

A MAFIA
ROMANCE NOVEL



WICKED KNIGHT

KNIGHT DUET BOOK 2

DIANA A. HICKS

Wicked Knight

(KNIGHT DUET, BOOK 2)

DIANA A. HICKS

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Wicked Knight, Book Two

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Recommended Reading Order

The Crime Society World

Beast Duet

[Lost Raven - Novella](#)

[King of Beasts \(Beast Duet #1\)](#)

[King of Beasts \(Beast Duet #2\)](#)

Wolf Duet

[Wolf's Lair - Prequel](#)

[Big Bad Wolf \(Wolf Duet #1\)](#)

[Big Bad Wolf \(Wolf Duet #2\)](#)

[Once Upon A Christmas - Bonus Epilogue](#)

Raven Duet

[Dark Beauty - Prequel](#)

[Fallen Raven \(Raven Duet, #1\)](#)

[Fallen Raven \(Raven Duet, #2\)](#)

Knight Duet

[Wicked Knight \(Knight Duet, #1\)](#)

[Wicked Knight \(Knight Duet, #2\)](#)

Cole Brothers World

Stolen Hearts Duet

[Entangle You](#)

[Unravel You](#)

Steal My Heart Series

[Ignite You](#)

[Escape You](#)

[Escape My Love - Bonus Epilogue](#)

[Provoke You](#)

Cole Twins Duet

Unleash You

Defy You

Praise for Diana A. Hicks

"Hicks' first installment of her Desert Monsoon series is confident and assured with strong storytelling, nuanced characters, and a dynamic blend of romance and suspense."

— KIRKUS REVIEWS

What makes any romance a great read isn't the fact that two hot people meet and fall in love. It is the episodes that bring about the falling in love and the unexpected places the experience takes the characters that make it an enjoyable read. Diana A. Hicks knows just how to make this happen.

— READERS' FAVORITE

About the Author

Diana A. Hicks is an award-winning author of steamy contemporary romance with a heavy dose of suspense.

When Diana is not writing, she enjoys kickboxing, hot yoga, traveling, and indulging in the simple joys of life like wine and chocolate. She lives in Atlanta and loves spending time with her two children and husband.

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Diana A. Hicks

SINFULLY DARK ROMANCE



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King of Beasts

1. Do You Have an Invitation?

Dear Readers,

The series is now complete! I hope you have enjoyed this wild ride. I'm sad to let these characters go, but also excited to start something new. More on that soon...

What is the Society???

The Society is a secret enclave comprised of the five original crime families. They have been around for over a century. With each generation, a new set of challenges arises. The last king is dead. Now the new sitting Dons must do everything they can to abide by their code...*Fac Fortia et Patere* (Do Brave Deeds and Endure). These ruthless and wicked mafia kings are the peacekeepers, the protectors.

You don't need to read the previous duets to follow each couple's love story. However, reading other books in the series will help you understand the mafia world and conflicts a bit better.

The suggested reading order goes like this...

King of Beasts Duet - Rex and Caterina

Big Bad Wolf Duet - Santino and Luce

Fallen Raven Duet - Enzo and Aurora

Wicked Knight Duet - Luca and Donata

Welcome to The Society!

Xoxo

Diana

CHAPTER 1

Wait For Me

LUCA

A year ago, Brooklyn, NY

The persistent heat of the sun kissed her cheeks, giving them a happy glow. When she smiled, I returned the gesture, even though she couldn't see me. My chest tightened as it did every time I was reminded that Donata Salvatore wasn't mine anymore.

This was us now—Donata having lunch with Enzo while I spied on her from a distance, hiding like the wanted man I had become.

A whole year had gone by since the last time I was in her bedroom—since she asked me never to return. That night, I had agreed to let her go because I was determined to end this relentless feud with Uncle Jimmy. Back then, I had no idea the kind of hell that was coming for me and my entire family. How could I have known that Uncle Jimmy's enemies would spend the next twelve months hunting us down like animals. Did he deserve what he got? Absolutely. He was stabbed thirteen times and left for dead in Hell's Kitchen.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" Alfred, my trusted friend, and the reason I was still alive, spoke into my earpiece. His tone was laced with all kinds of disapproval. I supposed he'd earned that right. "I told you she was fine. She moved on, Luca."

"I know." I fisted my hand, then released it. I shouldn't be angry that Donata was happy. She deserved a happy life with all the things I couldn't give her, like a home and a family of her own. "I needed to see her."

I needed to taste her and feel her in my arms again. The idea played in my head like a movie, like it had done countless times in the past year. I dreamed

of showing up at her penthouse in the city and spending the day buried deep inside her. Fuck. I rubbed my chest to ease the numbing ache that had settled there since I'd agreed to walk away.

I had to find the people responsible for murdering my family. Until I figured that out, Donata and I could never be together. Revenge was the only way back to her and the life we almost had. I wasn't ready to give her up.

Wait for me, Donata. One day soon, I'll come home.

"Why are you here, Alfred? I told you I needed a walk. Alone."

"I knew you'd go looking for her. It's time to let her go, Luca. It's only a matter of time before your enemies realize Donata is your Achilles' heel." His breath crackled in my earpiece. The long silence that followed had me thinking he had hung up on me. When he spoke again, he didn't sound so annoyed. "New York isn't safe for you anymore. There's still a price on your head. The message board on the dark web was updated again. Only a handful of names left. Your cousin Mikey was shot at in Atlanta a few months ago."

"Was it the Irish?" I asked.

"No, a local gang that runs illegal drag races." Alfred cleared his throat. "He survived if you can believe that. Last I heard he was in Ibiza, still on the run."

"It doesn't make sense. First the Russians, then the Irish, the Mexican cartel, even the fucking FBI. Because of Uncle Jimmy, the entire world's looking for us. What the fuck did he do?" I scratched my cheek, going against the grain of my beard. I let my gaze shift back to Donata's beautiful face. "Her hair is shorter." I mused aloud without meaning to.

"You saw her. Let's get you out." He typed with renewed purpose on his laptop. "I'm not far."

With my attention zeroed in on Donata's hand over Enzo's, I left the safety of my hiding place inside a cigar shop across the way. I couldn't stand being this close to her and not touch her. Who knew how long it would be before we were in the same space again. If another year went by without her in my arms, I was sure I'd go insane. As it were, I already felt like I was on the brink of losing my mind.

Living with a target on my back for so many years would do that to a person. At first, I was running from Uncle Jimmy. He wanted to punish me for exposing his plans to kill one of the Dons. Not that it mattered, the board members leading The Society didn't believe us. Uncle Jimmy didn't care that our efforts had failed; he still wanted revenge. For five years, he hunted me.

After he was murdered, I thought I could finally come home. But when I did, a new threat showed up. His enemies wanted not just me dead, but my entire family.

Yeah, the madness had already set in.

I stepped onto the curb and pulled down my baseball cap. The long hair, beard and sunglasses did a good enough job of making me invisible. No one ever paid any attention to the homeless. When I followed Donata earlier, I was very careful not to let her see me. But now, I didn't give a shit. In my head, I kept seeing Donata's blinding smile, her hands on Enzo, and just because I was a masochist, I let images of the two of them together in bed play in my head several times.

"Luca, stop. Do not go in there. There are eyes everywhere, you know that."

"I want her to know I'm still alive. I want her to know she can't give up on us just yet." My heart rate picked up the pace because I knew without a doubt that if I didn't show myself now, Donata would truly move on.

"Wasn't that the plan? For her to give you up? For you to do the same. Luca, she could get hurt because of you. You promised Signora Vittoria, you would let her be."

I stopped, both feet planted on the asphalt while cars sped by me. Alfred talked fast in my ear, reminding me why I couldn't go to her now. Round and round he went telling me things I already knew—Donata's safety, my promise to her, my own life. The assholes hunting my family would never let me be.

When I reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street, mere feet away from Donata's table in the small coffee shop, I stared at her openly, silently begging her to look at me. She did, and my heart did a somersault. Her gaze on me was fleeting. Two seconds was all she allowed herself before she turned her attention back to Enzo.

"She didn't recognize me."

"I hardly recognize you." Alfred released a breath.

The screeching of tires and stench of burned rubber sent a rush of adrenaline through me. When I made to bolt in the opposite direction as Donata, a black SUV cut me off at the intersection. The driver had that familiar hateful tinge in his eyes. He was here to kill me.

"Fuck. Where are you, Alfred?" I said under my breath. "There's two of them."

“End of the street. To your left. Run.”

I slanted one last glance at Donata. She was on her feet looking in my direction. If she knew she was looking at me, her expression didn't show it. The commotion had gotten her attention, but she had no way of knowing I was here for her.

“Gallo.” The driver licked his lips as he climbed out of the SUV and nodded to the guys flanking me. “The boss wants to talk.”

I had to get him away from here. He found me. But I was certain he didn't know I was here to spy on Donata.

“Talk? How civilized.” I chuckled.

“Yeah.” He was practically drooling, looking at me like I was his meal ticket, which I probably was. Alfred had mentioned that the price for bringing in known members of the Gallo family dead or alive had doubled in the last few months. “How about you hop in?” He tilted his head toward his back seat. Then he added in Russian, “little lamb.”

When I was in college, Uncle Jimmy ordered me to get a double major in Russian Studies. He wanted me to know our enemies. That was probably the only good piece of advice he ever gave me. He was an asshole for thinking he owned me and my family, that he could dispose of our lives as he saw fit. He thought of us as his own personal army, even though time and time again, I'd told him I had no interest in the family business or his money. Even in death, he was still making my life a living hell.

“How about you fuck off?” I glared at him.

“I can't get to you.” Alfred cursed in my earpiece.

My gaze darted from Donata to Alfred's car. “Meet me in the park.”

He knew I meant Prospect Park. It was a good distance from Dumbo, the swanky area where Enzo's parents lived. I had a hiding spot where I could lay low until Alfred could get to me. Alfred shook his head at me but did as I asked. He jumped the curve and easily maneuvered away from the traffic jam.

I didn't wait for the Russian assholes to say anything else. I bolted toward the alley, putting all my faith on the fact that they valued their anonymity as much as I valued mine. Shooting at a homeless guy on a crowded street would get the cops' attention. Slanting quick glances over my shoulder to keep an eye on their progress, I ran from alley to alley. The two SUVs were still stuck in traffic two streets over, honking and yelling at people to move out of the way.

A handful of men, though, had decided to chase me on foot. “Shit.” I hurled myself over the hood of a white sedan to lose them in the throng. They had their guns out, which meant they were done playing nice. They were losing patience. I took in a deep breath and focused on pushing forward. I’d been in situations like this one countless times. I just had to hold off a little longer until they got tired and gave up.

The thing about being on the run for so long, you learned to do whatever it took to survive. I was faster and smarter because I had way more to lose than they did. To them, this chase was a payday. To me, it was life or death.

“Alfred?” I cupped my ear. “Did you get out?”

“I’m still here. I see you. Take a left now. I got you.”

I did as he asked. Hot blood pumped through me as I made my way toward him and the safety of his vehicle. This was it. If I could get to him, I’d be scot-free. I repeated that mantra in my head over and over. I had survived assaults before—hot pursuits, stabbings, gunshots. I could do it again. If I could just get to Alfred.

The moment I saw Alfred’s friendly face fifty feet away from me, a new wave of adrenaline surged through me. I darted toward him, opened the passenger door, and heaved myself inside. I panted a breath while I scanned the area.

“Thanks, old friend.” I patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t thank me yet.” He slammed on the accelerator and careened away from the curb.

I leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the Russians in the side mirror as we made our way toward the bridge. The last thing I saw was the younger man, aiming a handgun at us. The thought that maybe he wasn’t that good of a shot crossed my mind a second before blood exploded inside the car.

At this point, panic and adrenaline felt the same as the high wore off and left me feeling numb. I patted my chest and stomach a few times before I realized Alfred was the one who got hit.

He turned to me with pity in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Luca.”

I took over the wheel and did my best to maneuver away from the cars. Alfred’s foot on the pedal didn’t let up, even when we nearly ran over a stop sign. His clothes were soaked through and made it hard to see where he’d been hit. Though that didn’t matter. What mattered was that he was losing too much blood, barely awake and still behind the wheel.

“Alfred, you need to stop.”

Another shot hit the passenger seat and then the dashboard. If I hadn't been practically on the driver's seat, that bullet would've hit me. Another shot rang out, and I swerved in and out of the lane.

"They're shooting at us in broad daylight. What the fuck?" I steered the wheel to get us back on the road.

Though at the speed we were going, we were likely to crash into someone once we reached the bridge. I veered away from the main streets to find a place where I could switch places with Alfred.

When Alfred toppled over unconscious, bullets pelted the side of our vehicle. They were aiming at the tires, not us. The other two SUVs caught up to us and were determined to stop us in our tracks. One second, I was trying to keep control of the car, and then the next, we were spinning in mid-air and somehow upside down.

The side impact sent me flying against the windshield. My skull made a cracking sound that quickly turned into a high pitch ring. Muffled voices grew louder in my head until the Russian words filtered through the fog.

"Motherfucker, I told you not to shoot."

"He was getting away."

"He's no good to us dead. Fuck. I think he's dead."

"If we hurry, we can take him to Papa before he kicks it. If he gives Papa the information he needs, maybe we'll still get paid."

"And if he dies before we get there? Papa will have our heads. Shit. Fuck. Shit. Grab his legs."

The drag across a patch of grass turned the ringing in my ears into an excruciating scream that I was pretty sure was mine. The pain was too much. But somehow, I had to stay alive. I squeezed my eyes shut and thought of Donata's beautiful face, her smile, and her scent. She always smelled of lilacs. The flowery perfume inundated my senses as I smiled at the blue sky. Bit by bit, the dark looming over me settled in until all I saw was black.

CHAPTER 2

Marriage and Family

MAXIM

Present Day, Brotherhood Compound, Little Odessa, NY

“Maxim!” My younger brother called after me.

I let out a breath and slowly turned to meet his gaze. “Your yelling is making this fucking headache worse.”

“Right. Sorry. Too much Vodka last night, heh?” He chuckled then put up his hands in mock surrender. “Just wanted to ask.” He paused to look behind him before he pulled me toward the corridor wall.

The long passage that led to the main courtyard of the Brotherhood compound loomed over us in the dark. We were alone, but these days, since his altercation with the Italian pigs, Ivan was afraid even of his own shadow.

“Spit it out, Ivan.” My voice rumbled against the brick walls.

“Don’t tell Papa I messed up again. He’ll kill me this time.” He rubbed the nape of his neck. “Tell him it was your fault? You’re his favorite. He won’t even bat an eye if the bad news comes from you.”

The bad news being that our crew lost their foothold in New Jersey. I met Ivan’s blue eyes. The terror I saw in them disarmed me. After all, he was my younger brother. And he wasn’t wrong about Papa. Ivan had messed up way too many times. This fiasco with the Italians cost us what little control we had across the Hudson.

“Ivan, I wasn’t even in the country when you decided to strike a deal with Angelo Soprano. What the hell were you thinking?” I slapped the back of his head. “You’re better than this.”

“It was a sure thing. We were making money hand over fist.” For a moment, the fire in his eyes returned. Money was Ivan’s main motivator for

anything he did, which was why he was always getting in trouble, always biting more than he could chew. “How was I supposed to know the Aurora woman was married to the Italian Mafia. Angelo just said he wanted her. I didn’t think it’d be a big deal.”

“You didn’t think.” I pointed a finger at him. “That’s the problem. All you saw was green and didn’t even consider the idea of asking questions.”

“Angelo is dead. That’s good. Right? He killed himself after the Alfera guy tortured him.”

“Jesus fuck.” I blew out an exasperated breath. “I suppose that is good news. There’s nothing to link us directly to him and his dealings. But the warehouse we had in Jersey, that’s gone, Ivan.”

After the Italians had rescued their woman and her child, they burned the place down. We lost a lot of men in the fire—not to mention the millions Ivan had made with the auctions. I had spent the better part of my day going through the wreckage. There was nothing left. To add insult to injury, after the ruckus settled, the local crew moved in to claim the territory and essentially left us holding our dicks.

“Oh fuck.” Ivan splashed muddy water with his boots as he paced up and down. “I’m a dead man.”

“Papa wouldn’t kill his own son.”

“No, he’ll probably just ask you to do it.” His voice quivered. “Would you? Would you do it?”

“What? Kill you? No. You’re my brother.” I placed my hand over his cheek and made him look me in the eye. “Papa is a reasonable man. Let’s talk to him. Okay?”

He nodded, blinking several times as he stepped back to wipe his face with the back of his hand. “Yeah, okay.”

“Maxim. Ivan.” Dominic waved us over from the entrance to the courtyard. “The Boss has called for a meeting. He’s waiting on you two.”

“That’s why we’re here.” I said under my breath, meeting Ivan’s gaze. “We’ll think of something. Come on. It’s best to get it over with.”

I strode the length of the corridor, past the ornate water fountain jetting water up at the stars in a dramatic crescendo. The trickling water soothed the pounding on my temple. Most nights when I couldn’t sleep, when the nightmares kept me awake, I liked to come out here and take in the quiet serenity.

At the opposite end, the entrance to the main part of the house stood wide

open. Across the foyer, Papa glared at us, gripping the library door open. Dimitri Belov, Papa, came to the States when he was twelve years old. His mother, like many others, simply wanted something better for her only son.

She passed away a few years after arriving, leaving young Dimitri to fend for himself. In no time, according to Papa's stories, he climbed the ranks of the Brotherhood until he became the man he was today. Papa was a ruthless business owner, a cold-blooded killer, and a father figure to us all.

As soon as we entered, his gaze shifted to Ivan's form cowering behind me. With a slight shake of his head, he motioned for us to join him. Yeah, he was in a murderous mood, just like Ivan had said. I sauntered toward the large table in the middle of the large rectangular room. The floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined with heavy books, the oversize fireplace, and the mahogany furniture gave the illusion that this place was a haven, when it wasn't. More than once, I'd seen Papa's personal guards beat a man to death for not paying his monthly dues.

With Ivan still on my heels, I made my way to the head of the table and sat to Papa's right. Dominic, one of Papa's spies, didn't waste time. He walked around me and punched Ivan in the gut, then the face. I shot to my feet and shoved Dominic before he went after Ivan again.

"He knows what he did." I wedged myself between them. When Dominic fisted his hands and squared himself, I stepped closer with my gaze boring into his. "Are you going to fight me too?"

The red on his cheeks streamed down to his neck. The asshole thought about it for a handful of seconds, then finally shook his head no. "He doesn't deserve a seat at the table."

"That's not for you to decide." I glared at him.

"Enough." Papa unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat back. "I will deal with my son in due time. For now, we have more important things to discuss. Sit."

I glanced around the table at Papa's two spies, Ivan and myself. There were a few people missing. What did Papa want to talk about that he didn't want the other crewmembers to know about? Despite what Ivan might think of Papa's volatile and dangerous disposition, he wasn't one to act irrationally. If he excluded key members of the Brotherhood, it was because whatever he wanted to talk to us about, it only concerned our family.

"Where's the boy?" He leaned to his left and spoke to Dominic directly. "Get him in here."

"Right away, Boss." Dominic's chair scraped the hardwood floors as he

stood and rushed out the door.

When he returned, he brought in Slava. A man in his early twenties, who was a computer whiz and had, as of a year ago, Papa's full support. "Boss?" He nodded.

"Tell them what you told me." Papa gestured toward me, which led me to believe that Dominic was already aware of the situation. Something that pissed me off on principle. Being Papa's spy made me Dominic's equal. Before I opened my mouth to ask, Papa raised his hand to shut me up. "Dominic happened to be standing next to me when Slava rushed in with the news. It's not the time, Son."

I nodded and swallowed my pride.

"Go on then." I said to Slava. "What do you have to say?"

"The Society is real." Slava swallowed. "The Italians pigs. All the crews all over the country answer to only five Dons."

"We knew this already." I furrowed my brows.

"We didn't have names. Well, we had one." Slava exchanged a look with Papa. When Papa nodded, he continued, "We have another name. She could be a chink in their armor."

Papa beamed at Slava then slammed his hand on the table. "I love this boy." He pointed at Slava then at me. "Do you understand? They have a woman as one of the Dons. What fucking nonsense. This life isn't for women."

"I see." I sat back, not exactly sharing Papa's excitement. So what if those pigs were letting a woman run their crews. She was of no use to us. "Killing Dons will only bring death to our doorstep. You know that."

"She's not a Don." Slava interjected. "I mean. The target isn't the Don, but her niece. I found her." He rushed to my side and plopped a laptop in front of me. "She's an ER doctor."

"I can take it from here." Papa patted Slava on the back. Letting Slava tell us the good news had been his reward. Now that Slava had said his piece, he was escorted out. Papa waited until Dominic returned then continued, "A mafia princess is exactly what we need to regain the territory we lost."

Ivan lowered his head, even though Papa didn't look his way. Sometimes Papa's cold shoulder was worse than his fist.

"You're going to kidnap the mafia princess and exchange her for a brand-new warehouse? Are we even sure the Italians will care?" I tapped on one of the keys on the laptop to look at whatever Slava wanted me to see.

Well fuck. She was incredibly beautiful with blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and pink cheeks. She was like a fairy princess plucked out of a children's book. My gaze shifted from her eyes down to the pretty bow of her shiny lips. Suddenly, I got the sense I'd met her before. Maybe she was one of those celebrity look-alikes?

"That's why I think it should be you." Papa leaned forward to look me in the eye. "Did you hear anything I just said, boy?"

Fuck, no I hadn't.

"He has a headache," Ivan interjected. "But he'll do it."

"The hell he will." Dominic shot to his feet. "I don't give a shit if you think his pretty face will make her more amiable. I can tame her. Leave her to me." His face contorted into a sneer that would instill terror in any woman, Italian mob or not.

Slowly, I rose to my feet as the realization of what Papa wanted me to do washed over me like a bucket of ice water. "You want to marry her into this family? The Dons would never allow it."

"No, I can't imagine they would." Papa looked up at me. "Which is why we're going to kidnap her, then put a baby in her first."

I fisted my hands.

"Maxim." Papa gestured for me to sit down. When I gestured no, he continued, "This is your chance to get revenge on those pigs. For what they did to your mother—my sister."

I didn't remember much from my childhood. I hardly remembered Mom's face, but what the Italians did to her was ingrained in my soul. They raped her. What they did to her was so atrocious, she killed herself after I was born. Papa took me in and swore that one day he would help me avenge my mother's murder.

"An eye for an eye." I met Papa's gaze. The wrath he found written all over my face, oozing from every pore like poison pleased him. What I felt went beyond anger now. This thirst for revenge could only be appeased with blood. I glared at the photo on the laptop screen. "What's her name?"

"Donata Salvatore." Papa smiled at me. "It has to be you, Son."

I nodded.

"You said I could have her, Boss." Dominic glared at me, then at Papa.

"I said I would think about it. Now I have." Papa pursed his lips.

"He's not your son."

"He's better than that." Papa stared at Ivan with so much contempt in his

eyes, Ivan had no choice but to get up and leave the room.

“It’s not fair. That bitch is worth a lot of money. If what Slava says is true, The Society and Don Salvatore will pay a lot of money to get her back. We can have anything we want.” He rubbed the side of his face, looking greedy and desperate at the same time. “If he wants her, he has to earn her.”

“What do you propose, hmm?” Papa’s features softened as if he’d heard more good news.

“We fight for it. If he wants her.” He sneered at me. “Your so-called son has done shit to earn his place as a spy. So he’s killed for you. So what? We all have. I don’t like him. I don’t like his pretty face. He sits here like he’s earned his place within our ranks, but he hasn’t. There are better men than him.”

“My sister’s only son is the better man for the job. You’re too thick in the head to recognize it.” Papa met my gaze again, silently asking if I was up to the task.

