associates? Paid actors? Some of them look rough, like they do shady things on the side.

Giosuè stands at the front, smiling, though I know it’s fake. Everything about him is fake. His wealth. His kindness. His persona. All lies.

My breath hitches.

I can’t do this.

I can’t marry him.

My father’s fingers dig into my arm, close to breaking the skin. I wonder what he’d do if I just pulled away and ran? Nervous laughter bubbles its way up my throat and comes out sounding like a small squeak. If anyone hears me, they’ll think I’m overcome with joy. They’d never suspect the opposite. That I’m on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

We reach the altar and Giosuè holds out his hand for me to take. I look at it before looking up at him. A look flickers in his gaze in warning. He's telling me I better not make a scene.

Looking to the left, my gaze lands on Gia. She insisted on being my Maid of Honor, even though she's the last person in the world I'd pick, but it was easier to agree than to put up a fight. I mean, it's not like I have anyone who could stand at my side. Where my dress is hideous, hers is beautiful. It's like the dress I tried on a few weeks ago when she said I looked fat. Only the one she's wearing is gold instead of white. Behind her are three of Giosuè's cousins, none of whom I know. They, too, wear gold.

I hate gold.

So much.

This isn't how I imagined my wedding. Not even close. For one thing, I always dreamed Nonna would be here, but she's been gone nearly nine years now. The colors aren't what I would have picked. The dresses. The guests. My father walking me down the aisle. None of it is what I want.

But what choice do I have?

My eyes are watering as I take Giosuè's outstretched hand, letting him pull me to his side.

The priest clears his throat. "In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit."

"Amen," the assembly behind us answers.

My breath hitches, but somehow, I manage to answer with everyone at the appropriate times. The heaviness in my chest gets worse with each moment that passes. At one point, my head spins and I feel faint. Thankfully, the sensation passes, but no matter what I do, I can't shake the heavy feeling that makes me want to be sick. It can't even be blamed on not eating this morning, which Gia insisted on because, and I quote, 'you're already not going to fit into your dress as it is'. No, this is a deep knowledge that I'm making a huge mistake.

Nonna always told me to only marry a man I could see myself loving. I don't love Giosuè and, if I'm being honest, I

don't think I ever will.

Why am I standing up here, marrying him?

I know why. Because my father said his life was in my hands and that this was the only way to save him.

A lump forms in my throat that burns when I swallow. Why didn't I tell my father no? Tell him that he needs to fix his own mistakes? Why should I look out for him when he's never looked out for me?

I look up at Giosuè and shake my head.

"I can't do this."

I say it low enough that only he can hear. He glances at me out of the corner of his eye, speaking in the same low tone.

"Quiet, Isabetta."

"Giosuè, I mean it. I can't do this. I won't."

Giosuè scoffs. "You will."

"No."

The priest notices that we're speaking and pauses, asking delicately, "Is everything okay?"

We answer at the same time.

"No."

"Yes." Giosuè's eyes narrow. "My bride is just having a few nerves. Please, continue."

But I'm shaking my head.

Giosuè grabs my arm, pulling me close.

"Isabetta, think carefully before you do this. I'm not a forgiving man."

His gaze is hard, making me shiver. If I do this, there's no going back. Everything in my life will change, and not necessarily for the better. I glance over my shoulder, my gaze landing on my father. He's glaring, but the shocking thing is that I don't care. If I do this, I'll be free.

Hope blooms through me as I face Giosuè.

“Giosuè—”

“Sorry to interrupt the ceremony, but there’s a change in plans.”

People behind me gasp, and I turn to see who had the balls to disrupt a wedding, even though I was about to do the same. My lips part, and I have to blink twice just to make sure I’m not seeing things.

There’s no way...

His dark gaze meets mine briefly before landing on Giosuè.

“Caruso, this is your only shot. Step aside and do this the easy way.” He takes a step and I see the holster under his suit jacket. “Choose the hard way and no one is walking out of this church alive.”

Anger radiates off Giosuè, but I’m shocked as he drops my hand, moving to stand next to his friends.

Before I can process what’s happening, the man strolls down the aisle like he has every right to be there. As he does, more men enter the church, guns in their hands, making it clear that no one is to move. There are murmurs through the church, but no one makes a move to stop the man. I guess I can’t blame them, really. Not when there are so many weapons on display.

He finally reaches me, and I have to look up to look him in the eyes.

“Hello, *Dolcezza*.”

“It’s you.” I shake my head. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting married.”

A loud ringing fills my ears and I sway on my feet. Surely, he’s joking.

But he turns to the priest and says, “You know who I am?”

The priest nods.

“Good. Let’s get this show on the road, Father. My bride and I have a flight to catch.”

The priest clears his throat and does as he’s told. The ringing in my ears gets even louder, making it hard to think.

What’s going on and why isn’t anyone stopping this man?

Why don’t I stop it?

My throat is so tight that I can’t speak, though I desperately want to.

“Do you, Isabetta Maria Bass, take Alessandro Moretti to be your husband?”

The ringing in my ears stops as I look up at him. Alessandro Moretti. I only ever knew his last name.

Alessandro’s lips twitch as he meets my gaze. “This is where you say, ‘I do’, *Dolcezza*.”

My gaze drops to his jacket. I can’t see the gun, but I know it’s there. Will he kill me if I resist?

“I do.”

“Good girl.”

Heat blooms throughout my body with those two little words.

God.

What in the hell is wrong with me?

The priest says, “And do you Alessandro take Isabetta Maria Bass to be your wife?”

“I do.”

He says it with so much surety.

Like this isn’t crazy.

Like he *wants* to marry me.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Blood pounds in my brain, leaps to my heart, and makes my knees tremble. He wouldn’t! Alessandro gives me a

wicked smile as he leans in. Minty breath fans my face right before his lips caress mine. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. This is sweet and kind and maybe a bit dreamy. My lips part on a soft exhale, and that's when he deepens the kiss. His hand cups the back of my head, holding me close as his tongue explores the recesses of my mouth.

Fire and desire course through me, confusing me. How can I feel this way about someone I don't know? My head spins. I press my palm against his chest to center myself and feel his rapid heartbeat beneath my touch. My own heart thuds against my ribcage in response. Just when I think I can't take any more, he pulls back, looking down at me.

The glint is still in his eyes, though it feels more dangerous somehow, like he might devour me at any moment. The thing is, I kind of think I want to be devoured by him. His lips are swollen and there's a smudge of my pink lipstick on his mouth. Without thinking, I reach up, rubbing off the lipstick. He captures my hand, turning it to kiss my palm. We stare at each other before it dawns on me that we're in a church in front of people who are staring at us. Not only that, but he just crashed my wedding and married me.

All the warmth I felt seconds ago vanishes and fear settles deep in my chest. The priest says something else, but all I hear is the blood whooshing in my ears. Alessandro takes my hand, pulling me alongside him down the aisle. Faces once again blur as we exit the nave and enter a room. How did he know this was the room I was in before the wedding started?

“Get your things.”

I should fight. Tell him no and to get lost. But I don't. My bag sits in the corner, so I shuffle to it, making sure it's closed before turning to Alessandro.

“That's it?”

I nod.

“Weren't you going on a honeymoon?”

“Yes?” I'm not sure why my answer comes out like a question.

His lips twitch. “Most women would have more than a single bag for a honeymoon.”

“Been married a lot?” I lift an eyebrow. “Besides, I believe we established a long time ago that I’m not most women.”

He snorts. “You’re my first bride, *Dolcezza*.”

I hate that his answer makes me happy, which just shows how messed up I am. I should be fighting him, kicking and screaming...doing anything to get away... Not having a semi-friendly conversation about whether he’s been married before. And I certainly shouldn’t be glad that he hasn’t!

“What’s going to happen now?”

“Now?” He gives me a lazy smile. “Now we’re going on our honeymoon. Come.” I reach for my bag, but he says, “Leave it. My men will get it.”

The same men who stormed the church? The same men he threatened would kill anyone who moved...

Icy fear makes it hard to think. What am I doing? I have to get away from Alessandro. Giosuè is somewhere in this church, I hope, and he’ll help me sort this out.

No, he won’t. The little voice in the back of my mind taunts. *You were going to leave him at the altar, and he knew it. Why would he help you?*

“Forget it.”

I meet Alessandro’s gaze. “What?”

“Forget whatever it is you’re thinking right now. If you run, I will find you. No one is going to save you. They’re dead if they try.”

My breath hitches. “Why are you doing this?”

“It doesn’t matter why.”

“It does.”

His gaze hardens. “Come.”

I’m torn.

I want to fight him, but I've had a lifetime of doing what I'm told. So, I do what I've always done, and I follow him, even though I hate myself.

Today was not the ideal day to grow a backbone.

He watches me, eyes narrowing. "Stop."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a folded blade. He flips it open with one hand and reaches for me. Is he...is he going to kill me?

"Spread your legs."

An actual whimper leaves my lips, making him scowl.

"*Dolcezza*, I need you to spread your legs, so I don't cut you. Understand?"

I still don't know if I can trust him, but something in his gaze has me widening my stance as much as I can in the dress. He lowers to his knees, holding the dress by the hem.

"Hold still."

I do as he says as he cuts upward. The blade slides across the fabric easily, though rhinestones pop off, scattering across the floor. There's immediate relief as the knife moves higher. I expect him to stop at my knees, but he doesn't stop until he's mid-thigh.

"I can't walk out like this," I hiss, embarrassed at the amount of my curvy thighs on display.

"Don't worry. No one will see you."

"Because they're all dead?"

His lips lift, showing off his white teeth. "Would you like that, wife?"

I swear his voice lowers as he says the last word, and my nipples harden in response.

Why do I enjoy hearing him call me that? I don't know him. Heck, he's basically kidnapping me at my wedding!

I say, "You didn't answer my question."

“Guess you’ll find out soon enough.” He stands, shrugging out of his black suit jacket before tossing it at me. “Put this on.”

I slip it on, smelling his cologne with each inhale. Something about it seems familiar, but I can’t place the scent.

“I guess I’m ready.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

He leads the way, not waiting to see if I follow. I wait a beat before trailing after him. It’s much easier to walk now, but I also feel super bare even with the jacket. It’s only a tad bit longer than the dress that he just cut. If I were to bend over, I would be exposed. I shoot a glance his way. Is that why he cut my dress so short?

When we’re almost at the front door, something inside of me makes me act without thinking. I shove past Alessandro, rushing outside. The fall air greets me, making me shiver. Three men stand next to a black SUV and look surprised as hell as I run past them. Alessandro yells something in Italian and I hear footsteps chasing after me.

My white flats slap against the pavement. Thank god I stood up to Gia and told her there was no way I was wearing heels today. Ahead, I spot a cab with the driver leaning against his car. Hope pushes me to run as fast as I can.

“Hey,” I yell. “Hey! Get me out of here.”

His eyes widen. Maybe it’s because four men chase me. Maybe it’s because I’m clearly dressed for a wedding and running out of a church. Either way, he nods, opening the back door before rounding the car.

Oh my god. This might actually work.

I dive into the back seat as something grabs my ankle. No! I kick, trying to get free, but it’s too late. A sob works its way past my lips as I’m pulled from the cab. Alessandro pulls me to my feet, wrapping his arm around my waist, holding me in place.

“My bride is having some cold feet.” He hands the driver a wad of cash. “For your troubles.”

“Thanks,” the driver says, eyeing the cash. He doesn’t meet my gaze again.

Alessandro’s hand digs into my hip and his breath fans against my ear. “Are you going to do this the easy way or the hard way?”

“Easy way,” I mutter.

“Excellent choice. Now, let’s try this again.”

He urges me to walk back to the SUV that is still waiting outside the church, though he doesn’t let go of me. No, he walks with his body pressed against mine as we go back to the SUV. I climb in first and he’s right behind me.

“Don’t even think about trying the door,” he warns, pulling out his phone.

It hadn’t even crossed my mind, but now it’s all I can think about. Glancing at him, I make sure he’s engrossed with his phone as I slowly move my right hand toward the handle. The SUV pulls away from the curb, giving me time to form my plan. I have no way of knowing where we’re going, but I can assume that once we get there, I won’t have another chance to escape.

Right now, I have the advantage of knowing where we are. Kind of. I mean, I’ve been to Manhattan often enough that I know how to get around. Which means the first step in my plan is getting to the subway. I mean, it’s perfect. It’s busy and crowded. Alessandro won’t be able to just grab me like he did in the cab. At least, I don’t think he will. Once I get on a train, I can think of part two of the plan.

The SUV finally comes to a stop at a red light, and I act. Lifting the door latch, I shove my shoulder into the door. Shit! It doesn’t open, and panic courses through me as I try again.

“Isabetta,” Alessandro says with a sigh. “I told you...”

But something wonderful happens as the SUV takes off from the light.

The door opens.

And then I tumble out, landing on my knees.

“Shit!”

*Isabetta*

Alessandro hasn't said a word since scooping me from the sidewalk. If my knees weren't hurting so badly, I might try to say something to break the silence. As it is, I'm doing everything not to cry right now. God, that was so stupid. Like, what did I think was going to happen? Did I really think I was going to roll out of the SUV like an action hero and get away? I didn't even make it three steps. Hell, I didn't make it one.

No, I literally landed on my knees and then rolled to the side in agonizing pain until he picked me up like I weighed nothing. Honestly, it was kind of impressive how he maneuvered me, but that's not the point, though that's all my hormones can seem to focus on.

"Come, Isabetta."

Hearing him say my name snaps me out of my thoughts. We're at an airfield and the SUV has stopped in front of a jet. I wince as I climb out, following Alessandro. He motions for me to climb the stairs first. I guess I can't blame him. I mean, I've tried to run twice now. And if my knees weren't killing me, I'd probably try it again.

Alessandro's hand presses into the small of my back, so I pick up my pace. Climbing the stairs is painful and I'm limping by the time I get into the jet. I pause. I've never been on a jet before. Heck, I've never even flown first class. So being here is just...wow. There are eight leather seats—four

on each side of the aisle that face each other. Behind them is a door, making me wonder if there is a bedroom or something.

“Sit.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I find Alessandro scowling at me. Okay, then. I lower into the seat near the window, hoping Alessandro will sit on the other side of the aisle. Of course he doesn't. He sits right next to me and calls out for the attendant standing next to door.

“I need a first aid kit.”

The woman nods, disappearing behind a curtain as two men step onto the jet. One dips his head before taking a seat across the aisle.

Clearing my throat, I ask in a low tone, “Friends of yours?”

“That's Hector and Edgar. They work for me.” He takes the first aid kit from the attendant and says, “Let me see.”

“It's not that—”

Air hisses through my lips as he cleans the scrapes on my knee. I try to pull away, but he stills me by holding my thigh.

“Stop.”

I grimace. “It hurts.”

“Well, that's what happens when you dive out of a moving vehicle.”

“I had to try something.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.” I jerk in pain as he wipes my other knee. “I think anyone in my position would have at least tried to get away.”

His lips part like he's going to say something. Instead, he blows against my knee, taking away the sting. A piece of his hair falls over his eyes and I have to literally grip the seat, so I don't do something stupid, like brush it aside.

“Your hair is longer,” I say. He meets my gaze and I stammer on, “I mean, longer than it was when we first met.”

He doesn't answer and sits upright. A small sliver of hurt spears through me, which is ridiculous. I should be glad he doesn't want to talk to me...

The flight attendant approaches and says, "Sir, we're about to take off."

"Thank you. Did our bags arrive?"

"Yes, sir. I put them in the bedroom before you came on board." Her gaze darts to me. "Can I get either of you something to drink?"

"Champagne," he says. "My bride and I are celebrating."

"Congratulations, sir! I'll be right back with your drinks."

When she's gone, I say, "I'd like to change before we leave."

He shakes his head. "We're about to take off. You'll have to wait."

Frustration courses through me. Who does he think he is, telling me what I can or can't do!

Screw it.

I stand and scoot past Alessandro. I don't wait to see what he's doing as I enter the bedroom, closing the door behind me. Outside, the engines of the jet start. Guess Alessandro wasn't exaggerating when he said we were leaving soon. Whatever. If I hurry, I'll be back in my seat before the jet takes off.

My black bag sits on the foot of the bed next to his designer bag. Unzipping it, I pull out a pair of leggings and a t-shirt. Giosuè never told me where we were going for our honeymoon, only saying that he'd be working most of the trip, so I packed things that were comfortable. Shrugging out of Alessandro's jacket, I set it on the bed and reach behind my back to unzip the dress. Or what's left of the dress.

"Dang it," I mutter, trying to grasp the zipper.

I finally get a hold of it when the door swings open. Alessandro strolls in, looking madder than hell.

"Way to knock! I was trying to change!"

He kicks the door closed behind him and closes the distance between us in three steps.

“I told you we were about to take off.”

“And I told you I wanted to change.”

We stare at each other, neither of us backing down. Maybe growing a backbone today wasn't such a bad idea. That thought goes out the window when Alessandro smiles down at me.

“Go on, then.”

“What?”

He sits on the edge of the bed, spreading his legs in a way that only a man can sit.

“Change.”

A laugh escapes my lips. “I'm not going to change with you in here!”

“Why not? We're married after all.”

“We've been married for less than two hours.” I cross my arms. “And not that I need to point this out, but this isn't a real marriage.”

“Isn't it?” He smirks up at me.

“No, it's not. In fact, I'm not really sure why you interrupted my wedding.”

I stare at him, waiting, but he doesn't speak. No, he just looks at me with that smile that is far too sexy.

“Whatever,” I mutter, grabbing my clothes.

I'm almost to the door that I hope and assume leads to the bathroom when I feel his presence behind me. Every fiber in my body screams at me to run, but I don't. I turn slowly to face him.

“Really?”

“There are some things I think you and I need to clear up right now. One, this is very much a real marriage.” He prowls

closer. “Two, I stopped that sham of a wedding because you deserve better than that piece of shit.”

I retreat until my back presses against the bathroom door.

“Three, you can’t tell me you don’t feel the chemistry between the two of us.”

“I don’t even know you. How on earth would I feel anything for you?”

“No?” He smiles. “That’s not how I remember our first meeting. I remember chemistry. A lot, in fact.”

I laugh. “You’re delusional. That was ten years ago. And we only spoke for a few moments.”

“So you’re saying there was nothing between us, then?”

“That’s what I’m saying.” The lie rolls off my tongue.

“And now?”

“Nothing. Not even a flicker of desire.”

He’s so close that I can smell his minty breath again. Heat pulses between us, and I feel it between my legs.

“Want to know what I think? I think you’re a liar. I think that if I reached between your legs right now, I’d find you drenched.” His head lowers. “As for the desire you claim you didn’t feel back then, let me remind you. It’s a funny story, *Dolcezza*. I met a woman ten years ago at a hole-in-the-wall hair salon who gave me the best damn shave of my life.” He leans in more. “She also turned me on.”

“Until you found out I was seventeen.”

He snorts. “Yeah. I was hard until I learned that bit of information.”

My cheeks flush at his admission, but it changes nothing. It can’t.

“That doesn’t explain why you married me. Why you brought me here. Why any of this is happening.”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

I nod. “Yeah, because in my experience, people don’t do things out of the kindness of their heart.”

“No, they don’t,” he agrees, as his lips brush against mine.

“What are you doing?”

His lips are still pressed to my mouth, but it’s the rest of his body that has my attention. He’s all muscle, hard and unyielding. It’s the hardness pressing into my stomach that has me gasping. He seizes the moment, deepening the kiss. I press against his chest, but it’s more to steady myself than to get away.

He breaks the kiss, looking down at me. “What am I doing? Why, I’m kissing my wife.”

My entire body feels like it’s on fire.

Shaking my head, I say, “We don’t know each other, Alessandro. This is madness.”

“It is,” he agrees. “But that doesn’t stop me from wanting you.”

I try to shake my head again only for him to grab my hair, fisting it. He pulls enough that I feel the sting. And, damn it, I like it.

“Don’t say that I don’t want you, *Dolcezza*.” He presses his erection into me, making us both groan. “The proof is right here.”

Tilting my head, I meet his gaze, noticing for the first time that his brown eyes have flecks of gold in them.

“Just because we’re attracted to each other doesn’t make this right. I was engaged to someone else hours ago. Heck, I was getting married, and you interrupted the wedding and—”

A dark look crosses his face that has me clamping my mouth shut mid-sentence.

“Let’s make a deal, *Dolcezza*.”

“What kind of deal?”

“I’m going to reach between your legs. If you’re not wet, then I will end this madness, as you call it, and let you be. We can get to know each other the old-fashioned way, taking our time.” He gives me a wicked smile. “But when I find what I think I’ll find, we’re going to forget all this nonsense of not knowing each other. Deal?”

It sounds too easy—too good to be true—but I give him a small nod.

“Spread your legs, *Dolcezza*.”

I widen my stance a fraction, and he smiles. Never breaking eye contact, he runs his hand past my ruined dress, up my thigh. His fingers are calloused, like he uses his hands. Nothing like Giosuè. All thoughts of my former fiancé go away when Alessandro reaches my panties. Because the dress that Gia picked out was so tight, I had to forgo the cotton panties that I would usually wear. Instead, I was forced to wear a thong. And since it was my wedding, and I was trying to make the most out of my situation, I splurged and bought a lacy thong. The same thong that Alessandro is now rubbing his big fingers over, causing the most delicious friction.

“Well, this is a surprise,” he murmurs. I gasp when he pushes the material against my core. “And this is not.”

He’s referring to the fact that I’m wet. Hell, drenched is more like it, just like he said I’d be.

I have to clear my throat before I can speak. “So I guess that means we know each other.”

“That it does.”

I bite my lip as he continues to rub me through the lace. Pleasure and heat build, and I know I’m going to hell because I want him to send me over the edge.

“Please,” I whimper, rocking against his hand.

“Such a greedy girl,” he says, his eyes dancing. “I haven’t even touched your pussy and yet you beg.”

My cheeks heat. He’s right. God, I’m so pathetic.

I gasp as he lifts me with the hand between my legs, carrying me to the bed. Right before he drops me onto the mattress, he rips off my thong. Holy crap. That may be the hottest thing that's ever happened to me!

He stands, looking me over. There's a moment where I'm afraid he's going to leave, but then he reaches to his pants, unbuckling his belt. My breaths come out in puffs of anticipation as he frees his cock. Oh my good god. And what a cock it is, too! My mouth waters as he fists himself, pumping his thick shaft before prowling toward me. The bed dips as he moves over me.

Suddenly, this is too much, too soon.

I shake my head. "We can't."

"Because we don't know each other?" He asks as he holds himself over me with one arm.

"Yes."

"That's where you're wrong, *Dolcezza*. I know everything about you."

He lowers his head, brushing his lips against mine. The sweet kiss has me relaxing, falling prey to his trap. By the time I realize what's about to happen, it's too late. He enters me in a single thrust that has me crying out. I grip onto his shoulders as my body becomes accustomed to his size, not caring that my nails are digging into his skin through his shirt.

"Fuck," he breathes out. "Your sweet pussy is so tight, *Dolcezza*. It's gripping me like a fist."

My breath hitches as he pulls back before slamming into me. I guess he didn't know everything about me. My eyes shut as he rocks into me again. It's probably too late to tell him that this is my first time. That I was a virgin mere moments ago. Biting my lip, I pray this is almost over.

Alessandro murmurs something in Italian and I gasp as he reaches between us, rubbing my clit in circles that have me moaning. While I was a virgin, I knew how to get off. And it was just like this.

“That’s right, *Dolcezza*. Come for me.”

His words send me over, and I cry out as I come. It’s different from when I come on my own, but not terrible. His thrusts become frantic until he stills. My cheeks flame. Oh my god. Did he just...but he’s not wearing a condom! The wetness that leaks out when he pulls out confirms that he indeed came inside of me.

“I’m not on the pill,” I blurt.

“I know,” he answers, as he stands, tucking his cock in his pants.

For some reason, I feel...used.

Closing my legs, I sit, hating that I feel our combined juices leaking out of me.

“Is there a shower in the bathroom?”

“We’ve already delayed takeoff so we could consummate our marriage.” He gestures to my bag. “Change and take your seat so we can leave.”

“You mean they know what we were doing in here?”

He laughs, low and deep. “If they didn’t know before, they knew after you cried out as you came.”

My eyes water. “I hate you.”

“Now, now. It’s not nice to lie to your husband.”

“You never answered my question. Why did you stop my wedding? And why did you marry me?”

“As I said before, it doesn’t matter. Besides, once your father and former fiancé learn that we consummated our marriage within an hour of marrying, it won’t matter why I did what I did.”

I feel faint. “You wouldn’t tell them!”

“Wouldn’t I? Now, get dressed.”

With that, he leaves, closing the door behind him. I fall back on the bed, my eyes watering.

How could I be so stupid?

There's a part of me that wants to follow him and give him a piece of my mind, but I don't. I still don't know how to *feel* about him. I can admit that I'm attracted to him and clearly the sex was... mostly good, but there's something deep inside that warns me that he's dangerous. That I'll get hurt if I let my guard down, even though he claims I can trust him.

So, I stand, reaching for the clothes I picked out before and go to the bathroom. Spotting a washcloth, I exhale. At least I can wipe myself down before I change. It'll be the first step in forgetting this ever happened.

Because it's *never* going to happen again!

7



Alessandro

Fuck.

*Isabetta*

Alessandro ignores me for the rest of the trip, which is fine. Well, mostly. Okay. It's not fine at all. Is this how it's going to be between us for the rest of our lives? Wait. What am I even thinking? There's no way I'm going to stay married to him. No. Giosuè or my father will find a way to get me and fix this.

But do I want them to? That's the real question. Going home means I'll be stuck with Giosuè. If he won't have me, then I'll have to go back to my father's house. Neither option is desirable, if I'm being honest. Both men will make me pay for what happened at the wedding, even though it's not my fault.

Alessandro's words dance through my mind.

Surely, he wouldn't really tell my father or my fiancé that we...consummated the marriage. Would he? I glance at him to find him staring at me with a look so intense that I shift.

"What?"

"Just thinking about dessert," he answers, licking his lips.

"You're a jerk," I hiss, making sure Hector and Edgar aren't listening.

"Just being honest."

My eyebrow lifts, but I don't respond.

"What? Don't think someone like me is capable of being honest?"

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’ll never lie to you, *Dolcezza*. Remember that.”

“Guess time will tell.”

“Guess so. Now buckle up. We’re about to land and it’s always a bit bumpy going into Vegas.”

“Vegas?” I look out the window. “I’ve never been to Vegas before.”

“And why is that?”

“I don’t know.”

He hums. “I would guess it’s because your controlling father wouldn’t let you go, even though you’re twenty-eight.”

I look at him in surprise.

“I told you I know everything about you.”

Flashes of what we did in the bedroom dance through my mind. “Not everything.”

“Is that a challenge, *Dolcezza*?”

There’s a glint in his eyes that suggests he likes the idea of me issuing him a challenge.

Heat creeps up my neck. “It’s just a fact, Alessandro.”

“I like hearing you say my name.” He leans in so his breath fans my neck. “Almost as much as I enjoy feeling your pussy clamp around my cock as you come.”

The heat spreads all over and I’m sure my face is red.

“It won’t happen again. I mean, this isn’t even a real honeymoon.”

“Another challenge?” His lips quirk. “I look forward to proving you wrong. As for the honeymoon part, I live in Vegas. So, welcome home, wife.”

There’s no winning with this man, so I look out the window. Alessandro sighs and reaches over, buckling my seat belt for me. The seat belts on a jet must be longer than the ones on commercial flights, because there’s plenty of extra

length left. Thank god. How embarrassing would that be? Like, I don't mind being curvy, but there are moments, like having to ask for a seat belt extender, that make my curves feel shameful. Alessandro makes sure the belt is tight before buckling his own.