Thing was, now that the challenge had been issued, I couldn’t back down. I would look like a coward to the rest of the crew. If Dominic thought he could stand between me and my revenge, he had another thing coming. He had to go.

“For the record.” I placed both hands on the table. “I don’t like your face either. I’m so tired of your fucking rants. So let’s see who’s the better man once and for all. Noon tomorrow, in the courtyard.” I pointed a finger at Dominic then in the general direction of the courtyard. “If you don’t show, you’re out of the Brotherhood for good. And the princess is mine.”

“I’ll be there.” He gripped the back of his chair and slammed it down before he stormed out.

“His hyped emotions will get him killed one day.” Papa shrugged.

“Agreed.” I rubbed the creases on my forehead. “How do we ensure the Italians don’t come for our crew when we take their little princess?”

“Marriage and family. Those are bonds that can’t be broken.”

“She would never agree to marry me, not after I put her through what Mother had to endure.” At thirty-four years old, I hated the idea of marriage. I didn’t need a wife. Then again, how long would the mafia princess endure my punishment? How long before she ends it all herself, like Mother did?

“We’re not going to ask her. Once she’s pregnant, her own family will cast her off.” Papa smiled at me. “We’ll be her only family. Do you understand? Once she’s one of us, she will give us anything we want. Women

are funny creatures that way. It's why they should never be allowed to lead a crew. What fucking nonsense."

Papa's plan wasn't exactly perfect, but the opportunity to make the Italians pigs pay for everything they have taken from us didn't come along often. For once, we had the upper hand. I wasn't about to waste my only chance on small details.

Donata Salvatore was mine.

CHAPTER 3

My Dirty Little Secret

MAXIM

The nightmare was always the same—a gun to my head, and a cacophony of voices telling me she didn't deserve to die. In my dream, I somehow knew she was innocent. I begged for my life. I hated how I sounded like a fucking coward, pleading to the man on the other side of the barrel. And then it came, the bang, the blood everywhere, and darkness.

I held my breath, waiting to wake up in a panic, but the release didn't come. Instead, I was in another place that felt so much like home. The doorbell rang and I answered it. My heart raced at the sight of Donata Salvatore at my door. She was breathtaking, and for some reason, angry at me. Her anger fueled my desire for her. When I reached for her waist, she didn't recoil in disgust. Instead, she melted into me.

“Is this why you came here?” I kneaded her perky breasts then slid my hand down to her sex.

The short skirt gave way under my touch so easily, it set my skin on fire. I wasn't ready to show her what I had in store for her. But what would it hurt to give her a small taste. I stepped into her circle until our bodies were pressed together. Her breath hitched, and I cupped her mound, feeling the wet that had already soaked through her underwear. Fuck me. I walked toward the sofa, past the foyer, taking her with me, caging her with my body.

“How many fingers?” I moved the wet fabric out of the way.

“How dare you?” She glared at me with pride and fire in her eyes. “What game are you playing?”

“Tell me to stop.” I challenged her, then plunged two fingers into her pussy.

I had meant to taunt and tease her, but the slickness of her walls sent a ribbon of lust through my body. Fucking her senseless was all I could think about, to hell with my revenge. I needed to be inside her in the worst way possible. She was easily the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. And she was mine. Only mine.

"Fuck me. Please." She writhed on my palm as if she were in pain.

I felt the same agony. To be so close and yet not close enough. Before I changed my mind about what Donata deserved, I drove my fingers deeper into her cunt. I pulled out then thrust in again.

"I want to see you come," I whispered in her ear while I continued to finger-fuck her.

"I can't." She glanced up, bracing her arms on the sofa.

Sprawled like this, she gave me access to all of her. My mouth latched on to her nipple, pushing angrily against her top. I sucked on it as if my life depended on it. I was so close to exploding in my pants. But I didn't dare stop my assault on her sex. I needed to give her this.

"Omigod." Donata let her head fall back, murmuring a string of incoherent curses. "Don't stop." She begged me as her heart drummed fast against my cheek. Her hot skin felt like pure silk under my touch. Her surrender was complete.

"I'm going to break your heart." I cradled her neck while I worked my belt loose, then pulled on it to remove it. My zipper came next. I had to free my cock. Never had I ever been this hard before. "Eyes on me, Princess." I plunged into her with all the desire I felt.

I rode her hard and without mercy. When our mouths collided in a frenzy of arms and lips, the inferno at my core finally gave way. It rushed through me like wildfire. Up until now, nothing had satiated this thirst that long ago crawled into my soul to stay.

Wave after wave of pleasure erupted from our connection. My raging cock and her wet pussy refused to let go of this conflagration. It didn't matter that the whole world around us could go up in flames because of us. We'd earned this sweet release.

"Jesus fuck, Donata." I nibbled on her neck as I slowly came down from my high.

What had I done? It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wasn't supposed to lose control. I was supposed to punish her. I placed a finger under her chin and pressed lightly to make her meet my eyes. I wanted to explain to her that

what we had done had been a mistake. That it didn't mean anything.

“Go home, Ms. Salvatore.”

You're my dirty little secret.

My eyes flew open. I was back in my suite with my cock in my hand and my heart thumping in my chest. There was cum all over the sheets, and my head pounded like a motherfucker.

“What the hell was that?” I muttered in the dark.

Donata is the enemy. Nothing more.

I kicked the covers off me and headed for the bathroom. I ran the water in the shower stall, then strode to the sink to rummage through my medicine cabinet. I was down to the last three capsules of ibuprofen. Glancing down at my still fully erect cock, I popped all three in my mouth and swallowed.

While in the shower, a plan began to take form. The kidnapping of the mafia princess couldn't wait. It had to be tonight before Slava ran his mouth and the other crews found out about Papa's plan.

I poured body wash into a washcloth and wiped the sweat and that fucked-up dream off me. It had been so real. I could still taste her mouth. My skin sizzled in all the spots where she touched me. My erection stiffened even more. I gripped it and pumped a few times. Oh fuck. Bracing my free hand on the tile, I let my head hang while I considered if I should keep going.

Her moans when she climaxed echoed in my ears.

“What the fuck?” I hit the lever to cut off the hot water.

I forced myself to stand there and welcome the icy punishment. It was one thing to dream of her. And a whole other to rub one out thinking of her while fully awake. When my cock finally conceded defeat, I shut off the water and stepped out.

On my way out, I grabbed a towel off the rack, quickly dried my hair with it, then wrapped it around my waist. I still had a few hours before my stupid fight with Dominic. The fight was a waste of everyone's time. Though if I had to be honest, I'd been itching to re-arrange Dominic's face for a while now. Ever since I got back from Russia and got reinstated as Papa's right-hand man and spy, he'd been going on and on about how I hadn't earned my spot.

He was only belly aching about it because before I came back, his cousin Boris had been up for a promotion. Hell if I cared. I had done everything Papa had asked of me. I earned my place on this crew. I wasn't about to let a coward like Dominic tell me I didn't belong with my own goddam family.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Belinda’s soft voice filled the room. “I didn’t realize you weren’t dressed yet.” Her gaze slid up and down my half-naked body.

Fuck. Why didn’t I think of her before I decided to take a cold shower to wash Donata’s dream off me. “Why are you here? I didn’t call for you?”

“I wanted to see if you wanted a bite to eat before the fight.” She inched toward me with greed in her eyes. “Or anything else.”

I chuckled and reached for her waist. She did the rest, standing on her tiptoes, pulling me down toward her, so she could kiss me on the lips. By the time her tongue touched mine, her big tits were already out. I took a handful of one, kneading as I deepened the kiss.

Belinda understood our arrangement. We were fuck buddies and could never be anything more. I let her soft mouth lure me in some more, like she’d done my first night back at the Brotherhood compound. When she let out a quiet moan of pleasure, I walked her back to the bed. My cock twitched for a bit but didn’t quite commit. Maybe now wasn’t the best time for a quickie. I pulled away first.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, laboring to catch her breath.

“Now is not a good time. How about that bite to eat instead?”

“Yeah, okay.” She exhaled.

Disappointment registered on her face as she pulled the top of her dress over her tits again. When she turned to leave, she froze in place at the sight of Papa by the door. How long had he been standing there?

“Leave us.” His voice rumbled.

“Yes, Papa.” Belinda scurried out of the room.

“You can’t waste your time with women before a fight.” He scanned the room before his gaze landed on the towel wrapped around me. “Get dressed. We need to talk.”

“Any changes on the mafia princess front?” I strode to my walk-in closet and grabbed a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt.

“No, but we need to move quick on this. I want her here tonight.”

“I was thinking the same.” I joined him in the sitting area on the opposite end of the bed.

He waited until I had put on my combat boots and sat across from him. “Dominic also needs to be handled today.”

“I got it.” I furrowed my brows.

“You understand he can’t survive the fight.” He said matter-of-factly. “Each day, he grows more and more disgruntled with the way I do things.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“So we agree then.” He smiled and rose to his feet. “Finish him. No one will question it. He knew the risks and agreed to them when he issued the challenge.”

Those were the rules of the Brotherhood. Honor was everything. Dominic doubting my capacity to lead my crew was a direct offense to my honor. I had to make an example of him before he made things worse for me. Not to mention, that there was a one-hundred-percent chance he was already planning to do the same with me. He wanted me out of the way.

Over my dead body.

As it were.

“I got it.” I swallowed as I considered my next words. If Papa cast aside Ivan now, Ivan would probably end up dead before the end of the week. “About Ivan. Without our protection, he won’t survive.”

“I don’t want to hear his name right now.”

“I know, but I could use him. He rushes into things, but his heart is in the right place. He’s also good at snatch jobs.” My lips pulled into a slow smile. “He’s a Belov after all. Even if he’s a hothead.”

“That he is.” Papa chuckled and nodded once. “Fine. Take him with you. But hear this, I will not tolerate any more mistakes. He’s making a fool out of me.”

“Understood.”

“You’re a good boy, Maxim.” He stood and cradled my neck. His rough hand tightened its hold on me. “You’re family. Never forget that.”

“I know.”

“I’ll see you out there.” He winced in pain. When I made to help him, he slapped my hand away. “I’m not as old as you think.”

“You’re going to outlive us all.” I stepped back.

“Hmm.” He headed out.

As soon as he left my suite, Ivan rushed in. “They told me Papa came to see you. Did he ask you to kill me?”

“No. Not you.” I gestured for him to take a seat.

His eyes went big in surprise as he lowered himself onto the couch. “Dominic?”

I nodded. “Don’t worry about that. We need to hatch out a plan. Papa wants the princess situation handled tonight.” I braced my arms on my thighs. “I was thinking the hospital is our best bet.”

“I was thinking the same.” Ivan sat forward, beaming. After a few seconds, his smile faded. “Wait. Did Papa say I could join you on this run?”

“He did.” I slapped his knee. “But Ivan, no more screw-ups. This is your last chance, brother.”

“Cross my heart.” He drew an x with his forefinger across his chest. “And hope to die.”

“Right. Let’s get to work.”

We spent the rest of the morning drawing up routes to get into the city without raising suspicion. After the auctions in Jersey, the Italian crews were on hyper alert. They were using the carnage that happened at the warehouse as an excuse to keep us out. Somehow, they had decided all the territories belonged to them now. Even the Irish were on their side, blocking our access to Harlem. We were confined to Brighton Beach.

“It’s like going through our asses to get to our elbow, but it should work.” I stood over the map I had laid out on the coffee table. “Let’s confirm she’s working the night shift tonight. I know that’s her normal schedule, but we need eyes on her before we make the move.”

“I can go and keep watch outside the hospital.”

“No, not you. Until Papa has forgotten about Jersey and your dealings with that asshole Angelo Soprano, you don’t leave my side.” I ran my fingers through my now dry hair, as I went through the list of possible men who could join us tonight. “What about Slava? He knows what she looks like. The less our guys know about what we’re doing, the better.”

“I’ll tell him he’s with us tonight.”

“Good. Do that now.” I motioned for him to go on.

“Yeah.” He jerked to his feet and headed out.

When the door shut behind him, I plopped myself down on the sofa and covered my eyes with my arm. I had about another half hour before I had to go and deal with Dominic. No matter how much I tried to focus on the fight ahead of me, all I could think of was that in a matter of hours, I would have Donata Salvatore, in the flesh, in front of me.

If all went well, my revenge against the Italians would start tonight. By sunrise, Donata would be all mine. In my mind, I saw her clear as day with her head tilted backward while I rammed into her over and over until I found my release, until every bit of pleasure had been spent, and I spilled my seed deep inside her.

“*Fuck me. Please.*” Her words echoed in my ears.

“Shit.” I squeezed my eyes tighter before I opened them.

Twelve hours ago, I didn't even know she existed. Between this thirst for revenge and the dream of her, I couldn't deny I had developed a dark obsession for her. Nothing else mattered until she was here with me.

I rose to my feet, letting the rage building in my chest take over. Dominic was in the way of getting what I wanted. Dominic had to die. I made myself remember my usual nightmare. I saw myself pulling the trigger and splattering his brain guts on the wall.

CHAPTER 4

Until There's a Clear Winner

MAXIM

Five minutes before noon, the ruckus down in the courtyard snapped me out of my reverie. I had somehow gone down the Donata rabbit hole all over again. With a loud exhale, I braced my hands on my knees and stood.

“They’re waiting.” Ivan pushed the door open and poked his head in. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I was just on my way.”

“Dominic is down there boasting about how he finally gets to put Papa’s boy in his place.” Ivan scoffed, letting himself in. “That asshole is all talk. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not.” I gestured for him to lead the way.

“That’s what I told them, but they all just laughed. Papa let this go on for too long. Dominic has a lot of guys on his side.” Ivan fell into step next to me as we covered the length of the hallway toward the stairwell.

The moment I set foot in the courtyard; the commotion died down. For all their boasting and bravado, the guys knew I wasn’t someone they wanted to mess with. They went along with Dominic because they simply liked the drama.

“The fight goes on until there’s a clear winner.” Papa motioned for Dominic and me to meet him in the middle of the space. “May the best man win.” He nodded at me, then retreated.

Before he’d taken two steps away from us, Dominic landed his first punch. He’d gone straight for my nose. The pain got my adrenaline going, which was a good thing. I needed to keep my head on the fight.

“You look prettier now.” He spat.

“You’re just as ugly. Let me help you with that.” I faked a right punch, then hit him right across the jaw.

He stumbled backward several steps and checked his lip for blood. As he pumped his fists in the air, he did a full circle around me. I was sure he’d seen that move on Ultimate Fighter. Yeah, Dominic was all show. The asshole wanted to milk this fight for all its worth. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time. I had a kidnapping to get to.

I let my guard down on purpose to get him to stop his theatrics. He took the bait quicker than I anticipated, and that earned me another punch in the face. This time, my nose cracked loudly in my ears. Suddenly, I felt disoriented as a bunch of random images flitted through my mind. I saw a guy in the dark shooting a man, the wall covered with blood, Donata smiling at me, and a bunch of other people from my nightmares.

When I finally came to, my head throbbed while Dominic pounded into me. I had no idea how long I’d been out on the ground like that. Papa had let the fight go on despite my disadvantage. Either he wanted me dead, or he was willing to give me another shot to make things right.

Exhausted, Dominic paused for a few seconds. Across the courtyard, Papa nodded at me. Or maybe I imagined the whole thing. But I took that as a sign that it was time to make my move. I slipped my hand under his legs and bucked him off me. Before he hit the ground, I was on my feet and had my fingers wedged under his chin.

I squinted at him and focused on the screams from the guys egging the fight on. I dragged him toward the fountain and smashed his head against the tiled concrete. Blood dripped from the tip of my nose onto his cheek as he stared at me in fear.

“Papa’s orders,” I whispered in his ear before I plunged his head in the water.

He fought me, but when it came down to it, I was bigger and stronger. His own goddam hubris brought him to this point. Dominic forgot that Papa was in charge of the Brotherhood. That every time Dominic called for my demotion, he was calling for mutiny. Because there was no way in hell Papa would ever back down on a decision he’d already made.

And here was proof. The red-tinted water bubbled around Dominic’s floating hair before he went completely limp. He was gone. The sound of my hollow breath replaced the commotion around me, and I still couldn’t make myself stop, or loosen my grip around his neck.

“It’s over, Son.” Papa braced his hand on my shoulder. “Ivan, get rid of this piece of shit.”

“Yes, Papa.” Ivan pulled at my arm, then dragged Dominic toward him.

“Someone get a doctor in here. My son needs help.” Papa’s voice sounded so far away as he ushered me inside the house and into the library.

A minute later, the in-house doctor, a third-year med school student, rushed in to help me. The Vodka and pills he gave me knocked out the pain and the dizziness fairly quickly. By the time he had his latex gloves on and his medical kit wide open on the table, I was feeling more like myself.

“Fuck.” He winced when he bent down to look at my injuries. “He broke your nose. I need to set it.”

“Alright.” I gripped the arms of the chair. “Do what you must.”

“Here it goes.” He pinched the bridge of my nose with two fingers and snapped the bones back into place.

“Hmm.” I doubled over in pain. When I recovered from the shock, I braced my elbow on my knee and glanced up at Papa. “We need to get a real doctor in here soon.”

“He’s got a few more years to go. Don’t be so impatient.” Papa chuckled.

“You’re not the one with the broken nose.”

“Looks like Dominic got his wish.” Papa leaned in to take a better look at me. “Will he need surgery?”

“The bruising and swelling should go away in a couple of weeks maybe three. He needs to rest.” He showed me the device. “Your nose will need to be splinted for ten days or so to realign the broken bone and immobilize the area.”

“Just do what you have to do.” I sat back and surrendered to the non-doctor.

When it was all said and done, Ivan escorted me back to my suite, where he gave me another dose of pain killers to take later.

“You look like a mummy.” He set a glass of water with a fucking straw on the bedside table.

Just fucking great.

“I tried to stop Dominic, but Papa said the fight needed to be fair and square.” He offered me an apologetic look.

“He was right. If you had helped me, the other men would’ve called foul play.” I squeezed his shoulder then went to the bathroom to find a mirror. “Jesus.” The splint and dressing covered most of my face, but I could still see

the red and blue all over. “Fucking asshole.”

“Doc said if you don’t like your nose afterward, you can always get rhinoplasty done.”

“Do I look like I give a shit what my nose looks like?” I furrowed my brows at him. “Get out. I need to be alone.”

Before he reached the door, I remembered we still had a kidnapping pending. “Did Slava get to the hospital yet?”

“No, he stayed to watch the fight. I’ll send him now.”

“Okay.” With a wince, I made my way to the bed and lay down. “Come get me as soon as he confirms Donata is at work.”

“You got it, Boss.”

As soon as he shut the door behind him, I dozed off. Hours later, though it felt like a handful of minutes, Ivan’s face hovered over me.

“Good news.” He shook my shoulder. When I didn’t move, he shoved harder. “Good news, Maxim.”

“I heard you the first time.” I placed my arm over my eyes. “Why is the light on?”

“Because you asked me to get you when we had eyes on the princess. Slava just confirmed. She’s there until two in the morning.” Ivan bounced on his toes. “You said I couldn’t leave your side, but since you can’t go anywhere, I think I should take the lead.”

“Absolutely not.” I let my legs fall over on the side of the bed, then reached for my next dose of pills. I tossed the straw on the floor to drink from the glass like a normal person, but the rim hit my nose before the liquid reached my lips. “Fuck.”

“Doc said to use the straw. I’ll get you one.”

“Leave it.” I swallowed hard. “Get the guys ready, we’ll leave in ten.”

“But you’re supposed to stay in bed.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I glared at him.

Ivan put up his hands in surrender. “I’ll get the guys. Do you need help?”

“Just go.” I winced again, which made it hurt more.

I let out a breath, then rose to my feet. A quick body scan told me most of the damage was on my face. Dominic really hated my face. After a quick shower, I donned a fresh T-shirt and jeans. If it had been up to me, I would’ve liked to meet Donata looking less vulnerable and beat up. What did it matter? She wasn’t here to make friends. The sooner she understood that, the better.

Ivan knocked on the door once, then came in. “We’re all set.”

“Good. And Ivan.” I waited until he turned around to face me. “You do as I say. We have a solid plan. Stick to it.”

“Done.” He nodded.

“Okay. Let’s go.” I strode the length of the dark corridor that led to the parking area.

For tonight, Ivan had arranged a white van and three of our most trusted men. Slava was already in position and sending updates every fifteen minutes. I climbed into the passenger seat and greeted the driver.

“Tore, do you have the address?”

“Right here, Boss.” He showed me the map on the nav system.

“Then drive.” I pointed toward the dark road ahead of us. “We have a long way to go.”

I used the rest of the time to review the plan—which was as easy as luring Donata out of the hospital. Slava had already paid a woman to do that for us. She had instructions to make sure Donata came outside alone. The woman was confident she could do that. Once Donata left the hospital, we’d scoop her up. The hardest part of our plan was driving across the bridge into Italian territory. That was a risk I was willing to take.

“Boss.” Tore pointed at his rearview mirror. “I think we have company. They’ve been on my tail since we got on the bridge.”

“Stay the course.” I spotted the SUV in my side mirror. “We’ll lose them once we’re across.”

“Got it.”

The minute we got off the bridge, the SUV swerved out of the lane to get in front of us. “Don’t stop,” I told Tore. “Fucking Italians don’t own this town.”

Tore nodded once and accelerated. At this time of night, the streets were not as busy, so it was easy for him to take a sharp turn and maneuver our minivan through an alley to get away from the assholes following us. Five minutes later, a different SUV caught up to us to ride our tail. Or maybe it was the same one. I couldn’t tell. One thing was for sure, they were after us.

I was about to ask Tore to take a left when the vehicle drove up next to me and started shooting. My window exploded into small pieces. The pain on my face made it feel like everything hurt, but this was a new kind of pain. I cradled my side and came back with bloody fingers. What the fuck?

“This day could not be over soon enough.” I groaned. “How close are we

to the hospital?”

“Two blocks.”

“Keep going.” I slammed the back panel. “Shoot them down. Don’t let them get in front of us again.”

“Yeah, Boss.”

Our guys opened the back door and unloaded a whole cartridge on the SUV behind us. In the side mirror, I watched their tires pop before they jumped the curb. Whatever damage the guys did, it was enough to disable their car. Lucky for us, the assholes had come alone.

As soon as we arrived at the hospital, Ivan rushed to my door. “You got hit.”

“We stick to the plan.” I made to open the door, but the pain on my side pinned me to the seat.

“You got hit bad.”

“What do we do?” Tore asked, looking at Ivan instead of me. “Do we take him in? I see three holes.”

“Fuck.” I let my head fall back, trying to think of a way out of this mess that didn’t involve walking out empty-handed. “Give me a minute.”

I was stalling, but no amount of time would help me with the gunshot wounds. Feeling like I was losing touch with reality, I pursed my lips and blinked several times. “Ivan. We gotta go back.”

“We can do this, brother.” He opened the door and hooked his arm around my waist. “Come on. There’s an ambulance there.”

“I don’t need an ambulance.” I leaned on him more than I meant to. “We have to go back.”

“Right, but we can’t go over the bridge again in the same car. We have to ditch the van.” He turned his cap around to cover his face.

“That’s good thinking.” Pulling my hat down, I limped toward the paramedic standing next to our ride home. “Hit and run.” I managed to mumble to the man before I crumbled to the ground.

My head landed on the asphalt as I watched my guys knock the paramedic out. In a blurry of angry voices and talking heads, I was lifted off the ground and put in the passenger seat.

“Sorry, Boss.” Tore climbed in and started the ignition.

“What’s going on?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Ivan went in.”

“What?”

“Slava found us. The woman he had hired bailed, but he figured out how to page the doctor. She’s on her way to meet us here.”

“Fucking Ivan. I told him to stick to the plan. If this shit goes sideways, he’ll have to answer to Papa. Does he have a death wish?” I winced.

“No offense, Boss. But this shit already went sideways.” Tore grabbed a bunch of bandages from the back and placed them under my hand. “Maybe the pretty doctor can help you.”

He wasn’t wrong. The Italians were on to us now. Trying to take Donata a second time would be almost impossible. I made to open my door, but then thought better of it. I was fucking useless right now. As I tried to focus on Tore’s words, shadows crept into my line of vision.

Blood seeping through my T-shirt pooled by my boots, right before the lights went out. The last thing I heard before I passed out again was a woman’s voice asking Ivan a bunch of questions about the dead guy in the back.

Donata Salvatore. It’s your turn to know pain.

CHAPTER 5

You Die with Him

DONATA

“I thought you wanted my help?” I banged on the cell door.

Omigod, I was in a real-life prison. For all I knew, I wasn’t even in the state of New York anymore. How the hell did I end up being kidnapped by the Brotherhood. I’d gotten a text to let me know the ambulance was arriving with someone who was in critical condition. When I reached the ambulance, which was parked far away from the back door of the ambulance bay, two guys jumped out and grabbed me. From what I understood, from the few words they said to me in English, they needed a doctor.

Then as soon as the ambulance pulled up to this massive place, they threw me in a cell without another word. I was starting to think there was never an actual emergency, that it was all a ruse to get me alone in the parking lot. Fuck. For the most part, I wasn’t this naive. How was I supposed to know not to trust the paramedics?

Did my family know I was missing yet? I’d been gone for at least two hours. Did Luca know?

“Luca, where are you?”

I pictured Luca’s beautiful face and held onto that thought for dear life. If I hadn’t gone insane in the past two years, it was because I could still feel his mouth on me. I could see him up on stage at Columbia, teaching. The hope that one day I would see him again kept me going all this time.

“Is anyone out there?” I kicked the door and screamed into the ether again.

This time, though, someone did hear me. “Shut it.”

“Hello, I’m Dr. Salvatore. I was told someone needed my help.” I spoke

into the small opening.

If I was going to get out of this hellhole, the doctor card was my only way out. The guys on the other side of the door bickered with each other in Russian. I got the sense they were supposed to keep a low profile. Either kidnapping a doctor was frowned upon in their organization or no one was supposed to know their crew boss had been gravely injured. Didn't that guy from the ambulance call him Papa's favorite son?

"Hi, hello? I can help."

In the dark, the two figures shifted their weight to look at me. "You're coming with us."

"To see your boss?"

"No." The one guy unlocked the door, then grabbed me by the elbow. "Listen carefully because your life depends on it. If you try to run away, I will personally hunt you down and kill you. Understood?"

"And if I stay? Will I live?"

"That depends. Walk." He pulled me down the corridor with long strides.

"This isn't necessary. I'm willing to help." I did my best to keep up. I had a decent stride but being dragged like this made it awkward to walk. "Where are you taking me?"

"You can ask all the questions you want after you tend to Maxim's injury."

"Maxim? Is that your boss?"

"He's my brother." He stopped to look at me. "If he dies, there won't be a place where you can hide from the Brotherhood."

I blinked to keep my terror in check. What did I do to these people? How was Maxim's predicament my fault? They couldn't kill me over something I had nothing to do with. God, Aunt Vittoria was right. The Brotherhood were cruel beasts. And now I was trapped here for God only knew how long?

"If he's as bad as you say, I will need an OR. A place with proper tools to assess the damage and fix it." I scanned the area where we were.

The water fountain in the middle of the courtyard made this place feel less like a prison. "Do you live here?"

"Yes. I said no more questions." He gestured toward the front door of the home, which sprawled all around the courtyard. "Past the double doors, and up the stairs."

Suddenly, I didn't want him to leave my side. He might've threatened to kill me five minutes ago, but at least he was talking to me. I could tell he felt

sad about his brother being hurt.

“Would you go with me?”

He swallowed, as if considering something. After a long minute, he conceded, “Fine.” He strode ahead of me.

With a quick glance behind me toward the dark and scary corridor that led to the cells near the parking lot, I followed close behind him. I couldn’t help but admire the sheer size of this place. It was a mix between a Spanish hacienda style home and barracks. The living room past the vestibule had high ceilings with wood beams and large plants that accentuated the terracotta tile. What kind of place was this?

At the top of the stairs, my guide-slash-kidnapper opened the first door on the right. “Your OR.” He ushered me inside. “That’s Maxim. Fix him.”

I stared at the hospital bed at the end of the oversized suite. Not exactly an OR, but Maxim was already hooked up to an IV with a guy in a white coat tending to his wounds. “I thought you said he was stabbed.”

“Blade or bullet is all the same.” He waved his hand in dismissal.

“Not the same at all.” I furrowed my eyes at him, then shifted my attention back to the doctor. “You said you had killed the old doctor.”

“We did. This is the new one, but he’s not a doctor yet.”

Omigod. “Okay.” I approached the new doctor. “I’m Dr. Salvatore. And you are?”

“Anatoli. Nice to meet you.” His pleasantness took me by surprise.

“I’m Ivan.” The brother barged in. “Ivan Belov.”

“Nice to meet you both.” I smiled at him pleasantly, the way I would’ve done in an OR, then turned my attention back to Anatoli. “What do we have here?”

“Um. Shots. Two shots to the chest. One on the side.”

“And one to the face?” I pointed at the patient’s swollen face. The dressings on his nose were covered in blood.

“No, that happened earlier. Broken nose. I took care of it,” he said proudly.

“Nice work,” I said to Anatoli and leaned over the patient to take a better look. “Two attacks in one day? Your boss must be a piece of work.”

“Busy day at the office.” Ivan chuckled, appearing in my line of sight.

“May I?” I asked Anatoli, nodding once toward the injured area.

“Yeah, please.” He stepped back and removed his latex gloves, then offered me a fresh pair.

As I donned the gloves, I examined the wounds. My best guess was that he was shot at an angle. Surgery was the only way to know for sure if the bullets did any damage on the way in or out. “Can you help me?” I asked Anatoli. “I need to see if the bullets found their way out.”

He moved into place right away and lifted the patient’s side. “Two of them did. The one in his shoulder didn’t.” He showed me all the locations.

“He needs surgery.” I glanced up at Ivan. “Like right now. He’s in bad shape.”

“Do what you gotta do?” He pointed at his brother.

“He needs to go to a hospital, where a whole team can operate. He can barely breathe.” I pointed at the massive splint covering his face. “You’re asking for the impossible here.”

“That’s not our problem,” a deep voice with a Russian accent said from the door, “save my son.”

“That’s Papa.” Ivan leaned over Maxim to whisper to me.

“I would love to help your son, but I need an OR.”

“We have everything you need.” He said matter of fact, then pointed at Anatoli. “Bring the lady doctor anything she wants.”

“I need better lighting. I’ll need to anesthetize him. He’s out now, but he’ll wake up as soon as I make the first incision. He’s also lost a lot of blood.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Anatoli rushed out of the room.

I took my time to look at my patient now. Maxim lay on the bed that was barely big enough for him in his bloody boxer briefs. Anatoli had taken the time to cut him out of his clothes but didn’t bother with a gown. I examined the sleeve of tattoos that wrapped around his arm and wide chest. The ink on his body was both a work of art and a love letter to Russia. Even in this state, the man looked formidable.

“Is there a place where I can wash up?”

“You have until morning,” Papa spoke again. “If he dies, you die with him.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that he was the one killing his son by keeping him here, but thought better of it. I didn’t want to make my situation worse. For as long as I could, I had to keep up the appearance that Maxim had a chance. If we were in a hospital, things would be different. But here? He’d lost so much blood. I would be surprised if he made it through the night.

“I will do my best.”

“Make sure you do.” He turned to leave, then stopped to glare at Ivan. “You did good. You saved the mission.”

Ivan nodded once. After Papa left the room and the tension in the air dropped a few notches, Ivan ushered me to the bathroom, where they had a fresh change of clothes for me. When I came out ready to do the impossible, Anatoli was already setting up the equipment he brought in with him.

“You know the chances of this working are not good, right?” I whispered while I set up the instruments on a small metal table. “They should’ve taken him to the hospital as soon as it happened.” I sounded like a broken record. Anatoli looked like a smart man. Maybe he could help me get his boss and me out of here.

“I can’t help you.” He lifted his gaze up at me. “I mean, I can help you with the surgery. But I can’t help you escape.”

“I get it. It’s my neck on the line. Not yours.”

With the limited resources I had, the surgery took almost two hours. The bullets on his flank hadn’t ruptured anything. So really, it was all just a matter of cleaning the debris out and stitching up the wounds. The bullet in his shoulder took the longest to remove because of how close it lay to a nerve root. Messing with it was risky, but it had to be done.

After I finished, Anatoli helped me clean up and get Maxim into a gown. When it was over and done, I rushed to the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I couldn’t keep pretending that this situation didn’t scare the shit out of me. Sure, Maxim would be okay in two or three weeks. But then what? Would they send me home now that Papa’s favorite son was out of immediate danger?

I sat on the cold floor and dropped my head in my hands. I thought of Papa’s words to Ivan. “You did good. You saved the mission.” The Brotherhood kidnapped me for a reason that had nothing to do with Maxim’s injury. Ivan went to the hospital to kidnap me, Donata Salvatore, not Dr. Salvatore.

What did the Russians want with me?

“It’s late. You should go to bed.” Anatoli spoke softly.

“Please don’t send me back to the cell.” I glanced up at him with tears in my eyes. Since I was little, I’d been afraid of the dark. That place was straight out of my nightmares. “I’ll be able to take care of Maxim better if I stay in the room with him.”

“Papa said to give you anything you need. I guess this counts as that. You

can sleep in Maxim's bed." He offered me his hand.

"Thank you." Tears streamed down my cheeks. "I need a shower."

"Oh, sure. I brought toiletries and stuff for you. Um yeah." He hesitated for a moment then darted out of the bathroom.

I locked the door then quickly removed the bloody scrubs. As soon as the warm water hit my back, my full body relaxed. Maybe Ivan and his guys initially treated me like a prisoner to make me more compliant. If they wanted money, my family would pay without hesitation. I just had to stay alive and not lose my shit.

With a sigh, I reached for the body wash. The label read for hair, body and face. Right. I pumped some into my washcloth, worked it into a lather, then rubbed it all over me. The sandalwood smell reminded me of Luca. I brought it up to my face and inhaled deeply.

"Luca. I need you." I leaned on the tiled wall and let the tears come again.

Tomorrow, I would come up with a plan to escape. For now, I was too tired to think. Maybe Maxim would be grateful I saved his life and choose to let me go.

"Donata." Ivan's voice filtered through the door.

"I'm here. I haven't climbed out the window." I shut the water off and grabbed a clean towel off the rack. "Just another minute."

I looked around for something to wear. In the end, I decided to wear the sort of clean scrubs I had on when they grabbed me. Another knock made me move a little faster. I took two deep breaths, then opened the door.

"I was covered in blood. I needed to clean up."

"Fine." He pointed at the king-size bed on the opposite end of the bedroom. "Belinda made the bed for you. You'll stay here. You might as well start now."

"Start now? What do you mean?" I shoved wet strands of hair out of my face.

"How's my brother?" Ivan asked.

"He'll live." I smiled at Maxim's form. "What happens now? If it's money you want, my family will pay."

"Money?" He scoffed. "I don't think we can put a price on you, princess."

Oh fuck. They knew exactly who I was. "What do you want with me then?"

Ivan beamed at me, then shifted his attention to his brother, rubbing the

side of his face. He shook his head as if considering something. After a long minute of going back and forth, he finally answered, “I wanted to keep you guessing a little longer.” He chuckled. “But what’s the point? Maxim can’t even enjoy it.”

“Enjoy what?”

“The start of his revenge against your family. Get some rest. Tomorrow is your wedding day.” He did a mocking curtsy and headed for the door.

“My what?” I chased after him. “You can’t be serious. You want me to marry your brother?”

Ivan opened and shut the door behind him.

“You can’t make me marry a stranger.” I banged on the door. “What the actual fuck? You can’t do this. My family will not allow it.” I tried the door handle. When it opened, I quickly started planning my exit route.

“Is there something you need for Maxim?” A big, burly guy with a long beard crowded the threshold.

“Let me guess, you’re going to be here all night.”

“Papa’s orders.”

CHAPTER 6

Favorite Son's New Bride

DONATA

After I crawled into Maxim's bed, I stared at his form across the room. I had turned off all the lights, but the one next to him. In his condition, he was no threat to me. But I still wanted to keep my eyes on him. To my surprise, the beeping of his heart and oxygen monitor lulled me to sleep faster than I thought possible.

When I woke, the sun was already up. I stretched in the soft bed, feeling refreshed and rested. For the first time in a long while, I didn't have bad dreams about Luca getting killed. Taking in the sandalwood scent on the pillow, I rolled to one side, then sat up. The second I realized I was in a strange place, I shot to my feet, heart racing. My gaze darted from the tall windows to the patient on the other side.

Right. I placed a hand on my forehead. The kidnapping from last night was real. I hadn't dreamed it. Shit. The Brotherhood wanted me to marry one of their own. I glanced up at Maxim with tears in my eyes. This wasn't happening. I couldn't marry a complete stranger. Especially not one who was after revenge. What did my family do to him? He had to know that forcing me into a marriage neither of us wanted wouldn't erase whatever my family did.

I glanced back at the bed. Omigod, no. They were all insane if they thought I would agree to a real marriage, one with babies and all that. Fuck. Pacing the length of the room, I considered my options. If Maxim was on a vengeful path, appealing to him wouldn't change a thing. Or maybe the shooting made him reconsider his life. I scoffed. Based on all the scars on his body, I was sure this wasn't his first near-death experience.

No, Maxim wasn't my way out.

The guard outside the door also looked fairly determined to keep me here. As did Anatoli. Last night, he sounded firm in his decision not to help me escape. Ivan was enjoying this too much to be of any help. Judging by the light that hit his eyes when his father said *good job* to him, I had to assume, he would never go against his father's wishes. Or his brother's for that matter.

I was alone in this.

Luca, where are you?

He'd been gone for more than two years. Did he forget about me like I asked him to? I hadn't meant it. That day, I'd been so afraid for his life. I would've said anything to keep him alive. But now that we'd been apart for so long, I realized that I'd made a mistake. I should have never given him up. I should've run away with him when I had the chance.

My own cowardice brought me here—across enemy lines, literally waiting for my execution.

I stomped toward Maxim to glare at him properly, even though he was still sleeping. The pain killers would keep him sedated for a while. I fisted my hands in frustrated anger. I wanted to scream at him for putting me in this situation, but he couldn't even do me the courtesy of being awake.

"You're sorely mistaken if you think your stupid revenge plan is going to work," I said to an unconscious Maxim. "My whole family will make sure you pay for what you did. You started a war, and for what? Luca will find me. My love will find me, and when he does, he will cut you up into tiny pieces and feed you to your dog." I let out a long breath.

After my rant, the room fell quiet again, until there was only the soothing beeping of Maxim's heart monitor. I stared at his face. Under that gauze, I could see thick eyebrows, a bearded jaw, and brown hair pulled up into a man bun. He had a tall form, and a body that had obviously had a rough life. Was that what I was to expect? A kind of hell contained in these four walls.

"You can't do this to me," I begged him. "Please. I don't want to marry you."

"Do you really mean that?" A woman's voice brought me back from my useless outburst of anger.

My gaze shifted from Maxim to the pretty woman by the door. She had long dark hair, a curvy body and all kinds of confidence. "Well, do you?" She spoke with a slight Russian accent.

“What? About not wanting to marry a stranger? Absolutely, I mean it.” I close the space between us, my hopes rising with every step. “I’m Donata.”

“I know who you are. All morning, all everyone’s done is talk about you. The great Donata is finally home.” She shook my hand. “I’m Belinda.”

“This isn’t my home.” I pulled her toward me. “You have to help me.”

“You want to leave?”

“Yes.” Why would she assume I want to stay? “I don’t want to marry Maxim.”

“You’re so lucky.” Tears pooled in her eyes. “Max is everything.”

“Oh. Are you?” I didn’t even know how to ask. Were they together or was this just a crush? This could be my chance. Belinda was my way out. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“We’re lovers,” she said proudly. “I thought it was just a matter of time before he proposed.”

I beamed at her. “That’s great news. Um, maybe we can help each other. I’m not here to steal your...fiancé. In fact, I need to go home to my fiancé. You have to help me.”

Her eyes went big in surprise. She shot a glance over her shoulder, then at Maxim, before she pulled me into the bathroom. Oh, I could tell when a woman was on a mission. Beautiful Belinda wanted to help.

“Delivery truck,” she whispered. When I leaned in, she continued, “we get them once a week. I can get you to the kitchen with some excuse. Then you go from there. I’ll tell them you hit me with a pan or something.”

“That’s a great plan. When do we start?”

“Friday.” She motioned for me to lower my voice. “Until then, don’t try to leave. Make them think you want to stay.”

“That’s two days from now.” I said louder than I meant to. “The wedding is tonight.”

“What? No. No.” She paced the length of the room, looking as desperate as me. “We have to postpone the wedding. Can you keep him asleep until Friday?”

“Okay. Yeah. I can try that. I mean, that’s a bit unethical for a doctor. I don’t really have a medical reason to do it.”

“Lady. You want out or not?”

“Yes. Yes. You’re right. I can do it.” I let out a small laugh. “They can’t possibly make me marry an unconscious man, right?”

“I don’t think they can.” She beamed at me. “Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I see him?”

“Oh sure.” I motioned toward the door. “He powered through it. He’ll be just fine.”

With a quick, grateful nod, she bolted toward him. By the time, I joined her, she’d crawled into bed with Maxim and had her head on his good shoulder. They made a beautiful couple. Who I was to get in the middle of that?

She whispered to him in Russian. I had no idea what she said, but it sounded kind of romantic and intimate. While she talked to him, I checked his stitches and replaced the bandages, including the gauze over his nose. He’d taken a real beating. What kind of man goes from a fist fight to a shooting in the same day?

“What happened here? Who did he piss of?” I poured water into a container and dipped a sponge into it.

“There was a challenge yesterday.” She sat. “Can I do that?”

“Go for it.” I stood back as she gently wiped Maxim’s inked skin. “A challenge?”

“Yeah. One of Papa’s spies. Maxim won.” She smiled at him. “Drowned Dominic in the water fountain downstairs.”

“Omigod.” I covered my mouth.

I grew up in a mafia world, but Aunt Vittoria kept me away from all the violence. She always thought we were too smart to get our hands dirty. Blood didn’t bother me. But I couldn’t imagine killing a man in cold blood.

“Dominic was the challenger. He got what he deserved.” She swiped dry blood from Maxim’s cheek and sobbed. “For a minute I didn’t think Maxim was going to make it, and then you showed up. Don’t take him from me.”

“I just want to go home.”

“I have to go.” She jumped off the bed. “Papa doesn’t like it when we serve lunch late.” She stopped to scan the room. “You haven’t eaten?”

“No. I’m not allowed to leave.”

“I’ll bring you lunch.” She patted my hand.

“Donata,” Maxim mumbled. “I didn’t kill her.” The rest was a string of Russian words I couldn’t even begin to make out.

“What is he saying?” I asked.

“He’s awake.” She pursed her lips. “It’s just his nightmares. He’s a restless sleeper. Give him the drugs before the guards hear him.” She rushed

to the door and pressed her ear to it. “Do it,” she whisper-shouted.

“Wait. I need to ask him a few questions.” I placed my hand on his chest to calm him down. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Donata.” He mumbled again but didn’t open his eyes.

“He’s not really awake.” I faced Belinda. “What did he say?”

“I think he was dreaming about you.” Her gaze darted between me and him.

The pain I saw there cut me. I got the sense that maybe this romance between Maxim and Belinda was one-sided. Why else would Maxim be sleeping with a woman who loved him while also planning his vengeful wedding to a woman he hated. I stared at his disfigured face and all the old scars on his body. Maxim was ruthless—a monster without a heart. Just as Aunt Vittoria had always said about the Brotherhood.

In the next beat, Belinda whizzed past me and opened the door. “Tore, Donata is planning to escape. If you leave her in Maxim’s room, she’ll run.”

What the hell? She ratted me out. I pulled her toward me. “You’re making a mistake.”

“I’m doing this for your own good.” She yanked her arm away before she turned to Tore, the bodyguard. “You should take her back to her cell.”

“Please, don’t.” I put up my hands. “I promise I won’t try to leave. I can’t be in that place again” My heart thumped so hard; I thought I was going to throw up.

“Are you really going to risk it with Papa? What do you think he’ll do if you lose his mafia princess?” Belinda switched to Russian, bracing her hand on his shoulder.

“Papa said to keep her here. So Maxim can see her when he wakes up.”

“As you wish.” She gave him a one-shoulder shrug, as if she could take it or leave it. “But if she jumps out the terrace, it’ll be your hide.” She pointed at the French double doors.

Half an hour ago, she was desperate to send me away so she could keep Maxim to herself. What happened? I got that we weren’t friends. But at the very least, we had a common goal. She wanted me out of the way. And I most definitely wanted to be out of the way.

“I’ll be good. I promise.” I backed away from Tore when his facial expression changed from confused to determined. “No,” I screamed.

He moved so fast, I only got a couple of steps in before he trapped me into a bear hug from behind. My legs flailed without purpose, at first. But

once I got the hang of it, I managed to land a few kicks to his shins. He groaned and loosened his hold on me. The door was opened, and he wasn't blocking it. Maybe this was my chance to make a run for it.

I kicked and squirmed and screamed until he said through gritted teeth, "If you don't stop your fighting, I will throw you in the cell with the dogs. I'm warning you. They haven't eaten."

A part of me wanted to believe that Maxim would want a bride with all her limbs. But honestly, these people were cruel. Maxim brought me here to enact his revenge. Maybe he already had plans to throw me to the dogs. I stopped, swallowing my tears. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me suffer. Not anymore than I already had anyway.

"I'll go quietly."

"That's a good girl." He let me go, then gripped my elbow.

"I'll take care of him. Don't worry. He's in good hands." She smiled at me as if we were friends.

Just fucking great. She figured out a way to keep the wedding from happening without risking Papa's wrath for helping me escape. Why did she change her mind?

"Belinda, please. Help me." I begged one last time before Tore escorted me out of the room.

Last night when I was brought here, the courtyard was dark and empty. But this morning, it was full of life and laughter. Of course, as soon as they all saw me, the party stopped. Men and women, and even some kids, gawked at me like I was a three-headed monster. They were the monsters, not me.

"She's so pretty." A little boy hiding behind his mother waved at me.

"Do all these people live here?" I asked Tore while trying my best to keep up with his fast pace. Getting dragged by the elbow was so humiliating. "Why are they staring at me?"

"You ask too many questions. Ivan warned me you were a chatterbox." He grumbled. After a while, he said, "Not all of them."

"What?"

"Not all of them live here."

"Oh. Do they know who I am?" Seriously, they were looking at me like I was some lost princess. They had to know I'd been kidnapped.

"You're Papa's favorite son's new bride." He pulled me toward the opposite end of the courtyard and into a dark and damp corridor I knew well.

I wasn't anyone's fucking bride—new or otherwise. I took in a breath.

Losing my shit in front of all these people couldn't be the best strategy, even if at this particular moment I didn't have one.

"Is there anything I can do? Please, I'm..." I bit my tongue. I was the worst mafia princess if at the first sign of torture, I divulged all my weaknesses. My father used to lock me in the cellar when I was little. He did it for years until Aunt Vittoria saved me from her own brother. I never got over my fear of the dark. "I'm hungry," I said when Tore stopped to listen to what I had to say.

"I'll bring you some food."

"Can I just eat in the kitchen? I'll die from Ebola eating in that disease-ridden cell."