My entire body comes to life at his closeness, and I can *feel* every little movement that he makes. It's strange. In all the years I've known Giosuè, I've *never* felt this way. Not even close. Of course, the only reason I even spoke to Giosuè was because of the predicament my father got himself in. I pause. I wonder what's going to happen to him since I didn't marry Giosuè? Strangely, I'm not worried one bit about him. He made his bed. Now he can lie in it.

The plane dips and I gasp, grabbing onto the armrests.

"Just a bit of turbulence," Alessandro says.

We dip again, and I force myself to look away from the window. I mean, if this plane goes down, I certainly don't want to have a bird's eye view of my demise! I meet Alessandro's gaze. His lips are curved in almost a smile. I bet he's stunning when he outright smiles.

He says, "It's going to be okay, *Dolcezza*. Just a few bumps before we're safely on the ground."

"Since you claim to know everything about me, then you already know that my mind always jumps to the worst-case scenario." I nod my head toward the window. "So you can guess how this is playing out in my mind."

"Plane crash?"

"Yeah, but not before the door rips off and we're gasping for air." My eyes widen. "What if the oxygen masks don't drop? Are there even oxygen masks on this thing?"

"Never had to find out," he teases.

"You laugh, but you never know what could happen. I mean, a person doesn't wake up and know it's their last day. When it's your time to go, it's your time to go."

“What else could go wrong on this flight so close to the airstrip?”

“Landing gear doesn’t come out.” I think. “A swarm of birds flying into the engines.”

“A swarm of *birds*?” This time he does laugh, and I was right. He’s stunning when he smiles. “And if we were flying to New York, I bet you’d imagine crash-landing in the Hudson.”

I nod. “That movie traumatized the crap out of me.”

“It’s a good thing I only employ the very best then,” he says as the jet touches down.

He has a smug look on his face, so I say, “I’m not going to mention that most accidents occur on the runway.”

He snorts but doesn’t answer. Instead, he pulls out his phone. I groan.

“Crap. I knew I forgot something.”

He meets my gaze. “What is it?”

“I don’t have my phone. I left it at the church. It was charging in the corner of the room where I got ready.”

“We can get you another one.”

“I just feel bad. I’m sure people are wondering what happened.” My eyes widen. “I’m sure my father is wondering where I’m at.”

“You are forbidden from speaking to your father.”

“Forbidden?” I sputter. “Why?”

“Do you really have to ask why?” He drops his phone in his lap, giving me his full attention. “Well, let’s start from the top of the list. One, he sold you to pay off his debts. Two, he’s a piece of shit who likes to take out his anger on those weaker than him. Three, he didn’t even try to save you at the wedding when I showed up.”

He’s making some damn good points, but I defend my father. “Your men had guns. What was he supposed to do?”

“And? Half the guests in there had guns, too. Rest assured, *Dolcezza*. If someone tried to take what was mine, I’d go down fighting to protect them.”

I try not to look too much into his words, because he’s not talking about me.

Is he?

I say, “Fine. I won’t reach out to him. Not because you told me I couldn’t, but because you made some valid points.”

“What I can’t figure out is why you agreed to marry Caruso to save him.”

“Is that supposed to be a question?”

He dips his head.

I think for a moment before answering, “He’s all I have left, family-wise.”

“And?”

“What do you mean and? And that’s enough of a reason to save someone.”

“Not in my world.” He shifts. “Did he tell you how much he owed?”

“Nearly a million.”

He barks out a laugh. “Try closer to a billion. Marrying you off to Caruso was only going to buy him a bit of time before his debts caught up to him.”

I’m trying to process what Alessandro is saying.

“A billion dollars? How is that even possible?”

Alessandro says, “That’s something only he can answer. From what I’ve seen in other situations, they borrow, thinking they can pay it back in time. When they can’t, they borrow more from someone else. Eventually, it turns into a vicious cycle that only a bullet to the brain can stop.”

I cringe. “Do you have to be so crass?”

“Just telling you the truth.” He stands, stepping in the aisle. “The SUV is waiting. I’ll meet you down there.”

I stand, too, sidestepping him before walking to the door, where the flight attendant smiles at me. God, I hope she doesn't know that Alessandro and I had sex in the back of the jet. My cheeks flame as I rush past her, going down the stairs. There's a black SUV waiting with a man next to the door. He doesn't even glance my way as I climb into the back seat.

A few moments later, Alessandro slides in next to me. Something is different with him. His jaw is tense, as if he's aggravated. Guess he's done talking to me.

Sighing, I look out my window as we leave the airfield. It doesn't take long before I spot the iconic Las Vegas Strip. I'm surprised when we drive toward it. I guess I never thought about where Alessandro lived. Sure, he said Vegas, but I didn't think he meant *here*, amid it all.

We turn, going to a large complex that's still within walking distance of the Strip, and the SUV comes to a stop in front of the building. My door opens and I step out, looking up. Holy cow. This place is amazing from the outside. I can only imagine what it looks like on the inside.

Alessandro says, "Come, Isabetta."

I follow him to the lobby, where an older man sitting behind a desk greets him by name.

"Mr. Moretti. We weren't expecting you back so soon."

"This is Isabetta, my wife." To me, he says, "This is Bart, the concierge. I'll show you how to get in contact with him when we get to the penthouse."

I smile. "A pleasure to meet you, Bart."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Moretti."

Before I have time to process how I feel about being called *Mrs. Moretti*, Alessandro puts his hand on the small of my back, ushering me forward. We enter an elevator, and he presses the button for the top floor.

We're both silent as the cart lifts us high into the sky. When the doors open, I'm stunned at the view. Moving from the cart, I go to the nearest window, looking out.

“I bet it’s beautiful at night.”

Alessandro clears his throat. “It is.”

I turn and find him staring at me with an intense look on his face. I may have only known him for a few hours, but it doesn’t take a genius to see that something is bothering him.

“Alessandro?”

“I’ll give you a tour when I get home.”

My lips part. “What? You’re leaving?”

“No rest for the wicked, *Dolcezza*. I’m needed at the office.” He points to the phone next to the couch. “Just lift that phone and my housekeeper can show you to our room. She can also let Chef know that you are here.”

“Alessandro, wait.”

But he’s already stepping into the elevator. As the doors close, a look passes between us.

And for some reason, it feels like regret on his end.

*Alessandro*

I'm an absolute asshole for leaving Isabetta like this. While it's true that I have work to take care of, that's not the real reason I left so quickly. No, it has everything to do with what I found when I went to the bedroom on the jet to grab our bags.

Normally, I would have just let Hector handle it, but I assumed his wife would be waiting. I went in and saw the bed where I fucked Isabetta.

And then I saw the blood.

Scrubbing my hand over my face, I let out a curse. My sweet bride was a virgin, and I fucked her like a fucking beast.

The cries of pleasure that sounded like music to my ears at the time now have me twisted.

Gutted, even.

I hurt her and I don't know how to make this fucking right.

So what did I do? I fled like a fucking coward.

Now I'm at my office not getting a lick of work done. The real kicker is that I'm literally staring at my phone, willing it to ring with news of what Isabetta is doing. I know she hasn't left our room yet because the staff was given strict orders to notify me the moment she did. She stayed in the living room for an hour before reaching out to Donna, my housekeeper. I'm such a prick that I didn't even tell her Donna's name, so

she had to ask. Something Donna scolded me for when she called after getting Isabetta settled in our room.

I'm about to open the security feed of the penthouse on my computer when my phone buzzes. Lifting my phone, I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face.

Well, well, well. Look who it is.

BLANC

We need to talk.

Now.

I expect you in Dallas by tomorrow.

Sorry, can't. Not sure if you heard, but I'm on my honeymoon.

That's an order, Moretti.

Funny, I wasn't aware Elite Members could order other Elite Members around.

My phone rings and I answer casually, "Blanc. This is a surprise."

"Do you know what you've done, boy?" He exhales. "We can still fix this, but I need you in Dallas to do so."

"As I said, I'm on my honeymoon."

"And where is that, exactly?"

I bite back a snort. Even if Blanc had the resources, he still wouldn't be able to track my jet because my resources are better.

"None of your damn business. You have one minute to tell me why you called before I end this call."

“Zhāng isn’t happy about what you’ve done.”

“I’m not sure why. His little friend can still join the Brotherhood.”

“We both know he can’t. Not without the heiress’ money.”

“Such a shame.”

“The fool is threatening Zhāng.”

“Then I guess Zhāng better take care of his problem.”

“Just because you’re an Elite Member doesn’t mean you stop being the head of the Mafia.”

I still, gripping the phone. “You’re right. It doesn’t. A fact you and every other person in the Brotherhood should remember. The Moretti Mafia is at the Brotherhood’s disposal because I allow it. Make no mistake that I can revoke that privilege at any moment.”

“Just as I’m sure you won’t forget that the Brotherhood has a far reach. It would be a shame for something to happen to your new bride so soon after marriage.” He pauses. “Why, I’d imagine the marriage might even be null and void at that point.”

“It would be if we hadn’t already consummated.” I’m the one pausing. “And there’s proof, since I know you’re into that kind of thing.”

He sputters, but I cut him off.

“I don’t have time to listen to you deny something we both know is true. As for the threat you just made against my wife, well, I’ll let it go this time. I understand that you’re under a lot of stress with the sudden death of DeLeon.” My voice hardens. “But if you ever threaten my wife again, I will burn your world down as you watch. Once you have lost everyone and everything that you love, only then will I end you. Understand?”

I give him a moment to process what I’ve just said, because we both know I’m not lying. I will end him in the most painful way possible, but not before making everyone near and dear to him suffer.

Finally, he says, “I’ll let Zhāng know that he needs to figure out another solution with Caruso.”

“Good idea. Speaking of Caruso, I’d like to see the policy about letting people join the Brotherhood when they clearly weren’t good enough to be invited in the first place.”

“That’s Zhāng’s area of expertise.”

“Sounds like maybe it shouldn’t be if he’s bringing in pieces of shit like Caruso.”

Blanc grunts in response. He will not admit that I’m right because that would go against his oldest friend.

“I’ll let him know you want to see the policy. Also, DeLeon has some...unfinished business that needs to be cleaned up.”

“What kind of business?”

“The same kind that got him killed.”

“As I said, I’m on my honeymoon.”

“We both know that this isn’t a genuine marriage. Just as we know you’re the only one who can clean up a mess like this.” He adds, “Besides, this is your area of expertise, and since you replaced DeLeon...”

I exhale. “Send me the info.”

Because he’s right on one account. I’m the only one who can clean up a mess like this. And the sooner I do, the sooner I can return to my wife and make things right with her.



Isabetta

“He’s...not coming home?”

Annoyance mixed with hurt settles over me like ice.

Donna, the sweet elderly housekeeper that works for Alessandro, shakes her head. “He said the business was urgent and that he would be out of town for a few days.”

I sit back. “Oh.”

“I’m going to give that boy a piece of my mind when he returns.” She sits next to me, reaching for my hand. “Now, what would you like for dinner?”

“I’m really not very hungry.”

Surprisingly, it’s the truth. Today has been a whirlwind of ups and downs and food has been the last thing on my mind.

“You need to eat, dear. How about some comfort food?”

I’ve only known this woman for a few hours and can already tell that she won’t let this go. If she thinks I need to eat, I’m going to eat.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“I’ll let Chef know.”

She gives my hand a squeeze before leaving me to my thoughts.

What on earth could take Alessandro away on his wedding day? I snort. Well, that right there is my first problem. This isn't a real marriage, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised that he left. This takes me back to the question that I asked him that he never did answer. Why? Why did he stop my wedding? Why did he marry me? Why am I here all alone?

I'm deep in thought when Donna returns with a tray. There's soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. I glance up at her to find her smiling.

"My children always liked this when they weren't feeling well. I know it's not the same, but I thought it might help."

I smile. "My Nonna used to fix the same when I was sick. It's perfect."

I might not be sick, but I've certainly felt better. An ache has settled between my legs from where Alessandro and I had sex. Each movement reminds me of what we did...of how easily I gave in to him. And he's not even here, so I can give him a piece of my mind.

My eyes water as I lift the sandwich, taking a bite.

Donna says, "I'll be in the other room if you need me."

"Thank you."

"No need to thank me, Mrs. Moretti." She gives me another kind smile. "No need at all."

When she's gone, I push the tray aside. If I had my phone, I could at least scroll on social media. But no. All I can do is think about why I'm here and, as I established on the jet with Alessandro, my mind always jumps to the worst-case scenario. I mean, really...what does someone like him get out of marrying me? Sure, we have a small connection from where we met a decade ago, but that's not enough of a reason to freaking marry someone.

So why did he do it?

Leaning back, I close my eyes. Why didn't I fight harder? Not just when he showed up at the wedding, but before. Why didn't I tell my father that I wouldn't marry Giosuè? Why

didn't I tell Gia my mind when she was mean to me for all those years? Why have I always just gone along with things?

I will not get any life-changing answers tonight, so I grab the control for the TV and turn on an old episode of *Friends*. Reaching for my sandwich, I take another bite and allow myself to not think about anything.

An hour later, I'm fighting yawns left and right and can barely keep my eyes open. Donna showed me Alessandro's room when I first arrived, but I don't think I can sleep in there. Not because he's not here, but because it means something that I'm not ready to admit. Once I sleep in there, I'm his wife. Like, I know I'm technically married to him, but this will make it feel...final.

Lifting the phone next to the couch, I wait for Donna to answer.

"Yes, dear?"

"Can I speak to you, please? I'm still in the living room."

"I'll be right there."

I try not to fidget when she arrives. I mean, I have every right to ask what I'm about to ask.

"I'm ready to go to bed."

"Of course. Let me show you to your room."

"Wait. That's not what I mean." I push myself onward. "Is there another room? A guest room, perhaps?"

We hold each other's gazes. She knows what I'm asking, and I get the feeling I won't like her answer.

"Mr. Moretti was firm. You are to stay in his room. *Your* room."

"But he's not even here."

"That may be true, but he'll know."

How would he know unless... My gaze darts around the room until I spot a camera in the corner near the ceiling. The flashing red light lets me know the camera is recording.

“I’d really feel more comfortable in the guest room.”

“The primary suite is the only bedroom that’s made up.”

My eyebrow lifts. “I don’t need much. Just a blanket.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Moretti. Mr. Moretti was firm. You can discuss the issue when he returns.”

“In a few days.”

“Yes, ma’am. Now, shall I show you to your room?”

“No, it’s okay. I can find it.”

Because that was never the issue.

Biting back a sigh, I stand. I really am tired. All I want to do is shower and then go to bed. If that means sleeping in his room, then so be it.

I enter the primary suite, closing the door behind me. A quick glance confirms there’s no camera, at least not one that I can see.

Alessandro’s room looks like him, or what I know of him. Dark furniture. Dark walls. Minimal personal effects, which makes me think the items that are out must mean a lot to him. There’s a framed photo on his dresser of a woman posing in a garden that’s faded over time. She looks like him. Is she a family member? His mother? Grandmother?

My bag sits at the foot of the bed, reminding me of the jet and everything that happened there.

“Ugh.”

Unzipping the bag, I pull out the oversized t-shirt that I sleep in and a pair of clean underwear. I also grab my travel sized toiletries.

The bathroom is huge and a stark contrast to the bedroom. White marble floors with matching counters. Double vanity with his and her sinks with mirrors over each side. Golden accessories. There’s a large walk-in shower that’s calling my name. I let the water warm while I undress. My gaze lands on my body and I freeze. My knees look terrible from where I fell, but that’s not what gets my attention. No, it’s my hips that

are covered in light bruises from where Alessandro held onto me while we had sex.

Heat licks my skin as I run my finger over my hip. Even though my first time didn't go as I dreamt it would, it still wasn't all bad. Alessandro wanted me. *Me*. So much so that neither of us undressed all the way. So much so that his fingers left bruises behind. Now, I've never been one of those girls who thinks that hot guys don't go for curvy girls. But sometimes it's hard not to have that mindset. I mean, I was a twenty-eight-year-old virgin, for crying out loud. At some point, it was hard not to think that my weight had something to do with it. That didn't matter today. No, Alessandro wanted me and took me. There was no revulsion in his eyes as he thrust into me. Only heat. So much heat.

My exhale is shaky. I just wish he was here so we could talk things through. Instead, I'm left to my own thoughts and fears.

Well, I'm not going to get any answers tonight, so I step into the shower, letting the hot water run over my body. My thoughts dance around. What is my life going to look like now? I worked while living at my father's house, even though he and Giosuè didn't want me to. In fact, Giosuè was insistent that I quit when we married so we could focus on starting a family. Will Alessandro have similar requests?

I didn't want to have children with Giosuè, but thinking of Alessandro holding our baby does something to my chest. God. What am I thinking? We don't know each other. I shouldn't be thinking about having kids with the man, for crying out loud!

I finish showering and dry my hair. In the bedroom, I slip on my pink nightshirt and panties. Hands on my hips, I look at the enormous bed, not knowing which side Alessandro sleeps on. I usually sleep on the right side of my bed, so that's the side I climb in on. The mattress is so freaking comfortable, and my eyes are closing before I can stop. Maybe things won't be as bad as I think. Maybe, just maybe, this might work out.



Alessandro

I stare out the window, my leg bouncing. Fuck. How long does it take to taxi? We're at a private airfield, for Christ's sake.

Hector is smirking at me when I glance his way.

"What?"

"Nothing."

My jaw tics and he laughs.

"Just a bit funny."

"Care to elaborate?"

"A few days ago, you were laughing at me because I was ready to get home." He gestures toward me. "My, how the mighty have fallen."

"Fuck off."

I don't even bother to deny it because he's right. I *am* ready to get home. Business kept me away longer than I expected, making me feel like shit. I know Isabetta has somewhat settled into a routine while I've been away. Donna has told me all about it with a few choice added words. Mostly about what a piece of shit I am. The thing is, she's right. I *am* a piece of shit. I should have told Blanc no when he called. Hell, I shouldn't have answered his call in the first place.

DeLeon left behind one hell of a mess that is going to require more clean-up than anyone expected. Some of that

falls on me because of my Mafia ties, but a lot of it falls on others within the Brotherhood. By the time this is all sorted out, more people within our group will know what a monster DeLeon was. The only positive thing is that Blanc held up his end of the deal and sent me information on Zhāng and the requirements for recruitment. I haven't had time to dive into the documents in depth, but from what I can see, Zhāng has been using new recruits for his own benefit, which is why Caruso was offered a chance to join. Well, that's going to stop as soon as I gather more proof of what Zhāng is up to.

Hector says, "Let's go, man."

I nod and stand. He motions for me to go first, so I do. His wife is waiting when I pass and a moment later, I hear her squeal when she sees her man. Isabetta's face crosses my mind. Maybe one day I'll get a greeting like that.

The ride is quick, since it's Tuesday night, and before I know it, I'm walking into the penthouse. The lights are out, but I don't turn on any as I make my way to the second floor. The bedroom door is closed. Apprehension makes me pause as I reach for the knob. I've had a week to think about what I was going to say to her when I finally saw her. But now that I'm here, everything has gone out of the window. What if she tells me to fuck off? She'd have every right.

I almost turn away.

Fuck it.

Opening the door, I stroll into our room. It's dark, but there's light coming in from the window that illuminates her sleeping form. She's on my side of the bed, which pulls at something deep inside of my chest. She's sleeping on her side, one leg kicked from under the blanket. Moving closer, I see she's wearing an oversized t-shirt. Pink, from the looks of it. It's crept up in her sleep and I catch a glimpse of cotton panties with little flowers on them.

Fuck.

I have to force myself to take a step away from her. I've already fucked things up once. I'm not going to do it again. No

matter how much I want her. Strolling across the room, I enter the closet, reaching for my tie. Loosening it, I pull it over my head, tossing it in the laundry basket. My shirt is next, followed by my pants, socks, and then boxers. I always sleep nude because of my hot nature. Since I'm an early riser, I'll be long gone before Isabetta wakes. For now, I just need to shower and then go to sleep.

Leaving the closet, I go to the bathroom and shower, washing off the grime from two days' worth of travel. The hot water soothes my tense muscles, and I stay under the spray until the water cools.

Isabetta hasn't moved when I exit the bathroom, but her lips are parted. I grin as she softly snores. Fucking adorable. Careful not to disturb her, I climb into bed. It's strange not being on my normal side of the bed, but it's not so bad since I'm facing her. I move close enough that I can smell the sweet scent of her shampoo. Closing my eyes, I exhale. It feels good to be home.

"Alessandro?"

Opening my eyes, I find Isabetta looking over her shoulder at me.

"Did I wake you?"

She shakes her head. "No. When did you get home?"

"Landed about thirty minutes ago."

"I'm glad." She yawns. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Go back to sleep."

She works her bottom lip with her teeth before saying, "You put off a lot of heat."

"Do I?"

"I think maybe that's what woke me." She pauses. "Would it be weird if I asked you to scoot closer? I'm kind of cold."

My cock jerks at her words, but I answer, "I'm naked, Isabetta, and being that close to you is a lot of temptation."

"I trust you."

Fuck. Me.

“Okay.”

She turns, facing the window, so I scoot closer to her until her back presses against my front.

“Better?”

She snuggles against me, brushing against my dick.

“Mmm. Yes. Thank you.”

If another woman tried this, I’d say they had ulterior motives. But Isabetta yawns again and a moment later she’s snoring.

Looping my arm around her waist, I close my eyes.

“Alessandro?”

Groaning, I snuggle into the mattress. Only, I’m met with the soft flesh of a woman. Opening my eyes, I find Isabetta looking down at me with a small smile on her face. Blinking away the fog in my brain, I try to figure out what in the hell is happening. Isabetta and I are still in bed, but we must have moved in our sleep. She’s on her back and that pink shirt of hers has bunched up under her breasts. I’m still holding on to her around the waist and realize that I was likely using her stomach as a pillow. I look down. A very comfortable pillow.

My gaze moves lower.

One of my legs is hooked around hers. Her other leg is bent, as if she wanted to give me space while we slept. The other thing I notice? The wet spot on her cotton panties.

My gaze meets hers and she blushes.

“Something you need to share, *Dolcezza?*”

The blush spreads beneath her shirt.

“I was dreaming.”

“About?”

Her pink cheeks are almost red now.

“You.”

“Me?”

She nods. “Yes.”

“Well, now I need to hear all the dirty details. They are dirty, aren’t they?”

She snorts. “A little. I was dreaming about the jet.”

And just like that, my semi deflates faster than a balloon.

“Oh.”

“Alessandro?”

“I’m sorry about the jet. It shouldn’t have happened.”

Hurt fills her eyes. “What?”

I realize what she thinks I mean and curse under my breath.

“I’m really fucking up things, aren’t I? Let me start over.”
I meet her gaze. “I didn’t know you were a virgin.”

The blush is back. “Oh. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It is. Your first time should have been magical. Not some quick fuck on a jet.”

“To be fair, I’d never been on a jet before.”

I smile at her attempt to make me feel better. “I should have at least asked.”

She reaches, cupping my cheek. “It’s okay, Alessandro. I’m fine. It was fine. Everything is fine.”

“Just fine? My male pride is wounded.”

“You could always make it up to me.”

My cock jerks, liking the idea, but I say, “We should take things slow.”

“Says who?”

“Me?”

“Don’t I get a say? Because I’m going to tell you right now that I’ve been told what to do all my life and just recently decided that I’m done with it.”

“How recent?”

She gives me an ornery grin. “You’re not going to believe me, but at my wedding. Right before you showed up, I had just decided that I didn’t want to become Mrs. Caruso.”

My eyebrows lift. “Really?”

“Yeah. Something my Nonna said to me a long time ago came back to me and I knew I couldn’t do it.” She motions between us. “So, are you going to try to push me around, too, or are we going to be partners in this marriage?”

“As we’ve established before, I’ll be honest with you at all times, but there will be moments when you may have to follow direction for your own protection.”

She’s silent for a moment.

“Okay. I can work with that.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She shifts and her shirt rides higher. So high that I can see the bottom of her breasts. I bite back a groan.

“Trying to seduce me already, wife?”

Her laugh is breathy. “Yes. Husband.”

That single word changes things between us. I planned on taking things slow, but there’s no way in hell that’s going to happen. Not with the way her eyes are darkening. And definitely not with my cock being fully erect.

“We’re going to take things slow this time, *Dolcezza*.”

“We’ll see,” she says with a teasing smile.

Since I’m still closer to her stomach than to her face, I kiss her skin just above her bellybutton.

“God, this is so embarrassing.”

I look up to find her covering her face with her hands.

“What is?”

“You...kissing on my stomach.”

“Why is that embarrassing? I think you’re sexy as hell.” I bite her skin this time, making her laugh.

“You don’t have to say that to make me feel better.”

“I’m not saying it to make you feel better, Isabetta. I’m saying it because it’s fucking true.” I grip her hips. “You are so fucking sexy. Hell, it almost got me in trouble when you were jailbait.”

“Jailbait.” She snorts. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“Do you remember that day?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you remember me asking you to dinner before we went back to my hotel, right?”

“Yes.”

“I was planning on fucking you, *Dolcezza*. Dinner was just to make sure you were on the same page.”

“Is it weird that I’ve thought about that day a lot? Like, I’d replay our conversation over and over until sometimes I wondered if it happened at all.”

“Not any stranger than me admitting that I’ve done the same. Now, can I get back to seducing you?”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

I bark out a laugh. “Fuck. If you’re having to ask, then I’m not doing something right.”

She laughs, too. “I didn’t mean it like that. I hoped you were trying to seduce me, especially after the dream, but I don’t have a ton of experience to know for sure.”

“Well, let me put your mind at ease. My cock is aching to be inside of your sweet pussy.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now, let’s get you naked.”

“Okay.”

I grin. “I’m liking how compliant you are.”

“Let’s just say I have ulterior motives.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “That dream left me feeling extra horny.”

My dick throbs hearing her admit that she’s horny for me. God knows I’m horny for her.

“Let’s get this shirt off you.”

“Okay.”

Her cheeks are bright and rosy as she sits, pulling the shirt over her head. She tosses it to the side and looks down at me, working her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Lay back, pretty girl. I’m about to make you feel so good.”

She holds my gaze, doing as I say. Her trust in me might be the sexiest thing about her.

I take in the sight before me. Her dark blonde hair fans across my pillow. Her big breasts rise and fall with each breath that she takes. That sexy blush has spread down her neck onto her chest.

I reach out, running a finger over her erect nipple. “Did you know that your blush is the same color as your nipples?”

“I had no idea.”

“I like that I make you blush, *Dolcezza*. I like it a lot.” I move so my head is level to her breasts. “Tell me. Have you ever been kissed here?”

Her mouth parts on a silent gasp as I tweak her nipple.

“N-no.”

“It’s only fitting that your husband should be the first, then.”

She arches into me as my mouth covers her budded flesh. I kiss her nipple the same way I’d kiss her mouth. When I suck,

she groans out my name.

“Ah, does my wife like it when I suck? What about this?”

I suck harder and nip her skin.

“Oh, god. Yes. That feels so good, Alessandro.”

Her fingers weave through my hair, pulling me closer. When I rub my beard against her skin, she almost loses it.

“Yes!”

I move to her other breast, showering it with the same attention. By the time I’m finished, the blush has moved lower. Funny. I’m about to move lower, too.

Moving down the mattress, I push her legs apart. The spot on her panties has gotten bigger. Leaning forward, I inhale deeply.

“Mmm. You smell so sweet, *Dolcezza*. I bet you taste even better. Would you like that, wife? Would you like me to taste you down there?”

“I’ve...I’ve never done it before.” She exhales. “But I want you to do it. Please.”

“Fuck. How can I say no when you ask so nicely?”

Settling between her legs, I inhale her scent again.

“I’m going to tell you a little secret, *Dolcezza*. I love eating pussy, especially when it’s going to be messy.”

She whimpers as I push her panties to the side. Fuck. Me. She’s gushing cream. Running two fingers through her folds, I hold them up so she can see just how wet she is.

“Is this all for me, pretty girl?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right, *Dolcezza*. This honey is all for me.”

I slip my digits into my mouth, sucking off her juices. Fuck. She tastes as good as I knew she would. But I’m a greedy bastard and I want more. I rip off her panties, tossing them to the floor and move to her pussy and spread her nether lips. Isabetta cries out as I lick her from her clit to her slit.

Circling back to her clit, I suck on the bundle of nerves. She groans, arching into me.

“Alessandro, I need...”

“What do you need, wife?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice is close to tears. “I don’t know.”

“I do.”

I move lower, spearing my tongue in and out of her. With my free hand, I rub her clit in a circle, bringing her to the edge.

“Yes,” she moans. “Yes!”

She comes, filling my mouth with more of her cream. I lap up every last bit. She comes so hard that it coats my beard, but it’s something I wear with pride.

I rub her clit until she stops shaking and then move over her.

“Are you ready for me, *Dolcezza*?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to go slow this time,” I say, my cock brushing against her opening.

Her gaze holds mine.

“I trust you.”

Fuck.

Slowly, I slide into her. It feels different this time, likely because she’s aroused. Her lips part on a moan.

“Oh. That feels so good, Alessandro.”

I keep moving until I’m inside of her all the way. And then I’m still.

“What are you doing?”

“Letting you get used to my size.”

Even though it’s fucking torture. Her pussy is so tight around my cock that it makes it hard to think. She shifts, clamping down on me, and we both moan.

“Fuck. Keep doing that, *Dolcezza*.”

She does it again and a moment later her hips rise, pulling me in even more.

“Alessandro,” she moans as her eyes flutter shut.

“Eyes on me, *Dolcezza*.”

She meets my gaze, and that’s when I move. My thrusts are slow at first, making sure she’s okay with what’s happening. Slowly, we find our rhythm. It’s new—nothing I’ve ever experienced before—and it fucking turns me on. Our lips brush together in a light kiss as our bodies move as one.

“Alessandro, I’m close!”

Reaching between us, I rub her clit. Her head tilts back, lips parted, and she breaks beneath me. It is, without a doubt, the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Her orgasm is so strong that I feel my body answering in response.

“Fuck,” I moan. “Isabetta!”

I bury my face in the crook of her neck as I come inside of her. It strikes me that this is the second time we’ve had sex without a condom. And she’s not on the pill. She’s the only person I’ve ever been with without using protection. The thought has my heart pounding. Lifting my head, I meet her gaze.

Would it be so bad if she got pregnant? It would ensure that the Moretti Mafia continued. It would also meet requirements of the Brotherhood. Requirements that I never gave a thought to.

Until now.

Brushing a piece of hair behind my wife’s ear, I make a decision that feels right.

She’s going to have my baby.



Isabetta

The last two days have been a blur, filled with sex, a bit of food, and minimum sleep. Alessandro and I can't keep our hands off each other and the sex is...so good. So, so, so good. I glance at him across the table. We're both freshly showered and dressed, but only because he received a call that he's needed for work. I bite my bottom lip as I watch him. His long hair is pulled back in a manbun that he manages to make look sexy. His beard is getting long, but he ran out of time to shave because he ate me out instead. My cheeks are warm. God, it was so worth it, though.

"I like whatever it is that you're daydreaming about that's putting a smile on your face."

I grin. "Just thinking about earlier."

"Oh?" He glances over the newspaper at me. "Which part? Where I took you from behind in the shower? Or when I ate you out on the vanity? Or when you sucked my cock in the closet?"

"All the above, but especially the vanity part."

"Liked that, did you?"

"A lot."

"I will make sure it happens at least once a day."

Heat spreads through my body because I'm fairly certain he's serious. And I'm okay with it because the man has

magical fingers and an even more skilled tongue.

“Sounds like a plan to me.” I pause, not sure if I should ask the question that’s been on my mind. “What do you do for a living?”

His lips twitch. “Worried about me?”

“I didn’t say that.” I lift my coffee cup, letting it warm my hands. “So, are you going to answer me?”

He folds the paper, setting it aside. “What do you think I do for a living?”

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

Because everything has been good. Too good if I’m being honest. I’m basically living a fairytale with a man I’ve been married to for less than two weeks, and I know nothing about him. I don’t know where he went for a week after we were married. I don’t know why he steps out of the room when he takes certain calls. I don’t know why it feels like the other shoe is about to drop.

What I do know is that there are bad people out there. My father. Giosuè. Is my husband one of those bad men?

“Maybe I’ll have to kill you if I tell you.”

“So it’s something illegal then, which I guess shouldn’t surprise me since you know Giosuè.”

He stills. “What did you say?”

“I said I guess it shouldn’t surprise me since you know Giosuè.”

He moves so fast that I don’t have time to react, pulling me to my feet. The look in his eyes is possessive and full of fire.

“New rule, *Dolcezza*. We no longer say that asshole’s name in our house.”

I look up at him. “Oh my gosh. Are you jealous?”

“You’re mine.”

“I am, but that doesn’t answer my question. Are you jealous, Alessandro?”

His gaze lands on my mouth, making me hot all over.

“I’ll kill anyone who touches you. Hell, who even looks your way. Does that answer your question?”

“Wow.”

“Too much?”

“Is it weird to say I like it?” I rub against him. “A lot.”

“Not as much as I enjoy hearing you say that you’re mine.” His gaze searches my face. “I hope you mean it.”

“It’s crazy. We’ve only known each other for a short amount of time, but I feel a connection with you.” I smile. “So, yeah, I mean it. I’m yours.”

Because as crazy as this is, it feels right. I haven’t had to worry about him coming home in a sour mood that he takes out on me. I haven’t been afraid that our power would be cut off because the bills aren’t paid. And even though he married me without asking first, I know I’m better off with him than with Giosuè.

His lips brush against mine. “Good.”

I playfully swat his chest. “This is where you say it back, dummy.”

“Dummy? I’m wounded.”

“Alessandro.”

“I’m yours, *Dolcezza*. There is no one else on this earth for me but you.”

“Wow.”

His eyebrow lifts. “What?”

“How do you get hotter each day?”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing.”

His phone rings and I groan.

“No.”

He glances at the screen and flips it facedown.

“I’ll call them back.”

“You never answered my question about what you do for a living.”

“Are you asking because you’re worried or curious?”

“Both, I guess. Our relationship isn’t normal. We didn’t get to do things that most people do before getting married, like getting to know each other.”

He says, “True. How about this? When I get home tonight, we can talk. Get to know each other a bit better.”

“I’d like that.”

He kisses me. “Me, too. Now, as tempted as I am to call in sick, I do need to go. The SUV is waiting for me. I’ll be back by six.”

“Be safe.”

“Always am.”

He kisses me two more times before pulling away with a groan. I hate that I feel a sense of loss when he’s gone. It wouldn’t be so bad if I had people to hang out with. Friends. I snort. God, I wouldn’t even know how to go about making friends. But it would be nice...

In our room, I straighten up the bedding just so Donna doesn’t think we’re screwing around all the time, even though we basically are. I really like Donna. She’s sassy and tells Alessandro exactly what’s on her mind.

I’m smiling when I grab my new phone. There’s a message from Alessandro, so I open it.

HUBBY

Miss you already.

I miss you, too.

My finger hovers over the heart emoji. Will he read too much into it if I send it? I decide against it and open up a book on my Kindle app. It's a romance about a woman who gets captured on her wedding day. I grin. A bit of art imitating life is exactly what I need because if they can have a happily ever after, then so can I.

Around noon, I make my way to the kitchen where Donna and Chef are sitting at the small table. They both stand when they see me, but I wave at them to sit.

“I'm just going to grab some cheese and fruit.”

Chef says, “There's a plate in the refrigerator waiting for you.”

I've tried several times to get Chef to tell me his real name but have thus far been met with silence. Even Donna claims she doesn't know, which makes me that more determined to find out.

“Thanks, Cheffy.”

His lips twitch at the nickname. “You're welcome, Mrs. Moretti.”

I grab the plate from the fridge and make my way to the living room. Chef and I have settled into a routine where he stops insisting to fix elaborate meals for every meal and I stop just helping myself to items in the kitchen. Chef is very particular about who touches anything in his domain—his words, not mine. Our other compromise is that he can go all out for dinner. And, gosh, does he ever. Last night he fixed four courses. I was so stuffed by the time the last course came out that I could barely make it to my bedroom, much less think about having sex with my husband. Definitely had to digest a bit before we could do anything of that nature.

In the living room, I sit on the couch with my plate in my lap. Alessandro said I could make some changes around the house if I wanted. The statement made me happy for a few reasons. It feels like he sees me as an equal partner and wants me to feel like his house is our house. Besides, I know he's heard me mention that I wish there was a chair by the window

because, honestly, there should be a chair over there. Which is why I'm looking for chairs online right now.

I've narrowed it down to a few choices, but I think I'm going to go with the one where we can both sit in the chair together. I let out a soft sigh, imagining it. He'll come home after a long day of work and we can sit there, talking about our day. Yeah, that sounds perfect. The only question is what color should I pick? All the other furniture is black, which is why I'm feeling compelled to order the chair in a light pink. My soft to his hard. My light to his dark. It's perfect. After ordering it, I look for a few more items to place around the house.

I end up scrolling on social media. Alessandro was reluctant to let me download some of my old apps on my new phone, but I have nothing to hide. I stop as I come across a post from Gia. I only followed her because Giosuè insisted and just never got around to unfollowing her. And now? Now I'm staring at a photo of Gia at her wedding...*to my father*. Disbelief courses through me. How in the heck did this happen? And when? The date says two days ago. Is that true?

The photo is of the two of them standing in front of the same priest that married me and Alessandro. Giosuè stands next to my father as his best man and one of Gia's cousins stands next to her. The kicker? She's wearing the same dress that she said I was too fat for. Of course, her dress is a smaller size, but it's the same design. I huff out a laugh when I read her caption.

Married the love of my life. I'm now Mrs. Dale Bass.

Jesus. That means she's my stepmother. Again, how in the heck did this happen? The comments on the post don't give any clues either. Just well-wishes and congratulations. There aren't any posts of the two of them before that one, either. My finger hovers over the comment button. Finally, I type out a message and post it.

Congrats to the two of you! Wishing you all the best.

There. Now no one can say I didn't do the right thing. I'm about to close the app when I get a message notification. It's

from Gia.

Should I open it?

Curiosity gets the better of me and I click on the message.

Gia: OMG, Isabetta! Your father and I have been so worried about you. Everyone tried calling after that monster stole you and no one could get ahold of you. Please let us know that you're okay!

I stare at my phone. I might believe that they had tried to get ahold of me, except for one thing. No one reached out on social media. I know if I couldn't get ahold of someone, I would try every avenue.

I type out my reply.

Me: No need to worry. I'm fine.

Gia: Your dad would like to talk to you and your old number doesn't work. Can you call?

Me: That's not a good idea.

Gia: Isabetta, he's worried. He said there are things you don't know about Moretti. Call, and he'll explain everything.

I don't reply. Why? Because I don't believe a word that comes out of either of their mouths. There's nothing they can say to me about Alessandro that I'd believe. And after we talk tonight, I'll be able to ask him anything and he'll answer. It's perfect. Everything is perfect.



Alessandro

I tap my fingers on the top of the desk as I listen to Smith and Jones argue on the virtual call we're on. We've been going at this for hours, getting nowhere. Smith received a letter and claims that Jones is the only person in the world who knows the enclosed information. This, of course, pissed off Jones, who didn't like being accused of being the person behind the letters. The thing that stands out is that it's not the same kind of letter that DeLeon received. The paper is different, as is the wording. Which makes me think someone else sent it. That's all we need—a copycat wannabe killer.

Now, they're going around in circles, accusing each other of any and every sin under the sun.

"Enough," I say. "Smith, it's obvious that Jones didn't send the letter. Despite what you say, someone else knows all of your dirty little secrets. Now what in the fuck are you going to do to fix it?"

Smith is stunned into silence. Jones, on the other hand, doesn't have the same problem.

"Thank you, Moretti, for saying what we can all see. Smith, I know you don't believe me. Hell, I probably wouldn't believe you if our roles were reversed, but I'm telling you I'm not lying. I have nothing to do with this." He takes in a deep breath. "What good does it do to threaten you when we work so closely together?"

Zhāng says, “Well said, Jones. Smith, it sounds like you need to figure out who sent you the letter. Now, let’s move onto the next topic. Moretti, I hear there are things you’re questioning that fall under my jurisdiction.”

I hold his gaze on the screen. “There are. After doing some research, I’ve discovered that several men have been let into the Brotherhood over the last decade who shouldn’t be members.”

“Such as?”

I fire off several names and say, “The only reason they were let in is because of their financial donations.”

“That’s not unusual or against the rules.”

“True.” I flatten my hands on the desk. “That’s why I followed the money. Turns out these members only benefit you, Zhāng.”

Blanc asks, “Do you have proof?”

“I do. You should each be receiving an email from me with the documents. I’ll give you a moment to look them over.”

They’re silent as they each check their phones or computers. I glance at the clock. Fuck. It’s already five, and I promised Isabetta that I’d be home by six. If this doesn’t wrap up soon, then I’m going to have to call and let her know I’m going to be late. And I really don’t want to disappoint my wife.

Finally, Blanc says, “Well, Moretti brings up some good points. Zhāng, do you have anything to say?”

Zhāng’s jaw tics. “If Moretti thinks he can do better, then I welcome him to take over my duties.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Blanc says. “Does anyone have any ideas on how we can resolve this issue?”

Smith says, “Perhaps members who are recruited should be approved by the entire committee.”

Blanc nods. “I like that. Zhāng, does this work for you?”

“It does.”

“Moretti, does this work for you?”

I say, “It does.”

“Excellent. Gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure. Now, I’d like to call this meeting to an end so I can get home.”

The others murmur their agreements, but Zhāng says, “Moretti, stay on the call. I’d like to speak to you privately.”

“Of course.”

Do I want to speak to him? No. Will I stay on the call to hear what he has to say? Yes.

The other members log off, leaving just the two of us. Zhāng leans back in his chair, staring at me for a moment.

“I remember when I first became an Elite Member. My predecessor died unexpectedly, much like yours, and I had to take on the role sooner than I planned.” He lets out a small laugh. “I wasn’t sure my marriage was going to make it past that first year.”

“I assume there’s a point at this attempt at a heartwarming speech.”

“There is.” His gaze is hard as he says, “Be careful of the waves you make.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“It’s not a threat. It’s simply a piece of advice. You may have lucked out this time, but the next time you might find yourself on the outs with the rest of the Elite Members. And that’s not a place you want to be.”

“Noted. Is that all?”

“It is.”

I nod and log out of the call.

His words dance through my mind. On one hand I know he’s right. I had proof and a valid point, but I’m not foolish enough to think that the other Elite Members are going to be on board with every suggestion I have. Which is why I’m going to have to stay one step ahead of them.

That's a problem for another day, because I have a date with my wife that I don't plan on breaking.

*Isabetta*

I've been on edge for the last twenty minutes. Each sound has me looking to the entryway, hoping to see the elevator doors opening. And, god, I don't even want to know how many times I've checked the time. He's not late. In fact, he still has ten minutes to get here, but that doesn't stop me from checking. My phone sits next to me and I reach for it just as the elevator dings.

Alessandro enters, smiling when he sees me. God. How can one man make all black look so good? He takes off his suit jacket, tossing it on the back of the couch.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Long and boring." He sits next to me. "What about you?"

"Same. I missed you."

We're kissing a moment later until both of us are breathless. I'm practically in his lap when we pull apart.

He gives me a lazy smile. "Fuck. Now I get it."

"Get what?"

"Why Hector is always in a hurry to get home to his wife."

I smile, too. "Oh."

"Now, I believe I owe you a conversation so we can get to know each other."

“Yeah, that was the agreement.” I scoot closer. “So, how do we want to do this? You go and then I go?”

He traces little patterns on my thigh. “Or we can make it interesting. Add some stakes.”

“I’m listening.”

Reaching behind me, he grabs the deck of cards sitting on the end table.

“Let’s play a little game of strip poker. Lose an article of clothing and tell the other person something about themselves.”

I make a face and he notices.

“Not a fan of strip poker?”

“I’ve never played. Isn’t poker hard to pick up?”

He smiles. “I’m an excellent teacher, *Dolcezza*.”

“Here’s a compromise. What if we play strip Go-Fish instead?”

“Go-Fish?”

“Yeah. We each get seven cards. If I ask if you have a four and you do, you hand it to me. If you don’t, then you say ‘go-fish’.”

“Where does the strip part come in?”

“Of course that’s what you’re worried about,” I tease. “If it’s my turn and I ask for a card and you have it, then I have to take off a piece of clothing. But if you don’t have it, you have to take off a piece of clothing. And, like you said, the person taking off clothes has to tell the other person something about themselves.” I think and then add, “If you get all four of the same number, then you lay it down.”

He rubs his beard. “Definitely sounds like it’ll go faster than poker. Let’s do it.”

I look around. “In here? Shouldn’t we go to the bedroom, so Donna or Cheffy don’t see us?”

“They’ve both retired for the night, but we can go to the bedroom. It’ll save us a few steps later on when we can’t keep our hands off each other.”

I snort but stand. I mean, he’s not wrong...

“Let’s do this.”

In the bedroom, we sit on the bed, facing each other. Alessandro shuffles the deck twice and I exhale.

“Wow.”

“What?”

I say, “I didn’t know I had a deck shuffling fetish.”

He grins. “Just wait, *Dolcezza*.”

He shuffles the deck one more time before dealing the cards. He’s not doing anything special, but seeing his large hands handle the cards with ease really does do something for me. I reach out, touching his left ring finger where his tattoo is.

“I don’t think I’ve ever noticed this before. What does it mean?”

The black ink covers his finger from his knuckle to the first joint. It’s a skull wearing a crown with a dagger shoved through the skull. Two snakes are entwined through the dagger and skull. The tattoo somehow fits him.

He looks at it and says, “Well, *Dolcezza*, I guess you’ll have to hope I don’t have a card and tell you as one of my truths.”

“Deal.”

Lifting my hand of cards, I move them so they’re in numerical order. Right away I see that I have two eights. Perfect.

“Who goes first?”

I say, “Usually it’s the youngest person. How old are you?”

“Older than you, that’s for sure.”

“Come on. Count it as a freebie, especially since I’m pretty sure you know I just turned twenty-eight.”

On our wedding day, in fact.

“Forty-two.”

I do the math. “Fourteen years difference isn’t so bad.”

“It is when the woman you want to fuck is seventeen.”

I laugh. “Well, we’ve moved past that and we’re both legal and consenting. And I’d like to point out that I was almost eighteen when we met. Like, seven days from it.”

“Says every pervert in front of the judge.” He shakes his head. “I did the right thing by leaving.”

“Why didn’t you come back?”

He looks at me over his cards. “Let’s play, *Dolcezza*.”

“Fine. Do you have a six?”

“Go-fish.”

I grumble as I draw another card from the deck. He watches me with a smirk on his face as I pull off my cardigan, setting it to the side.

“What would you like to know about me?”

He hums. “Well, I know the basics because of the file I have on you.”

“You have a file on me?”

I don’t know why that surprises me. If I were in his position, I’d probably want to know everything about the people around me.

“I do.”

“Wait. That’s why you claimed to know everything about me on the jet, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Well, that’s not fair. You have a head start.”

He smiles. “Life’s not fair.”

“I’m not going to point out that you didn’t know I was a virgin...”

“True, but I know other things. Now, tell me why you went to business school instead of veterinary medicine.”

My eyebrows lift. “How on earth do you know about that?”

Because I never told anyone that I was considering it when I was in college. In fact, the only person I ever mentioned it to was my advisor.

“I have my ways.”

“That’s cryptic.” I shake my head and say, “I always wanted to be a veterinarian as a kid. I even worked at a vet clinic before I started at the hair salon. When it came time to pick, I went with the easier choice.”

“Why?”

“I guess because I didn’t have to defend my choice to anyone.”

“You mean your father.”

I nod. “My Nonna had just passed away, and I felt so lost. Dad didn’t want me to go to college at all, but it was Nonna’s dying wish. I think there was a part of me that was afraid that he’d make me stop before I got a degree. Vet school would have taken longer than my business degree, so I went with business.”

He’s silent for a moment. “I’m sorry you had to choose.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I make decent money and can work anywhere. In my free time, I volunteer at a no-kill shelter, or used to.” I pause. “I’m not sure I would have made a very good veterinarian, anyway. I get too attached.”

“I think that means you would have been perfect.”

“Maybe. Now, it’s your turn.”

He looks at his cards. “Do you have an eight?”

Glaring, I hand over my two cards.

“I’m starting to think this game may be rigged.”

“Or lady luck favors me.” He motions at me. “Don’t forget to take off an item.”

“Don’t forget to take off an item,” I mimic as I reach down, pulling off one sock. “What would you like to know this time?”

“Were you in love with Caruso?”

“No.” My answer is immediate. “I was only marrying him to save my father.”

“His sister worked with you at the salon, right? The brunette who told me your age.”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Is she how you met Caruso?”

“She’s his twin, so I guess in a roundabout way. My dad did business with him, which is how the engagement came about, which I’m sure you already know.”

He nods. “Just wasn’t sure what made Caruso so eager to help your father. I wondered if he maybe had feelings for you?”

I think back to the way Giosuè treated me. While he never struck me, there were signs it was bound to happen sooner or later. I know because he acted the same way my father did.

“*Dolcezza?*”

“Sorry. Got lost in my thoughts. No, he didn’t have feelings for me. I really don’t know why he wanted to marry me. Heck, I don’t know why he wanted to help my father, either. Like, what was he getting out of it?”

It’s the first time I’ve voiced the thought out loud. What *was* Giosuè getting out of marrying me? I don’t have a ton of money. Nowhere close to what his family has. I don’t have a ton of connections. Nothing that would entice him to go after me and certainly nothing that would make him pay off my father’s debts.

I continue, “I know arranged marriages are common in our world, but those unions usually have some kind of benefit for both parties.”

Alessandro asks, “Did you ask your father?”

“I did once, but he wouldn’t answer.”

“Why didn’t you press him?”

“I did my best not to set him off and that would have set him off for sure.”

“Set him off?” There’s a hard tone in his voice.

My cheeks are warm. “Yes.”

“Did he hit you, *Dolcezza*?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does.”

I dip my head.

Shame fills me and my eyes water. Alessandro sets his cards down and leans forward, hugging me tightly.

“I’m sorry that happened to you, Isabetta.”

I hug him back, sniffing. “I’ve never told anyone.”

“Thank you for trusting me.”

I lean back, wiping my eyes. “Okay. Enough tears. Do you have a two?”

He settles back in his spot and glances at his cards. With a wry smile, he hands a two over. Slowly, he unbuttons his black dress shirt.

“Ohh,” I drag out the word. “Going for a big piece right off the bat.”

“I am.” He tosses the shirt to the side and asks, “What would you like to know?”

Across his lower stomach are big bold letters that spell out Hades. He has a lot of tattoos, but this one has always stood out to me.

I point. “Why the Hades tattoo?”

“I lost a bet back in college.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“That’s it.” He smiles. “My buddy, Brooks, and I were at a bar. He bet me he could out drink me. If I won, he had to get a tattoo of a microphone on his chest. If he won, I had to get Hades.”

“Okay, so why Hades? And why a microphone for him?”

“Brooks has the voice of an angel. I’m not exaggerating. He could have been a professional singer but ended up going a different route. Ever hear of Brooks the Body McGruff?”

“The pro-wrestler turned actor?”

“That’s him.”

“Yeah, of course I’ve heard of him.”

“I picked the microphone because he doesn’t want the world to know about his hidden talent.” He says, “He picked Hades because he found out that I went through a Greek mythology phase when I was ten or so. Drove everyone around me mad.”

“Let me guess. You liked Hades the best?”

“Guilty.”

“Does that make me Persephone?”

“Well, I *did* steal you from your wedding...”

I laugh. “Touché. Does that mean we have to worry about the other gods trying to tear us apart?”

A dark look flickers across his face.

“No one is going to tear us apart, Isabetta. I’ll kill any man who tries.”

I swallow at the seriousness in his tone. I was going to tell him about what I saw online and about Gia’s messages, but I guess it doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

“Do you have a five?”

I don't stop the smile that spreads across my face. "Go fish."

He pulls off both shoes and then his socks, letting them fall to the floor.

"You know, you could have counted that as four items."

"Maybe I want to get naked faster."

Heat courses through me because I don't think he's joking.

I think. "What was your longest relationship before me?"

"None of them matter."

"That's not the question."

He says, "I only casually dated before you, *Dolcezza*. I saw one woman on and off for a few years, but it wasn't serious. Not on my end, at least."

"So what I'm hearing is you left behind a string of broken hearts."

His shoulder lifts. "Perhaps. None of them matter. Only you."

I'm smiling as I ask, "Do you have any kings?"

He hands over two cards, meaning I have all four. I lay them in front of me, waiting to see what he's going to take off next. I mean, the next choice is obvious...

He stands, unbuckling his belt. Slowly, he pulls it off before reaching for the button on his black slacks. My mouth waters as he lowers his pants over his muscular thighs. His stomach flexes as he kicks them off, leaving him in nothing but his stone blue briefs. Briefs that do nothing to hide his erection. He adjusts himself before sitting on the bed.

"Ask your question, *Dolcezza*, because the look in your eyes is about to get you into trouble."

"What? Right." I let out a shaky laugh as I think. "Why didn't you ever come back to see me after that day at the salon?"

“I wanted to,” he admits. “Work kept me away, and I didn’t want to seem like a creep by popping up years later. By the time I did make it back to Vinny’s, you had already moved on, so I figured that was that.”

“Did you...did you ask about me?”

“I like to keep my cards close to my chest. Asking about you would have given Vinny information that could be used against me.”

“That makes sense.” I think. “I quit the hair salon when I was nineteen. Right after Nonna passed away.”

“The two of you were close?”

I smile. “We were. She was my maternal grandmother and my only link to my mother. I was devastated when she passed. It was unexpected.”

He reaches for my hand. “What happened to her?”

“She died in her sleep. The cause of death was listed as a heart attack, though she would have argued it was a broken heart. She never got over my grandfather’s death.”

“I’m sorry you lost her.”

“Me, too. But it gave me a reason to quit the salon. I was only working there to make extra money to help pay bills at my father’s house. Nonna left me a bit of money when she passed, and I was able to move into the dorms while I attended school.”

“Why did you move home after you graduated?”

“I’ve asked myself that a lot. My father made me feel guilty about wanting to find my own place. Said my mother would have never forgiven me for leaving. So I moved home and kind of settled into a routine where I just went along with things.” I pause. “I shouldn’t have done that. I should have been firm. Not weak.”

“You did what you had to, Isa. That doesn’t make you weak. Not at all.”

“Isa?” I smile. “I like it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Now...” he wiggles his eyebrows. “Do we want to continue playing, or can I get you naked and ravish you?”

I pretend to think. “Hmm. I guess we can get me naked.”

“Excellent choice, Mrs. Moretti. Excellent choice.”

I’m laughing as he knocks the cards onto the floor and pulls me onto his lap. Tonight was good for us. It shows that we’re both on the same page. It also tells me that my gut feeling about Gia’s message is right—Alessandro won’t hurt me. I know it.