"No." He hung a left then walked me to the middle of the cell. "You'll stay here until the wedding."

"But that can be in weeks. You don't know when Maxim will wake." I pulled at my arm.

I was in Belinda's hands now. If she decided to keep Maxim in a chemically-induced coma, I could be in this cell for years. I glared at the dirty walls around me. Again, Tore moved so fast that by the time I thought to run out, the door had already slammed shut.

"Argh." I screamed into the small barred window. "When Luca finds me, he will make you pay. He'll feed you to your dogs." I pressed my back against the door and let the tears flow.

I shut my eyes so the dark wouldn't get me and made myself think of Luca and the first time we met. But it didn't work. The darkness crept over my skin like long tendrils, leaving a trail of cold, empty space where Luca should be.

"No one is coming for me." I sobbed into my hands.

CHAPTER 7

This Isn't a Real Wedding

DONATA

“You didn’t eat your meal.” Tore stood crowding the threshold with another tray of food in his hands.

“I won’t eat in this place.” My voice sounded coarse from all the screaming I’d done all day. “You can’t keep me here. It’s repugnant. I’d rather starve.”

He grunted, looking confused again.

“Maxim can be out for weeks. If I die of starvation before the wedding, it’ll be on you.”

He mumbled something in Russian, then reached for my elbow again. “You’ll eat in the kitchen.”

According to Belinda, the kitchen had access to the outside, or at least a way to get to Friday’s delivery truck. I still had a chance to leave. Tore escorted me across the courtyard and back into the main house. Past the vestibule and the living room, he took the stairs on the right, which led to the lower level.

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was massive with a rustic vibe to it. The tall cabinets, lining the walls, were painted in a deep green color. Cookware hung from the suspended pot rack over an oversized wooden table in the middle of the room. As soon as we walked in, the three women standing around the counter rolling dumplings stopped to stare at me.

“She’s eating here,” Tore explained and set my tray on the far end of the table.

“I served that plate an hour ago.” The older woman frowned at Tore, then turned to me. “Let me get you a fresh plate.”

“Thank you.” I took the chair Tore offered me. “It smells amazing.”

“Galina is our head cook.” Tore gestured toward the older woman. “These are her daughters, Irina and Sasha. They work in the kitchen too.”

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled at the group.

“I’ll come back when you’re done.” He made to leave.

I shot to my feet. “I’m not going back to that cell. I need to speak to Papa. He can’t keep me like this.” I pointed at my scrubs covered in soot.

Tore glared at me for the longest minute before he turned around and left. I plopped myself down on the chair. I had to think of something to get Papa to let me stay in the house. Otherwise, I was afraid I’d lose my mind down in the dungeon.

“Here. Eat.” Galina placed a bowl in front of me.

I took the first spoonful of the stew and let out a little moan. “Hmm, so good. Thank you.”

While I ate, I scanned the kitchen for exits, but there were none. Was the way we came in the only way out? I had no idea how Belinda thought I could get to the delivery truck from here. Hopefully, that was still her plan. Keeping Maxim asleep only stopped the wedding. If she wanted him to marry her instead, I had to disappear.

After I finished my food, Irina took away my plate, eyeing me as if I were some rare animal. “Maxim will be a good husband.”

“I don’t need a husband. Good or otherwise.”

“You’re so lucky.” She sighed with stars in her eyes. “He’s handsome and kind.”

“Kind?” I scoffed. “The man had me kidnapped. Did you know that?”

They looked at each other as if they didn’t understand the words. What did Papa tell them about me? Why were they okay with keeping me here against my will?

“It’s for the good of the Brotherhood.” Galina beamed at me. “You’ll see. In time, you’ll learn to love Maxim. He’s very handsome and a good kisser. It’ll be easy.”

“I don’t care about his face or his kissing.” My gaze darted between Sasha and Irina who chuckled at the mention of kissing. “You can’t fall in love with someone just because they’re hot.”

Irina and Sasha giggled a little louder. They didn’t get how fucked up this entire situation really was. I thought of Luca and his beautiful face. In the time we’d been apart, I tried hard to get over him. I went out with a few guys.

But the truth was, Luca ruined me for other men. The sex wasn't the same when it wasn't with him.

I didn't care how handsome, or kind, Maxim could be. He wasn't Luca. I only wanted Luca.

"There you are." Belinda strolled into the kitchen with a big smile on her face.

Maxim should be awake by now. If the wedding wasn't happening tonight, it was because Belinda did her part and drugged Maxim to keep him asleep. Did she even know how much to administer?

"What are you giving him?"

Her eyes went big in surprise as her gaze shifted between Galina and me. She puffed out a breath, then pulled me by the hand. When we were alone just outside the kitchen, she let me go.

"Anatoli is helping me." She whispered.

"What is Anatoli giving him?"

"How should I know? Everything is going fine. You'll be out of here in two days. Then, we'll let him wake up." She beamed at me.

"You need to get me out of that cell."

"I'm sorry about that, but now you don't have to sleep in Maxim's room."

"Anything is better than that cell." I raised my voice. "Fix it."

"Okay." She shoved a bundle into my arms. "I brought you some clothes. My room is down the hallway. If you need a shower, the bathroom is across the way."

"I need to speak to Papa. He can't keep me in that cell. Maybe I can stay in your room?"

"Yes, Papa already said you could." She pointed at the clothes. "Tore asked him for you. Papa also asked me to get you clothes."

"Thank God." I hugged her.

Belinda's room was small with a twin bed in the corner and a desk table on the other side. I dropped off the clothes and toiletries she gave me then went across the hallway to take a shower and wash my clothes. The stench from the cell clung to my scrubs and my hair. I couldn't stand it.

When I finished getting dressed in Belinda's yellow mini-dress, I lay down on the bed. All day I had dreaded the idea of spending the night in the dungeon. I hadn't realized how terrified I'd been. I blinked away tears while I stared at my trembling hands. The nightmare was almost over. In two days, I was getting out of this place.

Belinda didn't return to her room. I could only assume it was because she'd decided to stay with Maxim. I shrugged. She could keep the handsome Maxim. With a sigh, I got under the covers and fell asleep again.

The next morning, a loud knock on the door woke me up. "Breakfast is ready." Tore hovered over me.

"By all means do come in." I sat up. "How's Maxim?"

"Still out." He pursed his lips. "You're staying with Galina and her girls today." He gestured toward the kitchen at the opposite end of the hallway, then left.

"Good talk." I waved at him. "One more day," I reminded myself before I trudged across the way to wash up.

When I walked into the kitchen, I was greeted by total chaos. It seemed Galina was responsible for feeding Papa's small army. On the stove, she had two big pots filled with what looked like porridge. The entire room smelled delicious, the way I'd imagined a real home would.

"The men come and go all morning. They're always hungry." Sasha shook her head at the three men seated at the far end of the table. "I saved you a chair over here." She offered me a spot next to a boy. "This is Alexei. He lives here too."

"Is he your brother?"

"No. He's an orphan. Papa took him in." She ruffled the boy's hair.

"You're pretty." He beamed at me.

"Thank you." I smiled back.

Sitting here, surrounded by people who treated each other like family, I felt less of a prisoner. At home, I usually ate alone. Since Luca left me, I buried myself in my work. The hospital was my life. I didn't have time for friends or for Aunt Vittoria, who was my closest relative.

"Kasha." Irina set a bowl in front of me. "You'll like it. Try the blinis too." She pointed at the plate in the center of the table, piled high with what looked to be crepes. When the boy Alexei shot to his feet to grab a thin pancake, Irina slapped his hand. "Ladies first." She pointed at me.

"Okay." He rolled his eyes.

"It all looks great. Thank you."

"There you are." Belinda rushed into the kitchen with panic written all over her face. "We gotta go." She pulled at my elbow. "Now."

"What? Why?" I followed her out of the room. "What happened?"

"Maxim is awake."

“I thought you had it under control.” My heart raced at the mere thought of having to face Maxim.

“I did. Maybe the dose wasn’t high enough. When I went to give him the next shot, he gripped my wrist and wouldn’t let me give it to him.” She panted a breath. “I think he knows what we were doing. I’d never seen him that mad.”

“What is he going to do?”

“I don’t know. I just ran out of there.” She glanced behind her.

“What now?” I swallowed to stifle the terror building in my chest. “The delivery truck won’t be here until tomorrow.”

“Make a run for it.”

I nodded. Though I had no idea what that even meant. I had no clue where I was or how to get home. But one problem at a time. First, I had to leave the compound. Once I was outside of these walls, I could find a phone and call Aunt Vittoria.

“Do you have a phone?”

“I don’t.” She shook her head. “Papa doesn’t allow them. He says that’s how the government keeps tabs on people.”

“What about a landline?”

“There’s one in Papa’s library.” She furrowed her brows. “We’re out of time. You have to leave now.”

“Okay.” I took her hand and darted up the stairs.

When we reached the top, I slowed down so as to not draw attention to us. By now, everyone knew I was allowed out of my cell. Even Tore wasn’t glued to my side anymore. So being out and about shouldn’t raise any suspicions. I took in a deep breath to calm down as I made my way across the courtyard.

The man sitting around a table playing cards looked up when we walked by. After Belinda greeted them in Russian, they returned to their game.

“What did you tell them?” I asked, shooting a quick glance over my shoulder.

“That I was taking you back to your cell.”

I shivered at the thought of going back there. If I failed today, I had no doubt Maxim would send me to the dungeon indefinitely. Galina described Maxim as kind, but there was a reason why Belinda was so scared. Who knew what Maxim had planned for us?

“How did he figure out what we were trying to do?” I fell into step next

to Belinda.

“I think he heard us talking. Maybe he was awake. I don’t know. Come on.” She took off running as soon as we entered the corridor.

Past the block of cells, there was a big grassy area then a brick wall that sprawled around the compound. This wasn’t going to work. The fence had to be at least nine feet tall. Belinda could prop me up, but then I would have a big drop on the other side. Shit. I’d never broken a bone in my life. This couldn’t be happening.

“Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t ask for help. They won’t give it. The town people will protect Papa at all costs.” Belinda talked fast and all I could do was nod. “Up you go.” She interlaced her fingers and bent down.

I should’ve changed back into my scrubs. They offered more protection than this flimsy dress. I exhaled loudly.

“We don’t have all day.”

“I know. Just one more minute.” I did a couple rounds of deep breaths. “I can do this. Just step up and catch the edge of the wall. Swing my leg over. And then drop. Easy.”

“You should probably hang from the wall, then drop.”

“Oh right.”

“Belinda.” A thunderous voice boomed against the brick. “Get back to the house.”

“Relax. We were just out for a walk.” Belinda braced her hands on her hips. “Papa said she wasn’t our prisoner.”

Tore’s gaze darted between Belinda and me, as if trying to figure out what he saw. He didn’t exactly catch me trying to climb the wall. I didn’t even get to that part. After a long minute, Tore relaxed his stance and his features softened.

“Maxim is awake.” He glanced down at my dress. “There’s new clothes for you to wear.”

“Why does she need new clothes?” Belinda glared at him, her chest rising and falling as she waited for Tore to say the words.

“For the wedding ceremony,” Tore said matter of fact. “Help her get ready. Maxim wants to get this over with as soon as possible.” He gestured toward the house. “They’ll be in the library. Make sure she’s there in an hour.”

The whole way back to Belinda’s room, she was in tears. Our plan had failed. We had no other way of stopping this ridiculous wedding. Feeling

much like a prized pig, I showered and donned the wedding gown Belinda laid out on the bed for me. It was a simple white dress with spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline. The silky fabric was soft and hugged my body in all the right places.

“Do you want to wear your hair up?” Belinda asked, as she put the finishing touches on my makeup.

“Don’t worry about it. This isn’t a real wedding.” I smoothed out the dress and turned to face the mirror.

“It should’ve been me.” She wiped her cheek. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. For everything. For trying to help me.” I offered her a weak smile. “Lead the way.”

When we entered the library, my gaze immediately spotted Maxim’s form facing the fireplace. He had to be in pain from the recent surgery. He should be in bed, not here seeking revenge.

“You’re a vision.” Papa sat at the head of the long table. “Please sit.” He pointed at the seat next to him.

I sat down and kept my head down. If I looked at Maxim now, I would burst into tears and beg them to let me go. I didn’t want to give them the satisfaction of seeing me suffer. In the corner of my eye, Maxim moved away from the fireplace and took the seat across from me.

“Tore and Ivan will be your witnesses. Father Sergey is here to perform the ceremony.” Papa explained while the two men and the priest joined us at the table. “We shall start.”

The priest droned on about the significance of marriage. At some point, he asked if I wanted Maxim Belov as my lawfully wedded husband. In a blur of faces and inaudible voices, I said I do, then signed the paper Papa placed in front of me. It already had Maxim’s signature. My tears pelted on the two names as my pen scratched across the page.

“Take her to my room.” Maxim rose to his feet.

By the time I lifted my gaze to meet his, he was already on his way out.

I was his wife now.

Luca, I’m sorry.

CHAPTER 8

He Sounds Violent

DONATA

“Please don’t leave,” I called after Belinda.

After the wedding ceremony, Ivan had escorted me out of the library then handed me over to Belinda. She’d been standing outside the door, probably hoping for a miracle that would put a stop to Maxim’s crazy plan for revenge.

“Did he kiss you?” She stopped at the top of the stairs.

“No. The man can barely breathe.” I pointed at my nose.

“Don’t sleep with him.” She took my hands in hers. “I’m going out of my mind picturing him with you.”

“I don’t want that either.”

“He doesn’t trust me anymore. But you, he won’t see it coming. You can drug him.” Her gaze darted between the bed and me. “He loves me. I know he does. It’s this stupid revenge idea. He’s not himself. He’s obsessed with making you pay.”

“What exactly am I paying for?” I pulled her into the bedroom and shut the door.

At some point before the night was over, Maxim would show up to consummate our marriage. Like Belinda, I was also going out of my mind, imagining what that would be like. A part of me wanted to ask her if he was cruel in bed. But I was sure that would set her off. Even if our escape plan today had failed, Belinda was my only friend in his place.

“Ivan said I was supposed to pay for what my family did to him. But he didn’t say what that was.”

“I have to go.” She shrugged away from me, wiping her red, puffy eyes.

Adrenaline rushed through me at the idea that I was alone and out of

options. I didn't want to be with Maxim. Something about his presence was so unnerving. He made my fears turn to jittery energy. I didn't know what to do with that. I wanted to hate him. Technically speaking, we were enemies, but I barely knew him. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't even exchanged a single word with him. I couldn't even muster the courage to look at him, to really see this person hellbent on seeing me suffer.

"Okay. I'm sorry." No idea why I was apologizing to her.

"I'm sorry too." She smiled; a sad gesture that made me hate Maxim a little more.

I had a feeling that after tonight, I would have a reason to loathe him for the rest of my life. Belinda walked away while I stood there numb and defeated. After a few beats, I jerked into action and slammed the door shut. When the image of my hand on his tattooed skin popped into my head, I latched the lock and stepped back.

Standing there, ready to fight, I considered Belinda's suggestion. Maybe I didn't have to drug him into unconsciousness, just make him sleepy enough to mess with his abilities. If he couldn't get it up....

The doorknob jiggled.

"What the fuck?" Maxim tried again, then slammed his hand on the door. "Donata, let me in."

I shook my head, even though he couldn't see me. With my heart thrashing in my ears, I stepped closer and pressed my ear to the wood panel. Two men said something to him in Russian, then chuckled. Their laughter trailed behind them as they walked down the hallway.

"Hmm." Maxim let out a soft moan as if he were in pain.

Of course he was. He was shot three days ago. He should be resting. I glanced over my shoulder. All the monitors, the hospital bed and equipment were gone. The suite didn't look like a hospice anymore. It looked like a bachelor pad.

"You have until the count of three," he said through gritted teeth. "One."

I took two steps back as silence crept into every corner of the room.

"Two."

The calm before the storm. I took a deep breath.

"Three."

With a loud thud, the door exploded open. Jeez. Even though he was still wrapped in bandages, Maxim looked as menacing as a raging bull.

"Don't come near me." I put up both hands, then kicked myself for not

procuring a weapon when I had the time. The bedside lamp would've been a good choice. "You're sorely mistaken if you think I'm going to stand back while you hurt me and my family."

His gaze swept up and down my body. "I didn't think you would." He winced, then strode past me toward the bed.

As if Anatoli could read minds, he rushed into the suite while panting, as if he'd ran up the stairs. He met my gaze then turned his attention toward Maxim. When he realized there were no casualties, he relaxed his stance.

"You're bleeding, Maxim. Let me look." He gestured for Maxim to sit.

Maxim raised his hand and stopped Anatoli in his tracks. "No. Let my wife tend to my wounds."

"Ooo-kay." Anatoli looked as confused as I was.

"Leave us." Maxim braced his good arm on his knees and released a breath.

"Everything you need is in the bathroom," Anatoli said to me then turned to leave. He paused when he spotted the unhinged door. "I'll get someone to fix that."

"Thanks." I smiled at him.

The wife in me wanted to tell my husband to go to hell. But the doctor in me was already thinking of all the things that could go wrong if I didn't check on Maxim. He was tired because his body was working overtime, trying to heal itself. But also, because he just cracked open a heavy wooden door with his foot.

Cursing under my breath, I strode to the bathroom and got all the essentials to wash out his wounds. When I returned, Maxim hadn't moved an inch.

"We should rinse your wounds twice a day, then cover them. They'll heal faster that way." I approached him tentatively, the way one would do with a wild animal because that was exactly what he was. My gaze swept from the splint and stained gauze to the blood seeping through his white dress shirt in two different places. "I need to take a look first."

He nodded. With a sigh, he undid all the buttons, then sat back to let me help him with it. I pulled the fabric up then pushed it over his shoulders. The soft hair on his chest bristled the skin on my arms and chest. To my surprise, the gentle exchange eased my nerves.

"Getting out of bed today was a bad idea." I picked at the gauze and removed it.

“I had things to attend to.”

“Right. You had that illegal wedding to go to.” I shot back.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “I did.”

“This shouldn’t hurt. It’s just water.” I squeezed the squirt bottle and rinsed his entire shoulder.

Even if fear wasn’t a big part of the equation anymore, I still couldn’t get myself to look at him. Not even when he cocked his head to look at me. His hot breath left a warm trail that ran from my cheek all the way down to my hip. He gripped his thigh with long fingers as his inspection of me continued.

“Little late for that, don’t you think?” I sneered.

“What’s that?”

“Buyer’s remorse.”

“I didn’t pay for you.” He took a lock of my hair. “Your hair is shorter.”

“I cut it after...” I’d cut it shortly after Luca left, but Maxim didn’t need to know that. I swallowed and bit my tongue for offering him intimate details of my life. “You were spying on me.”

“Not for long.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Your scent reminds me of something. But I can’t remember what.”

“Probably your dungeon. I’ve showered six times since I left and I can’t seem to scrub the stench off me.” I shuffled back. “I need you to get up to get the other two sutures.”

Slowly, as if he were trying not to scream in pain, he rose to his feet. When I stepped into his circle, he bent down to whisper in my ear, “You smell fine to me.”

The jittery energy intensified and magnified my senses. I could feel the air between us shifting, his breath on my neck, and the sandalwood scent on his skin. Though I kept my head down, I could feel his eyes on me, regarding me with curiosity. He was the wounded one. But he watched me so intently, it reminded me of a predator spying on his prey.

“Stop messing with your splint. Or your nose will not heal properly.” I pointed at the blood fingerprints on it.

“It itches.” He grunted. “How long before I can take it off?”

“How long has it been? It usually takes about two weeks.” I squirted his side.

He flinched, reaching for my wrist. I froze, keeping my gaze on the stitches and the blood running down his side. And because my brain hates me, I thought of our impending wedding night. Though by now, I was sure

that would not happen today. The man could barely move without wincing. As formidable as he was, and though he acted like a beast, he was still human.

His fingers slid up my arm. "This one hurts the most."

"I bet. There was a lot of debris to clear out. I had to dig deep." I freed my hand. "It is healing fine. I can give you something for the pain."

"Fuck." He made to touch his wound then stuffed his hand in the pocket of his trousers. "I don't know if I should risk taking more drugs from you. Will you poison me this time?"

In his defense, I had considered the option. "Not tonight."

He scoffed. "If Anatoli hadn't come to his senses, I'd still be unconscious."

So Anatoli was the one who foiled our plans. Coward. "I don't know what you're talking about." I shrugged. "Maybe you too will come to your senses soon."

I strode to the bathroom and rummaged through the medical kit Anatoli had left for me. I went through a bunch of bottles until I found a strong pain killer. Something to knock Maxim out for the night. And every night after that, until I found a way out of this place.

"For the pain." I offered him two pills and a glass of water.

"Am I so ugly, you can't even look at me." He took the meds, knocking them back. "My senses are fine."

"Right. Because kidnapping a woman for revenge is the epitome of mental health." I turned to leave.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me toward him. "You have no idea what your family is capable of."

"You're wrong. I know exactly what they can do." I jerked to free myself, but he held me tighter. I was no match for his strength. I exhaled. "One day my love will find me. He will make sure you pay."

"Your love?" He let out a dark chuckle.

"Yes." I panted a breath. "And when he does, he will chop you up and feed you to your dogs."

"He sounds violent."

Luca was an erudite, a distinguished professor despite all my efforts to corrupt him. He wasn't a brute like Maxim, punching his way through doors. But regardless of their extreme opposites, Luca would find a way to save me. I knew he would. I just had to hang on a little longer.

“He will come for me. You can be sure of that.”

“The only thing I can be sure of, princess, is that it’s time for bed. Since Prince Charming isn’t here, I guess I would have to do.”

“What?” I made to face him, but he kept me in place.

“I didn’t get married to sleep alone. Take off your dress,” he whispered in my ear.

“You can’t be serious. Not in your condition.” I should’ve given him a bigger dose of those pain killer. Fuck. Maxim was making me forget myself and my Hippocratic Oath. Right now, all I wanted to do was hurt him, and make him feel true trepidation. “I’m not having sex with you.”

He laughed and released me. “Is that what that whole display was about?” He pointed at the door barely hanging from its hinges. “You couldn’t decide if you wanted me or not.”

“What? How dare you? You have some nerve.” I glared at him with tears in my eyes and burning cheeks. When he’d said it was time for bed, he hadn’t meant he wanted sex. Only that he wanted to go to bed...most likely to sleep.

He furrowed his brows. “There are clothes in there for you. As beautiful as you look in that wedding gown, I can’t imagine it’s that comfortable.”

I glanced down at his pants. “What are you going to wear?”

“I sleep naked.” He unbuckled his belt and pulled to remove it.

Before he took off the rest of it, I darted toward the walk-in closet. He was toying with me. By now, I had no doubt that he planned to hold this sex thing over my head. Especially after I was stupid enough to let him know how much it terrified me, how much I feared him.

Just like he’d said, there was a whole section of his closet filled with women’s dresses and tops and bottoms with the tags still on. I quickly glanced through them before I moved to rummage through the drawers. Whoever did the shopping had thought to buy matching sets of bras and underwear, even socks. But no pajamas. I picked up a piece of lacy lingerie and gaped at it.

“Are they serious?”

So my options were, wedding gown or teddy?

I tossed the sexy garment back in the drawer and went looking for a T-Shirt. When I didn’t find one that was long enough to cover all my bits, I took one of Maxim’s. I looked at my reflection in the full-body mirror to make sure I was fairly decent, then returned to the suite.

Maxim had already turned off all the lights except for both bedside lamps.

I padded across the floor, hoping Maxim couldn't hear the drumming in my chest. When he didn't bother to look up from his book, I slipped under the covers and stayed at the very edge of the mattress.

"I don't bite." His voice rumbled.

"Better safe than sorry." I pulled the comforter all the way up to my neck. "I sleep with the light on."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he stayed focused on his book. "As you wish." He reached for his lamp and turned it off.