Alessandro

Isabetta sleeps in my arms. I think back to what she told me... about her piece of shit father laying hands on her. Sure, I knew about it, but hearing it from her lips did something to me. My chest was so damn tight that I couldn't breathe for a moment. He hurt her. He hurt my sweet, kind wife.

And so that means one thing.

Dale Bass is a dead man.



Isabetta

“Happy two-month anniversary.”

I grin as Alessandro enters our room carrying a tray with breakfast on it. The muscles in his arms bulge as he comes closer. Good lord. How does he get hotter every day? He plucks the rose from the tray and hands it to me. Okay, it’s because of little things like that.

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic husband.”

“Only for you, wife.”

He sets the tray next to me before climbing onto the bed. I snuggle into his side, lifting the lid on the tray.

“Aw, you fixed all my favorites.”

“Technically Chef did.”

I snort. “Well, it’s the thought that counts.”

“There’s a little something under the napkin.”

I make a sound of excitement as I lift the folded square linen. Under it sits a black ring box. Alessandro reaches over, opening it. I find myself staring at the most beautiful diamond ring I’ve ever seen in my life with a gold band beneath it.

He lifts it. “I realized that we didn’t do things the traditional way. If we had, I would have given you this engagement ring. And I sure as hell would have put a ring on your finger during our wedding ceremony.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“May I?”

I nod. My eyes water as he slips the rings on my left finger. It’s crazy. This makes things feel so much more real. Like, we’ve been in this happy bubble for the last two months, and this gesture proves we’re on the same page. He puts his left hand over mine, showing a matching gold band on his ring finger. It’s so sexy that he’s wearing a ring, too.

I look up at him, smiling. “I’m happy.”

“Good.”

I poke his side. “This is where you say you are, too, Alessandro.”

He pulls me close. “Happy doesn’t even begin to describe what I feel for you.”

My chest is tight. I’ve wanted to tell him that I love him for weeks now, but it’s never felt right. Should I tell him now?

His phone rings and we both groan.

“Don’t answer it.”

“You know I have to.” He pulls away, reaching for it. “This is Moretti.” There’s a pause. “Fuck. I’ll be right there.” He ends the call, sighing. “I have to go out of town.”

“What about our trip?”

We were planning on going out of town this weekend. Not because of our anniversary, but because we didn’t have a honeymoon. We’ve been trying to get away for the last month, but every time we make plans, something comes up. It’s starting to feel like someone or something is out to stop us from going away.

“We’ll have to postpone.”

“Alessandro, this is the second time we’ve had to postpone.”

He gives me a lazy smile. “Good thing we own the jet and villa, then.”

“That’s not the point.” I sit a bit straighter. “You never answered me when I asked you what you do for a living.”

We’ve danced around the topic for months now. I’ve thought of every worst-case-scenario. I just want to know.

He looks somewhere over my shoulder.

“Once I say it, there’s no going back.”

I take his hand. “I trust you, Alessandro.”

“I know, *Dolcezza*.” He exhales. “I’m the head of the Moretti Mafia.”

Icy dread fills me. He’s in the Mafia?

“Is that how you know Giosuè?”

A dark look flickers across his face at the mention of my ex, but he shakes his head.

“No, I know Caruso because of the Brotherhood.”

“Brotherhood?”

He says, “I’m an Elite Member in The Defiant God Brotherhood.”

My heart is pounding.

“Is...is that some kind of secret society?”

“It is.” His gaze searches mine. “Ask away, *Dolcezza*. I’m sure you have questions.”

“This is just a lot to process. So you’re in the Mafia, but you’re also in a secret society? How does that even work?”

“I was in the Mafia first. Born into it,” he clarifies. “In college, I was recruited for the Brotherhood.”

“Why join a secret society? Like, what’s the point of it?”

Because everything I’ve ever heard about secret societies hasn’t been good. Illuminati. Knights Templar. Heck, there’s even an old movie from the early 2000s about how bad secret societies are. Realization jolts through me, my gaze going to his left ring finger. The tattoo beneath his wedding band... that’s the mark of the Brotherhood.

He says, “I joined because it was an excellent opportunity. Because of the Brotherhood, I’ve been able to expand the *Cosa Nostra*.”

“How did they even find you?”

“I’m a legacy member. My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were members. Because of my legacy status, I was also in line to become an Elite Member.”

“What’s an Elite Member?”

“The Elite Members are a group of five who make all the decisions for the Brotherhood.”

I’m trying to keep up with all this information, but each time I get an answer, I end up with more questions.

“You said when you joined you were in line to be an Elite Member. What made you an Elite Member?”

“Someone died.”

“Of course they did.” I shake my head. “This is a lot. So you’re in a secret society and that’s how you know Giosuè?”

He nods. “He was trying to join.”

“Wait. I think I remember him talking about it with his uncle. Something about how it was going to change his life. Vinny didn’t seem very pleased about it.”

“I suppose someone like Vinny wouldn’t be a fan of the Brotherhood. It hurts his bottom line.”

“None of this makes sense. What kind of bottom line does Vinny have?”

“Surely you know he’s crooked.”

I say, “I just assumed it was small things. Petty crimes and such.”

“He tried to do more than that a long time ago, which got the attention of the Brotherhood. They sent me to check him out. To see if he might be a good fit for the Brotherhood.”

“How long ago?”

“Ten years.”

My stomach drops.

“Is that why you were in New York when we met?”

He nods. “Things didn’t work out. He couldn’t meet the requirements of the Brotherhood and that was that.”

“Wait. He couldn’t meet the requirements, but Giosuè could? That doesn’t seem right.”

“Caruso had something that the Elite Members wanted.”

“Was it...me?”

Because that’s the only logical reason Giosuè would agree to help my father. Somehow, marrying me was also going to help him get into the Brotherhood.

Alessandro is silent and looks off into the distance as if he’s thinking.

“Alessandro?”

“The Brotherhood likes their members to be married.”

“But why me? And why was he going to help my father? None of this makes sense.” I ask, “And why did you stop the wedding? Was that something the Brotherhood wanted?”

His voice is hard. “I stopped the wedding because I knew what a piece of shit Caruso was.”

“How did you know we were getting married?”

“All potential members have to go through an audition of sorts. I went with Brooks to Caruso’s audition. On the way, I looked over his file and saw your photo.” He gives me a small smile. “I knew who you were right away. After reading up on Caruso, I came to one conclusion.”

“And that was?”

His gaze holds mine. “There was no way in hell he was marrying you.”

Warmth flutters through me. “Oh.”

“So I stopped your wedding and told Caruso to step down. The rest is history.”

“Was the Brotherhood okay with what you did?”

He snorts bitterly. “Not at first. They’ve come around.”

“Wait. If the Brotherhood wants their members to be married, why weren’t you married? You weren’t, like, married before or something, were you?”

“I meant what I said at our wedding. You’re my first wife.” His lips brush against the top of my head. “My only wife.”

“Well, who can argue with that?”

“Certainly not me. Now, as much as I wish I could stay here with you all day, I have to leave. I should be back tonight, but if I’m not, it’ll be early in the morning.”

“Can I ask if it’s Mafia or Brotherhood related? Is that okay?”

“Now that you know about both, it’s okay to ask. This time I’m going out on Mafia business. There’s a pit boss who’s been stealing from one of the casinos under my protection.”

“Is that going to be dangerous?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. Now, give your husband a kiss.”

Tilting my head, I kiss him when his mouth meets mine.

“I’ll see you soon, *Dolcezza*.”

When he’s gone, I sit back, trying to process everything that just happened.

Alessandro is in the Mafia.

And a secret society.

I’m glad that he trusted me enough to tell me, but I’m worried this is going to change things. My ring catches the light and a warm feeling spreads through me. Then again, maybe it won’t. Maybe today was a new beginning for the both of us. One where we know everything about each other and there aren’t any secrets at all.

*Isabetta*

Another month goes by in a blur. Alessandro and I have settled into a comfortable routine. We're closer than ever, telling each other how much we care for each other. We haven't said we love each other yet, but, god, I want to so much. And I think he might love me, too.

He's waiting for me when I enter the living room.

"How would you like to come to a meeting with me?"

"Meeting? As in the Brotherhood?"

We don't talk about the Brotherhood much, but he's told me about some of his friends that he's met because of it, like Brooks and Dimitri.

He nods. "They're holding a dinner tonight and the families are invited to attend. I know it's short notice, but it will be nice to introduce you to everyone. I may have to slip away for a bit, but it shouldn't take too long."

"Who will I talk to while you're gone?"

"The Elite Members sit together, so their wives will be there."

"Are they nice?"

He makes a sound that has me laughing.

"That's not very reassuring."

“They’re set in their ways.” He sighs. “It’s something that I’ve never noticed before. Not until I had to deal with them on a daily basis. Their wives are similar in that aspect.”

“Well, even though you’re not selling this very well, I’d love to go with you. What should I wear?”

“I’m having a dress sent over as well as a team to do your hair and make-up.”

I look down. “I hope you mentioned my size.”

He tips my chin. “They’ll have something, *Dolcezza*, and it will be stunning.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I’m probably going to regret this.”

Hurt spears through me. “Why is that?”

“Because I’m going to want to kill anyone who looks your way tonight.”

I giggle. Actually *giggle*.

“Oh. Well, I’ll allow it.”

“You’ll allow me to kill for you?”

“Sure.”

He grins. “A woman after my heart. The team will be here around three.”

Alessandro says we’re leaving at seven. The team arrives right on time at three, and they’re all absolutely lovely. I’m shown several gowns, all in my size, and I have a hard time choosing one. By the time they’re gone, I feel like an actual princess. Now, all that’s left is to show Alessandro.

I twist, looking at myself in the mirror. The dress I picked is a floor-length black gown covered in rhinestones that catches the light when I move. Unlike my wedding dress, this one shows off my assets without enhancing my flaws. The neckline is a sweetheart cut, giving off a nice glimpse of my chest, and the sleeves cover the unflattering parts of my arms

that I'm self-conscious about. Around my waist, the skirt flairs as to not call attention to my curvy stomach and wide hips. My shoes are a two-inch kitten heel. I've never worn a kitten heel before, but I really like it. I feel sensual without the fear of falling on my butt.

My blonde hair is curled and pinned in a way that I could never pull off on my own. My make-up is fitting for an event at night, making my eyes pop. And I'm wearing a red lip for the first time in my life. Red might be my new favorite shade of lipstick. I was definitely taking notes, and the team said they would leave behind the products they used so I can try to recreate the look myself. I'm carrying a black clutch with my phone, lipstick, and compact so I can freshen up my powder if needed.

I'm still nervous about meeting the members of the Brotherhood, but knowing I look good eases my worries. I spritz perfume on my chest and behind my ear. There. I'm ready.

Leaving our room, I make my way to the living room, where Alessandro waits. He got ready in one of the guest rooms, so I don't know what he's wearing. He's standing near the window, looking out, his hand resting on the new pink chair that was just delivered today. He's dressed in all black, which isn't surprising. His long hair is pulled back in a manbun tied off with a black silk ribbon. Oh, I'm going to love pulling it untied at the end of the night because there's no way I'm keeping my hands off him. Not with how sexy he looks.

"I'm ready."

He turns, a smile on his face. But then he takes in my appearance and stills.

I run my hand over my hips. "Too much?"

"Fuck. I'm giving each person who helped you get ready a tip."

"They deserve it. I feel like a princess."

He pulls me close. “They only enhanced what was already there.”

“You’re looking pretty handsome yourself.”

“Oh?”

I nod, holding onto his jacket lapels. “Mmmhmm. You clean up nice, Mr. Moretti.”

“As do you, Mrs. Moretti.”

I’m smiling when he kisses me.

“Ready to do this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

He says, “Atta girl. I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Oh, I’ve already got some ideas.”

“Care to share?”

“It involves that ribbon in your hair.”

He wiggles his eyebrows. “Do I get to tie you up with it?”

My lips part as I envision what he’s suggesting.

“I’ve shocked you.”

“I wouldn’t say shocked. I just didn’t think about it.” I giggle. “I was just thinking how nice it’ll be to untie your hair.”

He grins. “I like it, but just know the tying up part is still on the table.”

I swat his chest. “We’ll see.”

“Mrs. Moretti, you impress me every day.”

His words make me warm all over.

“Ditto.”

We make our way to the first floor, where the SUV is waiting.

“I didn’t even ask, but where is the meeting?”

Alessandro told me that the Brotherhood owns properties across the world, but since we're not headed to the airstrip, it must be somewhere local. He rattles off the name of a famous hotel here in Vegas.

My lips part. "Does the Brotherhood own the hotel?"

"They do."

"Wow. I'm shocked."

"This is just the tip of the iceberg. Castles, massive estates, super yachts. The Brotherhood owns a lot of them."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, you hear all kinds of rumors about secret societies."

"Some of those rumors are true and some aren't."

"Do they run the country?"

He snorts. "Which country?"

"What about Hollywood?" At his nod, I ask, "Sports?"

"They have their hand in a lot of things."

"Wow. This is wild."

And my husband is one of the top men. Wow. Just wow.

We arrive at the hotel and are ushered inside. I look around in awe. It's crazy to think that the Brotherhood owns something like this. I mean, it's one of the most famous hotels in Vegas.

Alessandro says, "This way, Isa."

I follow him through the casino toward the convention center. I guess it makes sense that the meeting is being held here. Alessandro mentioned that there are over three-hundred members around the world. It's not like they can all fit in a regular sized conference room.

A man opens the doors to the convention center hallway and says, "Greetings, Elite Member Moretti." He turns to me. "Mrs. Moretti."

Alessandro doesn't seem surprised or weirded out by this interaction. He dips his head at the man as we pass, and the

man bows in return. Actually bows.

“Will everyone address you as Elite Member Moretti?”

He laughs. “Yes, *Dolcezza*.”

“Will they all bow?”

“Most of them will.”

“It’s just a lot to take in.”

He stops, facing me. “I think we can do anything as long as we have each other. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, crap. When you say things like that, it’s hard not to agree. You make me feel like anything is possible.”

“The feeling is mutual. Now, let’s rub a few elbows and then get the hell out of here. You and I have a date with a ribbon.”

I laugh. “You and that ribbon.”

“The idea’s been planted, Isa. There’s no going back now.”

Heat courses through me at the look in his eyes.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You’ve convinced me.”

“Fuck.” He looks around before grabbing my hand. “Come with me.”

“Alessandro—”

“It’s too late, *Dolcezza*. You’ve woken the beast.”

He pulls me into a bathroom, kicking the door closed behind him. He turns the lock and spins to face me. I’m reminded of our wedding day when he did the same. Things are different now. So different. We’re building a strong relationship each day because we *want* to be together. Yeah, we started out unconventionally, but that doesn’t matter. We trust each other. I look up at him and my breath catches. I love him. Oh my god. I love him. I’ve danced around the feeling for weeks, but at this moment, I know with every fiber in my

body that it's true. I'm in love with Alessandro Moretti. And, god, I hope he loves me.

He moves closer, reaching behind his head. Time feels like it slows as his hair comes down. He shakes his hair, making him look primal as he lifts the black ribbon.

"You look delectable, wife. I have so many fucking things I want to do with you, but that would require cutting this dress off your body. For now, let's make a small compromise. Take off your panties."

I say, "Well, I really wish I could do that. But I'm not wearing any panties."

His lips part on a loud exhale.

"Fuck. It's a good thing I didn't know that. We would have never left the house." He presses against me, and I feel his hard cock. "Hold out your hands, *Dolcezza*."

I do, and he quickly ties them together with the ribbon. The silk is smooth against my wrists, but it's tight enough that there's a bit of a bite when I move. He walks me to the floor-length mirror, spinning me so I'm facing it. My pulse quickens as I take in our appearances. He towers over me by at least a foot. With his hair down, he looks like a beast who's about to devour his prey. For once, this prey is willing.

His head dips, and he nuzzles on my neck. I tilt to give him better access, and he smiles against my skin.

"So willing to let me corrupt you?"

I gasp when his hand moves to my breast, cupping it through my dress.

"Yes," I groan, leaning against his chest. "Corrupt me."

Something shifts between us. Something carnal and delicious that makes heat course through my body, right between my legs. My thighs press together, and he notices. Of course he notices.

"Such a dirty girl. Spread your legs and I can help ease your pain."

I widen my stance. I'm so freaking glad that this skirt is wide enough to allow me to move freely. Slowly, he lifts the skirt until it's to my waist. I'm bared to him, and he stares at our reflection in the mirror.

"Fuck. Look how pretty you are." His hand moves to my thigh, rubbing my skin. "So soft. Sometimes it takes everything in my power not to sink my teeth into your flesh." His grip tightens. "To mark you. Make you mine."

Goosebumps lift on my skin and my nipples harden. My breasts are heavy and there's an ache that only my husband can fill. He leans in, rubbing his nose against the side of my neck. My exhale is shaky, and he smiles.

"Your scent drives me crazy, *Dolcezza*."

"I feel the same way. You always smell so good."

"I have a little secret about that. One I'll show you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

He nods. "Yes. Because we'll be far too busy tonight."

Any question in my mind goes away when he sucks on the side of my neck on the spot that drives me crazy. I whimper when his hand moves higher between my legs. The ache there turns into a tsunami as he toys with me. But it's not enough.

"Alessandro," I moan. "I need more."

"More, *Dolcezza*? Tell me what you need." He adds another finger. "This? Or something else?"

"Something else." My words come out in almost a sob.

"Say it, my sweet girl. Tell me what I can do to help you."

I'm so close. So freaking close. But I don't want to get off like this.

"I need your cock, Alessandro."

His nostrils flair. "Such a dirty mouth, *Dolcezza*. My, how I wish we had all the time in the world. I'd put that mouth to use and smear that red lipstick as you choke on my dick."

I groan when he steps away from me, but my pain is short-lived. He unbuckles his belt and pants, freeing his cock with one hand.

“Eyes on the mirror, *Dolcezza*.”

He pushes me so I’m leaning forward and tucks my skirt through my bound hands. I take in our reflection, my breaths coming out in short bursts filled with anticipation. He looks at my bottom, cupping my cheeks with both hands.

“One day I’m going to take you here, *Dolcezza*. How does that sound?”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Just like that?”

“I trust you. And you always make me feel good. So, yeah, just like that.”

His gaze is so intense that it takes my breath away. “You never cease to amaze me, Isa.”

He shifts and I feel his dick at my entrance. Slowly, he enters me until I’m full of him. My pussy clamps around him and we both moan. He pulls out, thrusting in harder this time.

“Look at how well you take my cock.” Another thrust as he watches himself slide into me. “So fucking pretty.”

I moan as his fingers dig into my hips. I love when he gets carried away, leaving small marks behind. His pace increases and the sounds of our bodies coming together fill the air.

“Alessandro,” my voice is hoarse. “I’m close. Please…”

“Please what, Isa? Please fill you full of my cum? Please put a baby in you?”

Tears leak from my eyes as my orgasm builds. “Yes! Please do both.”

“You want my baby, wife?” He rocks into me. “Because I want to make one with you.”

Our gazes meet in the mirror as I shatter. Hot pleasure swirls through me, stealing my breath. He’s right behind me,

filling me, just as he said he would. My pussy clenches around him, and he smiles.

“Your greedy pussy is doing everything in your power to make that baby, isn’t it?”

I push back against him, nodding. “Yes.”

“Fuck. You amaze me, Isabetta. I…”

My heart pounds. Is this it? Is he going to say he loves me? God knows I’ve almost said it at least ten times tonight.

“I’m so fucking lucky that you’re mine.”

My stomach falls. I know I shouldn’t be upset. People fall in love at different speeds, but, surely, he feels it, too?

But what if he doesn’t?

What if this is one-sided?

“Isa?”

“I’m lucky that you’re mine. Now, we should go. I don’t want to make a poor impression with these people by being late.”

His gaze searches mine in the mirror. I give him a small smile of reassurance. He pulls away and our combined juices run down my leg. I hate that it makes me feel dirty. Like what we just shared isn’t special. My eyes water when he grabs some tissue to clean me up.

“I can do it.”

“I want to, Isa.” Once he’s satisfied, he lets my skirt fall into place. “Give me your hands.”

I turn to face him, keeping my gaze on my hands as he unties them. He rubs my wrists, even though the ribbon didn’t even leave a mark behind.

“Good?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Isa—”

“I’m fine, Alessandro. Really.”

He tips my chin, so I'm looking at him.

"I never want to hurt you. You know that, right?"

I smile. "I know."

"Good." He exhales. "Let me straighten up and then we can go out there."

I nod and move to the vanity so I can reapply my lipstick. When I meet my reflection in the mirror, my eyes water. How much longer can I keep this up? And what is going to happen when I tell him I love him?



Isabetta

“Ready to face the beasts, *Dolcezza*?”

Alessandro’s hair is pulled back again, tied by the same ribbon that was just around my wrists.

“Beasts, huh? I thought you were the only beast I had to worry about.”

He seems to relax at my teasing. “They’re a different type of beast.”

“Well, I guess it’s good you’re at my side.”

“Indeed.”

We’re both smiling as we exit the bathroom. A tall, muscular man with blond hair leans on the opposite wall, his arms crossed.

“Damn, Ace. Couldn’t even wait until the meeting was over?”

Alessandro laughs, showing off his teeth. “Fuck off, Brooks.”

Oh my gosh. That’s where I know this man from. It’s Brooks the Body McGruff, the wrestler turned actor.

He turns to me, smiling. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Isabetta. It is okay to call you Isabetta, right?”

“Of course.”

“Brooks. Brooks Henderson.” He snorts. “Though more people know me by my alternate ego.”

I hold out my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Alessandro puts his hand on my waist and asks, “Have they started?”

“They’re seating everyone for dinner.” Brooks frowns. “We’re at different tables, which shouldn’t be that surprising, I guess, but still sucks.”

Alessandro says to me, “Brooks is at a table with the other alternates. We’ve sat together for years now. This is the first meeting where we haven’t been seated by each other.”

Brooks slaps Alessandro on the shoulder. “And now Ace here is all high and mighty and has to sit with the other Elite Members. Speaking of, did you ever find out what this shindig is all about?”

Alessandro says, “Not yet, but I haven’t even made it inside.”

“True. Well, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

Brooks grins. “Good. Now, let’s get inside before Zhāng and Blanc’s heads start to spin.”

Alessandro makes a motion for Brooks to go first, and we follow.

“I like him,” I whisper. “He’s nice.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that. It’ll just go to his head.”

“I heard that,” Brooks says, glancing over his shoulder with a wink.

It’s easy to see why Brooks is the Face of the Brotherhood. He’s charismatic—magnetic, even—and you find yourself just wanting to be his friend. There’s a bit of sadness in his eyes, even when he smiles, making me think that things aren’t always what they seem.

Inside the convention space, I stop. Holy cow. There are so many people here. More so than that, people I recognize. Actors. Politicians. Activists. Businessmen. Alessandro gives my hand a squeeze. I smile at him in thanks. As we walk, people nod their heads at my husband. I knew he said he was an Elite Member, but now I'm seeing just what that means. He's important. Like, really important. Some of the most powerful men in the world are in this room, and they're showing respect to Alessandro. I move closer to him as we walk. I can do this. I can do anything with him at my side.

Brooks says, "This is where we part. Find me for a drink later, Ace. Isabetta, do you drink?"

"Not much, but I never say no to good conversation."

"Even better. See you two soon."

He heads to a table where I spot a politician who's rumored to be running for president next term. There are others at the table who I've seen on TV or on gossip websites. Good lord. How is this even real?

Alessandro says, "We're over here."

The table he's gesturing toward sits away from the others at the head of the room. It feels intentional, like whoever is at this table is more important than every other person in the room. The table is full except for two seats that I assume are for me and Alessandro.

An older man says, "Moretti. About time you showed up."

"Blanc," Alessandro greets, but it's not friendly.

I don't think anyone else notices, but I do. And I take note. Blanc is someone not to trust, which I had already gathered before he even spoke. He's one of those powerful men who gives off the creepy vibe. Like, if he caught you alone, he'd definitely try *something*.

Alessandro pulls out my chair before taking his own seat.

"Les, who is this darling creature at your side?" the woman next to Blanc asks.

She's smiling, but it feels fake. Everything about her feels fake, if I'm being honest. I know better than anyone that I shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but I also have experience with mean girls. And this woman is giving off Gia vibes. Also, what's up with her calling Alessandro 'Les'? Clearly, it's supposed to be some kind of nickname, but I've literally not heard anyone else call him that.

He puts his arm around the back of my chair and says, "Isa, I'd like you to meet Blanc and his wife, Aimée. Everyone, this is my wife, Isabetta."

The woman smiles, again looking phony. Blanc dips his head my way before turning his attention back to his phone.

Alessandro points to the man across from us. "This is Zhāng and his wife, Vivian."

Zhāng says, "A pleasure to finally meet you, Isabetta." His gaze slowly rakes over me. "I can see what the fuss over you was about."

Okay, that's really random. And creepy. Is that a requirement with these men because we're two for two in the creepy department.

His wife glares at me, as if I've offended her. Cool. So, she's not going to like me, either.

"That's Smith and his wife, Jacqueline."

Jacqueline huffs. "Darling, if you're going to introduce me, do it right. I'm Jacqueline Chanel Minty-Smith. You might know me from the Minty Chewing Gum empire."

Who hasn't heard of Minty Chewing Gum? I think I have a pack of their gum in my purse back at the house.

"Oh, wow. Yeah. I love your gum."

She smiles. "It's an American staple."

Alessandro points to the last couple. "This is Jones and his wife, Buffy."

Buffy sniffs the air, like she smells something bad. "Nice to meet you."

“You, too.”

There’s an awkward silence. I don’t miss that Buffy and Jacqueline share a look. A look I’m all too familiar with. God. Are all these women mean girls?

Alessandro leans in and whispers, “Ignore them.”

“Hard to ignore them when their welcome is so chilly.”

He snorts as he lifts his drink. “A fair assessment. We can leave after the first course is served.”

“Really?”

“I believe I promised cutting my wife out of her dress before the night was over.”

I swat his arm, laughing. “Hush.”

Blanc clears his throat. “Moretti, did you read the briefing I sent you?”

Alessandro drags his gaze from me to Blanc. “I didn’t. As you know, other matters detained me for most of the day.”

“Please read it. Now.”

Tension is thick around the table, but now it’s stemming from the men. Do they not like Alessandro? Worry courses through me. Should he be worried? Should I?

Alessandro pulls out his phone. I can literally feel the tension rolling off him with each moment that passes. Whatever is in that message isn’t good.

He says, “That’s why you wanted to meet in Vegas.”

Blanc nods. “It is. This needs to be addressed. Now.”

Alessandro looks torn. He glances at me, his jaw clenching. Unease makes my chest tight. What in the heck is in that message?

Finally, he says to Blanc, “I’m ready when you are.”

“Gentlemen, let us leave the ladies so we don’t bore them.” He stands and says to Smith, “Bring the alternates, too.”

Alternates? I follow his gaze to the table where Brooks sits. He said he was an alternate. I feel better knowing Alessandro will have someone in that room who's on his side.

Alessandro touches my arm. "I won't be long."

I don't want Alessandro to leave my side, but I get it. He's here because he has to, not because he wants to. He and the other men at our table stand. Blanc leads the way as they exit the room. Smith pauses long enough to speak to a man at the other table. A moment later, every male at Brooks' table leaves, too.

Awkward silence settles over our group. Now I'm really wishing I had paid more attention when Alessandro made introductions...

"You get used to it," the woman to my right says, flipping open a lighter.

"Pardon?"

She inhales on her cigarette and answers on the exhale, sending a puff of smoke my way.

"You get used to them running off." She waves her hand in the direction Alessandro went. "There's always something with the Brotherhood that takes precedence over our lives."

The woman sitting across from me lifts her glass. "I'll drink to that. Mr. Smith lives for it."

I remember her name, but only because made sure everyone knew it. Jacqueline Chanel Minty-Smith—the heiress to the Minty Chewing Gum empire. Also wife to Mr. Smith, which is apparently how she refers to him.

Jacqueline continues, "I just hope it's not about that pesky deal that fell through."

The woman next to me leans forward. "Do tell." To me she adds, "Jacqueline always has the most delicious gossip."

Jacqueline seems proud of this, practically preening as she answers, "Well, the Brotherhood was set to receive a very generous donation, but it all relied on the man's fiancée. Very similar to your situation, Buffy."

The woman next to me, who I guess is Buffy, nods. “Sounds like it. God knows Jim and the rest of the Jones family wouldn’t have been able to join the Brotherhood without my money.”

I ask, “The men have to pay to join?”

Buffy laughs. “Oh, I forget what it’s like to have a newcomer amongst us. Yes, they have to pay. In one way or another.”

Okay...that’s rather ominous.

Jacqueline says, “Well, as I was saying, Peter Zhāng hand-picked this man to join because, as we all know, he needs all the help he can get keeping his spot on the council.”

I feel so lost right now, not knowing who in the heck these people are, but nod along with Buffy.

The dark-haired woman next to Jacqueline says, “Peter was livid.”

Vivian. Her name is Vivian. Which means the woman who’s silent is Aimée. Out of all the women here, I remembered her name because of the way she eyed Alessandro and how she called him Les.

Buffy asks, “What made it fall through?”

“That’s just it. Mr. Smith won’t breathe a word of it to me.” Jacqueline’s lips lift in a devious smile. “Good thing Vivian doesn’t have the same problem.”

Vivian says, “I certainly don’t owe my piece of shit husband anything, and that’s why I’ll tell you. The woman married someone else. And get this...he’s already in the Brotherhood!”

Buffy’s overly injected lips part. “No! Who would go against an Elite Member?”

“Another Elite Member, of course.” Vivian’s gaze lands on me. “It was Alessandro.”

I laugh. “Oh no. That’s definitely not about me. I’m not an heiress.”

“But you *were* engaged before, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he was trying to join the Brotherhood, right?”

I shift. “I believe so.”

I know he was, but I don't voice this. Not when they're both hanging onto every word. My chest is tight. Is there a chance this is truly about me? No. It can't be. It doesn't make sense. If I was an heiress, I'd know about it. Wouldn't I?

“So it stands to reason that you're the heiress, then.”

Buffy looks like she's living her best life right now, looking back and forth between the two of us.

I say, “Like I said, I'm not an heiress.”

Buffy pulls out her phone. “What's your maiden name, dear? I can sort this out.”

Jacqueline nods. “Buffy can find anything online.”

“I'm not sure I should be part of this conversation—”

Buffy cuts me off. “There it is. Bass. Thank god for public announcements.”

Her fingers fly across her screen and her smile widens. When she turns the phone to face me, my stomach drops.

“Right there is the information, dear.” Her eyebrow lifts. “You surely can't expect us to believe that you didn't know...”

What I'm looking at doesn't make sense. My name is there as well as Nonna's. And the amount that supposedly belonged to me as of my twenty-eighth birthday. I blink, just to make sure I didn't imagine all the zeros after the one. What is going on? Nonna left me...*millions*? How is that possible? I mean, I knew she had money, but this? No. This has to be a mistake.

Aimée makes a sound of pity. “Oh my. I don't think she knew, Buffy. Now, why would dear Les keep something like that from you? Unless...”

“Unless what?” Vivian asks, hanging onto every word.

“Unless it’s because he’s using Isabetta for her money.” She eyes me. “God knows you’re not his usual type.”

Buffy nods. “You’re right there, Aimée. Alessandro usually goes for brunettes, like Greer or even Missy. No offense, Isabetta.”

No offense, Isabetta? How is that anything but offensive? And who in the heck are Greer and Missy?

Aimée says, “You took the name right out of my mouth. Tell me, Isabetta, has Les told you about Greer? They were madly in love once upon a time. We were all shocked when she ended things, but one can’t blame her.”

“It’s hard to look past cheating,” Jacqueline says with a faraway look on her face.

My chest is tight. I don’t know whether or not to believe these women. Aimée is staring me down, smirking. She has ulterior motives, but that doesn’t mean she’s lying. I mean, Alessandro lived a life before me, and we haven’t talked about his past exes other than what he said when we played strip go-fish. He said there was no one serious, though there was someone he saw on and off for a few years. Is that who Greer is? His almost-serious ex?

Vivian says, “Oh my. I think we’ve scared Isabetta. Dear, please pay us no mind. We’re just looking out for you.”

Buffy adds, “It doesn’t look good, does it? Thankfully, we’re here for you.”

I trust these women as much as I trust a rabid dog or venomous snake. In fact, I’d trust the animals more than these women.

Reaching for my water, I take a sip as I try to get my emotions under control. These women are the type that thrive on drama, and I’ll be damned if I give them fuel.

I say, “Well, I’m sure there’s a logical explanation. Alessandro has been upfront and honest about everything else. Now, who else is thirsty?”

They all chime in except for Aimée, who is on her phone, texting as fast as she can. I wave down a server, who takes everyone's drink orders. They probably don't even realize that I didn't order one. I don't like to drink on a good day, much less when I'm surrounded by fake-ass bitches who are making me queasy. In fact, the longer I sit here, the more worried I'm becoming that I'm going to vomit.

I stand. "Please excuse me."

The bathroom is thankfully empty when I step inside, and I lock the door behind me. My stomach heaves and I have to take in a deep breath as I wait for the nausea to pass. How on earth am I supposed to go back out there knowing they're laughing at me? They're not even doing it behind my back. I lean my head against the wall, willing the tears filling my eyes not to fall.

I'm not a pretty crier. If I cry, there's no denying it and I don't want to give Aimée and her mean girls more fuel in whatever game this is. A single tear runs down my cheek and I brush it away in frustration. I don't want to believe what they're saying is true, but what if it is? Does Alessandro know? My stomach drops. Would he keep something like that from me?

He swore to be honest with me, but I can't stop the doubt that's swirling around in my mind. He married me, and there had to be a reason for it. Did Giosuè know about the inheritance? Did my father? The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. My father needed money to pay off his debt. Giosuè was trying to get into the Brotherhood but needed a substantial amount to be accepted. Money he didn't have on his own. And Alessandro? That's the only part that doesn't make sense. What does he have to gain out of all of this? Could he really have married me to get my money, too?

I straighten. I need to talk to him. That's the only way I'll get any answers.

Aimée and Buffy are gone when I return to the table, and Jacqueline and Vivian's heads are together as they whisper. Probably about me.

“Ladies. Did I miss anything?”

Vivian’s eyes are wide. “Isabetta. You were gone so long we were worried that you had left.”

Way to exaggerate. I was gone for like ten minutes.

I say, “I had to take a phone call. So sorry you were worried. Where did Aimée and Buffy run off to?”

Jacqueline waves her hand toward another table. “Those two love to collect gossip. It’ll be hours before we see them again. Now, I hope we didn’t hurt your feelings earlier.”

“Hurt my feelings? Was that your intention?”

“Of course not. We’re just looking out for you.”

“Right.”

Vivian says, “It’s true. We don’t want to see anything bad happen to you.”

“Are you this worried for all the other wives?”

Jacqueline laughs. “Well, no, but they’re not all millionaires like you are.”

I hum under my breath but don’t say anything.

Jacqueline sits a bit straighter. “Oh, here comes Brooks. He’s always got a good joke to tell.”

Vivian fixes her dress as Brooks approaches.

“Ladies,” he greets everyone.

I try not to smirk when he squats next to my chair.

“Ace had to take off. Brotherhood business. He asked me to see you home.”

His tone is low, so Jacqueline and Vivian can’t hear what’s being said, though I’m sure their ears are straining.

“He’s not here?” When Brooks shakes his head, I ask, “When will he be back?”

“Hard to say. Might be tomorrow. Might be a few weeks.” He glances at the other ladies, who are openly listening. “Anyway, just let me know when you’re ready.”

There's no way I can sit here and pretend to make small talk with these women, especially knowing Aimée and Buffy might return at any moment.

"I'm ready now." I stand and say, "It was so very nice to meet you both."

The two return the sentiment, though I don't believe them one bit.

As I leave, I hear Jacqueline say, "I wonder if poor Alessandro knows his wife is leaving with his best friend?"

"Poor Alessandro," Vivian agrees.

I follow Brooks from the conference center, keeping my head held high. In the hallway, I exhale.

"It's hard being around piranhas."

"What?"

Brooks points over his shoulder. "The Elite bitches."

"Jesus. I thought maybe it was just me."

"Not at all. The only one worse than them is Missy."

"Who is she? They mentioned her earlier, saying she was the type of woman Alessandro would usually go for."

He whistles. "They didn't waste much time, did they?"

"So I'm guessing it's true."

"Well, Ace didn't fly across the country to stop her wedding when she married DeLeon, now did he?" He smiles. "Just remember that. No matter what they throw at you, he chose you."

"God, you're so good at it."

His eyebrow lifts. "At what?"

"At selling whatever you're saying. It's a talent."

"Thanks, I think."

"No, I wish I was more like that." I exhale. "I've always struggled to be strong and bold, but it's been hard because there's people who want to knock me down."

“Do you know why that happens?”

“Because I look like a pushover?”

He’s serious as he says, “It happens because people see your strength, Isabetta. They see this greatness in you, and it scares them. So they try to knock you down. But what they don’t know is that you are strong and that none of it matters.”

“See, you’re doing it again.”

He snorts. “I’ll let you laugh it off, but mark my words, one day soon you’ll see the truth in what I was saying.”

My eyes water and I have to blink back tears. This man has just met me, and yet he makes me feel like he sees me.

“Thank you, Brooks.”

“No need to thank me. I just call ‘em like I see ‘em. Besides, Ace thinks the world of you, which takes a lot.” He smiles. “You’re good for him.”

“He’s good for me.” I frown. “I just wish I understood the Brotherhood more.”

“Hell, there are members of the Brotherhood who don’t even understand it. The best thing you can do is just be there for Ace.”

“I can do that.”

“I knew you could. Now, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Deal.”

Because I’d much rather be at home than here.



Isabetta

Seven days go by without a word from Alessandro. I try not to go into a tailspin of doubt and worry but fail miserably.

After Brooks dropped me off at the penthouse, the first thing I did was get out of the dress that Alessandro promised to cut off me.

It's now in a pile on the closet floor.

I can't bring myself to do anything with it.

The next thing I did was google my name. I found the same information that the Elite bitches found, and then some. It looks like the money became mine the day I turned twenty-eight, though I have no idea how to access it. I reached out to the bank listed on the website but haven't heard from them. It's frustrating, to say the least.

The third thing that's happened is that I've been nauseous every day like clockwork. At first, I thought it was stress but now I'm not so sure. Alessandro's words have crossed my mind more than once. Did we make a baby together? Am I pregnant?

It's possible. We haven't used protection once, and I'm not on birth control.

I wish I was confident enough to leave and get a pregnancy test, but that will raise questions. Questions I'm not prepared to answer. Not when I have my own questions that haven't been answered. I think Donna is worried about me, but I don't

have it in me to ease her fears. Not when there are so many what-ifs dancing through my mind every moment that I'm awake.

I'm in the living room, staring out the window when the elevator doors open.

Alessandro enters the house, looking more disheveled than I've ever seen him look. There are smudges under his eyes, as if he hasn't been sleeping, and his beard has grown unruly and wild.

I stand.

"Is everything okay?"

He crosses the room, pulling me into his embrace.

"I've fucking missed you."

"You're scaring me, Alessandro."

His grip tightens, so I hold him back.

"Alessandro?"

He finally pulls away.

"It's been a long week, *Dolcezza*. I'll be better once I shower and sleep."

My heart falls. "Alessandro—"

He shakes his head. "Please, Isa. I need you."

I nod, and he grabs my hand, pulling me behind him. We make our way to our bedroom. He's undressing me before the door even closes.

I should stop him...stop this before it goes any further.

There's so much that we need to talk about. The money. The fact that I might be pregnant. The Brotherhood.

But one look in his eyes has me cupping his face.

"Hey. It's okay. I'm here. Everything is okay, baby."

He presses his cheek against my palm. I've never seen him like this, and it has me worried.

“Come on. Let’s get you undressed.”

He lets me lead him to the bathroom where we both finish undressing. Once the water is warm, we step inside, and he ducks his head under the spray. The water running off his body is tinted with blood.

“Are you hurt?”

He shakes his head. I look him over, trying to see if he’s telling me the truth. It doesn’t take long to find the source of the blood. His knuckles are busted on both hands.

I lift one, brushing my lips against the bloodied skin.

“Isa, don’t—”

“Shh,” I whisper. “Let me take care of you.”

Reaching around him, I lift his body wash and squirt some soap onto his loofah. Once it’s lathered, I gently wash his body. His eyes close and he leans into my touch.

“Tilt your head,” I whisper.

He does and I lather his hair, washing and rinsing it. When he’s clean, I reach for the water knob, but he stops me by wrapping his arms around me, holding me as close to his body as he can.

“It’s okay, baby. I’m here.”

Water pours over us, but I think I see a tear running down his cheek. Before I can ask, he tilts my face, capturing my mouth in a desperate kiss. There are so many emotions coming from him that it makes my heart pound erratically. He pulls back, spinning me so I’m facing the tiled wall.

“Spread your legs, Isa. I need to be inside you, or I’ll die.”

I widen my stance and feel his cock brush against my opening. I’m wet, so he slides right in when he thrusts. My breasts press against the tile, but I don’t mind. Not when I know he needs this and not when he makes me feel so good. His grunts fill the air as he chases his release. When he reaches around and rubs my clit, I shatter. He’s right behind me and presses his face against the back of my head as he comes.

Looking over my shoulder, I say, “Let’s go to bed, Alessandro.”

He nods and turns off the water. I should probably shower, but my priority is taking care of him. I’ve never seen him like this. I step out of the shower first, reaching for a towel. I hand him his when he steps out. We’re silent as we dry off. When I pin up my hair, he kisses my shoulder and then carries me into the bedroom, placing me on the mattress. He slides next to me, pulling a blanket over both of us.

I turn to face him. “Do you want to talk about it or sleep?”

“Sleep.”

“Promise me you won’t run off in the morning. Not until we talk.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” I rub his arm. “Sleep.”

He brushes his lips against mine before closing his eyes. A moment later, he’s asleep. I’m not as lucky but settle for watching him. He’s wrapped around me as if he’s afraid something is going to take me away. I gently run my fingers through his hair.

“I’m here. It’s okay.”

He snuggles even closer, breaking my heart. Tomorrow is going to be interesting. I just hope our relationship can withstand whatever he has to say.

Because, deep down, this feels like a goodbye.

I wake up early the next morning to find Alessandro watching me.

“Hope I wasn’t snoring,” I say with a small laugh.

“Only a little, but it was adorable.”

I look him over. He looks better—more rested—but there’s still a heaviness in his eyes that makes my chest tight.

“Are you ready to talk about it?”

He sighs. “No.”

“But you will?”

“Yes, I will.” There’s a pause. “Someone is coming after members of the Brotherhood. And their families. That’s what took me away.”

“Did you find the person?”

“No.”

I touch his arm. “It’s going to be okay.”

“No, it’s not. When I say coming after the members, I mean killing them.” His gaze searches mine. “They threatened you.”

“Me?”

“Well, they threatened me, but used you as a motivator.”

“I’m not following.”

He runs his fingers through his hair. “At the dinner last week, Blanc wanted me to read an email he received the prior day. It was from the same person who threatened and killed my predecessor, Hugo DeLeon.”

“Hugo DeLeon. Why does that sound familiar?”

“Because he was a huge Hollywood producer. His sins finally caught up to him and he was murdered.”

Oh my gosh. I know exactly who he’s talking about. But I thought the news said DeLeon died after a home intrusion?

I say, “And Mr. Blanc received a letter, too? What did it say?”

“Basically the same. It listed things that he had done over the years and then there was a threat for him to right his wrongs.”

“Why did he want you to read the letter?”

Alessandro says, “Because of what I do for the Brotherhood, I can find people when others can’t. He was hoping I could get some insight by reading the letter.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No. And when we were all in the other room, we each received letters of our own.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know how the fucker knew we were all together, but he did. It makes me think...”

“It makes you think what?”

“That whoever is behind these letters is in the Brotherhood. There are other things that point to this as well.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the way DeLeon died. If this person is in the Brotherhood, then he has an advantage over us.”

I ask, “What did your letter say?”

“It said that I had yet to prove myself as an Elite Member.” He exhales. “It also said that you could be taken back as easily as I took you.”

“Alessandro, that’s not going to happen.”

“I know it’s not because I’m going to find this fucker and kill him.”

“Did Brooks get a letter, too?”

“No, but he’s not an Elite Member.”

“So you, Blanc, and who else got one?”

“Everyone at our table. Me, Blanc, Zhāng, Smith, and Jones.”

“And you were all threatened?”

“In one way or another.” His jaw tics. “I thought there was a hint or clue in Jones’ letter. It ended up being a dead end. Not one of my contacts has any idea who this fucker is. He’s like a ghost, and ghosts are dangerous.”

“You’ll find him.”

“We can’t be sure. No, my best bet is to increase security on you while I hunt down this man.”

I laugh, thinking he's kidding. One look at his face has me shaking my head.

"You can't be serious. Alessandro, I barely leave the house as it is and you're wanting to lock me down even more?"

"Have you wanted to leave?"

"Well, kind of, but that's not the point. I don't like the idea of not being able to leave if I want."

He says, "It's for your own good. I promise you won't want for anything while I'm gone. Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do. But—"

"Then it's settled." His gaze searches mine. "I'll do anything to protect you."

"I know you will."

He says, "I have to leave for a bit today to put some security measures in place. With any luck, this will be resolved by the end of the week."

I watch him go to the closet where he disappears.

There's so much going on right now and I feel bad about asking him about the heiress thing. Maybe he's right. Maybe this will all be resolved by the end of the week and then we can talk.



Isabetta

I groan when I see Alessandro slipping into his shoulder holster.

“Please don’t go.”

“I have to. This might be the lead we’re looking for.”

I don’t have the heart to disagree with him. Not when he needs this to work out so badly, especially when every other lead has led to a dead end over the last month. I’ve seen less and less of him and, when he is home, he’s so tense that we barely speak.

I’ve still been sick in the mornings, making me fairly certain that I’m pregnant. Sure, it could be chalked up to stress, but there have been other signs. My breasts have been tender, and I swear there’s a slight curve to my stomach that wasn’t there before.

“Did you ever make an appointment for me? I’d really like to get set up with a primary care physician here.”

Alessandro’s face falls. “Shit. I haven’t. I’ll do it when I get back.”

“As I’ve said before, I’m more than capable of doing it myself.”

“You know I need to vet the person, Isa.”

“I know.” I pause. “How long will you be gone this time?”

“I should be back by the end of the week.”

I’m really, really starting to hate those ten words because I’ve heard them a *lot* in the last month.

He tips my chin. “I’ll make it up to you when I return. I promise.”

I’ve heard those words, too, and each time they lose meaning. But I never want him to leave feeling like I’m mad at him, so I smile.

“Be safe.”

“Always am.”

He grabs his travel bag and leaves five minutes later.

I wait until he’s gone before I allow a few tears to fall. We can’t keep going on like this. We can’t.

After my pity party, I make my way to the living room, curling up in my pink chair. It’s kind of depressing that I’ve settled into a routine where I sit here for a few hours a day and stare out of the window.

Donna stops by at one point and asks, “Do you need anything?”

“I’m good, but thanks for asking.”

I think she’s going to say something else, but she shakes her head and leaves.

Alessandro has been gone for about an hour when the phone next to me rings.

“Mrs. Moretti, this is Bart downstairs. I’m just letting you know that your friends are on their way up. Mrs. Blanc knew the passcode.”

Aimée is here? Well, this isn’t going to be good. I don’t even have time to change, and Aimée is definitely the type that’s going to judge me for being in jeans and a t-shirt with my favorite rock band on the front.

I bite back a groan. “Thank you, Bart.”

I'm standing when the elevator doors open and Aimée and another woman step off. Aimée is beautiful and wears a tailored pantsuit, but the brunette next to her is stunning. Like, looking at the sun and hurting your eyes kind of pretty. She's a curvy girl, just a bit smaller than me, and wears a black and white polka dot skirt with a black top. Her smile is genuinely friendly, and I smile back at her.

Aimée says, "Darling, we're so sorry to barge in uninvited, but when Charles told me that Les was going out of town, I knew we couldn't leave you here all alone." She turns to the other woman. "Isn't that right, Greer?"

Ah. So this is the infamous Greer. For some reason, I expected someone who looked more like Aimée and less like me. Maybe Alessandro's type is curvy girls. The thought makes me smile.

Greer nods. "I'm sure Les wouldn't want it any other way." She holds out her hand. "Greer Blanc. A pleasure to meet you."

I shake her hand and ask, "Are you related to Charles, then?"

I mean, if Aimée can use my husband's first name, then I can use hers. I don't miss her scowl.

Greer says, "We're first cousins."

Well, that explains a lot, like how she knows Alessandro. I try to gauge her age. She's not as old as Alessandro, Aimée, or Blanc, that's for certain, but I think she's older than me. Maybe in her early thirties?

"Let's sit. I can have Cheffy bring us some refreshments."

"Cheffy?" Aimée snorts. "I'm sure Chef has never been called that in his life."

Greer says, "I think it's a sweet nickname. Lord knows the man won't tell anyone his real name."

Both women follow me to the living room and sit on the couch next to each other. I sit in the chair by the window, crossing my ankles.

“Do either of you have a drink preference?”

Aimée taps Greer’s arm. “What was that drink the Chef used to make for you?”

Greer’s laugh rings out like bells. “Heavens to Betsy. I haven’t thought of that in ages. He probably doesn’t even remember what was in it.”

At that moment, Donna arrives. She looks between Greer and me.

Greer stands. “Donna! How are the grandkids?”

“They’re well, Ms. Blanc. How are you?”

“Excellent. Do you think Chef can fix me the little pink drink that he always used to make for me?”

Donna glances my way and I nod.

“I’ll ask him. Mrs. Moretti, would you like anything to drink?”

I secretly like how she just emphasized the *missus* part of my name. Way to show ‘em, Donna!

I say, “Water is fine with me. Aimée, would you like anything?”

Aimée frowns but says, “I’ll have what Greer is having.”

Donna dips her head before leaving. I feel a bit better knowing she’s aware that they’re here. If they aren’t supposed to be here, I’m sure she’ll make sure they’re gone before too long.

As if sensing my thoughts, Aimée says, “I can’t believe our husbands thought it would be okay to put us on lockdown while they’re off doing god knows what.”

“Mr. Blanc is with Alessandro?”

She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “I would assume so, though one can never tell with them.” She says to Greer, “Do you remember that one time they said they had work, and we found out they were here, in Vegas, living it up?”

Greer smiles. “Wasn’t it when Brooks finally divorced that terrible woman?”

“No, it was when Dimitri and Serafina found out they were expecting the twins.”

Greer’s smile fades. “Poor Serafina.”

Aimée turns to me. “How rude we’re being. You don’t know who any of these people are, do you?” Before I can answer, she continues, “Greer and I sometimes forget that not everyone has been with the group as long as us.”

“It’s fine. Alessandro has spoken about his friends, so I know a little about Mrs. Santos passing away recently.”

Both women look surprised. I shouldn’t get satisfaction out of shocking them, but I do. A lot of satisfaction.

Greer nods. “You would have liked Serafina. She was kind, as you are.”

Donna arrives at that moment with our beverages.

As she hands me mine, she says in a low tone, “They should be leaving soon.”

“Thank you.”

Like clockwork, Aimée’s phone rings.

“Hello? Yes, I’m at Alessandro’s house. Greer is with me.” She pauses. “No, I didn’t bring my guard. Honestly, Charles, I think you’re getting a bit carried away with this.”

She pauses again. This time I can hear pieces of what her husband is saying. Words like ‘idiot’ and ‘never listen’ stand out.

“I understand, dear. Greer and I will return to the prison, I mean, our house, immediately.” She ends the call with a huff and stands. “We need to leave. Greer, darling, don’t forget to get the things that you came for.”

I echo, “Things?”

Greer stands, too. “I left some toiletries in my room and a few changes of clothes. Would it be okay if I got them before I

left?”

I’m momentarily stunned. Her room? Changes of clothes? How long ago were she and Alessandro together?

“Of course.”

“You can come with me, just so you can tell Les I took everything that he asked me to.”

There’s a lump in my throat. “He asked you to come here?”

“Well, it was a while ago. Honestly, he’s probably forgotten by now.” She shakes her head. “You know how he gets when he’s busy.”

The smile on my face feels forced. “We should get your things. I’d hate to keep Aimée’s driver waiting.”

Greer nods, leading the way through my house. She’s clearly been here before. There’s no hesitation in her steps as she walks to the guest room furthest from my room. In the room, she goes to the dresser, opening the top drawer. It’s full of lingerie—the kind of things you’d wear if you were trying to seduce a lover. Greer giggles when she drops a pair of crotchless panties and grabs them off the floor.

“My bag is in the closet. Could you grab it for me?”

“Sure.”

Anything to get this woman out of my house.

In the closet, I stop. There aren’t just a few changes of clothes in here. It’s a full wardrobe. I glance over my shoulder to see her coming from the bathroom with an armful of toiletries.

“Can I ask you something?”

She looks up. “Of course.”

“Aimée hinted that you and Alessandro were close.”

“We were.”

“But you aren’t now?”

She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “You’re married to him. Why does it matter?”

“It matters.”

She sits on the edge of the bed. “We’re not close. As much as I wish we were.”

My chest is tight. She’s in love with him. I can’t blame her, I really can’t. That doesn’t mean I have to like it, though.

“I’m not a threat to you, Isabetta. I know Aimée brought me here to cause drama, but it won’t go anywhere. Do you want to know how I know?”

“How?”

“Because he chose you. When I left, he didn’t chase after me. When my engagement was announced, he didn’t bat an eye. When I suddenly became single again, he didn’t call.” She shakes her head. “He’s yours, Isabetta. And I’m just glad I can finally have my favorite pair of jeans back.”

We both share a laugh and the tension in the room eases.

We work together, packing up her clothes. When she’s finished, I turn to her.

“Thank you for saying that. You didn’t have to, and it means a lot.”

Greer’s gaze searches mine. “Can I be frank?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not the one that you have to worry about, but there are others who want to see your marriage fail.”

“Others?”

She dips her head toward the door. “Aimée enjoys gossip, but she never does anything unless she’s told.”

“Her husband?”

Greer nods. “Yes, I believe so.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know how much Les has told you about the Brotherhood, but their golden rule is that their members are married.”

“He mentioned that.”

“Charles was married before Aimée. After his first wife passed away, the Brotherhood was quick to match him with Aimée. It’s been the same with almost every other member of the Brotherhood except for Les.” Her pause is long. “There are exceptions, of course, but why haven’t they wanted him to marry?”

“You have thoughts?”

She nods. “I believe they are worried that they’ll lose control of Les if he finds love.”

Something in my chest pulls at the mention of love.

“Do you think he’s found it?”

“You tell me.” The smile fades from her face. “Which makes me worried for you. They’re going to try everything to break up your relationship with Les. And god knows if anyone in this world can ruin something, it’s the Brotherhood. Just be careful.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

She rolls her suitcase out of the bedroom, and I follow.

In the living room, Aimée huffs. “The two of you were gone long enough. Did you find interesting things to talk about?”