The space between us was big enough that he was left in his own little circle of quiet darkness while my side was bright and filled with jittery energy. I sat there with my heart pumping hot blood through me. What the hell was I supposed to do with this? This couldn't be the rest of my life. I didn't know where I was or how to reach the outside world. This man could keep me here for years.

"What exactly is your plan anyway?" I shifted to stare at his dark profile.

"Go to sleep, Donata," he ordered.

CHAPTER 9

Know Your Enemy

DONATA

The first night I slept in Maxim's room, I slept like a newborn baby. But that time, Maxim was unconscious and on the far end of the suite. His form on the other side of the bed kept me on high alert. Who could sleep next to a stranger? I inched closer to the edge of the mattress and the dim light of the bedside lamp.

Sometimes when the faint rays of sunshine poked through the tall windows, I drifted into a waking dream. My eyes fluttered open for a moment toward Maxim, but he was gone. The shower in the en-suite turned on and then off. I curled into the pillow and listened for Maxim's movements.

When the sheet over my hip slipped off me, I sucked in a breath. He hovered over me for what felt like hours before he ran his fingers over my hip and my underwear. Sunlight spilled into the room and made the back of my eyelids turn bright red. But I didn't dare open my eyes. I couldn't face my new husband.

"Wait for me," he whispered. "I won't be long."

I released a breath and slowly shifted my body toward him. But by then, he had already gone. I sank into the comforter again and fell into a deep sleep. Now that he was gone, the agitated feeling in my chest and in the air around me lifted.

By the time I woke up again, it was mid-morning. I wanted to sleep some more, sleep for days until this nightmare ended. But staying in bed meant Maxim could find me here and make me have sex with him. That single thought was like a bucket of ice water over my head. I shot to my feet, fully awake.

I inhaled to calm my nerves, then headed to the bathroom to wash up and put on some real clothes. I opted for a pair of jeans, a tank top, and a light sweater. The chill in the house made my bones hurt. When I was finished, I paced the length of the room. What was I supposed to do with my day?

Now that Maxim and I were married, I felt less of a prisoner. I still couldn't leave the premises, but at least the threat of the dungeon wasn't hanging over my head anymore. For now, until I learned more about the Brotherhood, I had decided to postpone my escape plan. Even if I had been able to leave yesterday, I didn't think I would've made it far—I needed money, a phone, and a getaway car.

After a few more rounds of pacing, I ventured out of the suite. *Know your enemy*. Aunt Vittoria used to say that to me. If she were here, she would be asking the right questions instead of demanding to be released. She would play it smart. That was why our plan to stop the wedding didn't work. I had no idea who Maxim was. What he was capable of. Or how much the people here revered him.

Belinda had been able to dupe Anatoli into helping her drug Maxim for a day or two. But eventually, his respect for Maxim won over and he decided to tell Maxim everything. Belinda had been scared out of her mind, which meant Maxim wasn't someone who would take betrayal lightly.

Was she okay?

I headed for the courtyard. Their hangout seemed like the best place to start. Like before, as soon as I stepped outside, the men stopped to ogle me. I ignored them and found a shady spot by the water fountain. Summer was almost over, but today was warm and humid. The cascading water provided a cool breeze and serenity.

After a few minutes, the men got bored with me and went back to their card game. I sat there and casually scanned the area. My pulse accelerated a bit in anticipation. Maxim was bound to show up at some point. Butterflies fluttered in my belly. I still hated him for bringing me here against my will. But I had to admit, his presence intrigued me. Of course, my interest in him was purely for informational purposes. I had to get to know my enemy.

"He's not here." Belinda sat next to me.

"What?" I craned my neck to get a better look at the front door. When the tall guy standing there moved on to join the rest of his crew, I shifted my attention back to Belinda. "Who's not here?"

"Maxim." She flashed me a suspicious look.

“Oh. Do you know when he’s coming back?”

“He said maybe a week.” She pursed her lips. “He had some Brotherhood business. He said I couldn’t go with him.”

“Do you do that a lot?” I didn’t care if my new husband slept with another woman. But I needed to know if he was planning to keep Belinda while married to me. “I mean do you travel with him?”

“No, I’ve never gone anywhere with him.” She smiled. “Other than his bedroom, that is.”

“Oh.” For no good reason, I pictured the two of them naked and having hot sex. “I’m sorry our escape plan didn’t work.”

“That’s okay. It would’ve been a painful fall.” She shrugged. “We can try again while he’s gone.”

“Delivery truck?” I asked.

“That’s not gonna work. Anatoli told Maxim everything. So now the delivery guy is not allowed in. Tore will meet him at the gate.” She shook her head. “I never should’ve trusted that coward.”

“That was unfortunate. The plan was working.” I laughed.

“Yeah. Well, I have to get back to work.” She shot to her feet.

“Work. What do you do?”

“Mostly cleaning. I help Galina in the kitchen too. I keep the kids in line. Whatever Papa needs me to do.” She furrowed her brows, zeroing in on Alexei on the other end of the courtyard.

“What is it?” I followed her line of sight. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t think so.” She waved at me, then made a beeline toward the boy.

Out of curiosity, I went with her. Alexei stood in the corner with puffy eyes. He seemed to be scared out of his mind. I glanced over at the guys gathered around the patio table and their cards. Most of them hadn’t even noticed the kid. But two of them were watching us like hawks, ready to swoop in for their prey.

“Let’s go inside.” I placed my hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Mind your own business, lady.” A man about my height with blond hair and hard features swatted my hand away from Alexei. “The kid needs to learn manners. He doesn’t need women hovering over him like he’s a pussy or something.” He glared at me then at Alexei. “Scram, kid.”

Alexei darted back into the house. The look in his eyes was way too familiar. This asshole did something to him. And now he didn’t want Belinda and I to know about it. Something about this guy made my skin crawl.

“What did you do to him?” I shot him a glare of contempt. “He was scared.”

“Like I said, mind your own business. If you’re getting lonely because Maxim is gone, Boris Jr. can step in.” He grabbed his junk. “Fuck your brains out, better than Papa’s boy.”

“I seriously doubt that.” I grimaced.

When I turned to leave, he grabbed my arm and made me face him. The beer stench in his breath triggered me. Dad would lock me in the cellar every time he came home drunk. Mom was too sick to even know what was going on. Most nights he’d leave me there for hours. I stayed alone in the dark for a long time until Aunt Vittoria saved me.

I fisted my hand and clocked him square in the face. “Don’t you ever touch me again.”

“Or you’ll what?”

“Boris.” Papa’s stern voice called from the entrance. “Don’t you have a delivery?”

“Yes, Boss.” Boris spat blood to the side, then strode across the courtyard toward the long corridor.

“The kitchen might be a better place for you. Safe.” He gestured for me to go inside.

I opened my mouth to tell him what I thought of his safety precautions, but then thought better of it. Papa wasn’t someone I wanted to cross. This was the guy who kidnapped me, knowing full well what it could mean. He got away with it for now. I was married to his favorite son. But sooner or later, my family would find me. He had to know the kind of bloodshed the Society would bring to their doorstep. Of course he knew. He was just stupid enough to think he could win.

“Right. The kitchen.” I strode past the vestibule toward the downstairs access in the back.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Belinda rushed toward me the minute I strolled into the kitchen. “Boris is very dangerous. He’s worse when Maxim is gone. What were you thinking humiliating him like that?”

“I guess I wasn’t thinking. It was sort of a reflex.” I rubbed the tender spot on my arm where it was already turning blue and a little green.

“Well, now you’ve done it. He won’t leave you alone. Watch your back. Papa should’ve kicked him out after what happened with Dominic.” She shook her head.

“What do you mean? What happened with Dominic?” Maybe Boris and Dominic were the chink in the armor. Boris seemed to be the hateful type. His disdain for Maxim was written all over his face. When Papa showed up earlier, Boris didn’t seem afraid like the others. He was pissed.

“I told you about Dominic.” She stepped closer when Galina rolled her eyes. “She doesn’t like it when I gossip. But if I didn’t keep my eyes peeled and ears opened, we’d never know what’s going on around here. The guys don’t tell us anything. Even Maxim won’t tell me. Not even after we have sex.”

“Oh.” I smiled at my hands. This time I did a good job of keeping a naked Maxim and Belinda out of my mind. “So what’s the deal with Dominic?”

“Dominic was Boris’s cousin. Maxim killed him.” She pointed at her nose. “Not before Dominic beat his face to a pulp.” Her eyes watered. “It was so scary. For a minute, I thought Maxim was a goner. But he came back and put Dominic in his place.” She did the sign of the cross.

“Is that why Boris hates Maxim? Because he killed his cousin?”

“Yeah that too, but mostly Boris hates Maxim because he thinks Maxim stole his promotion. You see, Boris was next in line to be Papa’s spy. But then Maxim came back from Russia. And boom. No more Boris.” She beamed at me then pointed at Alexei sitting at the end of the table in front of a bowl of porridge. “Anyway, I think you’re right. He did something to Alexei.”

“Did you ask him?” I pointed at the kid.

“Yeah, but he’s terrified.” She ran a hand through her hair. “He reminds me of when I first came here. Boris isn’t wrong, there’s no room for weakness here.”

“That’s how you came to be here?” I studied her pretty features. She had to be a few years younger than me.

“Yeah, I was an orphan too. Papa has a soft spot for us because he also grew up without parents. He only asks that we make ourselves useful.” She gestured in the general direction of all the house chores waiting for her.

“Boris is a bully.” I patted her arm.

“And a coward. He’s taking it out on the kid because he knows he can’t fight Maxim. I wish he would, so we could be rid of them.” With a smile, she grabbed a crepe off the table and took off.

When Alexei winced in pain, I sat next to him. “Do you mind if I take a look at your arm?”

“That’s okay, I guess.” He gave me a one-shoulder shrug.

“How old are you?” I lifted his wrist then turned it left and right.

“Ten.”

“Do you go to school?”

“Yeah. It’s at the um.” His gaze shifted toward Galina. “It’s not far from here.”

“You don’t want to tell me where I am? That’s fine.” I squinted at him. “I’m a very good detective. I can figure it out all by myself.”

I put his arm down, then checked the other. No broken bones. But as I continued my inspection of him, I found a bruise behind his ears. I’d be willing to bet this was Boris’ handiwork. He knocked the kid around before they showed up in the courtyard. Asshole. But the thing with bullies was that they never acted randomly. What was Boris up to?

“Has he done this before?” I pressed the area around his lymph nodes.

Alexei shook his head.

“Something happened recently?”

He nodded.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked gently. When he shook his head again, I pressed on, “Well, it seems I’ll be here for a while. If there’s anything you want to get off your chest, just come find me. Yeah?”

“Okay.” He let out a sigh as he regarded me intently.

Oh yeah, he wanted to tell me.

“I miss Maxim.” The boy took a spoonful from his bowl and stuffed it in his mouth. With big chipmunk cheeks, he asked, “Why did he have to leave?”

“I hear he had very important Brotherhood business.” I crossed my arms on the table and leaned in. “Why do you miss him?” I asked, though what I really wanted to know was...*what is he like? What’s going to happen to me when he returns?*

All questions a ten-year-old couldn’t answer.

“He’s good to me. He’s teaching me how to fight. Maxim has the best left hook. I’ve been practicing.” He showed me his move. “He also helps me with my homework.”

“That’s good.” I glanced over my shoulder at Galina, then faced Alexei. “So he’s really not that bad?”

“Maxim is the best.” He beamed at me.

Right. Maxim was the best. Minus his whole quest for revenge, of course.

I thought of his mocking last night when he realized I was terrified to have sex with him. He even laughed at me, right before climbing into bed and ordering me to go to sleep.

Whether he was a good guy or not, didn't matter. I had a whole week to come up with a new plan to get out of here. Would Boris help me escape to spite Maxim and stick it to Papa? If he was in charge of deliveries, he had access to a big truck where I could hide. Shit. The last thing I wanted to do was ask an asshole like Boris for help. But what choice did I have?

CHAPTER 10

Who The Hell Is Luca?

MAXIM

“If I’d known you’d be this grumpy during our trip, I would’ve ordered your new bride to come with us.” Ivan climbed in the back of the SUV.

Three weeks had been a long time to stay away. Even though I spoke with Belinda daily and had regular updates on Donata, I was excited to see her again. More than that, I wanted her to see the real me. I never cared about looks, or how women liked to ogle at me. But that one night I spent in bed with her messed me up. The whole goddamn night, she spent it coiled in a small corner as far away from me as possible. As if she were afraid to catch some disease. Hadn’t I made it clear that I had no intention of having sex with her?

I opened the passenger door and settled in. The entire drive back to the compound, Ivan went on and on about my fucked-up mood. Now that we were on our way home, I couldn’t remember why I was so pissed off at everything. Though I had to admit, my angry face made our negotiations with the Irish go a lot smoother than I thought it’d be—that and the shipment of rifles we brought from Russia.

“Well, at least now that you’re healed and she can see your pretty face, you might get lucky.” He leaned forward and shoved my shoulder.

The day I told Ivan about how Donata wouldn’t even look at me, I had drunk a lot of vodka. I had no idea why it bothered me, and I couldn’t blame her for being terrified of me. My face looked like I’d borrowed it from one of those weird sea creatures that lived deep in the ocean. Ivan’s words. Not mine. Fuck.

“What’s the hold up?” I asked Tore. “What’s with this traffic?”

“The Italians have been snooping. Papa thought it would be a good idea to double our surveillance.” Tore took a left.

“Wouldn’t that just tell them we have something to hide?” Ivan asked from the back seat. “I mean. Let them look. They’ll never find the compound.”

“It’s good to keep our finger on the pulse. Our biggest allies are the townspeople. I’ll talk to my guys.” I took off my sunglasses and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Does it still hurt?” Tore asked.

“Hmm.” I faced Tore. “No. Force of habit.”

I glanced out the tinted window, searching for Donata’s face. Every night, I expected to hear the news that she had escaped. According to Belinda, Donata had settled into a routine. The kids and the men kept her busy with a myriad of injuries. Donata was also more than happy to help with the cooking. That was surprising. A mafia princess like her, I would’ve thought she’d never set foot in a kitchen before.

If she seemed different or not didn’t matter. I had to stay focused on the task. In the three weeks I had spent away, I couldn’t come up with a decent plan to make her suffer while in the compound. So far, the only two things that scared her were the dark and sex with me. I fisted my hands.

“Fuck.” I said aloud. Without meaning to, Donata had become the bane of my existence. But her family deserved to feel the pain my family felt all those years ago when Mom disappeared. Only to come back pregnant with me.

“See what I mean.” Ivan slapped Tore’s arm. “The whole goddamn trip has been like this. Shit, Maxim. Just fuck her and be done with it.”

“Fuck off,” I grumbled.

When we finally arrived at the compound, I bolted out of the SUV. I didn’t want to hear anymore of Ivan’s brilliant advice. I took long strides down the corridor. The commotion toward the courtyard caught my attention. By the way the guys cheered, I figured someone had gotten into a fight. Great idea. I sprinted toward the laughter, ignoring Ivan’s comments about some welcoming committee.

The minute Boris came into view, I saw red. He had his arms around Donata while she struggled to get free.

“All you need is a good fuck.” His words echoed in my head.

I thrust through the crowd, grabbed him by the collar and punched him in the nose. “You touch my wife again, I will kill you.” I hovered over his body

on the ground while adrenaline rushed through me. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you now.”

“It was a joke. I wasn’t gonna do anything.”

“That’s not what I saw or heard.” The fucking asshole was pulling Donata toward the house. He meant what he’d said. The thought of someone else touching her made my stomach churn in anger. “Get out of my sight.” I gripped the front of his shirt. I meant to pick him up and send him on his way. But instead, my fist connected with his face again. His head bounced off the pavers, before he grabbed my forearm. That wasn’t enough. I hit him again.

“I’m going.” He cradled his head. “I’m sorry.”

I finally stood back, panting a breath. When I glanced up, Donata was a few feet away from me, all pale, and glaring at me with her mouth slightly open.

“Donata.” I reached for her, but she flinched back in fear.

“Maxim.” Belinda came out of nowhere and sprung into my arms. “You’re finally home.”

“Yeah.” I peeled her arms from around my neck. “What the hell happened?” I pointed in the direction where Boris had taken off. “Why didn’t you tell me this was going on?”

“He’s been messing with Alexei. Donata was just defending him. But you know how Boris gets.” She shook her head in disgust. “I went to get Papa, but he was on the phone. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Where is he?” I asked Donata.

“Um who?”

“Alexei?”

“Oh, um, probably ran back to the kitchen.” Her chest heaved as if she couldn’t catch her breath.

“Let’s go see him.” I motioned for her to go on, then addressed the guys at large. “Find something to do. The courtyard is closed the rest of the day.”

The crowd scattered quickly until it was just Donata and me. And Belinda hanging from my arm. “Did I suddenly grow two heads?” I met Donata’s gaze. “Before you couldn’t look at me. Now you can’t stop staring.”

“No.” She shook her head. “You still have just the one head. Um. Let’s find Alexei.” She glanced around her, as if looking for her purse or whatever else she’d left behind. When she didn’t find anything, she rushed into the house.

When she was out of earshot, I turned to Belinda. “You should’ve told me Boris was causing trouble.”

“We had it under control. Donata can handle Boris. This wasn’t the first time.” She crossed her arms over her chest. Her tits bounced a bit, and she smiled. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Belinda.” I braced my hands on my hips. “We’ve talked about this. I’m married now. End of story.”

“It’s not even a real marriage.” She gripped my dress shirt. “We all know you haven’t fucked her. There’s a reason for that.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, you don’t want her. I don’t care that you’re married.” Her eyes watered. “We can still be us.”

“There’s no us.” I cocked my head to look her in the eye. “There never was. And you know that. You were fine with it, until Donata came along.”

“Because you only wanted me.”

“Never like that.”

“You’re just like the others. I’m glad she hates you.” She sneered at me then ran back into the house.

Now I had two women who hated me. Just fucking awesome. I headed for the kitchen to check on Alexei. When I got there, he was sitting at the far end of the table, crying on Donata's shoulder.

“What happened, bud?” I sat on my haunches next to him.

Like before, Donata’s gaze zeroed in on me. The pink in her cheeks had returned, but she was still shocked to see me. I ignored her ogling and focused on the kid instead. Donata and I had all night to talk about us, her family, and the reason she was here.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I finished all my chores even. He’s mad at me because.” He stopped to wipe his nose with the back of his hand. “He thinks I’m a tattletale, but I’m not.”

“A tattletale?” Donata asked. “Alexei, Maxim is back. You can tell him anything.”

My gaze cut to her. Since when had she decided I was trustworthy? I regarded her profile, itching to touch her soft cheek. Suddenly, I had the feeling all my dreams about her could be real. Alexei squeezed my arm and pulled me out of my Donata rabbit hole. Truth was, in the time I was away, my obsession for her had reached new levels of fucked up. I dreamed of her constantly. Vivid dreams that felt like memories of a life I’d never had.

“You said you were going to teach me how to fight. But then you left.” He wiped his wet eyes.

“I’m sorry I had to go away for a while, but you can tell me what happened.” I met his gaze.

Boris was a coward. If all of a sudden, he had found the balls to disrespect me by going after my wife, it had to be because he had something waiting in the winds. After I killed Dominic, I told Papa we had to watch out for Dominic’s crew. Sure, to my face they said I had the right to end the challenge however I saw fit—meaning, Dominic wanted me dead. The only way to stop him was to end him. But what were they saying when I wasn’t around? Was Dominic’s crew still loyal to Papa?

What was Boris up to? Did Alexei figure it out somehow and now Boris was trying to intimidate him into keeping his mouth shut? Whatever it was, the kid was too scared right now to tell me what I needed to know. Not to mention, I had a feeling that what he had to say, couldn’t be said in present company.

Galina might look like she was always busy bent over the stove, but she kept tabs on everything that went on in her kitchen. And Donata, even if her eyes didn’t show contempt anymore, she was still the niece of one of our most powerful enemies.

I turned to Alexei. “How about you finish your cookie and go take a nap? I have something I need to take care of first. But I promise, I’ll come find you later tonight.”

“Okay.” Alexei smiled at me. The color returned to his face as relief washed over him. “Can I take this off now?” He pointed at his bandages around his wrist.

“Leave them on for now. Some rest is actually a good idea. Stay out of the sun. You hit your head pretty hard. We have to watch for a concussion.” She tousled his hair. “Go on.”

“I’ll go with him.” Irina wiped her hands on her apron, beaming at Alexei. “If Boris comes back, I can hit him over the head with my pan.”

Alexei burst out laughing. “Donata did that last week. It was so funny.”

“I’ll have to remember that.” I smiled at her. “No pans in the bedroom.”

Her cheeks turned bright red as she shifted her attention back to Alexei. “I thought you guys were going?”

“We are.” Irina giggled on her way out.

“Santa Donata.” I bowed and tipped my invisible cap.

“What?” She held my gaze long enough to make Galina turn around to busy herself with the pot on the stove.

Donata continued to survey my features, moving slowly down to my mouth then back to my eyes. When Galina let out a small chuckle, Donata snapped out of her trance and finally looked away.

Something had changed with her. The trepidation that oozed out of her before was gone. Maybe spending time with the kids and Belinda helped her realize we were not the monsters she thought we were. We were a family too.

“Belinda says that’s what the kids call you. You’ve been tending to their cuts and scrapes.” I smiled at her. “Helping them with homework.”

“I miss the hospital.”

“Right.” I rose to my feet. “Can we talk? Alone.” I raised my eyebrows toward Galina and her daughter.

“Sure.” Donata swallowed. “Where to?”

“Our bedroom.” I took in her scent.

When she nodded, I placed my hand on her lower back and ushered her out of the kitchen and toward the upper level. The whole time, she shot furtive glances up at me. I had to admit, this amiable Donata pleased me to no end. Had she finally figured out that leaving wasn’t an option?

My head pounded again as it always did around this time of day. I had a bottle of painkillers waiting for me upstairs, though all I wanted to do was reach out and touch her hand, touch all of her. She stopped in front of the door and waited for me to open it. Or maybe she was too chicken to go inside and be alone with me, while the air around us crackled with electrifying anticipation.

My intense need for her made me forget about my headache and all the work I had lined up for me today. Right now, all I cared about was that Donata was here and not afraid of me—more than that, she was willing. She kept her distance but stayed close enough that her body heat still burned my skin.

I reached for the handle and got a big waft of her scent again. I never knew time could stand still. I didn’t understand why it was happening now as she backed into the room, with her gaze on me as if she was afraid I’d disappear. She had to know I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Donata.” Her name echoed in my head.

Or maybe I said it aloud. At this point, it didn’t matter. I was too far gone. I shut the door behind me and closed the space between us in a single stride.

Cradling her neck, I captured her mouth. Her lips were soft and sweet...and kissing me back. In the back of my head, a voice told me something was off. But I didn't care. After all those nights of seeing her in my dreams, tasting her, I was starved for the real thing.

"Donata," I whispered, deepening the kiss. She fit perfectly in my arms, just like in my dreams.

"Omigod. Luca." She wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her entire body to mine. "You're back."

My cock stood at attention. As it were, it was going faster than my brain. Luca? I thrust my tongue past her lips. She let out a small moan and let me in. Fuck. This was like living inside an erotic dream. I didn't know how or why this was happening, but at the same time, I felt as though this kiss wasn't our first. Luca? The word finally set in.

Laboring to catch my breath, I stepped back. "Who the hell is Luca?"

"What?" She blinked a few times, scanning the room as if she didn't know where she was. Her cheeks were a pretty red. Her parted mouth was an invitation for me to get lost inside it again.

"You called for Luca." I pressed my fingers to my throbbing temple. "Is that the love that's supposed to come for you." Anger pooled at the pit of my stomach.

"Wait? What?" She cradled my face. "You're serious?"

"Serious about not wanting to hear another man's name on my wife's lips while I kiss her? The fuck I am." I reached for her waist and pressed her to my body. "You're my wife now. I don't give a flying fuck who this Luca is. You're mine."

CHAPTER 11

Luca's Doppelgänger

DONATA

Was this Luca's doppelgänger? Jesus, what the hell was I saying? Doppelgängers didn't exist. This was Luca Gallo, my Luca, in the flesh. Did he seriously not remember who he was? Downstairs when he first showed up and clocked Boris in the face, I thought Luca had finally come for me.

But then Belinda called him Maxim, and I realized Maxim and Luca were the same person. I figured maybe Luca pretended he didn't know who I was while he recovered from his injuries. In his condition, he had no way to get me out of here. But now, I wasn't so sure. Luca truly believed he was Maxim Belov. He didn't remember me at all. He didn't remember us.

Why was it always like this with Luca? Just when I finally got what I wanted, it turned out not to be real. Luca and I were husband and wife. But not really, because there was no Luca, only Maxim. I was married to Maxim Belov. This was so confusing.

"Your wife? You were gone for weeks." I blew out a breath, meeting Maxim's gaze.

"It couldn't be avoided." He ran his thumb over my lips.

Oh fuck. I missed Luca so much. My eyes fluttered closed. "You have to stop."

As much as I wanted to be with Luca again, this wasn't him. This was his face on someone else's soul. Even the way he looked at me wasn't the same. Luca loved me. The only thing I saw in Maxim was pure lust, raw and reckless, just like him.

"Why? I can see you want me." His hot breath brushed my cheek.

Of course, I wanted him. The irony wasn't lost on me. I once told Galina

I couldn't fall in love with a face. And here I was, madly in love with the man in front of me, only because he looked like Luca.

"Because I'm so confused right now." I shoved him away from me. "Don't touch me."

I thought of the man Maxim killed in cold blood the day he kidnapped me. Maxim wanted revenge. His marriage to me was only a means to an end. This version of Luca was all brawn and zero logic. Luca was a professor. I was in love with his brain as much as I was in love with his body.

"I've waited so long already." He advanced on me.

When I shuffled back, a streak of pain marred his features. My rejection hurt him. But what the hell was I supposed to do? This felt like cheating on Luca. I took another step as he regarded me with curiosity. I had no doubt he was as confused as me. Not two minutes ago, I was ready to jump into bed with him. But that was when I thought he was Luca, that he was here for me because he loved me.

My back hit the wall, and Maxim continued to prowl toward me. I froze as he took both my wrists in his hand and pinned them over my head. The desire in his eyes sent flutters to my core. Before he left on his trip, I got this jittery energy in my belly every time he was near. Was that my body trying to tell me who Maxim really was?

"Don't make me take by force what's already mine." His lips brushed my temple and my cheek.

Yeah, I'd always been his. The anticipation of his touch sent a shock of adrenaline through me that set my whole body on fire.

"I think you like it when I touch you." His mouth found mine in a searing kiss.

In the time we were apart, I searched for this high, for this unwavering passion, so many times. No one kissed like this. No one ever kissed me the way Luca did. I melted into him, parting my lips, to taste him again. Two years was a long time without him. Luca Gallo had always been my drug. I needed him so badly.

"Maxim." A loud knock shook the bedroom door. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming home today?" Papa's excited voice streamed through the room.

"Fuck." Maxim pressed his forehead to mine, bracing both hands on either side of my face. "Is there no fucking privacy in this house?"

"You should get that." I labored to catch my breath.

“Yeah.” He breathed in and out three times before he pushed away from the wall.

I stood there doing my best not to slide down the wall and melt into a puddle of want on the floor. Maybe for now, it would be best if Maxim and I didn’t spend any time alone. First, I needed to figure out how to get Luca back. If Luca lost his memory or if the Russian’s brainwashed him into thinking he was Maxim, I had to tread very carefully. Both our lives were in danger.

Seeing Papa in the suite was the equivalent of a bucket of ice water over my head. It cooled down whatever bad ideas Luca had put in my head—err Maxim. I couldn’t risk any slip-ups. Until I figured out how Luca-slash-Maxim ended up as Papa’s favorite son, I had to continue playing the role of the kidnapped bride.

“Ivan tells me the gun deal went without a hitch.” Papa beamed at Maxim.

I took the time to really look at both of them. Maybe Maxim got knocked hard in the head and couldn’t remember who he really was. But what was Papa’s story? Did he not know this wasn’t his sister’s son? There was real adoration and pride in his eyes.

“They had no idea we were desperate to unload that shipment.” Maxim chuckled. “It was well worth the trip.” He slanted a glance toward me.

“I knew you could do it.” Papa patted him on the back. “I think drinks are in order. Right now.”

I glanced down at the clock on the bedside table. It was one in the afternoon. Nothing like day drinking after a successful and highly illegal gun run. Maxim shifted his attention to me as if trying to decide if he should turn down Papa for a quick tumble in the sheets with me. I squeezed my legs together to ease the throbbing there. If Maxim kissed like Luca, I had no doubt sex with him would be way more than a quickie.

My cheeks burned hot at the memory of the last night I spent with Luca. We had sex all night. Fuck. I had to stop thinking about all that and focus on getting the love of my life back. I met Maxim’s gaze. I surveyed his handsome features, his wide shoulders, and long hair. I never would’ve thought the great professor Gallo would be sporting a hot man bun and a sleeve of tattoos.

Jesus, what happened to him?

“It’s settled then.” Papa put his arm around Maxim. “Let’s go have that

drink.”

“Count me in.” Maxim nodded. “But I got something to take care of first.”

“Sure.” Papa peered at me with curiosity, or maybe he just didn’t like that Maxim was giving me priority. “Where’s my head today? I almost forgot. There’s a party tonight. Downstairs. To celebrate the newlyweds. Last time, the situation didn’t call for it. But I can see you’re now in the mood to celebrate, Ms. Salvatore.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Same as before, of course.” He glared at me.

Translation: play nice or die.

Everything with Papa seemed to be that way.

“While you finish up here.” His gaze cut to Maxim. “I’ll make sure Galina has everything she needs for tonight’s feast.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Maxim walked him to the door. He really loved this man as his own father.

My heart rate spiked when Maxim shut the door again and turned around to face me. His gaze bore into mine in a silent promise. I had to bite my tongue to keep me from screaming at him that he wasn’t Maxim, that he was my Luca.

“I need a cold shower.” He groaned, then headed for the en-suite.

I had so many questions for him. None of them could wait, so I followed him. I stomped toward the bathroom, determined to find out how the hell he’d gotten here. But when I pushed the door open, he was already running the water, and completely naked.

How did he undress so fast?

I stood there like an idiot as he let the spray hit his muscled back and then his inked chest. Jeez, he was way hotter than I remembered. I didn’t think that was possible. My gaze swept from his wet hair all the way down to his abs, butt, and muscular thighs.

“You can join me if you want,” he grumbled. “Or leave. You standing there is defeating the purpose of the shower.”

I swallowed. “Am I required to attend this ridiculous party? We’re not newlyweds.”

“We married recently. That, by definition, makes us newlyweds.”

“We’re not a happy couple.”

“Maybe after tonight, we could be.” He shifted his body toward me.

My breath hitched. Oh fuck. The last thing I needed was a reminder of how big he was. “You’re delusional.” I stormed to the door and slammed it behind me.

His laughter filled the suite and reminded me of all the happy moments we had together. Since the beginning, our relationship wasn’t perfect. But then he became a wanted man, hunted by his own uncle at first, and then, by every enemy our family had ever made. Tears ran down my cheeks as I plopped myself down on the bed.

I didn’t blame Luca for wanting to forget his life. He’d been on the run for almost six years. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what that kind of horror would do to a man. With the Brotherhood, he was the good son. He was revered and loved by all. He had a good life here.

“I’ll see you tonight.” He called from the door. “Wear something nice. Papa likes to go all out.”

“How do you know that?” I shot to my feet.

“Because he’s done it all my life.” He ran a hand through his wet hair. “Don’t be late.”

“Yeah, I got it. Papa doesn’t like that either.”

With long, languid strides, he closed the space between us. He braced his hands under my elbows and helped me to my feet. His tenderness disarmed me. I let him run his fingers down my cheek and wrap them around my neck. He pressed his forehead to mine. Unlike before when he was out of control with desire, he was calm and collected.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered in my ear. “My beautiful wife.”

Destiny could be so cruel.

He released a breath. “Stay in your room until the party. We haven’t heard the last of Boris. He likes to hold a grudge.”

“I can handle him.” I tilted my chin up.

“I know you can.” He scoffed. “You were giving him hell when I found the two of you.” His body tensed as his eyes darkened with fury. “I should’ve killed him for laying a hand on you.”

“He’s a coward.”

“I promise. He will answer for what he tried to do. Today’s been a busy day.”

“Right.” I smiled at him, feeling the pull that had always been there between us drag me toward him.

“Fuck, Donata.” He captured my mouth and kissed me hard once more.

“Stay in your room,” he warned as he walked out of the room, leaving me so confused and *frustrated*.

“Arghh.” I fell face first on the pillow and screamed.

After a long while, I got up and went to the walk-in closet to look at dresses to wear. I still had a handful of hours to get ready, but I had nothing else to keep me busy. As annoyed as I was that Maxim thought he could just order me to stay in my room, I had to admit he wasn’t wrong.

Boris was on a warpath. He didn’t like that I had interfered. But I couldn’t stand by and let him hurt a little boy half his size.

“I take it you heard the good news?” Belinda walked into the closet and leaned her hip on the dresser. “Big party tonight. To celebrate the newlyweds. What bullshit.” She rolled her eyes.

I laughed. I appreciated that even though she loved Maxim, she didn’t blame me for taking him away from her. Did I appreciate that she’d been sleeping with my boyfriend for the past year? Nope. But again, it wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know Maxim-slash-Luca was mine.

Images of her and Maxim flitted through my mind. Fuck. I had to stop thinking about that. The idea of Luca with someone else made me want to burn this whole place down.

“Yeah, it is bullshit. And now I’m not allowed to leave the room.”

“Maxim mentioned it.” She plopped herself down on the vanity chair.

“You talked to him?” I tried not to sound like the jealous girlfriend.

“No.” She pouted. “I’m mad at him. I heard him talking to Papa in the library.”

“Eavesdropping again?” I laughed, then I realized I’d had the answers to all my questions right in front of me. Belinda had been living here since she was little. She was here the day Maxim came back from Russia. Was he already Maxim then? I pulled out a dress and showed it to her. “What do you think? Too much cleavage?”

“There’s no such thing as too much cleavage.” She winked. “Maxim will come in his pants if he sees you in that.”

“Really?” I eyed the red silky dress. Focus. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“Were you and Maxim good friends when you were kids? You two grew up in this house, right?” I asked casually while sorting through the other gowns.

“Not really. He lived in Moscow all his life.” The space between her brows furrowed. “Come to think of it, Papa never mentioned he had a nephew until Maxim showed up.”

“Oh, how long ago was that?”

“About a year ago.” She beamed. “We hit it off right away.”

Papa did something to Luca. I pursed my lips and put the hanger back on the rack. “I can’t imagine how. Maxim is so grumpy all the time.”

“He wasn’t back then.” Her features softened. “When he first came here, he seemed lost. But he was kind. Life with the Brotherhood is hard. He learned that the hard way. If you don’t toughen up, you won’t make it.”

“Does he ever talk about his time in Russia?”

“No.” Her smile faded. She swallowed then shot to her feet. “I forgot I had to help Galina with the food. Um.” She fixed her top, then took off.

“I’ll see you at the party,” I called after her.

“Yeah, bye.”

Did Belinda know about Maxim? Was she in on this insane charade? Fuck. Fuck.

CHAPTER 12

No One Has Forever

MAXIM

“I about shit my pants when Maxim got up and told those assholes, they either took our deal or there was no deal at all.” Ivan laughed as he told the story for the tenth time tonight.

“I need a drink.” I patted him on the back and left him to tell the group how the rest of the negotiations went.

The good thing about everyone talking about the Irish deal was that they stopped asking me how I was doing as a newlywed. So far, being married was overrated. Donata’s cold-one-minute, hot-the-next exchanges were giving me whiplash.

Not to mention that my own desires were fucking with my head. A part of me felt as if I knew her. As if our lives were intertwined somehow. The other part of me wanted her in the worst way possible. Her scent made me want to have a life that until now I hadn’t considered. I wanted a family with her. How fucked up was that?

What would Papa say if I told him I no longer cared about revenge? Or I did care. I just didn’t think Donata should pay for something she didn’t do. He would be disappointed, for sure. A month ago, I was certain I would never do anything to make him think less of me. He was the only father I knew.

I slanted a glance toward the stairs again. Where the hell was she? Earlier, after my business and drinks with Papa were done, I wanted to go see her. But if I saw her again, alone in our suite, I was sure I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I wanted to feel her naked body against mine. If that ever happened, it would be days before we left the room.

Yeah, it was better to stay away. At least for tonight, until this party was

over, and Boris had been dealt with.

Irina smiled at me and offered me a drink off her tray. I took it, then grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her to a corner of the living room. “Where is he?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“I asked you to look for him an hour ago.” I thrust a hand into the pockets of my trousers. “Alexei was supposed to stay with you.”

“And he was. But Mom asked me to help her with dinner. When I came back to the room, he was gone.” Her eyes watered. “Maybe he’s hiding somewhere?”

“I hope he is.” I clenched my jaw. “Where’s Boris?”

“He got here a little bit ago. He’s in the library drinking.” She rolled her eyes.

“Keep an eye on him.” I knocked the drink back then gave her the empty tumbler. “And go find Alexei.”

“Yeah, okay.” She scurried away.

Halfway down the living room, a group of guys stopped her and grabbed the rest of the drinks off her tray. They turned to me and raised their glasses. I nodded, then headed for the stairs. I couldn’t wait on Donata anymore.

Two strides in, she appeared at the top landing, wearing a red dress that barely contained her tits. She looked absolutely beautiful. I stepped toward her, as she practically floated down the steps.

“Are you trying to kill me?” My gaze dropped to her cleavage.

“I found it in the closet.” She smoothed it out. “Is it too much for this sort of shindig?” She surveyed the room, and all the men clad in dark suits and their wives in fancy dresses.

“It’s perfect.” I offered her my hand.

She stared at my fingers for a long minute before she sighed and accepted the gesture. When we touched, a raw charge crackled in the air. I squeezed her hand, and she glanced up at me.

“Do you think anyone will notice if we make a break for it now?” I winked at her.

“Definitely.” She beamed at me, pointing at Papa.

I turned as Papa raised his glass and tapped it with a spoon. “It fills my heart to see everyone having a good time. As you know, we’re celebrating my son’s marriage to the lovely Ms. Salvatore.” He chuckled. “I mean Mrs. Belov.”

Next to me, Donata coughed into her hand. Yeah, the idea of a Mrs. Belov was shocking to me too. I put my arm around her and kissed her temple. "One hour. And then we can go."

Papa went on for another minute about how proud he was of me and how happy he was that he'd decided to take me in. I usually didn't mind that he liked to remind everyone that he raised me after his sister passed away. But all of this was news to Donata. She didn't know what her family had done to mine. She didn't know why she was here and why I wanted revenge.

I couldn't imagine how she felt right about now, to know that one of her own raped my mother and then tossed her aside, that I was the result of that assault. When Donata made to leave, I tightened my hold on her.

"And now you know why you're here."

"Are you going to force yourself on me?" She glared at me. "Make me pay for something that happened before I was born?"

"It won't be the same," I whispered in her ear. "Because you want me."

"Fuck off." She squirmed to free herself, but her strength was no match to mine. She pursed her lips. "This isn't you."

"How would you know what I am, princess?"

"A dance." Papa called from the middle of the room. "Come on. Both of you."

Keeping my grip on her shoulder, I ushered Donata toward Papa. As soon as we did, a soft tune played over the speakers and filled the air around us. The circumstances of how we got together were less than ideal. But having her in my arms like this left me with zero regrets.

"Earlier today, I only wanted to talk," I confessed while I swayed to the beat of the music. When she glanced up at me with so much pain in her eyes, I pulled her closer to me. "I would like for us to start over. Do you think that's possible?"

"I don't know." Her eyes watered. "Would you ever set me free?"

"No. Never." I led her into a turn, then brought her back to me. "I would kidnap you a thousand times if it meant I got to keep you."

"Let me go. Only then can we start over."

"I can't."

What would that even look like for us? I couldn't send her home and expect a first date the following week. At this point, the only thing for sure in our future was carnage. I wasn't an idiot. As blinded as I was before when Papa spoke of avenging Mom, I knew our actions would carry heavy

consequences. If the Italians ever found out we had Donata, they'd unleash hell on Brighton Beach.

"Then starting over would be impossible." She slid her hand up my shoulder. "I can't stay here forever. You have to know that."

"No one has forever, Donata." I cocked my head to look her in the eyes. "We only have now."

A click of metal against glass cut through the music. In the next beat, the entire room was filled with the noise. Donata stared at me with shock in her eyes.

"It's tradition for the bride and groom to kiss when the guests demand it." I gestured to the room at large.

"I know what that means." She shot a glance toward Papa.

"We better oblige. Or they won't stop." I cupped her cheek and bent down to press my mouth to hers.

I meant for it to be an innocent kiss, but she gripped the lapel of my suit jacket with so much desire in her eyes. I couldn't stop myself from thrusting my tongue past the seam of her lips. And then, I was on the same high as before. I wanted all of her.

"I want to be inside you so badly," I whispered in her ear, so only she could hear me. "Let's go back upstairs."

"Now?" She sighed.

"If now is all we have. I don't want to waste it."

"Okay." Her brows shot up in surprise as if she wasn't expecting to say that aloud.

When I lifted my gaze, I spotted Irina on the other side of the room with Alexei standing beside her. She'd found him. Fuck. Why now? I glanced down at Donata's pink cheeks. As much as I wanted her, this thing with Boris couldn't wait. By the look on Alexei's face, I was sure there was something he wanted to tell me.

"You have no idea how much it hurts to have to say this. But there's a matter that needs my attention. And it can't wait." I nodded toward Irina.

Donata glanced over her shoulder then pursed her lips. "Belinda? That's the important matter that can't wait? Are you fucking serious right now?"

"What? No. Not her." A smile pulled at my lips. I didn't even bother to tell her I meant Irina. "Are you jealous?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't care what you two have going on." She crossed her arms over her cleavage.

Donata knew what she was doing when she chose to wear that dress tonight. I braced my hand on her waist then slid up so my thumb touched the curve of her breasts. “I don’t know what she told you. But whatever we had, it’s over.” I had no fucking idea why I needed her to know that. “I’ll meet you upstairs in half an hour. Yes? Say yes.”

She regarded me for a few beats before she conceded. “Yes.”

Walking away from her took all the self-control I had. I strode directly toward Irina and Alexei. When he saw me coming, he tried to leave, but Irina held him in place. His eyes were red like he’d been crying. I looked for bruises or cuts but didn’t find any. His gaze cut to the other side of the living room. When I followed his line of sight, I spotted Boris glaring at him.

“Let’s go outside and talk. Hmm?” I placed my arm around his shoulder and ushered him to the courtyard. As soon as the front door shut behind us, I asked, “Boris has never paid you any attention before. I’m guessing he’s intimidating you because you know something important. Something that has to do with him. Am I right?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“I promise you. He won’t hurt you again. But you have to tell me what you know so I can deal with him.” I stepped back to give him space. “Go on. Tell me what you know.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping. Or anything. I was downstairs in the pantry eating cookies. I was hiding because Galina told me not to eat them.”

“Okay.” I chuckled.

“Boris and his brother were arguing about something that went wrong and how it was Boris’s fault because he was such a bad shot.” He wiped his cheek. “Then Boris said he could fix it because you were dying anyway. He just had to make sure you died all the way.”

“Are you saying Boris and his brother were the ones who shot me when we drove into the city?” I pressed the heels of my palms to my eyes. What the fuck?

“Boris told his brother that if he wasn’t such a bad driver, he would’ve gotten a clear shot to your head. That’s when I dropped the cookie jar. The glass was everywhere. I panicked and took off running. But he saw me.” He sniffled. “He said if I told you, he’d kill me.”

“You were very brave telling me.” I reached for the back of his head and brought him in for a hug. “He won’t kill you, because I’m going to kill him first.”

“When?” he asked.

“Good question, kid. Come on.” I darted toward the house with Alexei on my heels.

We’d been in the courtyard for a good ten minutes. I had expected Boris to come out and face me. He had to know Alexei would tell me everything. So why had he not come out.

“Boss.” Tore met me in the foyer. “What’s going on?”

“Bring Boris’s brother to the library. That fucking traitor will have to answer to me.” I took the stairs two at a time. As soon as I reached the landing, Donata’s screams filled the hallway.

“Don’t get any closer,” she ordered.

I tried the door, but it was locked. Taking a step back, I kicked it in and rushed in. Donata was backed into a corner, holding a broken lamp in her hand. Most of the shards were around Boris’s feet. He seemed disoriented but determined to get to Donata. Fucking asshole. He realized his time with the Brotherhood was done, so he decided the only thing left to do was to stick it to me by going after my wife.

“I warned you.” I grabbed the back of his shirt and made him face me. “That if you ever touched my wife, I would kill you.”

I pummeled into his face twice and then twice more. When he fell to the floor, I wrapped my hands around his neck and squeezed. “Did you think I wasn’t going to find out?”

“You took everything.” He sputtered. “I was Papa’s right-hand man. He should’ve given her to me.”

“Before I thought kicking you out of the Brotherhood would be punishment enough. A coward like you won’t last a day out on the street. But you came after my wife, asshole. You don’t get to live.” I tightened my hold on him until his eyes bulged out, and he turned a sick shade of purple.

“Maxim, stop.” Donata braced her hand on my shoulder. “Please. He’s not worth it.”

“Stay out of it. You don’t know what he did.” I squeezed my eyes shut to clear my vision, but all I saw were Boris’s hands all over Donata. The image wasn’t even real. When I came in, Donata was holding her own. But the truth was, Boris would never stop being a threat to her if I didn’t end him now. “He deserves it.”

“Please. This isn’t you,” she begged.

“Fuck.” I pushed off him and rose to my feet. “Fuck.”

“Boss.” Tore appeared in my line of sight. “I got the brother. Papa’s waiting.”

“Take this one too.” I ran a hand through my hair to calm the fuck down. In the end, the trepidation in Donata’s eyes snapped me out of my rage. “He’s the one who shot me. And now this?” I pointed at the mess in the suite.

I turned to leave.

“Don’t go.” She reached for my hand.

“I’ll send Tore to guard the door.” I touched her soft cheek. “Alexei will stay too. You’ll be safe.

“Where are you going?” She followed me out into the hallway.

“To take out the trash.”

CHAPTER 13

Another Kill for The Brotherhood

MAXIM

“Maxim.” Alexei ran after me. “I want to go with you.”

“You’re not old enough for what has to happen next.” I braced my hand on his shoulder, then met Donata’s gaze over his head.

She nodded, then flashed me a brilliant smile that made my pulse skip a beat. “Come on, buddy. We have a lot of cleanup to do in here.” She took his hand in hers and pulled him toward her. “Let Maxim do his thing.”

“Don’t let Boris shoot you again.” He frowned.

“That’s the plan.” I stopped to look at the two of them for a beat before I headed for the stairs.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had considered my future. In truth, before Donata came into my life, I’d spent my days drifting. Focusing on the present instead of the past, made my head hurt less. Only Papa knew what I’d been struggling with since the accident last year. The pounding headaches, the distorted nightmares, and even the vivid dreams started shortly after the car chase in Moscow.