There’s a sly look in her eyes that I hadn’t noticed before. Maybe it was there all along.

Greer smiles. “Of course we did. You know me. I can make a friend anywhere.” To me, she says, “It was a pleasure, Isabetta.”

“Ditto.”

Aimée looks back and forth between the two of us, like she's trying to figure out what's changed or if we're being sincere. The thing is, I *can* see myself being friends with Greer.

The two leave and I fall onto the chair by the window with a loud sigh. Well, that was a lot.

Donna peeks her head around the corner.

“Are you alright, Mrs. Moretti?”

“I'm fine.”

She enters the room slowly. “It's not my place to say anything, but those women are vipers.”

I snort out a laugh that comes out sounding like a sob. She rushes to my side, reaching for my hand.

“I'm okay, I promise. Greer seemed nice.”

“Ms. Blanc has her moments, but Mrs. Blanc doesn't.” She squeezes my hand. “Do I need to call Mr. Moretti?”

“Heavens, no. I don't want him to worry about me while he's out of town. I *would* like to let the front desk know that they aren't to let visitors up unless they speak to me first.”

“That can be arranged. Now, let's get you dinner.”

“Thanks.”

I try not to dwell on Greer's words, but it's hard.

The Brotherhood doesn't want Alessandro to be married, which means I'm their enemy. Dread coils through me. I now feel like I'm fighting for my life. My hand goes to my stomach. And I might even be fighting for two.



Isabetta

Alessandro is home before the week is up. He enters the bedroom, seeking me out. I'm in the closet hanging up some clothes I ordered online. I mean, it's not like there's a whole lot of other things I can do. I read. I eat. I sleep. I worry about Alessandro's safety. I wonder if he's lying to me. And now I shop for things I don't need online. A lot.

Alessandro stands in the doorway and says, "That looks new."

"It all is." I gesture to the row of tops I just hung. "Don't worry, I used my card to pay."

A dark look flashes across his face. "I'm not worried about the money. In fact, I wish you would have used my card. I left it for you."

I huff. "I'm aware. So, did this trip provide any insight into who is out to get the Brotherhood?"

He's silent for a moment.

"No."

"Let me guess. You did, however, find another clue and came home long enough to make sure I'm okay before you take off again." I lower my voice to sound like him. "I should be back by the end of the week, *Dolcezza*. And I promise I'll do everything I've said I'll do for the last month when I get back. This time I mean it."

He touches my shoulder. “Isa—”

I spin to face him. “You’re gone more often than you’re here. When you’re here, you’re on your phone, worrying about the Brotherhood. How long do you think we’re going to last like this?”

“I know, Isa, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I don’t want your apologies, Alessandro. I want *you*.” My eyes water and I swipe at a tear that escapes.

“*Dolcezza*, please don’t cry.” He pulls me into his embrace. “Fuck. It kills me to see you like this.”

“I’ve been like this for the last month. You’re just never around to see.” I push away from him. “We need to talk.”

Because I mean it when I say that we can’t go on like this. I can’t. I *won’t*.

Pushing past him, I go to the bedroom and sit on the bench at the foot of the bed. He stands near me, looking torn.

“Isa, my flight leaves in an hour.”

“Then you better sit, because if you don’t hear me out, you won’t get another chance.”

His eyes widen. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that this isn’t going to work. The Brotherhood is going to tear us apart before this mystery threat will.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable? Alessandro, you’ve been gone more days than you’ve been home since we’ve been married. You’ve rescheduled our honeymoon so many times that I don’t even bother asking when we’re going. I sit here, doing nothing while you’re gone because you’re afraid to let me leave. Tell me, how am I being unreasonable?”

“It’s for your protection.”

“But the only one hurting me is you.” I don’t try to hide the tears that are falling. “I should have spoken up sooner. I should have let you know how I was feeling, because I’m sure

this is coming as a shock to you. I just...I can't keep doing this."

"Isa, I swear to god I'll make it up to you once we find who is behind the letters."

"Have you received another one?"

He shakes his head.

"Have you ever stopped to think that you might be playing into this person's game by running around? He sent one letter and you're gone for a month!"

"I've thought of every scenario, and it's driving me fucking mad that I can't figure out who this man is!" He all but yells the words.

"And it's driving me mad that you're not here! Did you know that I met Greer when Aimée brought her here to collect her things from *her* room? Did you know that she warned me that the Brotherhood would try to ruin us?" I laugh. "I thought she was just saying that to get under my skin, but now I'm not so sure. The kicker is, I thought the bigger issue was going to be the fact that I'm an heiress."

He stills. "What?"

"Yes. Some more news you missed because you've been gone."

"Explain what you mean about being an heiress."

"At the dinner last month, right after you and the other Elite Members took off, the wives were gossiping. They told me that not only was I an heiress, but that you had ruined some kind of deal between Giosuè and Mr. Zhāng. I didn't believe them at first until they showed me proof."

"Those women don't know shit."

"That was my thought until I came home alone and started doing some digging. I think my Nonna set up some kind of trust for me that became mine when I turned twenty-eight. It makes sense, if you think about it. It's why Giosuè was so willing to marry me and why my father arranged the engagement. Both had something to gain."

This is the part I've dreaded saying, but if I'm laying all my issues on the table, then I have to tell him.

"What I want to know is, did you know that I was an heiress? Clearly the Brotherhood knew."

"Isa—"

"Answer the question, Alessandro. Did you know? Is that why you married me?"

He's silent, which breaks my heart because deep down I think I know the truth.

"Please tell me, Alessandro. Please just tell me the truth. You promised you always would..."

My chest is tight and my stomach churns. He has to answer me. If he doesn't, then I'll know my worst fears are true.

That he only married me to get my money for the Brotherhood.



Alessandro

“You promised you always would...”

I can't look at her. Not when this is fucking killing me.

“I knew.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Her sweet voice breaks.

I look at her in time to see more tears silently running down her beautiful face.

“I'm a bad man, Isabetta. It's in my nature.”

“We agreed never to lie to each other.” Her breath hitches. “I would have forgiven you.”

Alarms go off in my head and suddenly this feels final. Like she's already decided not to love me. And, god, does it hurt.

“What are you saying?”

“I don't think we should be together.” More tears fall. “I want a divorce.”

“No.”

“I wasn't asking.” She inhales. “I'll be gone by the time you return from your trip.”

“Isa, this is madness. We can talk about it. Work things out.” I run my fingers through my hair. “Sweetheart, please.”

“It won’t change anything, Alessandro. If you care for me at all, you’ll let me go.”

“Isa, there’s still a threat out there. I can’t let you go. I won’t.”

She meets my gaze.

“Then find somewhere safe for me to go. Somewhere away from you.”

Each word feels like a knife stabbing me right through my fucking heart.

“I can’t protect you if you’re not here.”

“I don’t care, Alessandro. At least out there I’ll be able to *live*. I won’t be sitting here, looking out a window, wishing I were *anywhere* else but here.” Her chin wobbles. “At least out there, I won’t have to worry that the man I love is lying to me.”

“Isa—”

My fucking phone rings.

“Answer it. You know you’re going to anyway.”

“Isa, please.”

She moves past me, going to the closet. My phone continues to ring and Blanc’s name flashes across the screen. Cursing, I send the call to voicemail and follow Isa to the closet. She’s on her knees, folding items before putting them into her luggage. I feel so fucking helpless. No. She can’t leave me. She can’t!

I squat next to her. “*Dolcezza*, we can work this out. Please, just wait until I get home.”

“You are home, Alessandro.” She meets my gaze. “I can’t wait. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Please—”

“You have two days to find me a place to live until the divorce is final. If you don’t, I’ll find my own place and you won’t have a say in where I go. Understand?”

Her words are sharp. Final, even, reminding me so much of something I'd say.

I've done this.

I've hurt this sweet, sweet woman so much that she now has to harden herself.

From me.

Fuck.

She's right. It's not fair to keep her here when she's unhappy.

Even though it's going to kill me to let her go, I say, "I'll have a place for you by tomorrow."

"Thank you." She stands. "I'm going to stay in one of the guest rooms tonight."

"Isa—"

My fucking phone rings again and I curse.

Isa says, "Answer it, Alessandro. I'm sure they need you."

With those last words, she brushes past me, leaving me alone in our closet.

My grip is so tight on my phone that I'm surprised it doesn't break.

Finally, I swipe the screen. "This is Moretti."

Because, at the end of the day, I still have a job to do. And once I do it, I'm going to do whatever it takes to get my wife back.

*Isabetta*

I walk around the apartment, looking around the living room and kitchen. Everything is new and fresh. It's nice, but it doesn't feel like home. My eyes water. But I'll just have to make it my home, won't I?

The building is close enough to Alessandro's building that I can see it when I look out my window. I'm not sure if that was intentional, but I think maybe it was. Hard to forget someone when you can literally see the place where they live...where you used to live. Not that I'm going to forget him anytime soon. My hand goes to my stomach. Once I'm settled, I'm going to buy a test. If it confirms what I think is true, then my next step will be finding an obstetrician. I'll worry about the rest later. The rest being finding an attorney to get a divorce and to get access to my inheritance. I have money in my account, but it won't last forever. Sooner or later I'm going to need the money Nonna left behind. My eyes water at the thought of Nonna. God, what would she say to me right now?

She'd say something like, "You can do this, *amorina*. You are my granddaughter, which makes you strong."

The thought gives me hope.

I sit on the couch and exhale. It's so quiet. Too quiet. Donna offered to come with me, but I didn't want to take her from Alessandro. She seemed torn but agreed to stay with him if I'd let her bring over a meal now and then. Of course I said yes. Should I have let her come? I hate being alone, but the

thought of Alessandro being alone when he is home guts me. I can't do that to him. No, he needs Donna more than I do.

A dull ache forms between my eyes. I'm not going to accomplish anything, so I might as well go to bed.

The next week goes by like this. Finally, on the fifth day, I decide I've had enough. I have things I need to take care of, so it's time to stop moping around. Using my phone, I google divorce attorneys in Vegas and pick a woman with a high rating and thousands of reviews. She agrees to meet me later this afternoon, which is good. Right? Like, the thought shouldn't make me want to cry and call her back to cancel. And I'm definitely not avoiding the other issue...the one where I might be pregnant. Not at all.

For the first time since I arrived at my new place, I take the elevator to the first floor. The doorman greets me.

"Hello, Mrs. Moretti. How can I help you?"

"Please call me Ms. Bass."

He doesn't bat an eye. "Of course, Ms. Bass. How may I help you today?"

"I need to get here, please." I show him the piece of paper I wrote the address on.

"Of course. I believe your car is outside, waiting."

"My car?"

"Mr. Moretti informed us you'd be traveling in his vehicle at all times. Is this incorrect?"

I'm torn. I don't want to take anything from Alessandro, but I know he's doing this because he wants me to be safe. As much as I want to refuse, I nod.

"It's correct. Can you point me toward the car?"

He leads me outside to a black sedan. The driver gets out, opening the back door for me. I've seen him before when I went out with Alessandro.

"Mrs. Moretti."

Ugh.

“Please call me Ms. Bass,” I say as I slide into the backseat.

The door closes, and the man rounds the car, getting in the driver’s seat.

“Where to, Mrs. Moretti?”

I hand him the piece of paper and say again, “Call me Ms. Bass, please.”

He nods and pulls away from my building. Twenty minutes later, we arrive at the attorney’s office. The driver gets out, opening my door for me.

“I’ll be there when you get out, Mrs. Moretti.”

My smile is so fake that it actually hurts my cheeks. “What’s your name?”

“Neil, ma’am.”

“Well, Neil, as I’ve said twice now, please call me Ms. Bass.” I gesture to the building. “I’m sure you can read, right? I won’t be married to Mr. Moretti much longer.”

He’s silent, so hopefully I got through to him.

My stomach churns as I enter the building. There are two women sitting behind the receptionist’s desk, and both smile welcomingly toward me.

“Hello. How may we help you?” the brunette asks.

“I have an appointment with Patricia German.”

She looks at a tablet in front of her. “Ah, yes. Ms. Bass, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Please follow me.”

I follow her through the frosted glass doors down a hallway. From what I can tell, only women work here and that makes me feel better. Like, I’m basically going up against Alessandro and the Brotherhood right now and can use all the support and girl power I can get.

We enter an office that's decorated in vibrant décor and furniture. Normally, something like this would look tacky, but it's done in such a way that it is elegant and uplifting. My mood feels lighter just by being here, amongst the cheery colors.

"Ms. German will be here shortly. Can I get you something to drink? Water? Coffee? Soda?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

She nods, leaving the room with a smile on her face. A few moments go by before an older woman with grey hair enters the office.

"Ms. Bass, I'm Patricia German. It's a pleasure to meet you."

We shake hands.

"Thank you for seeing me so quickly."

"Your email intrigued me. Mr. Moretti is a powerful man here in Vegas."

"Does that mean you don't want to represent me?"

"Not at all. I'm a firm believer in sticking it to the man. Literally. As long as my clients aren't mediocre cis-het white men, then they're welcome to be represented by me and my firm." She grins. "I hope that's fine with you."

I like her, and not just because she's blunt.

"It is."

Patricia says, "Great. Now, I'll ask you a few questions, and then we can get started."

Two hours later, I leave her office with a plan of action. She thinks that this can be handled within a month, though I'm not as confident. I think Alessandro is going to balk when he's served the papers. Patricia also referred me to someone at her firm who does estate law, so hopefully I'll have answers about the inheritance that Nonna left me.

The driver, Neil, is waiting when I exit the building. Good lord. Did he move at all while I was in there?

Inside the car, he asks, “Where to, Mrs. Moretti?”

I glare at the back of his head. “Home.”

“Will do.”

At my building, I hurry out of the car before Neil has a chance to open my door. Heck, I don’t even give him time to open his own door. Good freaking riddance!

Inside my house, I smile when I see Donna standing in the kitchen. There are two empty bags next to her, which means she probably brought me more goodies.

“I didn’t know you were coming by today,” I say as I hug her. “I would have made sure I was here.”

“I brought you meals for the next week.” She cups my face. “How are you?”

“Good.” I pause. “I saw an attorney today.”

“Have you talked to Mr. Moretti at all?”

“No.”

Her mouth drops. “He hasn’t called?”

I shake my head, hating the sliver of hurt that spears me right through my chest.

“That man,” she mutters.

“It’s probably for the best. Besides, I don’t think he’s going to be too happy with me when he’s served the divorce papers.”

“No, I don’t think he will be happy at all.” Her gaze searches mine. “He’s been miserable since you’ve been gone.”

“He’s back?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

My heart hurts so much that it’s hard to breathe.

Finally, I say, “Well, since you brought dinner, you have to stay and eat.”

“I’d love that.”

I really do want her to stay, and not just because I’m lonely. She’s my last link to Alessandro. The thought makes me pause as my hand goes to my stomach. Well, maybe not my last link.

*Alessandro*

My head spins as I stare across the room. Maybe if I stare long enough, the elevator doors will open, and Isa will walk back into my life.

Like a dream, the doors open and hope soars through me. My joy is short-lived as Brooks' frame fills my line of sight.

Brooks sniffs. "Jesus. When's the last time you've showered?"

I glare at him. "Who let you in?"

"I have a code, remember?"

He sits across from me in the chair that Isa put by the window so she could look out. My chest is tight. Fuck. Blindly, I grab the bottle next to my chair and bring it to my lips, drinking until the ache is gone. The bottle is pulled away, spilling liquid down my shirt.

"What the fuck, man!"

"Is this really what you've been doing for the last two weeks? Jesus Christ, man. I thought for sure you were coming up with a plan to get her back. Have you tried to see her?"

I shake my head once.

"Ah. Afraid she'll turn you away. She probably would, just so you know, but you should still try."

"You don't understand."

Brooks leans forward. “I understand more than you’ll ever know, Ace. That’s why I’m here. Because if I had a chance in hell of getting my girl back, I’d tear down the world to make it happen. So, what are we going to do to win her back?”

“We?”

“Figure you could use all the help you can get. Besides, I’m off TV until my knee heals, and it’s boring as fuck just sitting at home.”

I lean back, sighing. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“You said she mentioned something the Elite bitches said, right?” At my nod, he continues, “Then I say we get some answers. It’s a start.”

He’s right. I will not get Isa back just sitting here doing nothing.

“I’ll make some calls.”

“Hell yeah.”

For the first time since Isa left me, I smile.

*Isabetta*

I smile at the doorman as I exit the lobby. Neil stands in front of the black sedan, ready to take me to the store. I've stopped trying to speak to him, since he clearly only takes orders from Alessandro. He opens the back door for me, waiting for me to slide onto the leather seat before closing the door.

"Nice to see you, too," I mutter.

He rounds the car, getting in the driver's seat.

"Where to, Mrs. Moretti?"

I hate the flicker of hurt that I feel when he calls me that. At first, I would correct him and say Ms. Bass, but he continues to call me Mrs. Moretti, so why waste my breath?

I rattle off the name of a grocery store and I see him scowl.

"I believe Mr. Moretti has you set up with a delivery service."

I smile sweetly at him. "Your name is Neil, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, Neil, I don't recall asking for your thoughts. If you have a problem with where I'm going, then I'll get out and call a cab or an Uber. As for what Mr. Moretti said to you, I don't give a rat's ass. Now, are you going to take me to the store, or do I need to save us both time and get out?" His jaw tics, so I nod. "Don't bother following me."

I get out of the car, slamming the door behind me. Part of me expected to find the door locked when I got out. My exhale is shaky. Thank god it wasn't because I don't think I could deal with it. Not today, when I've finally built up enough courage to do what I've been putting off for weeks.

I stroll back inside my building, stopping where the concierge sits.

"Please call Mr. Moretti and tell him I will no longer need the service of his incompetent driver. And please hail me a cab."

"Oh, I can't do that, Ms. Bass."

My fist clenches at my side, and I prepare myself for another battle.

He continues, "The building offers a private car service."

Why in the crap didn't he mention that weeks ago? Well, to be fair, he probably just assumed I wanted to use my own car...or Alessandro's car.

"That will be fine. Thank you."

"And we will let Mr. Moretti know his driver is no longer needed."

He lifts the phone behind the marble counter and a moment later, a black SUV pulls up behind Alessandro's car.

"The driver's name is Steven. He'll take you anywhere you need to go."

"Thank you."

I stroll outside, going to the second vehicle. Neil stands next to Alessandro's car with the back door open. Ignoring him, I go to the SUV, climbing into the back.

When Steven is behind the wheel, he asks, "Where would you like to go, Ms. Bass?"

"To a grocery store. I don't care which one."

"Will do. Will you need help carrying your bags?"

"I think I'll be fine."

“I’ll give you my card just in case.”

Ten minutes later, we pull up in front of a grocery store and I exit the SUV with Steven’s card in my pocket. I’m not surprised to find that Alessandro’s man followed us in his car, his phone pressed to his ear. I can only imagine what he’s saying to his boss, which means I need to get in and get out. I’m really only here for one thing, and the last thing I want is for Alessandro to show up and see what I’m buying.

I’ve put this off long enough but now I need to know...

Inside, I grab a shopping basket and ask a sale’s associate where the pharmacy is. She points me in the right direction, and I hurry to the aisle feeling a sense of dread when I see several options. Who knew there were so many choices? I settle on one that seems straightforward and then rush to another aisle, grabbing random items. By the time I get to the checkout line, my basket is full, but if someone asked me to name an item other than the one I came for, I don’t think I could do it.

“Would you like help carrying out your bags, ma’am?”

“No, thank you.”

Outside, the SUV is waiting, and I slide inside. Alessandro’s car is still there, too, and Neil lifts his phone to his ear, likely tattling on me.

Steven asks, “Back home, ma’am?”

“Yes.”

He nods, taking off. I’m not surprised when my phone buzzes.

ALESSANDRO MORETTI

Why did you get into a car that I have not vetted?

Indignation courses through me. He hasn’t reached out once since I left! And to reach out because of this? My fingers fly across the screen.

First, I don't owe you an explanation for why I do ANYTHING.

Second, your driver is rude and refused to take me to the grocery store.

I have a delivery service set up for you, Isa. There's no need for you to go to the store.

How do you know I didn't run out of something? Maybe I was baking and needed sugar. Did you think of that?

Third, I'm an adult. I don't need you to tell me where I can go. I agreed to stay in a house that you vetted because I knew it would make you feel better. In my opinion, I've done more than enough.

I miss you.

Those three words stun me. I type out several replies before deleting all of them. It won't do any good to tell him I miss him. That I wish we could work this out. That I might be pregnant and being away from him is killing me. So, I'll say nothing instead.

I drop my phone in my bag just as we arrive at my building. I half-way expect to see Alessandro standing out front, but he's not there. Of course he's not. He's probably off on Brotherhood business. I mean, that is the root of most of our problems. If he would just *show up*, then things might be different!

Inside my apartment, I drop my bags on the kitchen counter and pull out the pregnancy test. It's straightforward. Pee on the stick and in one to five minutes, you'll know if you're pregnant. Carrying it to my bathroom, I sit on the toilet. My heart pounds the entire time. What am I going to do if it's positive? What am I going to do if it's not? When I'm finished, I set the stick on the countertop and wash my hands.

The digital screen on the test flashes, showing the test is progressing. A countdown to my results. God, who thought this was a good idea? It's literally torturous watching each segment light up. And one to five minutes to get the result? I grab the box the test came in to make sure I read it right. Yeah, that's what it says. I glance at the stick and my lips part. Oh my gosh. Pregnant.

I take the other test in the box when I wake up the next morning. It shows 'pregnant' even faster, if that's possible. On my phone, I check my period tracking app. My cycles are never regular. Once, I went an entire year without having a period. From what I can tell, the last period I had was a few months before I married Alessandro. Okay, that's not really helpful. So, sometime between the wedding and the nearly four and a half months that we've been married, I got pregnant.

My hand goes to my stomach. I've always wanted to be a mother. Even as a little girl, I would carry my baby dolls around and care for them as if they were real. I'd make stories up about my little family, even pretending that I had a husband. And now it's true. Except I don't have the perfect family. Not at all.

Alessandro's face crosses my mind and my eyes water.

I have to tell him, and I will. I just need time to process this on my own.

The next day I leave my apartment to go shopping on the strip. It's kind of fun being here as a tourist, though it would be even better if Alessandro was here with me.

I'm debating where to go next when I see a familiar face walking toward me.

"Isabetta? Is that you?"

"Greer," I greet as she gets closer. "I didn't know you lived in Vegas."

"Oh, I don't. I'm here with work." She grins. "There was a special at one of my favorite bars. It's a speakeasy and you

have to know the secret password to get in for free, so I came in a few days early.”

Ah. Is that what’s making her cheeks so flushed right now?

“That sounds fun.”

“It was. You’ll have to come with me next time.”

I nod, but don’t say anything. There’s not going to be any drinking in my future for a while.

She looks around. “Are you out here, alone?”

“I am.” I wiggle the bag in my hand. “Just doing some shopping and sightseeing.”

“Oh, we must go to one of my favorite stores, then! And lunch! Have you had lunch?”

“I haven’t.”

“I know just the place to take you.”

A bit later, I find myself seated across from Greer in an Italian restaurant. She orders another drink, but I settle with water with lemon.

“My feet are killing me,” she says. “I always forget how much walking there is in Vegas.”

“I had never been before I married Alessandro.”

I don’t mention that this is the first time I’ve been out on the strip since I’ve been here.

She says, “It’s not my favorite place to visit, either, but I’m here a lot because of my job.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m the social media coordinator for Humans Yearning to Protect Earth.”

My eyebrows lift. “Oh wow. That’s really cool.”

Humans Yearning to Protect Earth, better known as HYPE, is an activist group that works hand in hand with other global organizations to protect the world.

“There’s a conference about to start that I’m dreading just because I think it’s going to get out of hand. But the people need to know the truth.”

I think back to an article I read online.

“Wait. Are you here to cover the republican presidential candidate debate?”

She frowns. “Yes.”

“That’s kind of cool.”

“Like I said, I think it’s going to get out of hand because some of the candidates are morons and seem to think pumping the earth for more oil isn’t going to backfire.”

“I must confess I don’t keep up with politics as much as I should.”

She snorts. “Many people don’t, which is how villains like Grant Carter even get a chance to run for the republican presidential candidate.”

“Grant Carter? Isn’t he…” I look around and lower my voice. “In the Brotherhood?”

“He is.”

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

“Not for me. I’m not in the Brotherhood and my cousin doesn’t control what I do in my free time.” She looks at me. “You’ll learn to put your foot down. Otherwise, they’ll run right over you. Even Les can’t tell them no.”

She’s right to a certain extent. Alessandro can’t tell them no.

“I’m surprised the Brotherhood hasn’t tried to marry you off yet.”

She snorts. “My god, knock on some wood.” She raps her knuckles on the top of the table three times before I get a chance. “They’ve tried. First with Les. Then to a new recruit who was barely out of diapers. Thank god most of the members who need to be married are already married, or I’d be worried.”

“What do you mean the members who need to be married are married?”

“The Brotherhood only survives by bringing in new blood.” She gestures toward me. “From what Aimée said, you brought a lot of money with you when Les married you. That’s how they are able to stay afloat. Marrying women like us who have our own money that doesn’t belong to the Brotherhood.”

“Your own money?”

She nods. “My mother’s side of the family was very wealthy. She left it all to me, even though the Blanc side of my family tried their hardest to get their hands on it. Jacqueline Minty-Smith has a similar story, which I’m sure she told you all about.”

I laugh because Jacqueline *did* tell me all about it.

She continues, “Charles and Peter handpick the brides for all the members, and believe me when I say, no one is picked unless they have money.”

“If that’s the case, then why wasn’t Alessandro married off before? And why is Brooks single? And Grant Carter, for that matter.”

“I don’t know why they never pushed for Les to marry after the failed attempt with me, but I suspect it’s because they knew that he would be loyal if he ever found love. And that’s something they can’t compete with. Brooks was married before, and they let him divorce the woman because she was on a downward spiral that ended up taking her life. Of course they were only worried about how her actions reflected on Brooks.” She frowns. “As for Grant Carter, well, I’d imagine he’ll be announcing something sooner rather than later. It hurts his odds of being elected if he’s single.”

“Again, I have to ask if that worries you.”

“Grant Carter and I are as opposite as night and day. There’s no way I’d ever marry someone like that.” She reaches for her purse. “So, where shall we go next?”

I smile. “I could use a new purse.”

“Excellent. Louis Vuitton is just across the street.”

As strange as it sounds, I think I may have found a friend in Greer. And, god, does it feel nice.

The next morning, I put my big girl panties on and finally make an appointment to see an obstetrician. They had an opening, which is where I’m at now. Luckily, the office is located inside of a family practice, so if anyone reports back to Alessandro where I’m going, I can say it was for a check-up.

My phone dings and I see Alessandro’s name on the screen. Speak of the devil...

ALESSANDRO MORETTI

Why are you at a doctor’s office???

Stalker much?

You’re my wife, Isa. I want to make sure you’re okay.

I’m fine.

Then why are you at a doctor? Do I need to come and sit with you?

Panic courses through me. Crap! I didn’t expect him to say that. I mean, he hasn’t tried to see me any other time, so why now. Is it because he thinks I’m ill?

Like I said, I’m fine. I’m just getting set up with a primary care physician, and this one came highly recommended.

Not a lie. The receptionist at my attorney’s office recommended this obstetrician and spoke highly of her.

Alessandro doesn't reply, so I type out another message.

I'm fine. Truly.

You'd tell me if you weren't?

Yes. Of course.

I still miss you.

My eyes water. I'm typing out a reply when my name is called.

"Isabetta Bass?"

Dropping my phone into my bag, I stand. "Hi."

The nurse smiles, motioning me to follow her through the door. We walk down a long hallway with pink and blue walls. My heart pounds with each step that I take.

This is it.

After today, I'll know.

I leave the office an hour later in shock. I'm pregnant. Not only that, but, according to the tests, I'm at least four months pregnant, which means Alessandro and I conceived right off the bat.

Alessandro is going to be a father.

I'm going to be a mother.

Oh my god.

In the SUV, Steven asks, "Where to, Ms. Bass?"

I need time to think before I speak to Alessandro, so I say, "Can we go to the Bellagio? I'd like to walk around for a bit."

He smiles at me in the mirror. "Going to see the fountains again?"

"Guilty."

“It’s a nice day for that. We’re supposed to get up to sixty-four degrees today.”

I nod, but I’m distracted. I knew I was pregnant, but hearing the heartbeat changed everything in an instant. And my first thought was that Alessandro should be there with me. My eyes water. Leaving him was the right thing to do, but how can I stay away when I’m carrying his child?

“Ms. Bass?” I look up, realizing Steven’s likely said my name a few times. “We’re here, ma’am.”

“Thank you. I’ll text you when I’m ready to go home.”

Exiting the SUV, I walk on the sidewalk toward the fountains. It’s not busy since it’s earlier in the day, but there are still enough people about that I have to sidestep several to get up to the concrete wall that overlooks the fountains. I stay there for a few moments, allowing myself to face my own truths.

I want this baby. Truth.

I want Alessandro. Truth.

I can’t be with him if he lets the Brotherhood come between us. Truth.

I love him. Truth.

I need him to love me back or we can’t be together. Truth.

It seems so simple when I lay everything out just like that, so that’s exactly what I’m going to do when I speak to Alessandro.

Lifting my phone, I see that the message I was typing earlier is still there and hit send.

ALESSANDRO MORETTI

I miss you, too.

Can we talk?

Yes. I'm at the office but can meet you. Where are you?

I'll come to you. See you soon.

No more lies and no more running. I'm about to text Steven and tell him I'm ready to leave when someone calls out my name.

“Isabetta.”

I slowly turn, coming face to face with my father.

My pulse beats erratically at his threatening presence.

“How did you find me?”



Isabetta

My father says, “I’ve been looking for you since that monster stole you.”

“That monster? Surely, you’re not trying to imply that Alessandro is worse than you?”

He dips his head. “I’ve done a lot of things that I’m not proud of, Isabetta, but everything I’ve ever done was for you.”

“My god. You really believe that, don’t you? Tell me, Father, was spending your paycheck, so I had to work during high school for me? Was beating me throughout my childhood for me? Was selling me to the Caruso family for me?”

He scoffs. “You’re being dramatic. I didn’t beat you.”

Really? That’s his takeaway from what I said?

“You did,” I say, standing tall. “Don’t you dare deny it.”

“It’s funny how similar to your mother you are. You never even knew her, and yet you’re as dramatic as she was.”

His words barb me, like I’m sure he intended.

“Again, I’m going to ask...how did you find me? What do you want?”

He moves closer and I can see how bloodshot his eyes are. He’s been drinking. A lot. Now that he’s close I can smell it on his breath, and it makes my stomach roil. I take a step back, just to put distance between us. I don’t miss the scowl on his

face, but this isn't like when I was little. I don't have to take his abuse, especially when I'm pregnant.

I look around, making sure I have a quick way to escape if it comes to that. People walk around us, used to individuals just stopping in the middle of the sidewalk in Vegas. At least he didn't find me somewhere alone. Thank god for that.

"I think we can make things right. I've been in contact with a friend, and he said that once your divorce is final from Moretti that you can marry Giosuè and all will be right in the world."

His words send off warning bells in my head. How does he know I'm getting divorced? Alessandro hasn't even been served the papers yet. And why on earth does he think I'd want to marry Giosuè? Realization dawns on me. He doesn't know that I know about the inheritance. So, he's getting information from somewhere, but it's not current information.

"What friend?"

"Huh?"

"You said you've been in contact with a friend. Who is it?"

"It doesn't matter."

There's a hard look in his eyes that I know all too well. He's not going to answer me because he doesn't trust me. Luckily, I have years of lying to this man.

"Dad, I'm scared." I look around and lower my voice. "Do you trust this person?"

"With my life."

"Do you trust him with *my* life?"

He nods. "I do."

"Can you at least tell me where you met him?"

He's the one looking around this time.

"This is going to sound crazy, but he's in a secret society."

My pulse quickens. Oh my god. He knows about the Brotherhood. How?

“A secret society? Like the Illuminati?”

He snorts. “The Illuminati are child’s play compared to this. These men have ruled the world since the crusades, pulling strings behind the curtain, so to speak.”

“That’s amazing. How did you meet him?” I widen my eyes. “Are you in a secret society, Dad?”

“I wish. I met him by chance a few years ago in New York City. It was at a big event held by Malik Jafar. I was trying to get in with Jafar, but the deal fell through. Apparently, he only works with Made Men.”

The name doesn’t ring a bell, but I nod, letting him continue.

“My friend was in town looking for potential members to join the society. After talking to him, I suggested Giosuè. The boy’s got a level head and will do what it takes to get the job done.”

“Giosuè is in a secret society? He never mentioned it to me.” I pretend to look hurt or offended. I don’t care which one my father thinks it is, as long as he believes me.

My father says, “Well, he wasn’t a full-fledged member. He had to prove himself. That’s why he was going to marry you.”

“Me?”

“The society prefers their members to be married, so Giosuè needed a bride. The only problem is that Giosuè can be a handful, as I’m sure you’ve discovered, and we had a hard time finding him someone that met the group’s requirement.”

Thankfully, I have no idea what he’s talking about since I barely spent any time with my former fiancé. If he’s anything like my father, then I can guess what kind of person Giosuè is, and it’s not good. And the requirement is definitely my money. It’s a struggle keeping my expression neutral.

“That’s why he proposed? Because you knew I’d marry him?”

“It is. And Moretti ruined everything when he stormed into the wedding, stopping it.”

I’m curious to see how he’s going to spin this, so I say, “He never would tell me why he ruined my wedding. Only that it was something he had to do.”

“He would say that.” He shakes his head. “He’s a dangerous man who’s trying to gain power within the society. There are even rumors that he killed his predecessor to get ahead.”

“I don’t understand how stopping my wedding helps him get ahead.”

“It made Giosuè appear undesirable. He couldn’t protect you, so how could he protect the society? I guess once Giosuè was under the microscope, other things came to light. Things that will be swept under the carpet, so to speak, once your divorce to Moretti is final.”

The Elite bitches said that Alessandro had made Zhāng mad by marrying me. Is Zhāng the man my father is talking about? I need to know for sure before I can do anything with this information.

“And your friend is certain that Giosuè and I will be safe once I divorce Moretti?”

It kills me to call him Moretti, like he means nothing to me.

My father nods.

“How can he be sure?”

“Because he’s going to have Moretti killed. Tell me, daughter, did Moretti ever tell you what he did for a living?”

“He said he was in sales.”

He barks out a laugh. “Sales, my ass. He’s in the Mafia.” Before I can react, he rushes on, “There’s another Family here in Vegas that wants him gone. Ever hear the name Facilier?”

“Isn’t that a hotel here in Vegas?”

“Bingo. They also have mob ties. When my friend gives them the word, they’ll take out Moretti and you won’t have to worry about him ever again.” He makes a gun with his finger and points it at his head. “A bullet between the eyes and Moretti will be no more.”

I feel sick. Like, it’s taking everything in my power not to vomit all over my father’s shoes right now.

Inhaling through my nose, I wait for the nausea to pass before asking, “Does your friend live in Vegas, too?”

“No. He lives in London, though he’s in the States a lot for work.”

That’s still not enough information to help me. I assume there’s a lot of members in the Brotherhood who live in London.

“Dad, I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I’ve just been on edge since I left Moretti, and seeing you was a lot.” I reach out, touching his arm. “I’m sorry I wasn’t at your wedding to Gia.”

He smiles, and, shockingly, looks genuinely happy.

“It was rather sudden. Gia was right there by my side when you were taken. I don’t think I could have survived without her.”

Okay, that’s a bit dramatic, but whatever.

“Is she okay with Giosuè joining a secret society? I know the two are close...”

“Well, it’s a funny story. She’s actually how I met Smith. They met while she was in London on vacation and started chatting at a bar. Small world, eh?”

My stomach drops. Smith? As in Jacqueline Chanel Minty-Smith’s husband? He’s my father’s connection in the society, not Zhāng? But this doesn’t make sense.

“So this Smith person is your friend?” I rush on before he can answer. “And he swears that I’m going to be safe?”

I learned a long time ago that the most minuscule change in my father's expression can be bad. A long blink. A twitch of the eye. Touching his ear. All signs that his mood has shifted. Which is why I know that whatever he says next is going to be a lie.

"Of course. Your safety is our only priority."

So, they're going to kill me.

I nod. "Okay, so I marry Giosuè and then he gets in the society. It just doesn't seem fair that you aren't getting invited."

His chest puffs out. "I agree, daughter, but Smith says I'll be invited to join once Moretti is out of the way."

"Because they'll see you as a hero?" At his confused look, I say, "For helping them get rid of Moretti."

"Precisely."

My father is a bigger fool than I knew if he really thinks they're going to let him join the Brotherhood. He doesn't have money. Hell, neither does Giosuè, for that matter. He doesn't have skills that the Brotherhood can use. Why on earth does he think they would want him to join?

"Is Smith how you were able to find me?"

He nods. "Yes. He's been having you followed."

There's only one person who's been with me when I've gone out. "Is it Steven?"

"Steven? No, the man following you is Neil."

My nerves tense immediately.

"Neil is spying on me for your friend?"

"Not just you. He's reporting on Moretti, too."

It makes sense. Neil was with me when I went to the attorney's office, but he has no idea that I saw the obstetrician. He also likely doesn't know that I recently spent time with Greer Blanc. But how did he know where I was today?

My father continues, “We knew that you’ve been visiting the fountains in the mornings, so I took a chance, and it paid off.”

“It sure did.” I glance around. “I should go, though, before I’m missed. Moretti tends to check up on me at my apartment.”

He nods. “I’m not surprised. He’s known to be controlling.”

“That he is.” I go in for one last bit of information. “You’re sure Gerald Smith won’t betray us?”

“He won’t. He’s on our side.”

“What about his wife?”

“What about her?”

“She wasn’t very nice when I met her.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know the woman, but I know Smith. He won’t let us down.”

“Okay. How do I get in touch with you?”

“Send Gia a message on social media. She’ll let me know.” He smiles. “I’ll see you soon.”

I nod, taking a step away from him. Part of me is scared that he’ll try something the moment I turn my back on him, but he leaves first.

When he’s gone, I exhale. Oh my god.

Pulling out my phone, I finish texting Steven. He arrives moments later, and I climb into the back of the SUV.

“I need to go to Mr. Moretti’s office, but I need you to make sure we’re not being followed.”

“Followed, ma’am?”

I nod. “I think my old driver, Neil, is working for some very bad people.”

His eyes widen. “I’ve noticed the black sedan following us sometimes. I thought it was on Mr. Moretti’s orders or I would have said something.”

“I thought it was, too, but now I’m not so sure.”

He says, “I’ll get you to Mr. Moretti without anyone following us. No one knows this town better than me.”

Steven kept his word, taking me through hotel parking garages and backstreets the entire way to Alessandro’s office. The sedan was definitely following us when we first left the Bellagio, but we lost him shortly after going through the first parking garage.

We arrive at Alessandro’s office and Steven says, “I’ll be waiting for you and will let you know if I see the sedan.”

“Thank you, Steven.”

I hurry from the SUV, entering the building.

A woman waits for me next to the receptionist’s desk.

“Mrs. Moretti, I’m Kate, Mr. Moretti’s assistant.”

I shake her hand. “How did you know what I looked like?”

“Mr. Moretti has a photo of you on his desk.”

He has a photo of me? I try not to show my shock. If she notices, she’s discreet about it.

“Right this way.”

I follow her into an elevator where we’re whisked to the top floor.

“His office is right through that door. Just go on in.”

“Thank you, Kate.”

Inhaling, I open the door, entering the office. Alessandro sits behind his desk and jumps to his feet when he sees me.

“Isa. What is it? What’s happened?”

I’m momentarily floored by the man standing before me. Alessandro looks like he’s lost at least ten pounds since I’ve seen him last. His cheeks are gaunt, and his eyes have dark smudges under them. His beard and hair are both unruly. But

the most shocking thing is that he's not in a suit. No, he's wearing jeans and a black t-shirt.

I cross the room, going to him. "Alessandro, I need to tell you something. My father found me when I was out today."

A dark look flashes in his eyes.

"What did he want?"

"He said he'd been looking for me since the wedding. He also told me he's been working with someone in the Brotherhood. Someone that's planning on having you killed."

"Did he give you a name?"

"It's Smith. Gerald Smith."

His eyes widen. "There's no way it's Smith. No, it has to be Zhāng. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Alessandro, it's Smith. My father knew that I was filing for a divorce from you, and *no one* should know. Not yet, at least." Hurt flickers across his face, but I continue, "He also said that as soon as it was final, that the Facilier Family was going to take you out."

This gets his attention. "Facilier?"

"Yes."

"Fuck. I don't think Facilier or anyone in his group would try anything. They would be crazy to, especially since I have the support of Families across the US and he doesn't. Going after me will bring war on him from the Families of Chicago and New York City."

I exhale. "Okay, well, that's good to know, but that doesn't explain how my father knew what he did. And he said Smith's name. First and last. How would he know that?"

Alessandro is silent.

"You've been looking for a phantom all these months. What if the real villain was right in front of you?"

He meets my gaze. "What do you mean?"

“I said it once before. What if the letters that you all received were fake? A way to throw everyone off their game and send you on a wild goose hunt.” I ask, “Did you see the other’s letters?”

He stills. “I saw them all. Except for Smith’s. Fuck. How could I be so blind?”

“Is there anyone in the Brotherhood that you can trust with this?”

“Brooks,” he answers right away.

“Then call Brooks, Alessandro, and let us sort this out.”

“Us?”

I nod. “I meant what I said. I miss you.”

Hope blooms in his gaze, but I take a step away from him.

“I can’t. My father said your driver, Neil, is watching me for Smith. I can’t let you touch me and then walk out there like nothing has changed.” My voice is filled with anguish when I speak again. “I love you and once you touch me, I won’t be able to let you go.”

“Isa—”

“No. This is how it has to be. I trust you, Alessandro, and I trust that you’re going to fix this so we can be together without worry.”

I give him one last look before walking away from him.

I meant what I said. I trust him. And I trust that he’s going to fix this. When he does, then I’ll tell him about the baby.

I just hope and pray it’s not too late.



Alessandro

My entire world has been turned upside down by Isa's visit, and not just because of what she told me about Smith and her father.

She loves me.

My wife loves me.

Fuck.

And I love her, but she has no fucking idea.

I should have told her a long time ago that I love her, too, but I didn't.

Rubbing my face with my hands, I groan. I don't deserve her or her love. But I'm going to do everything in my fucking power to spend the rest of my life trying to earn it. That starts now.

Lifting my phone, I call Brooks. He answers on the first ring.

"Are you still in Vegas?"

"I'm in LA, but can be in Vegas in an hour. What's up?"

"I need a guy's weekend. Isa served me with divorce papers."

I don't know how far Smith's reach is. He should never have had access to me in the first place, so I'm going to play this smart until I know better.

“Fucking hell,” Brooks mutters. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Bring that cinnamon whisky you like so well. We’re going to need it.”

Brooks pauses for a beat. “Got it. See you soon.”

He ends the call, and I get back to work. An hour later, I get a text from him.

BROOKS

Just landed. Can you pick me up?

I’ll be there shortly.

Gathering my things, I make my way downstairs. Neil stands in front of my car, waiting.

“Mr. Moretti,” he greets, opening the door.

I slide into the backseat and watch him round the car with a narrowed gaze.

When he’s inside, he asks, “Where to, sir?”

“We’re picking Henderson up at the airport.”

I rattle off the information he needs and sit back as we take off. It takes everything in my power not to slice his neck right here, right now. He’s lucky I need him to play a part. For the moment. His time is running out, though.

At the airport, Brooks climbs in next to me, lifting a bottle of whisky into the air.

“Got the booze, friend. Now let’s get fucked up and forget all about the women in our lives!”

He uncaps the bottle, taking a swig before passing it to me. I do the same, grimacing.

“Fuck. How did we drink that shit all the time in college?”

Brooks laughs loudly. “Blame Grant. It was his favorite.”

Neil clears his throat and asks, “Mr. Moretti, would you like to go back to your penthouse?”

Brooks answers, “Hell no. We’re celebrating! Didn’t you tell him, Moretti?”

I shake my head, taking another drink from the bottle.

Brooks leans forward, and says to Neil, “Our boy is a newly single man. I’m here to take him out on the town and remind him of what it’s like to be free again.”

Neil’s eyebrows lift. “Single?”

“That witch delivered papers to his office today.” Brooks slaps Neil on the back so hard that Neil flinches. “Thank god he has me, though. I’m here to remind him of how good losing the old ball and chain can be.”

“Indeed, sir. So, where shall I take you?”

Brooks rattles off the name of the casino and hotel the Brotherhood owns. I breathe out a silent thanks for him thinking ahead. Smith won’t try anything there. There will be too many witnesses.

Neil nods. “Of course, sir.”

Brooks leans back, grabbing the bottle from me. “Where to first, Moretti? A titty bar? The casino?”

“You know me.”

“Titty bar it is.”

He winks at me as he finishes the bottle, tossing it to the front of the car, narrowly missing Neil. By the time we get to the hotel, Brooks is lit and leans heavily against me as we walk. Since we’re members of the Brotherhood, we have withstanding reservations. No one at the front desk bats an eye at Brooks’ behavior, since he’s done this once or twice. He plays it up until we’re in his suite.

The moment the door closes, his expression turns serious.

“What in the fuck is going on? Did Isabetta really serve you with divorce papers today?”

“No, but she did come to see me.”

I tell him everything that she said, and he listens, never interrupting me once. When I’m finished, he shakes his head.

“It explains why we kept running into dead ends when we were looking into Zhāng. We couldn’t find anything because there wasn’t anything to find.”

“Other than the fact that he wanted Caruso to become a member.”

“But did he? What if that was Smith, too, in a roundabout way?”

We’re both silent.

Finally, I say, “Caruso has to go. So does Isa’s father. And my driver.”

“Smith?”

“He’s dead, too, but I need proof first.”

“Think you can get it?”

“I think we can, yes.”

Brooks grins. “Fuck. Haven’t been hunting with you in a long time.”

“Only because you’re too afraid of getting your hands dirty,” I joke back.

There’s some truth to my words, but only because it doesn’t look good for the Face of The Defiant God Brotherhood to be out killing people. But there was a time and place when Brooks was just my friend and we both did what it took to secure our futures.



Isabetta

Two days after I see Alessandro, an enormous bouquet of roses is delivered to my apartment with a note inside.

Isa,

*I understand that you don't want to see me
right now, which is why I'm going out of town.
Donna is at your disposal. Be safe.*

-A

I clutch the note to my chest.

He's telling me that he's going after Smith. I know that's what this is.

Please let this work.

God, it has to...

*Alessandro*

Caruso's screams fill the air, echoing off the walls of the warehouse in Manhattan. The concrete walls are thick enough that no one will hear, but, damn, it's annoying.

Hector shakes his head and Brooks laughs.

Hector hands Brooks a wad of cash and says, "How in the fuck did you know he was going to piss his pants in three minutes?"

Brooks gestures toward Caruso, who's tied to a metal chair. His pants are wet from where he just urinated himself and the scent fills the air.

"Because I know his type. All talk, but the moment they see a hacksaw, they lose their shit." He waves his hand in front of his nose. "Fuck, man. Don't you drink any water? Your piss smells rancid."

He's not wrong...

I say to Hector, "Don't fret, friend. You'll still get your beer when this is over."

Caruso moans, and I turn my attention to him.

"Something you want to say, *amico*?"

He nods, or tries to. We've roughed him up pretty good, so I'm sure he's in all kinds of pain right now. A few broken bones are the least of his worries. I hope he realizes that.

“Let’s hear it, then.”

Hector pulls the gag from his mouth and the first thing Caruso does is whimper like a fucking baby.

“Well?”

Caruso says, “I don’t know what you think I’ve done, but there’s been some kind of mistake.”

“Oh, you haven’t done anything. We just wanted to chat a bit.”

“Ch-chat?”

“Yes. Chat.”

“What about?”

I grab a metal chair and sit across from him.

“I want to know who you’re working with.”

“Working with?”

Brooks huffs. “Jesus. Is he a parrot?”

Hector laughs, but I don’t.

“Yes, Caruso. I want to know who you’re working with in the Brotherhood.”

“Zhāng.”

“Who else?”

“No one.”

I make a sound. “Once upon a time I told you what the Brotherhood would require of you if you joined. Do you remember?”

“Y-yes.”

“That vow also comes with a vow of honesty. We are to never lie to each other. If we do, the punishment is our tongue. Did you know that?”

His eyes widen. “No, I didn’t know.”

He wouldn’t know because it’s not a real thing. Hell, half the Brotherhood would be missing their tongues if that were

the case.

“Now, you’re on your way to becoming a member, right?”

He nods. “Y-yes.”

I smile, reaching into my pocket, pulling out my folded blade.

“Then let’s try this again. Who are you working with in the Brotherhood?”

“Zhāng.”

I stand, and the fucker actually screams.

“No! Wait! I’ll tell you.”

I gesture for him to continue.

“I’m working with Smith.”

I glance at Brooks, who nods. He’s recording this little encounter with his phone, and I want to make sure he’s getting it all.

“How did you meet Smith?”

“He met my sister, Gia, in London. They hooked up. Did all kinds of kinky shit. When she threatened him, he said he could make it worth our while.”

“How so?”

“If Gia didn’t press charges, he said he could get me into the Brotherhood. Said he had something on Zhāng.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know. I swear! All I know is that Gia met with him and then introduced him to Dale Bass. That’s when I found out about Isabetta’s money. Smith told us that the members of the Brotherhood need to be married and have a lot of wealth to join. It was a win-win to use Isabetta.”

Parts of this story are coming together.

“Your sister is married to Bass, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How long have they been fucking around?”

He shrugs or tries to. “On and off for years.”

So Bass likely told Gia about the money, which is how Smith knew. Smith then told Zhāng to issue Caruso an invitation to the Brotherhood. But why did Zhāng go along with it? What does Smith have over him that’s so terrible that he’s willing to bend over and let Smith do whatever in the fuck he wants?

“How does Smith get in contact with you?”

“We go through Bass. He’s the middleman in all of this.”

I snort. “Don’t try to blame this all on him. You had a choice. You could have said no, but you didn’t.” I move closer. “You said something a moment ago that got my attention.”

“I did?”

“Yes. You said that it was a win-win to use *my* wife.”

His eyes widen in fear.

“That was your first mistake. Your second mistake is trusting that Smith will protect you. This is your last chance to come clean, *amico*. Tell us something that might save you from death.”

“D-death? No! You said you just wanted to chat!”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing? Chatting? Surely you didn’t think I’d let you walk out of here alive, though?” I move close enough to see the sweat beading on his eyebrows. “Give me something useful and I’ll make your death quick.”

He violently shakes in his chair.

Hector asks Brooks, “What was that thing the two of you used to do back in the day? Boss told me, but I can’t remember.”

Brooks grins. “Eyeball golf?”

“No. Something to do with cutting off fingers.”

“That was eyeball golf. We’d cut off a finger.” He makes a gesture as if he’s cutting off his index finger. “Then shove it in

the eye socket. If the eye stayed intact, we'd use it for a round of golf. If not, we'd use a ball." He snorts. "Of course, it's hard to miss the nose at that angle, so shit happens."

Hector nods. "Okay, maybe that was it."

Brooks turns to me. "Want to play eyeball golf?"

"That depends on Caruso here."

Caruso shakes his head. "No, please, no!"

"Then you better talk."

There's something he's not saying. I can see it in his eyes. But he doesn't have a choice in this. He's either going to tell me or he's going to die a slow and painful death. Hell, I'll even let Brooks and Hector play a round of golf, if that's what they want.

Finally, Caruso says, "He plans to kill Isabetta after the money is transferred into my account."

My nostrils flare in fury. "Who?"

I expect him to say Smith.

"Her father. Dale Bass."

"Thank you, Caruso. You've been most helpful."

Pulling my gun from my holster, I shoot him right between the eyes.

Turning to Brooks and Hector, I say, "Let's go pay Bass a visit."

We exit the room that Caruso was in and go to the room next door.

Hector says, "We should look into getting something like this in Vegas. Did you notice the drains on the floor? I bet clean-up is a breeze."

I snort. "I'll keep that in mind."

We enter the room where Dale Bass is being held. He, too, has been roughed up a bit, but not enough. I crack my knuckles. Not fucking enough.

He stares at me like a man without a fear in the fucking world.

I smile at him.

“Hello, Dad. It’s okay that I call you that, right?”

He glares. “You’re a dead man, Moretti.”

“Ah. I wondered when you would bring that up.” I cross my arms. “Be a good little puppet and look at my friend over there.”

Brooks waves his hand, pointing to the phone where he’s recording this encounter. Smith is going down and I’m going to use his own pawns to do it. First Caruso. Now Bass. I’m sure even my piece of shit driver will have something incriminating to say. Men like Smith are cocky, and cocky people tend to be sloppy.

Bass glares. “Fuck. You.”

“My, how brave you are.” I move closer. “I read Isa’s medical records. Her mother’s, too. Want to know what I think?”

Bass spits at me. I don’t try to dodge it. No. I’m going to enjoy every fucking moment of this. And that wad of spit running down my cheek? It’s going to fuel my rage that much more.

“I think you’re a weak man who takes out his anger on those who can’t fight back. I think you’re about to find out what Isa and her mother went through at your hands.” I lean in. “Most importantly. I think you’re going to wish you’d never heard of my fucking name.”

I slam my head into his, relishing in the pain that shoots across my skull. Blood pours from his forehead when I pull back. Smiling, I press my finger into the cut until he grimaces.

“Sorry about that, Pops. That was for Isa, in case you’re wondering, and the concussion she had when she was six.”

“You bastard!”

“Now, now. Let’s not throw around names we know aren’t true. My father, even though he was a piece of shit, was married to my mother before I was born. The same can’t be said about you, can it? Because we both know you trapped Bella Angelo by getting her pregnant.” I pause, letting my words sink in. “She was young and thought she was in love. You promised her the world just to get your hands on the Angelo fortune, didn’t you?”

“So what?” he spits out. “Why shouldn’t that money have gone to me?”

“I bet Maria Angelo saw right through you, didn’t she?”

“She was a cunt, just like her daughter and just like my daughter.”

Reaching out, I grab his pinkie finger and bend it until it breaks. He screams, and I smile. I break three more fingers in succession. There’s not a damn thing he can do, either. Not with the way he’s bound to the chair.

“That is for Bella. You broke several of her fingers when she tried to leave you. Smashed her hand in the car door, right?” I continue, “So you married Bella to get the Angelo fortune? But Maria saw who you really were and made sure you couldn’t get your hands on the money by leaving it to Isa. Not only that, but she put in stipulations where even if something happened to Isa, you still wouldn’t get the money.”

Maria Angelo was a smart woman who looked after those she loved. She made sure Isa was protected, because Dale Bass would have killed his daughter if he thought he could get the money. Maria’s instructions were explicit. The Angelo fortune stayed in a trust where no one could touch it until Isa turned twenty-eight. If something happened to her before that time, the money would be donated to some of Maria’s and Tommaso’s favorite charities around the world. Not a cent would go to Dale Bass.