Papa was the one who came to my rescue. The crew hunting me in Russia was relentless. If Papa hadn’t gotten me out of the city when he did, I wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t be part of this family now. He’d been right to ask me not to dwell on whatever happened before I came here. I had to move on.

But now that Donata was here. I wanted more. I wanted her more than anything else. Also, I wanted a family, a life of my own. When I reached the library door, I dug into the inside pocket of my suit jacket and fished out two pills. I popped them in my mouth and barged in.

Papa stood by the fireplace with his back to the rest of the room, while Ivan and Tore poured drinks from the bar. Boris and his brother were at the conference table tied to their chairs. I removed my suit jacket and laid it over the back of the sofa, facing Papa. I rolled up my sleeves and clocked Yaroslav square on the nose. They knew why we were here. They didn't need introductions. The cracking noise it made didn't ease the anger pooling in the pit of my stomach. I hit him again and again, until Papa's voice cut through the rage in my head.

"Enough, Maxim." He put up his hand. "What is it they say? Dead men tell no tales?" He chuckled. "We need them to tell us who else was infected by Dominic's lies."

"There were more?" I glanced at Papa then Ivan.

"Yeah." Ivan handed me a drink and a gun, then sipped from his own. "The night you got shot. I saw five men in the van. It was dark. I couldn't see their faces. But there were more than these two assholes."

"Dominic was planning a coup." I stuffed my handgun in the waistband of my pants.

"Thanks to you, he didn't get to execute his plan." He shook his head, while glaring at Boris and Yaro. "I treated you like my own sons. And this is the payment I get?"

"You left us with nothing." Boris met his gaze.

"Shut up." I punched him. "Belly aching is not going to help you. Show Papa the respect he's owed and tell us who else was involved."

"It was just the two of us." Yaro pursed his lips, lifting his chin with pride.

Papa chuckled, interlacing his fingers behind his back. "Someone of consequence." He braced his hand on my shoulder, pointing at the two men. "They're protecting their new boss."

"Fucking assholes. New boss? Who?" Ivan threw his empty tumbler at them.

"Dominic is dead." I raised my eyebrows, looking at Papa. "Who else would be stupid enough to go against you?"

"I'll tell you who." Ivan stomped to the roaring fire Papa had been tending to when I walked in and grabbed the poker sitting in the flames.

Without preamble, he smashed it against Yaro's thigh. Yaro's screams filled the library with a jabbing pitch that singed the nerve behind my eye. I pressed my fingers to my temple to ease the throbbing there. I had hoped this

part would go quick. The last thing I had on my mind for tonight was torturing a pair of ungrateful mother fuckers.

“Papa took you in when you were a fucking kid. You were nothing. He made you what you are today.” Ivan seared Yaro’s leg again,

“That’s enough Ivan. Yaro wants to get back into my good graces. I can see it. He will tell us now.” Papa leaned toward him and gestured for Yaro to speak. “Go on, son.”

For all of Yaro’s bravado, when Papa mentioned an opportunity to get back into the fold, his eyes widened as he looked to Boris. Boris turned to Papa as if asking, ‘can we really return?’

I stood back and folded my arms over my chest. I’d seen Ivan torture men to get information out of them. But in the end, Papa was always the one to get them to talk. He had a way of getting everyone around him to do what he wanted. His methods were how he rose to power when he was so young.

He focused his attention on Boris now. After the beating I gave him upstairs, he could barely keep his left eye open. He blinked and lifted his head to meet Papa’s gaze. Boris was scared shitless, which was why I didn’t understand how he found the balls to shoot at me.

“Dominic started talking to the Pakhan in Chicago. After our dealings with the Italians fell through in Jersey. They reached out to Dominic,” Yaro blurted out.

“Shut up.” Boris glared at his brother.

“Look at us,” Yaro yelled at him with tears in his eyes. “We’re done for.”

“That you are.” I perched myself on the edge of the table, facing Papa. “They figured we were weak after we lost a warehouse and all that territory.”

“Leeches.” Papa shook his head. “We’ll deal with them later.”

“Right. For now, we have to clean house.” I turned to Boris. “So what was the plan? Kill me, then put you in my place? Then what? You slit Papa’s throat once you gained his trust. Did you really think the men would follow you?”

When Boris stared at me in surprise, I laughed. “Jesus fuck. That was it? That was the fucking plan?” I reached for my gun and aimed it at his head. “Can I shoot him now?”

“Wait.” Boris finally realized he had no leverage. That at this point, all he could negotiate was a merciful death. “I’ll give you their names.”

An hour later, I followed Tore to the compound gates where Boris, Yaro, and the other three traitors faced the brick wall.

Tore braced his hands on his hips. “I found the assholes drunk in their bedrooms. They didn’t even think to get the hell out of here. Fucking idiots.” He shoved one of them back in line. “Get on your knees. All of you,” he yelled.

“Tore,” Papa called out. When he joined us, he pointed at me. “Let my son handle this one. This is his kill.”

“Sure.” Tore stepped aside to make room for me.

Another kill for the Brotherhood. The bang of my gun echoed in my head and brought back memories from my usual nightmare. Except, this time I saw something different. I wasn’t the one facing the barrel of the gun. I was the one holding it. I squeezed the trigger again. In the dark of the night, all I could see were the gory images from my dreams.

When it was over, I handed my weapon to Tore and stormed back toward the house. Why was it always that same dream? The memory of it lingered in my mind until I reached my bedroom door. I glared at it, then glanced down at my bloody knuckles. Fuck. Slowly, I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Donata jerked to her feet, but then relaxed when she saw me. To my surprise, she rushed toward me and threw her arms around my neck. “Tore left hours ago. I thought.”

“I’m fine. I had a job for him. I didn’t trust anyone else with it.”

“I was here.” Ivan came out of the bathroom. “They were perfectly fine.”

“Is he gone?” Alexei peered up at me. “Is it over?”

“It’s over.” I smiled at him. “Why don’t you go to your room and get some sleep? Boris and his guys won’t bother you anymore.”

“Yeah, okay.” He made to go, but then, turned around and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too.” I chuckled.

“I’m going too.” Ivan winked at Donata, then followed Alexei out the door.

“You’re hurt.” Donata held my hand in hers.

“Let me take a shower first. Then you can doctor me all you want.” I sauntered toward the en-suite.

The stench of gunpowder and blood clung to my suit and my skin. It was a reminder of how fragile our lives and safety were. I ran the water and stepped under it. As soon as I relaxed, more of my dreams flooded my mind. I didn’t fight the random images. I was used to them by now. They always

came after a fight or a night like tonight.

“Maxim?” Donata called from the door. “Are you okay?”

“Just a minute.” I rinsed off the last of the body wash, shut off the water, and grabbed a towel off the rack.

In the closet, I found a pair of pajama pants. The last time I spent the night with Donata, I had slept naked only to get a rise out of her. Tonight was different. I needed to keep myself in check so we could talk about our future together.

As soon as I left the bathroom, my gaze settled on all the medical supplies on the bedside table. “Is this really necessary?”

“Yes.” She gestured for me to sit.

With a sigh of resignation, I sauntered toward the bed and lowered myself on to it. Donata took my hand in hers to examine it. It was swollen with a few cuts and bruises. Shaking her head, she grabbed some ointment and applied it gently.

“No stitches this time.” Her gaze cut to mine for a brief moment. “Please no more fights for at least two weeks. Doctor’s orders.”

“Yes, doctor.” I regarded her profile.

Her soft cheek turned a pretty pink under my scrutiny. It reminded me that a few hours ago, Donata had agreed to come upstairs with me. I had been in a rush all night to get her back in my bed. But now that we were here, I wanted to take my time with her. She was so beautiful. I could sit here and watch her tend to my wounds all night. I lifted my left hand and brushed the side of her arm. She inhaled and held her breath.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid.” She gently placed a butterfly band-aid over my deepest cut. “I’m worried about you.”

“Why?” I chuckled.

“Why?”

“I still have seven lives left. Or is it six?”

“Six?” She stopped to look at me. “You mean these attempts on your life have happened more than once? Exactly how many times have you been shot at lately?”

“I can’t remember.” I reached for her waist and pulled her toward me, so she was wedged between my thighs. “It’s over. Boris and his men can’t hurt you.”

“Ivan told me what you had to do. You had to kill those men.” She

glanced away. "All of them. In a single night."

"I let Dominic spew his hate all he wanted. I should've handled him when I first got here. If I had, Boris and his brother would probably still be here. I would've saved myself and my family a lot of grief. Do you understand? Dominic was my fault. I couldn't make that same mistake again. I had to cut the cancer at its root before it grew again." I inched my hand up her back, searching for her gaze. "Don't look away. I like your eyes on me."

"Hmm." She let out a breath. "I don't know what to do with all this."

"We can live in the now." I could tell she wasn't afraid of me. But something was stopping her from giving into what she wanted. And it wasn't her family's would-be wrath over the kidnapping. I was sure it was me. "I don't understand where this thing between us came from. But it's too powerful not to see it through."

She cupped my face, then flashed a light in my right pupil, then the other. "Do you ever get headaches? Maybe dizziness? Nausea?"

"I don't have a concussion, if that's what you're getting at." I hadn't hit my head and all of a sudden started having feelings for her. Though I had to admit, my obsession for her began the moment I saw a picture of her. "I think that's enough doctoring for one night." I captured her wrists and took the flashlight from her. "Before Alexei showed up, we were in the middle of a conversation."

She shook her head and pushed away from me. "I don't know what came over me. I don't think this," she pointed at me then her, "is a good idea. Sooner or later, my family will find me. If you return me home, I can convince them not to retaliate."

I scoffed. "How do you propose I do that? The Italians, your people, have set up a perimeter. We can't go into the city. It's some sort of punishment for what happened in Jersey with Alfera's wife."

Her eyes went big in surprise. "You remember being there?"

"No, I wasn't there, but my brother Ivan was. I was in Russia at the time."

She surveyed my face as if trying to decide whether or not I was telling the truth. And that was the real problem between us. She couldn't trust me. I was the enemy. A marriage contract didn't automatically do away with decades of hate and rivalry between our families. She wasn't wrong about any of it.

I rose to my feet. When she didn't back away from me, I cradled her neck and pressed my lips to hers. The wave of desire engulfed me instantly. I

deepened the kiss. Bit by bit, her body melted into mine. Desperate to feel her skin, I slipped my hand under her long T-Shirt and didn't stop until I found her bare breast.

"I want you." I left a trail of kisses from her cheek down to her neck and chest.

Just like in my dreams, I sucked on her taut nipple over the fabric. She tunneled her fingers through my hair and called for me. "I want you too."

CHAPTER 14

If All We Have Is Now

DONATA

As far as great ideas went, this wasn't one of them. Not even close. My brain knew that. But my body refused to see that sex with Maxim would complicate things a whole lot more than they already were. My worst fear was that Luca might never come back to me. But I couldn't let myself fall in love with this version of him. Because even if Maxim was Italian, he was now a highly-ranked member of the Brotherhood.

A part of me wanted him to stop because in a weird way this felt like cheating on the old Luca. But the thing was, Luca Gallo had always been my own personal brand of heroin. No matter how long we spent apart, I couldn't get over him. I couldn't get over how he made me feel. How his touch alone set my whole body on fire. I missed him too much. I had spent too many nights wondering if he was even alive.

We deserved this reprieve.

"Omigod." I reached for the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it over my head.

I stopped when I realized Maxim had never seen me naked. Or rather he didn't remember any of the nights we'd had together. Or all the times I slept in his arms. As far as Maxim knew, this was our first-time having sex.

His gaze swept from my face down to my breasts, and then, all the way down to my pussy. The thumping in my chest sent waves of desire-induced adrenaline straight to my core. The first time we were together, he hadn't even taken my clothes off. At the time, he was still mad at me for ruining his career as a teacher.

Now those months felt like a lifetime ago.

“Jesus.” Maxim took a handful of my breast and leaned forward to suck on my pebbled nipple. “So beautiful.” He switched to the other side, holding it tight as if he were afraid I would disappear.

The skin-to-skin contact was enough to send me down the usual frenzied spiral. As if he knew what I craved, he wrapped my legs around his waist, walked me past the bed, then caged me against the wall. His kissing was raw and desperate. Maybe a part of him remembered me, remembered all our nights apart.

I got so lost in his syncopated breathing, the hard beating of his heart, and the heat between our bodies, that I didn’t think about what would come next. When he pinned both my wrists over my head and powered into me, I yelped in surprise. I’d forgotten how big he was. I’d forgotten what it was like to have him inside me, pressing against my walls with demanding thrusts.

“Don’t tell me you’re a virgin?” He looked at me with terror in his eyes.

Luca was my first.

“Not this time.” I smiled at him. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“If all we have is now, I don’t want to waste it,” he muttered. His hips rolled into me, slow at first, while he watched my reaction. “I’ve been dreaming of you.”

His searing thrusts quickly drove me to the edge. He cupped my ass and positioned me farther up the wall so he could have better access, then pressed his shaft to my entrance and pumped hard into me again. Jesus. He was a force of nature. The last few years had made him rough and ruthless, but I didn’t care. I wanted him in whatever form I could have him.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as my core tightened in anticipation of the inevitable. With every pass, he fanned the flames lapping at my G-spot. And then I couldn’t contain it anymore. My walls squeezed tight as an orgasm ripped from my core through the rest of me. The avalanche of pent-up desire was like a fire I couldn’t contain. It rippled through me over and over in a myriad of sensations, until there was nothing left to feel, and my legs turned to Jell-O. If Maxim hadn’t been holding my entire weight, I would’ve landed on the floor.

“You’re not real.” I panted a breath. “You can’t be.”

“Hmm. Fuck.” Maxim grunted against my neck as he found his own release and spilled his hot cum inside me.

I stayed in his arms with my cheek pressed to his forehead and my heart beating a million beats per minute. A whole minute went by before Maxim

pulled away from the wall and carried me to the bed. When he climbed in next to me, he gathered me close to him. I opened my mouth to ask if that round of sex had blown his mind the same way it had done to mine, but my eyes fluttered closed, and I couldn't open them again.

The bed shaking woke me from my deep slumber. I sat up and shifted my body to get away from Maxim as he thrashed around in his sleep. He seemed to be having a nightmare.

"Maxim." I shoved at his shoulder. "Wake up."

"You chose this." He winced with his eyes closed. "Running makes it worse. You were always going to end up here." He continued to mutter a bunch of incoherent things. His eyes watered. But no matter what I did, he didn't wake up. "The punishment for killing an innocent girl is death. I'll see you in hell."

"Luca," I called out. "Wake up."

"Fuck." His eyes flew open, and he jumped out of bed, rubbing his chest and glaring at his hands as if looking for something.

"It was just a nightmare." I crawled across the mattress and placed a hand over his heart. "You're okay. Just a nightmare," I repeated.

"I know." He picked up my hand, kissed it, and headed for the bathroom.

I sat on the bed. Bullet wounds? I could patch those up. But this psychological trauma? That was outside my medical scope. I knew so little about it. What was he dreaming about? Was he remembering something? With my heart up in my throat, I slid off the bed and padded over to the ensuite. When I entered, he stood over the sink, shut off the water and rammed a bottle of pills back into the medicine cabinet. He lifted his head and met my gaze in the mirror.

When I was in medical school, I read a paper about amnesia due to physical trauma to the head. Not everyone had the same symptoms or recovery time. According to the research, some people never got their memories back. I wanted to tell Maxim who he really was, but I was afraid the new information might make things worse.

"Do you get headaches often?" I asked.

He scoffed, then turned around to lean on the sink. "All the damn time."

"The nightmares?"

"Those too."

"Can I take a look?"

"No." He walked past me on his way to the room.

“It could be serious.” I followed him.

When he reached the bed, he turned around to face me. “What are you even looking for?”

“Signs of head trauma.” I needed him to tell me what happened to him. I didn’t believe this bullshit story that he was in Russia for the past year. How the hell did he get there and back? “You said there were two attempts on your life. I know about the shooting a few weeks ago. What happened before that?”

“I can’t.” He sat on the mattress and braced his arms on his thighs.

“You can trust me.” I kneeled in front of him.

“It isn’t that. I just can’t.” He met my gaze. “It hurts when I try to remember.”

“What happened?” I cradled his face.

“Nothing.” He took my hands in his. “I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” I let out a small laugh.

“Galina won’t be up for another couple of hours. Let’s go raid her kitchen.” He winked at me. “Get dressed.”

I donned my nightgown, which was just one of Maxim’s T-shirts. It was long enough to cover my butt, so I didn’t bother with pants. Maxim grabbed his pajama pants, and to my delight, he decided to forgo the top. With a smile, he took my hand and pulled me toward him.

Like thieves in the night, we descended the stairs, crossed the living room, then found the steps that led to the kitchen. It was dark and empty, but Maxim knew his way around. He padded toward the fridge and took out a platter piled with Galina’s thin Russian pancakes.

“What are you making?” I hopped on the table.

“Blini for breakfast.”

“Are you sure? I didn’t know tough mobsters could cook,” I teased. I already knew Luca made the best egg and chicken sausage scramble.

“I don’t get to do it often.” He laughed. “Galina doesn’t like to share her kitchen.”

“She’s very good at what she does.” My gaze followed him around the room as he collected a pan, butter, powdered sugar, strawberries and condensed milk from the pantry and cabinets. “I bet she’s been here since you were little.”

He stopped to exhale. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing. Probing?” He cocked an eyebrow before he placed the pan on the stove.

“I just want to know more about you.” I let my legs fall open. “That’s all. I’m your wife, remember? I need to know certain things.”

His gaze zeroed in on my crotch. The T-shirt was long enough so that he couldn’t see my pussy. But if he wanted to see, all he had to do was give the fabric a little tug.

“Are you trying to seduce information out of me, Mrs. Belov?” He waved a spatula in the air. “How about we eat first.”

“So stubborn.” I braced my hands behind me, while I regarded his form. I’d gotten older in the last few years. He’d gotten hotter. That wasn’t fair.

He finished cooking, then made a single plate. At first, I figured he meant for us to share. But when I reached for the fork, he slapped my hand away. “You need to pay the toll?”

“What toll?”

“You want a bite? Show me.” His gaze dropped to my legs.

A current of desire swirled up into the seam of my pussy lips. I glanced behind me, then pulled back the hem of my T-shirt. His eyes turned dark with lust while his gaze bore into mine. I could see the wheels in his head turning as he decided what to do with me. When I reached for him, he placed my hand behind me, sucked on two of his fingers and slid them into me.

“Hmm.” I leaned back to give him access.

“Eat.” He used his free hand to cut a piece of blini and then fed it to me.

The berries and condensed milk were a delicious combination that wasn’t overly sweet. I’d had the pancakes before, but not prepared like this.

“Wow, that’s really good.” I chewed my food and swallowed. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was until now.”

“Me too.” He applied pressure with his fingers, then fed me another forkful.

“Hmm.” I let my head fall back. “We can’t do this here.”

“Why not?” He glided his hand in and out with firm strokes.

“They might see us.” I spread my legs wider.

“I definitely don’t want anyone to see your pussy.” He set the fork down and focused on rubbing my clit. “It’s such a pretty pussy, and it’s all mine. Only mine.” He captured my mouth and kissed me hard.

His tongue and his hand fell into the same rhythm of thrusting in and out of me. If anyone walked in on us right now, I’d be thoroughly embarrassed to be seen spreadeagled on the kitchen table while Maxim finger-fucked me. But his hand felt too good. I didn’t want him to stop.

“Come for me.” He placed another piece of blini in my mouth. Then licked the powdered sugar off my lips. “You taste so good.”

He increased the tempo as he bent down to nibble on my nipple over my T-shirt. It was the most infuriating feeling because his wet mouth on me was so much better. With another glance behind me, I pulled my top over my head.

“Good girl.” He lapped at my peak with his tongue before he sucked the whole thing into his mouth.

My clit’s reaction was immediate. It swelled with a throbbing force that left me breathless. Maxim stepped closer and dug his fingers even deeper. I closed my eyes and eased into my climax. At first, it lingered at the tip of my bud, but then, like a shockwave, it spread to my core and down my legs.

I was still reeling from the high when Maxim removed his fingers and replaced them with his erection. He pumped several times before he stopped and whispered in my ear, “I want to see my cock disappear into that gorgeous ass of yours. And when you come, I want you to say my name.” He gripped my waist, and in a single fluid movement flipped me over, so my belly pressed against the table, while my ass was up in the air.

“We definitely should not be doing this,” I mumbled as he rammed into me.

He filled every inch of me as he surged in and out. “You’re ready.” He wrapped his arms around my body as he continued his relentless and sweet torture.

“Yes.”

When his lips found my cheek, I turned so our mouths would collide. He rode me hard like that until I orgasmed all over again. This time though, we climaxed together. I squeezed my eyes shut and clearly saw us jumping a dangerous abyss of desire. Because now that Luca and I were together, I wasn’t going to stop fighting until he was all mine. I wanted to be with him always. He left me so many times before. I refused to live without him, not even for a day. If the Brotherhood wanted a war, I was prepared to give them hell. They couldn’t keep him.

“Omigod, Luca. I love you. I have always loved you.” I blinked away tears.

Maxim hitched a breath, then released me. The air around us shifted from hot to cold in an instant. *What did I say? Fuck. What did I say? Luca?* I turned around to face him. The pain I found in his eyes cut me. I hadn’t

meant to hurt him like that.

“I didn’t mean that.” I reached for my T-shirt, suddenly feeling naked and exposed.

I searched for the right words to make this right. But what could I say?

You’re not you, you’re him.

He scoffed and tucked away his semi-erect penis. “Was all this an act? To get me to fall for you? And then what? Set you free out of love?” His jaw clenched as he wrapped his fingers around my neck. “Well, at least now I know where I stand. Make no mistake, Donata. You’re here to stay. You’re here for me. For me to fuck until I can’t feel my cock anymore.”

CHAPTER 15

But I Remember You

DONATA

The next morning, I woke up alone in Maxim's bed. I was the biggest idiot for letting my guard down. Having Luca back in my life had me on cloud nine. I couldn't be held responsible for saying stupid things during mind-blowing sex.

"Arghh." I screamed into his pillow. A knock on the door made me sit up. "Come in," I called out, hoping Maxim had reconsidered and realized that being jealous of his past self was utterly ridiculous.

"The boss asked me to bring you breakfast." Tore strode across the suite and set a tray of eggs and sausage and a plate of mixed fruit on the coffee table.

The oversize sofa and chairs in the living area faced the tall window and a cozy balcony. In the last three weeks I'd been in the compound, I'd tried to break the lock so I could get some fresh air in private, but I hadn't had any luck with it.

Tore exhaled, fishing a key out of the back pocket of his jeans. "Boss said you can't leave your room."

"Great. We're back to that. Are you going to guard the door too?" I glared at him.

"I have the first shift." He nodded, pointing at the window. "Boss asked me to unlock the door. It's a nice day out."

"How generous of your boss. Which boss is this, by the way?" I was pissy this morning. Maxim should be eating breakfast with me.

"Maxim." He furrowed his brows, confused by my question. "I'll be in the hallway."

When he shut the door behind him, I climbed out of bed and padded toward the open French doors. The balcony faced the glittering water fountain. From the second floor, the courtyard felt more serene and quiet. To my left, on the opposite end, a few guys sat around the patio table, playing cards as usual.

I brought the tray with me and set it on the small table, poured some coffee, and sat down to eat my breakfast alone. I was on my second cup when Maxim stomped across the courtyard. My pulse spiked because it looked like he was leaving again. I shot to my feet and almost called out to him. I couldn't spend another month in this place without him.

"Maxim," Belinda called after him.

Maxim slow-blinked, then turned to face her. "I'm in a hurry."