I say, “Did you really think that this little plan of yours was going to work? That you would marry off Isa to Caruso, get a chunk of her money, and get invited to the Brotherhood?”

He glares, and I know I've struck a nerve.

"Ah. So you're stupid as well. Noted."

"You think you're so smart, Moretti? Well, the joke is on you because we've been two steps ahead of you the entire time! Did you know that it was my idea to send everyone a letter?" His chest puffs out as if he's proud. "Smith didn't think anyone would believe it, but you did. And you've all been running around like fools while we made our move."

I meet Brooks' gaze. He doesn't even try to hide the grin on his face. Bass just said Smith's name without being prompted, which means our evidence is piling up on him.

Bass isn't done and says, "You and the rest of the Brotherhood think you're better than everyone. Well, we're going to show you what it's like to be on the bottom."

"Bottom?" I snort. "Bass, you're delusional if you think Gerald Smith is at the bottom of anything. You clearly know nothing about the man, or you would see that he's using you to do his dirty work. When push comes to shove, he'll toss you away. But you'll be dead before he gets the chance." I lean in. "I'm going to kill you, you fucker. It's going to hurt. A lot. And it's going to bring me so much satisfaction that I'll remember it long after you're gone."

He stares me down, but there are cracks showing in his stoic mask. Sweat beads his upper lip. The scent of fear lingers in the air. Most of all, it's the look in his eyes. He's finally realizing that he's going to die.

I say, "I'll take into consideration the fact that you are Isa's father. But only if you work with me a bit. Give me something that will make killing you quickly worth my while. I'll let you think about it."

Standing, I cross the room to the table where a glass and pitcher of water wait. Bass hasn't had a lick to drink since he was captured two days ago. I'm sure he's parched from all the crying and screaming he's done. Filling the glass, I go back to him and take a long sip, emptying half the glass. Drool pools in the corner of Bass' mouth.

“Need a drink, *amico*?”

Bass nods ever so slightly, so I tip the glass to his lips, letting him drink. He gulps it down as fast as he can, which is smart. I pull the glass away, and the rest of the water spills on his shirt.

“I...I’m a dead man if I tell.”

“You’re a dead man if you don’t,” Hector points out. He shakes his head. “Fuck. This is *déjà vu*.”

He’s not wrong. We’ve definitely had this conversation with prisoners in the past.

Bass finally nods. “I’ll tell you what I know.”

He starts from the beginning, which is similar to the tale Caruso told us. Smith met Gia Caruso in London. They hooked up. She blackmailed him. He was introduced to Bass. This is where Bass’ story varies a bit from Caruso’s.

“Smith knew about my daughter’s inheritance. I don’t know how, but he did. He also knew about my...money issues. He said that it could all go away, but I had to help him. He said that we needed a pawn. Someone who wasn’t too bright and could marry Isabetta, gaining control of her money.” He pales. “After the money was secure, Smith said he would have both Isabetta and Giosuè killed.”

My fist clenches at my side, but I nod for him to continue.

“Once they were out of the way, I would get a spot in The Defiant God Brotherhood.”

“And where was Isa’s money going?”

“To Smith. He said he needed it to fund a war against those in the Brotherhood who didn’t have the same views as him. He mentioned that he tried to use his wife’s money, but that she had a good portion of it locked up in various trusts that he couldn’t get his hands on. He said when she was dead, he could pay me back the money he borrowed with interest.”

I stand, unable to sit any longer.

“It’s funny how you speak about the money like it’s yours. We established earlier that the money was never yours, Bass.” I smile down at him. “But thank you for being honest. I’ll take it into consideration before I kill you.”

I motion for Hector to come near. He carries a black duffel bag filled with...tools of the trade.

He unzips it and asks, “What do you want first, Boss?”

Bass’ eyes widen when he sees the contents of the bag and he jerks in the chair. But he’s not going anywhere. Not until I’m good and done with him.

“Let’s start with the mallet. I’d like to show Bass what Isa felt when he broke her wrist.” I turn to Bass. “This is going to hurt, *amico*. It’s going to hurt a lot.”

Three hours later, Brooks, Hector, and I emerge from the room. Malik Jafar’s second in command, Razoul, waits for us with a cleaning crew.

“Jafar is waiting at the hotel. He’d like to speak with you.”

I shake his hand. “A pleasure working with you, Razoul.”

He grins. “The pleasure is all mine.” He pauses. “Eyeball golf, huh? Might have to remember that in the future.”

We leave the warehouse behind, heading to the hotel owned by Malik Jafar. Inside, we’re taken to the second floor where his office is located. He’s sitting behind his desk, phone to his ear. He motions for us to wait, so I take the time to look around. Being in the Mafia is like being in a secret society in some ways.

Jafar is one of those members who’s been in the game nearly as long as me. Two things stand out about him. One, he wears a gold band on his wedding finger. Two, there’s a framed photo on his desk. His family. He and his wife, Ellie, sit side by side. There are two boys and two girls in the photo. They all look so fucking happy, and it pulls something deep in my chest.

I want that.

I want Isa at my side while we're surrounded by our kids.

Jafar ends the call and says, "Sorry about that. I take it your business is finished?"

"It is. Thank you."

He snorts. "I've already spoken to Razoul. Eyeball golf? I must admit, I've never heard that one."

Brooks answers, "What can we say? We like to keep things interesting."

"I have to ask. Is that a Moretti Mafia thing or a Brotherhood thing?"

Brooks makes the motion of zipping his lips, and Jafar laughs.

"Fair enough. Now, is there anything else you need from me?"

"Was the matter we spoke about taken care of?"

He nods, a dark look flickering across his face. "Facilier and his family are no longer a threat. I'll be taking over his casino effective immediately. You are welcome to take over his territory, or we can send someone out there. Just let me know."

We both know that it makes sense for me to take over Vegas, but that's something we can discuss later.

I shake his hand. "I look forward to working with you in the future."

"As do I. By the way, a letter was dropped off for you while you were busy."

Ice courses through my veins. "A letter?"

"Yes. It's in your room."

"Who delivered it?"

Jafar's dark eyebrow lifts. "A courier. Why?"

Brooks meets my gaze and I know he's thinking the same thing. Is this the same person who sent DeLeon a letter or is this Smith?

“Someone has been threatening members of the Brotherhood.”

“Ah. Well, I suppose that is to be expected now and then.”

I dip my head. “I suppose it is. Thank you, again, for all of your help. Look me up when you’re in Vegas.”

He grins, showing off his teeth. “My wife is expecting soon, so it’ll be a while before we can get away, but I’ll take you up on the offer when we do make it to Vegas.”

He shakes my hand before my men and I leave.

In the hallway, Brooks asks, “Think it’s from Smith or from whoever killed DeLeon?”

“Only one way to find out.”

*Isabetta*

Donna pats my back as I finish vomiting. I lean back, resting my head against the wall.

“Morning sickness,” I scoff. “What a joke to call it that.”

I had no intentions of telling anyone that I’m pregnant, but Donna came over a few days ago and found me being sick. Since then, she hasn’t left my side and now knows my big secret.

She hands me a glass of water. “Poor thing. Let’s get you into bed and I’ll make you some more broth.”

She helps me stand and I make my way to my bed. Once I’m settled, she goes to the kitchen to get my broth. It’s one of the only things I can keep down.

“Have you reached out to Mr. Moretti?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Isa—”

“Donna, he’s out there doing what needs to be done to protect our family.” I put my hand on my stomach. “When he gets back, I’m going to tell him. I swear.”

She nods, though I know she doesn’t like it.

I take a sip of the broth, letting it soothe my upset stomach.

I’m worried.

I'm worried because I haven't heard from Alessandro.

I'm worried that something has happened to him.

I'm worried that I made a mistake by not telling him about the baby when I had the chance.

Most of all, I'm worried that I'll never see the love of my life ever again.



Alessandro

Moretti,

I hope this letter finds you well. Since you're reading this, Caruso and Bass are dead and you're on your way to killing Smith.

Good for you, Violent God.

Let me introduce myself. You can call me Gabriel, the angel who went against God. I'll admit there's some symbolism in the name because I'm going to bring down the Brotherhood and all its so-called Gods unless you all change your ways.

I've been watching The Defiant God Brotherhood. I've learned every sin that you have and plan to make each of you pay. DeLeon had to go first. His sins were the worst, and no redemption could be found for him. As you yourself have said, the world is better off.

Will the world be better off without you? If the head of the Moretti Mafia was gone, would Las Vegas thrive or crumble? You have a chance to make a difference. Do it. Otherwise, the next time we meet may be your last day on this earth.

-Gabriel

The Angel who will bring down ALL the Gods.

I hand the letter to Brooks, reaching for my phone.

BLANC

I'm invoking Rule 47. Immediately. I expect everyone to be in Dallas tomorrow.

Moretti, what is going on?

You'll find out tomorrow.

Brooks meets my gaze as he finishes the letter.

“Fuck. He knows your nickname, Ace.”

“I noticed.” All the Gods have nicknames. Violent. Magnetic. Tempting. Words that describe who we are and what we do for the Brotherhood. Names that only other Gods know. “Come. We need to get to Dallas before the others.”

Because I don't trust Gerald Smith. Not one bit. If he gets wind of this, he's going to run. And I will not let that happen. Not when we're so close to bringing him down.

*Alessandro*

Brooks and I enter the ritual room of the same mansion I was inducted in only months ago. I look around the room, meeting the gazes of those who I've reached out to over the last twenty-four hours. What happens today is going to change the Brotherhood from here on out. Not everyone will live to see the dawn of this new age. But those who matter will.

The Elite Members wait in their seats. Zhāng's nod is so slight that I doubt anyone notices.

"Gentlemen. Thank you all for meeting me on such short notice." I turn, looking at the rest of the members. "I have invoked Rule 47."

There are murmurs around the room. This rule has only been invoked twice since the Brotherhood was founded.

"I understand many of you have questions, and I hope to answer those questions today."

Blanc stands. "Elite Member Moretti, you must give us the name of the accused Brother so that he may step forward and defend himself."

Smith won't be able to defend himself. Not when I'm done with him.

I say, "I call upon Peter Zhāng."

More murmurs fill the room. Smith looks smug as Zhāng walks to the spot on the floor where the accused is supposed to

stand. Zhāng looks down at the spot before joining me at my side.

“Elite Member Moretti and I call upon...” His voice trails off as he looks around the room for a pregnant moment. “... Gerald Smith.”

Smith’s eyes widen, but he stands. “Surely there’s some kind of mistake.”

Blanc says, “You’ve been called upon, Smith. Join your Brothers in the circle.” When Smith doesn’t move, Blanc adds, “Now.”

Smith makes his way to the circle, standing in the spot of the accused.

“Gentlemen, I demand to know what this is about.”

I say, “You have no right to speak. From this moment forward, you will be silent until all charges and truths have been brought to light.”

Smith glares but closes his fucking mouth.

Zhāng says, “I’ve been a member of The Defiant God Brotherhood longer than many of you have been alive. I’ve seen people come and go. Friends. People I was glad to never see again once they were gone. Until today I thought I had seen it all, but then I spoke with Elite Member Moretti, and he made me realize that I was wrong.” He points to Smith. “Gerald Smith is the worst kind of lowlife. Today, we lay everything on the table and allow him a chance to respond to our claims.”

Blanc nods. “And what is the outcome that you seek?”

“Death,” I answer. “Smith has betrayed the Brotherhood and death is the only way justice can be served.”

Smith glares but remains silent.

I look to the other members and say, “Hugo DeLeon received a letter that resulted in his death. Two months ago, every Elite Member received a similar letter, though there was something off about it. Not only were we threatened, but our families were threatened, too. Everyone except for Smith. You

will each be receiving a text message from Brother Henderson. In it, you will find every item of proof that I'll be bringing up tonight."

Phones are pulled out and I see shock etched on several faces as they read through the charges. For the next forty minutes, I read off charge after charge against Smith. He's silent, but his face grows so red that I wonder if he's about to have a heart attack.

When I'm finished, I turn to Smith. "You may respond."

"This is an outrage. You men can't seriously believe a word he just said!"

Blanc says, "Smith, do not address the Members. Your only task right now is to defend yourself. If you cannot do that, then we will move onto the voting."

Smith blanches. "No. I will defend myself." Glaring, he turns to me. "You have no actual proof that I sent the emails to the Elite Members, except for the word of a man employed by you."

"I employed him, but he was a plant by you. He's here right now. Let's bring him down so he can tell everyone what he knows."

Smith says, "That is against the rules."

Blanc shakes his head. "I say what's against the rules, or have you forgotten? Bring in the driver."

My former driver is brought in from one of the side rooms. He's been roughed up and is bound so he can't run. When he sees Smith, he openly weeps.

"Help me, Uncle! They're going to kill me!"

I face the Brotherhood, pointing to Neil. "This man is Smith's nephew. Adopted by his only sister and trained to be a spy. Isn't that right, Neil?"

He nods. "Yes, it's true. Please don't kill me!"

Smith says, "You call this proof? The boy is lying!"

“I’m not. My mother is Carol, your sister. I was adopted in 1998. There are photos of you at my birthdays.” He thinks. “I was at your house last Christmas. Jacqueline made homemade ornaments for everyone.”

There are murmurs around the room again. Anyone who knows Jacqueline knows three things about her. One, her full name. Two, that she is an heiress to a chewing gum empire. Three, that she’s crafty and loves giving out handmade gifts. She did, in fact, give the Members of the Brotherhood homemade ornaments last Christmas.

Blanc asks Neil, “Were you spying on Moretti for your uncle?”

“I was. He wanted to know where Moretti went and who he was with. I was also watching Moretti’s wife.” He thinks. “My uncle had me email him and four other members of the Brotherhood. I’m sorry. I swear I meant no harm! He had my brother and sister watching other members, too.” He turns to Smith. “Tell them, Uncle! Tell them how you told us you would kill our mother if we didn’t help you!”

Smith remains silent.

I say, “This boy is telling the truth, but he also went against the Brotherhood and must die.”

“No!” Smith says, finally showing some kind of emotion. “That is too harsh of a punishment.”

Blanc says, “I disagree. Kill the siblings as well.”

Neil’s screams fill the room as he’s dragged away.

I turn to Smith. “Would you like to say anything else, or can we vote?”

“You think you’ve won! Well, you’re wrong! I might not live to see the day that you are brought down, but it will happen. Mark my words.” He points to the other Elite Members. “All of you will get what you deserve.”

“Are you threatening us, Smith?” Blanc asks, leaning forward in his chair.

“It’s not a threat. It’s a promise. People are ready for a change. DeLeon dying was just the beginning.”

Blanc asks, “Are you saying you had something to do with Hugo DeLeon’s death?”

“No, but whoever sent the letter did. And that person is coming for you.”

I say, “You got a letter, didn’t you? A real one. That’s why you’re so certain that we’re going to get one, too.”

He glares. “Yes, I got one.”

“I got one, too. Want to know what mine said?” I move closer. “It said that as long as pieces of shit like you were taken care of that the Brotherhood would be just fine.”

I’m paraphrasing. A lot. But he doesn’t know that.

“You mother fucking piece of—”

His words cut off as he coughs. It’s nothing out of the ordinary until his eyes widen. Gasping, he tries to catch his breath, but only coughs more. When blood runs out of his nose, I realize what’s happening.

“He’s been poisoned,” I say to Blanc.

He says, “I assumed as much. Well, that takes care of that matter. Brothers, are you satisfied with the outcome of this?”

Ayes are spoken throughout the room. Not a single nay is heard. And right there in front of us all, Smith chokes until he dies, falling in the circle.

Blanc says, “Smith is dead. Brother Henderson, your induction will happen tomorrow. Brothers, enjoy the rest of your evening.”

I turn to Zhāng. “Thank you for the support.”

“Thank you for destroying the evidence Smith had on me. Don’t think Vivian would have been able to turn another blind eye if it came out.”

Come to find out, Gia was getting around with several men within the Brotherhood, Zhāng being one of them. She

recorded their encounter, much like she did with Smith, and Smith was using it to force Zhāng into offering Caruso an invitation to the Brotherhood.

I say, “Remember this the next time you want to fool around on your wife.”

He snorts. “Of course. If you’ll excuse me, Blanc and I have matters to discuss.”

I search out Brooks when Zhāng leaves. He’s in his seat, looking a bit green. I cross the room, going to him.

“You okay?”

“I...fuck...I don’t know.” He meets my gaze. “I didn’t expect this to happen so soon.”

I sit next to him. “I know the feeling.”

“There was a part of me that hoped Smith could explain it all, you know?”

I’m silent because I knew there was no way in hell Smith could defend himself. Not with the proof that I gathered.

“Think of it this way. At least we’ll be sitting at the same table again.”

“True.”

He curses under his breath, and I ask, “What?”

“I’m an Elite Member now.”

“Yes, and?”

“And Blanc is going to expect me to be married.”

“Maybe not. Things are changing around here.”

“Fucking hell. I hope you’re right.”

I stand. “I’ll stay long enough to see you inducted as an Elite Member. After that, I’m going home to my wife.”

And pray she’ll give me another chance.

*Isabetta*

The days have started to blur into each other to the point that I'd be lost without Donna. She's become my rock. Well, her and Greer, who has ironically become someone I consider a friend.

There's a knock on my door. Donna and I both look toward it.

"Isa. It's me."

I exhale and rush to the door, looking through the peephole before opening the door. Alessandro stands there and we stare at each other before I throw my arms around his neck.

"I've been so worried."

He hugs me tightly and kisses the top of my head.

"It took longer than I thought." He pulls back, meeting my gaze. "We need to talk."

Donna clears her throat. "I can leave."

"Stay," we both say.

Alessandro says, "You're family, Donna. You should be here for this."

We make our way into the apartment. He looks around, taking in everything. I don't miss the hurt in his eyes. What he doesn't know is that this place has never felt like home. No, my home is with him.

I reach for his hand, leading him to the couch. We sit side by side and Donna sits across from us.

“Caruso is dead. So is your father.”

I nod. I knew it was coming. The crazy thing is that I can’t say that I’m sad about it. What does that say about me?

He tips my chin. “You have every right to feel however you need to feel about him. He was an evil man, Isa, who didn’t deserve your love or your tears.”

I nod, my eyes watering. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Smith is dead, too.”

That gets my attention.

“He was planning to take down the Brotherhood, and we almost fell for it.”

He then tells us everything he discovered in the time that he’s been gone. I’m not going to lie—it’s a lot.

“Does his wife know?”

He grimaces. “She’ll know soon enough.”

“Poor Jacqueline.”

“If anyone can survive this, it’s Jacqueline.” He reaches for my hand, gripping it. “Isa, I’m so fucking sorry that I didn’t tell you about your money. I was wrong for keeping it from you. You had every right to know. Keeping it from you makes me just as bad as your father and Caruso.”

“Alessandro, you’re nothing like them.”

“The money is in an account at my bank under your name. I know you’ve been trying to get access to it and now that you’re safe, you can. I’ve also made stipulations that I will not get a drop of your money, but you will get half of mine.”

My eyebrows lift. “What?”

“I got the divorce papers from your attorney when I returned to Vegas this morning.” His gaze searches mine. “I want to make sure you’re taken care of, and this allows me to do so.”

“What are you saying?”

“I won’t force you to stay with me. Hell, I’m not even going to ask, because I know you deserve better than me.”

“Alessandro, no!”

He brushes his thumb over my lips. “I love you, Isabetta Maria Moretti. I should have said it the moment I knew it was true, but I didn’t. I can’t change the things I’ve done or the lies I’ve told you. But I can make this right by letting you go and then trying every day to win you back.”

Tears run down my cheeks, and I don’t wipe them away.

“No.”

“Isa—”

“I’m pregnant, Alessandro.” I move his hand to my stomach. “Nearly five months now. You’re not sending me away, understand? I love you, you fool, and we’re going to work through this together.”

His gaze goes to my stomach. “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to be a father?” Joy fills his eyes. “You’re going to be a mother?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck!” He turns to Donna. “Did you know?”

She nods. “I recently found out.”

He turns back to me. “Isa, I’m so fucking happy. We’re having a baby!”

“Yes, we are, which is why I will *not* be divorcing you. I love you, you dummy, and we’re going to make this marriage work.”

His gaze searches mine. “We can tear up the divorce papers if you agree to two things.”

“What are they?”

“One, you marry me again. A real wedding. Your dream wedding.”

Tears fill my eyes. “Done.”

“Two, I want you to keep your money in the account I set up.”

“Alessandro—”

“Hear me out, Isa.” I nod, so he continues, “Men have told you what to do for your entire life. I don’t want to be one of those men. I want to take care of you, but, more importantly, I want you to know that your money has nothing to do with why I’m with you. I want you to know that if, for some reason, this relationship doesn’t work out that you will be able to take care of yourself.”

“Don’t say things like that. We’re going to make this work.”

“If it doesn’t, I’ll rest better knowing you’re taken care of. So, do we have a deal?”

I smile up at him. “We have a deal.”

One week later, I’m about to walk down the aisle to marry Alessandro for the second time. This time is so different in so many ways. Alessandro asked me what my dream wedding looked like. When I was a little girl, it was something out of the movies I used to watch where the princess got the prince. As an adult, that dream looks a bit different now, which is why we’re getting married in one of the casinos here in Vegas by an Elvis impersonator.

Alessandro stands at the front of the tiny chapel, his all-black suit standing out against the white walls and the cherry red carpet. Brooks is at his side, smiling as I make my way down the aisle. Donna stands in the spot of the Maid of Honor, dressed in a light pink dress. My dress is white. Pure white. The top is fitted and the skirt flares, making me look like a princess while hiding my slight baby bump at the same time. When I reach Alessandro, he takes my hand, holding it tight.

Fake Elvis says, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...”

An hour later, Alessandro carries me from the elevator into our penthouse. I look around when he puts me on my feet.

“God, I’ve missed this place.

There’s a two-tier wedding cake on the dining room table with a note from Cheffy.

Welcome home, Mrs. Moretti

-Chef Antonio Stuart

I grin, spinning to Alessandro. “Cheffy told me his name!”

“He wanted to surprise you.” He grins. “Welcome home, *Dolcezza*.”

I turn to him, kissing him. He kisses me back until desire coils deep in my stomach. I press my hand against his chest when we pull away.

“I still can’t believe you wouldn’t let me move home until today.”

“I wanted to do things right this time, wife.”

I beam up at him. “Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I can forgive you. Now, will you take me to bed?”

Because I need to be with him.

“Not yet. I believe I promised showing you something a few months ago. Do you remember?”

“I do, but can’t it wait?”

“No. Come, my love.”

I take his hand, letting him lead me through the penthouse. I’ve been to most rooms, but there was always one area that was locked, and I never asked him what was inside. We come to a stop in front of the door, and he pulls out a key.

“If this is some kind of red room of pain, I’m going to be mad that you didn’t show me sooner.”

He snorts. “Just wait, *Dolcezza*.”

He opens the door and steps aside. I enter the room and look around when he flips on the light.

“It’s a...barber shop.”

Not only that, but it looks just like Vinny’s salon.

Alessandro stands next to me. “I met a woman ten years ago who gave me the best shave of my life.”

I grin. “I think I’ve heard this before.”

“What you might not know is that she made such an impression on me that I had this room built to remember her.” He goes to the counter, pointing to a bottle of shaving cream. “Smell that.”

I do. “Mmm. That’s why you always smell so good.”

“Know where I found the scent?” I shake my head and he smiles. “It’s the same scent you used when you shaved me. I reached out to Vinny to get the name of it.”

“But that bottle is probably the cheapest thing on the market! You could use anything.”

“I wanted to remember how I felt when I met you. Each time I use that shaving cream, it’s like I’m back in that chair and the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life is asking if I’d like to be rubbed.”

I laugh, though tears fill my eyes. “Oh my god. I can’t believe you remember me saying that.”

“I remember everything, *Dolcezza*, and I can’t wait to see what other memories we make together.”

“Wow.”

“Too much?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s perfect. I was just wondering how I got so lucky.”

“I’m the lucky one. Now, give your husband a shave so he can look his best when he takes his wife to bed.”

“You’re the only person I’ve ever shaved, Alessandro! I don’t know if I even remember how.”

He grins. “I trust you.”

“I trust you, too. But if I cut you, it’s not my fault.”

He lowers into the chair, leaning back. “Before you ask, I most definitely want to be rubbed this time.”

I laugh. Life with this man will never be dull, and I can’t wait.

EPILOGUE



Brooks

My head throbs to the beat of the music. I'm at the annual charity benefit held by the Elite bitches. The only thing that makes this tolerable is sitting next to Ace and Isa. Isa glows with pregnancy, and Ace can barely keep his hands off her. They'll only be here a bit longer before they sneak off to their hotel and I won't see them again this trip.

And I'll be alone. As always.

I reach for my drink, only to find it empty and wave down a server.

"Leave the bottle."

Isa's gaze is worried as she looks at me. "Are you okay, Brooks?"

No. I'm not. My entire world is falling down around me and there's not a goddamn thing I can do about it. Not when my order comes directly from Blanc.

Ace catches my gaze, giving me a hard look that tells me to get my shit together and to stop worrying his wife.

I smile at Isa. "I'm fine. Promise."

She makes sure no one is listening and asks, "How did the meeting go?"

Some men choose not to involve their wives with Brotherhood business. Ace is not one of those men, so Isa

knows I had a meeting with Blanc today. Hell, I'm sure Ace is wondering how it went, too. Only Blanc, Zhāng, and I know what was said. That Smith was poisoned, likely by the same person who killed DeLeon. At least, that's what the letter found in his office implied. Ace also doesn't know the name of the woman the Brotherhood wishes me to marry.

Before I can answer, Vivian Zhāng and Buffy Jones stop next to Isa.

“Isabetta, you're supposed to be mingling with the guests, not sitting with your husband and his friend.”

Isa smiles up at them, rubbing her round stomach. “As you both know, I was told to stay off my feet as much as possible.”

Buffy shakes her head. “My doctor told me something similar. Didn't stop me from going to work every day until the day I had my son.”

Alessandro stands, and both women flinch. Since he invoked Rule 47, he's gained quite a reputation. I snort into my newly delivered glass of vodka as he puts his hand on Isa's shoulder.

“My wife is not going to leave my side. Understand?”

“Of course, Mr. Moretti.” Vivian says. “Come, Buffy. Let's find Aimée.”

When they're gone, Isa scowls as she stands. “I wish Greer could have come tonight. She always knows what to say to them.”

How odd it must be for Ace. His wife and his ex-lover have become best friends and spend a lot of time together. If it bothers him, he doesn't let it show. The thing is, I doubt it bothers him. He only has eyes for Isa.

It reminds me of how I used to look at...

Ace pulls her close. “Maybe we'll get lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if other Elite Members are getting threatening letters, then there will be new members joining. And it's a

requirement for them to be married.” His gaze lands on me.
“So, Brooks, who’s the lucky lady that Blanc picked out for you?”

I finish my glass of vodka, though I’d rather throw it against the wall.

“Jacqueline Chanel Minty-fucking-Smith.”

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Even when it meant destroying us.

But I won’t let him break my heart again.

I barely survived last time.

Only, he’s used to getting what he wants, and the Magnetic God wants me...even if it means making me his bride.

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To discover the rest of Sarah's backlist, please visit her website at:



www.SarahBale.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Bale's family always knew she would write romances when they saw the elaborate stories she created for her Barbie dolls. At fifteen she penned her first book, which will never see the light of day if she has any say.

When Sarah isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends, and also planning what she'd do in a zombie apocalypse. One of her favorite pastimes is attending comic cons, where she can nerd out over all things Marvel. She is a USA Today Bestselling Author living in Oklahoma and doesn't plan on leaving any time soon.