"You're always in a hurry lately." She pouted, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Maxim reached back to peel her arms off him. I blinked, and then, they were kissing. They were fucking kissing. I understood that before, when they were sleeping around, Maxim didn't remember he was Luca or that I existed. But now, he was married to me. What the fuck?

I darted inside the room and slammed the door shut. I fucked up last night when I called Maxim Luca. That was my fault. But if he thought that I was going to stay in his house and watch him make babies with Belinda, he had another thing coming. I was done with this place.

The plan since the beginning had been to escape. The dungeon truly put the fear in me, which was why I had stayed put while Maxim was gone for three weeks. But now, Luca's life was also on the line. If I left tonight, Rex, Enzo, and Santino could help me rescue Luca. Once he was home, surrounded by his memories, I was sure he would remember who he was.

In my head, I clearly saw myself climbing down the balcony, darting across the courtyard in the dark, then jumping the brick wall. I had to do it. For us.

I got to work before I lost my resolve. With a bit of luck, Maxim will sleep somewhere else again tonight. A lump churned in my stomach at the thought of him spending any more time with Belinda. She was nothing if not persistent. She'd warned me about it since the beginning. At the time, I didn't care that she wanted my husband because I didn't know Luca was said husband.

"Jerk." I snatched the bedding off the mattress then removed the sheets

and laid them on the floor.

This had to work. Admittedly, I'd only seen this work in movies. The drop into the courtyard wasn't that bad. At most, I was risking a twisted ankle or a bruised butt. When I was finished knotting the two pieces together, I hid them under the bed. Then tossed the comforter back on top to cover the naked mattress.

That night, Maxim didn't come back. I laid awake in bed staring at the clock. When we snuck around the house to eat an early breakfast, the house had been completely quiet and empty around two in the morning. I figured that would be a good hour to try and escape again. My heart pumped so hard while I waited in the dark, it muted all sounds around me.

When it was time, I didn't bother checking the door. Without a doubt, Tore or one of Maxim's guys was standing guard. Quietly, I let my legs drop on the side of the mattress before I lowered myself to the floor. I reached for the sheets and cradled them to my body. Luckily, I had thought to leave the French doors wide open to minimize movement and noises.

I tied one end of the sheet to one of the stone balusters. I tugged at it to test the knot. When it tightened instead of unraveling, I tossed the rest of my makeshift fire escape ladder over the balcony. With one last calming breath, I swung my leg over the handrail and slid my body to the other side of it.

"Don't fall. Don't fall," I muttered, taking a handful of the sheet, then letting my body hang. "Hmmm." I squealed when my hand slipped down the fabric under my weight. "You're fine. You're fine. Don't look down." Fuck. I had to look down to see how far off the ground I was. My guess was I had about a four foot drop, maybe five. If I climbed down the sheet, I might have a softer landing. But my fingers were frozen and refused to loosen the death grip they had on the only thing keeping me alive.

I was still contemplating my drop when a pair of muscled arms wrapped around my thighs and yanked me down. My hands came out, and I landed tits first on Maxim's face. His whole body trembled as he let me slide down his front until my feet were safely on the ground.

"Are you going somewhere?" He gritted his teeth.

I didn't like it when his jaw clenched. It usually meant he was pissed. I shoved away from him. Our gazes locked, his hazel eyes boring into mine. In the next breath, he bent down and hoisted me over his shoulder.

"Are you kidding me?" I huffed as my belly bounced off him.

With long strides, he walked back inside the house and up the stairs.

When he reached the door, he stopped for a moment to send Tore away. Luckily, Tore didn't think to ask any questions. He left silently, without even a glance back. Once inside, Maxim dropped me on the bed then went to close the balcony doors.

"What the hell were you thinking?" He braced his hands on his hips. "You could've gotten hurt."

"What was I thinking?" I scrambled off the bed. "You left me here. Alone for days. Do you think I want to stay and watch you make out with your girlfriend?"

"What?"

"I saw you." Tears streamed down my cheek. "You were kissing her."

"You can't seriously be jealous of Belinda. Why would you be? You barely know me." He glared at me, though his eyes showed more pain than hate. "You're still waiting for your love to come for you."

"Are you jealous of him?"

"Yes." He wrapped his hands around my neck like he'd done last night after I called out Luca's name. "Yes, I am. I hope he comes for you. When he does, I'm going to make him watch while I fuck your brains out. I want him to see how good we are together. Then I'm going to kill him."

"You're insane." This whole thing was insane. "You're jealous of Luca so naturally you had to go and get in bed with your girlfriend? That doesn't make any sense."

"Belinda loves me." He released me. "At least with her, I know she's thinking of me when we fuck."

"You slept with her?" I hit him square in the chest. "After you were with me? You went back to her."

I shoved him with both hands, but he didn't budge an inch. Instead, he grabbed both my wrists and pinned them behind my back. "I tried. But I couldn't stop thinking of you. You're in my head all the time. You're..." He slid his thumb across my lips, looking at me with hunger in his eyes.

In the next beat, he captured my mouth in a heated kiss. When his tongue collided with mine, desire swirled at my core and made me forget why I had wanted to leave in the first place. We fell on top of the bed in a tangle of arms and legs as he removed my top, shoes, and jeans.

He tossed my pants aside, then braced his knee on the bed. My whole body trembled with anticipation as he removed his T-shirt and his belt. Jesus, the man was beyond hot with his bulging biceps and ripped abs. The ink on

his skin reminded me how dangerous this version of Luca really was. But I didn't care. I wanted him in the worst way.

With his chest rising and falling, he stared at my naked body. Did he want to punish me or fuck me? "I would bet you're already wet for me." He flashed me a knowing smile. "Show me."

I let my legs fall open to expose myself. A rush of hot adrenaline spiraled through me and settled at my core. I was a puddle of want already, and all he had done was look at me.

"Show me how you touch yourself." His gaze zeroed in on the spot between my legs. "Go on."

I let out a soft moan as I rubbed my clit and spread my juices all over it. Like a storm, my orgasm began to gather deep inside me. I grabbed my own breast and pulled at my nipple while Maxim watched me intently. Just when I was about to come, he prowled toward me and nestled his face between my legs.

"My turn." He licked the seam of my pussy lips, and then parted them with his tongue.

"Omigod." I tunneled my fingers through his hair.

He sucked and nibbled so slow and with such precision that inside of a minute, I was ready to explode again. And once again, he left me hanging. Was this his plan? To bring me to the very edge of my orgasm, only to let it fade away.

"Does he make you feel like this?" He crawled on top of me with his huge erection hanging between us. "Does he set your body on fire like I do?"

"No." I ran my hand over his chest and shoulders.

"Ask me."

"What?"

"Say my name, princess. And ask me to fuck you."

I was too far gone to care about pride. "Maxim, fuck me. Now." I squeezed my eyes shut as a wave of desire flooded my soul.

"Look at me." He plunged deeper into me as he ran his hand up my thigh and my butt cheek.

"I only want you." I pressed my lips to his neck and shoulder, meeting his thrusts one for one.

When his body tensed, ready to climax, I wrapped my arms around him and unraveled along with him. After our orgasms were spent, neither one of us wanted to let go. He stayed on top of me, bracing his elbow next to me for

support, laboring to catch his breath.

“What were you doing up at two in the morning?” I cupped his face and brushed my lips over his.

“Couldn’t sleep.” He ran his fingers down my cheek.

“Nightmares again?” I kissed him softly. “You can tell me.”

“It’s always the same dream.” He rolled off me and propped his head on the pillow. “It feels so real.”

I sat up and shifted my body to face him. Maybe there was a way to help him remember. But until he trusted me enough to tell me he had lost his memory, I couldn’t flat out tell him who he really was. For one, he wouldn’t believe me. But also, I was afraid the truth might make things worse.

“What happens in the dream?” I braced my hand on his stomach. “Sometimes our brains erase traumatic events in our lives. Or at least it tries to make us forget. Could this dream be a memory?”

“I doubt it. I get shot in the head every time. I see my brain guts all over the wall. There are three men there with me.” He rubbed the side of his face. “I think I get shot because I killed an innocent girl. In the dream, I know Ava is dead because of me.”

Ava Conti was Luca’s fiancée years ago. She was killed before they could get married. Luca spent months looking for her killer. When we finally figured out who’d done it, Luca went after him. I hadn’t been there when it happened, but my friend Enzo told me everything. He didn’t leave a single detail out.

Tears brimmed my eyes. Maxim was beginning to remember. This distorted dream was a memory. Luca didn’t get shot in the head. He shot Ava’s killer.

“Are there other nightmares?”

He cradled my cheek and smiled. “Not all my dreams are bad. Especially when you’re in them. I dreamed of us, like this.” He touched the pad of his thumb to my lips. “Before I even met you in person, I knew being with you would be this intense and all-consuming.”

His gaze swept from my face down to my chest. He kneaded my breast, rolling my nipple with every tug. My eyes fluttered closed as he continued to explore my body. He slid his fingers down to my waist and then my hip.

“How do I know your body so well?” He asked, mostly to himself, before he lifted his gaze to meet mine. “I’ve never told this to anyone. Only Papa knows.” He let out a breath. “About a year ago, I was jumped by a couple of

assholes. Or at least, that's what Papa told me. The truth is, I don't remember a goddamn thing about my life before I came here."

Luca.

"I know you don't remember anything." I pressed my forehead to his and whispered, "but I remember you."

CHAPTER 16

We Can Be Happy Here

DONATA

He buried his fingers in my hair and brought me in for a kiss. “Did we meet in some dream a long time ago?”

A part of me knew that telling him the truth all at once wasn’t a good idea. But I couldn’t stand the thought that Luca didn’t know who I was, that he didn’t know everything we’d shared over the past ten years. Sure, not all of it was roses and champagne, but we had each other.

“I met you when I was fifteen.” I exhaled. “You were teaching at Midtown High, an elite high school for members of the Society.”

He chuckled, but after a few beats when I didn’t back down, his smile faded. I had no way of knowing what was going through his head. For all I knew, his brain blocked my words or the absurd concept that Maxim and the niece of Don Salvatore met so long ago. Could he even entertain such a thing?

“You were fresh out of college. Six years older than me. Back then, you didn’t even see me. I was persistent.” I glanced down at my hands.

Maybe he didn’t need to remember all the things I did before we finally got together—the lies I told about him when he rejected me because I was too young, the stalking, or the time I tricked him into meeting me in the Hamptons. That had been the night Ava Conti was killed.

“The woman in your dreams, Ava. She was your fiancée. She was innocent like in your dreams. You searched for her killer for years. When you found him...” I stopped to get a better read on him. “He was your first kill.”

He lay so still next to me. For a moment, I thought he’d stopped breathing. I braced my hand on his bare chest. The drumming against my

palm was the only clue that he'd heard what I'd said.

"I think that's why you keep going back to that moment in time." I brushed a strand of hair away from his face. "It was an important event in your life. That night, everything changed for you and me. It's been eight years since then."

"Were you there?" His gaze cut to me.

"At Nathan's house? When you..." I cleared my throat. "No. But my friend Enzo told me everything. You gave him a letter to give to me. I made him tell me every single detail."

Slowly, he sat up and let his legs fall down the side of the bed. With his wide back to me, it was as if he was shutting me out. But I had already started down this road. I couldn't stop now.

"Three men were with you that night. At Nathan's place. Enzo was one of them. Also, Rex and Santino. Do you see them in your dream?"

"How the fuck do you know all this?" He braced his arms on his knees and let his head hang. Every breath he took, his back expanded with the tiniest tremor. "Did Papa tell you?"

"No, he didn't. I told you. Enzo did. Don't you understand?" I pressed my lips to his shoulder. "You're him. Luca." That single word came out barely above a whisper. In the past few weeks, the name had become a point of contention between us.

"That asshole again?" He rose to his feet and faced me. "This is about you getting back to him."

I glanced up at him. His pants were still undone from our love making. Even in this state of disarray, he looked formidable. When he braced his hands on his hips and glared at me, I realized the truth hadn't had the desired effect. He didn't believe me.

"Papa would never have betrayed my confidence. Were you spying on us? Is that how you know every detail from my nightmares?" He pursed his lips. "You heard us, and so you thought you could use my weakness against me. Is that it? You think you can fill my head with lies to confuse me and get me to let you go. You're wasting your time. I'm never setting you free."

"I think you know I'm not making this up. You just don't want to see it." I grabbed my T-shirt and pulled it over my head before I climbed out of bed. "Your dreams. I think they're broken memories. Jesus. Listen to me. Everything Papa has told you is a lie." I wrapped my fingers around his wrist. "Your mother was never raped. She didn't kill herself."

“Stop.” He cradled my neck.

“No. I can’t. You have to remember.” My voice faltered. “Luca, please. You have to remember us.”

“Stop saying his name.” He stepped back.

“Why? You are Luca. My Luca. The only man I’ve ever loved.”

He pressed his palms to his temples. “Whatever you think you’re doing is not going to work.”

“I just want you to remember the truth.” I cupped his cheek. “Luca, I love you. I have always loved you.”

“No.” He zipped up his pants, then buckled his belt. “You’re trying to take advantage of the situation. I shouldn’t have trusted you.” He stormed toward the door.

“Wait.” I chased after him. In my panic that I could lose him forever, I beat him to the door. “You’re not leaving here until I’ve told you everything.”

“Move out of the way.” He slow-blinked.

“He’s lying to you. You’re one of us. Part of the Society.” I bit my tongue because this wasn’t the time to tell Luca that his entire family had been wiped out in the past two years. No doubt, the trauma of losing his loved ones and then becoming a wanted man was part of the reason he didn’t remember who he was. His memories were there—all jumbled up and distorted—but they were there. “You’re next in line to be Don Gallo. You know about the Society, right? Papa didn’t lie to you about that. It exists and it’s more powerful than you can ever imagine. You belong at the table same as Rex, Santino, Enzo, and Aunt Vittoria. It’s your birthright.”

“Let me guess.” He chuckled. “The only way to prove you’re telling the truth is if I take you back to your family. You must think I’m stupid. You’re staying here. End of story.”

“Now I really know you don’t remember me.” I raised my voice. The real Luca would know that “end of story” had never worked on me. It didn’t work when he rejected me when I was fifteen. Or when he said he had to leave me for good. “I’m not giving up on you.”

“I could never be one of you.” He placed a hand over the mosque tattoo on his chest. “I might not remember the details of my life before I got here, but I know what family feels like.”

“We’re your family.” I reached for his face. “Papa is using you.”

“Okay. So let’s see it.” He gestured to the room at large. “I’ve been here

for over year, if not longer. Where is this loving family you speak of? Where were they when I needed them the most? That's right. They weren't here. Do you know who was? The Brotherhood. Papa offered me a haven and rank within the family." He pointed at his chest again and the body art inked on it. This was Maxim's love letter to Russia because that was who'd shown up when he needed help. "What did the Italians do? The same as always, they sent a big pile of shit."

"I'm sorry I didn't try harder. I looked for you."

"Enough." He peeled my hand off him. "A couple of hours ago, you were trying to leave. So yeah, I can see how hard you were trying to find me."

He was right. Maxim was trapped here because I gave up on him. I told him to never come back. And even though I was mad at him for doing exactly that, I never did anything of real consequence to find him. I could've asked Rex to search for him under every rock. I didn't do any of that. Instead, I simply waited for him to return. This was all my fault. And Maxim was right to hate me for it—hate me enough to want to forget I ever existed, that his old life ever existed.

"Don't leave." I pressed my forehead to his shoulder with tears brimming my eyes. "Please. I can't stand the thought of losing you again."

"I have to speak with Papa." He gripped my upper arms and moved me aside. "This can't wait."

"What?" A shock of adrenaline rushed through me. "Don't do that."

I hadn't considered the fact that Maxim trusted Papa with his life. Of course he wanted to run back to Papa and let him ease his mind with more palatable lies. If anything, this was proof that Maxim wanted to believe Papa's story. He wanted this life where he was the favorite son, loved by all, and revered.

"You can't tell Papa any of the stuff I just told you. It's too dangerous. There's a chance he doesn't know exactly who you are. Or that you're the next Don Gallo." I searched for the right words to dissuade him from making a deadly mistake. "He knows about the Society, but if he brought me here, that means he has no clue you are part of it." I wracked my brain for more plausible evil plans fitting of someone like Papa. He seemed to be the long con kind of guy. Whatever he wanted from Maxim, he'd already waited a whole year for it. "For now, maybe he's holding off until the right opportunity presents itself so he can ask for a ransom. If that's what he wants, the Society will pay whatever he wants."

“That’s so far-fetched, it’s comical, and you know it.” Maxim scoffed. “He brought you here for revenge, remember?”

Revenge for a dead mother who didn’t exist.

Papa was committing to his bullshit story. He gave Maxim a way to enact his revenge on me. Who the hell did that? He was next level psychopath.

“I still have nightmares about your dungeon. So no, I haven’t forgotten why you brought me here.”

What would Papa do if he found out I knew Maxim’s real identity. Papa had put a lot of hours and planning into making Luca believe he was Maxim. Now I understood why phones were not allowed in the house. Belinda had said it was because Papa didn’t want the government spying on them. That was bullshit. He didn’t want Luca accidentally seeing his picture on the internet. When he was teaching at Columbia, he attended a bunch of scholar events. He was a public figure.

Fuck. Fuck.

I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Whatever Papa’s plans for Maxim were, his time and effort were well worth his time. I had no doubt he would kill me to keep this nonsense going. But what about his favorite son? Would he kill him too?

“I’ll stay.” I took in a deep breath. “I’ll stay for as long as you want me. I won’t try to escape again. But please, don’t tell Papa what I just told you. Who knows what he’ll do.”

Those were the magic words. As soon as I promised to stay, Maxim’s whole body relaxed. Even the fury and mistrust in his eyes dissolved. I’d like to believe that deep down, he knew who I was. He knew that the only way for him to find his way back home was to keep me close to him.

“It’s four in the morning. He’s probably not even up yet.” I pulled him away from the door.

“He’s an early riser.” His gaze bored into mine as he let me usher him toward the bed. “For your own good, let it go, Donata.”

“Do you promise not to tell Papa?” I pushed him down on the covers and unbuckled his belt. “He’ll kill me.”

“He’s not the monster you think he is.” He sank deeper into the comforter as he let me climb on top of him. “You want me. I can see it in your eyes. You want to be with me. Why are you fighting it?”

“I’m not fighting us.”

“There are no monsters to fight here. You’re safe with me.” He cradled

my neck and brought me in for a searing kiss. “You’re my wife. We can be happy here.”

I couldn’t remember the number of times I had wished for a moment like this—for the time when Luca and I could marry and live our love in the light. For years, we had to hide our relationship because it was forbidden by the Society by-laws. Later, we had to continue keeping it a secret because he had too many enemies hunting him. And now here we were with everything we ever wanted, except Luca wasn’t here.

He lifted my butt and sat me on his cock. I let out a slight moan as he rocked his hips slowly into me. Bit by bit, I forgot about our conversation and his denial. Instead, I focused on his words. We could be happy here. Was this life our future? Could I ever resign myself to the fact that Luca was gone for good?

On the surface, Maxim and Luca seemed so different—one was pure testosterone and brawn, while the other was logical and intelligent. Both had the ability to set my body on fire. At some point in the last few weeks, Maxim had gotten under my skin. Seeing how his crew revered him, how the staff loved him, and how far he was willing to go to ensure my safety, I’d begun to develop feelings for this new version of Luca.

Papa’s compound was a prison for both of us. But the truth was, I would go to the ends of the world if it meant spending the rest of my life with Luca or Maxim.

“You’re so beautiful. You bewitched me. After all you’ve done to get away. After all the lies. I still can’t find a reason to let you go.” He pulled my T-shirt over my head and wrapped his arms around me to make me sink deeper into him. “Promise me you’ll never leave. I feel like setting the whole world on fire every time you look for exits that aren’t there.” He captured my mouth, deepening the connection between us.

“I promise.” I let my head fall back as a spark ignited in my core. The slow-burn torture of his hard cock inside me had me at the very edge of madness. I had to be going crazy if at this moment I was considering staying with Maxim forever. We deserved this happiness, even if it wasn’t real.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He buried his face in my neck. “You’re mine.”

“I’ve always been yours.”

CHAPTER 17

End of Story

MAXIM

Donata fell asleep next to me after our last round of sex. Jesus, being with her was like nothing I'd ever experienced. Even without my memories, my gut told me Donata and I were meant to be together, that what we had didn't come along often.

The early morning sun rays seeped through the curtains and cast a glow on the curve of her hip. Unlike all the other times I'd watched her sleep, I didn't fight the urge to run my hand over her soft skin. She felt so good wrapped around my body like that. At least for now, she'd given up on the idea of escaping. I about lost it last night when I came out to get some fresh air and spotted her climbing down my fucking window.

She was such a contradiction. One minute she was scared and running away from me. The next, she was looking at me like I was something to eat. She wanted me. I could see it in her eyes and in the way her body trembled with desire every time we touched. She had a whole life back at home. But last night, she surrendered herself to me. I believed her when she'd said she wanted to stay with me. A smile pulled at my lips as her words echoed in my head.

"I love you."

"I've always been yours."

"Donata Salvatore," I whispered as I brushed a strand of blonde hair away from her smooth cheek.

If she was telling the truth about her feelings for me, was she also telling the truth about my past? I didn't know what was real anymore. For months after my accident, I obsessed day and night over the details missing from my

memories. I didn't find peace until I let it all drift away. If I could control my dreams, I would let those go as well. Was she right? Were my nightmares broken pieces of my past trying to find their way back?

"Did you lie?" I bent down to kiss her forehead.

A part of me wanted to believe her, but she was still my enemy. Or at least, she wasn't a member of the Brotherhood. I'd stopped thinking of Donata as my enemy the first time we kissed. Was I the biggest idiot for wanting to trust her? Her mercurial episodes were giving me whiplash. She didn't understand how my gut feeling, my sense of belonging, was my only compass. Without my memories, I had to rely on my compass to survive.

She was asking me to take a huge leap of faith. Leaving the Brotherhood to start over somewhere else, away from the only family I knew, was too much for me to get my head around. Round and round I went as I tried to process everything she'd said last night. I wanted to believe her. But her words threatened to destroy me and everything I held dear.

When she stirred in my arms, I gently let her go and slipped out from under the covers. As much as I wanted to stay in bed with her all day, I had work to do. The guys still hadn't gotten paid from our last gun run. I pulled the sheet over Donata's naked body and forced myself to walk away.

After I showered and got dressed, I headed out. I needed to stop by the kitchen to grab a bite to eat and to ask Galina to send something up for Donata. No doubt, Donata would want to stay in the suite all day. If she trusted me enough, she would know I had no intention of telling Papa about our conversation and all her conspiracy theories. As Papa had said, it would be best if we let the past be. Whatever lay on the other side of the dark abyss my head had become, I didn't care for it. My life, my family, and my future were here with the Brotherhood and with Donata by my side. End of story.

I closed the door behind me. As soon as I reached the landing, Ivan caught up with me. "Good afternoon." He said even though it was still early morning. "Looks like you finally tamed the doctor." With a chuckle, he pointed at my bedroom door. "Although, the guys say it's the other way around. It's been days. They were hoping for some severe punishment."

"Punishment for what?" I slanted him a glance as we descended the stairs.

"For what her family did to your mom?"

"I've decided to put a hold on that. For now," I lied. I didn't need Ivan up in my business. Especially when Donata kept changing her mind about escaping. "Have you seen Papa? I need to talk to him about the guys'

payday.”

“He left before sunrise.” He glanced over his shoulder. “The old man is up to something. Are you sure he’s gotten over my last snafu?”

“He hasn’t said anything else to me. I think you bringing Donata to us redeemed you in his eyes.”

“I hope you’re right. Hey,” his eyes lit up, “do you have time for a quick game? Since Papa is not here. Come on, man. All you do is work. The guys haven’t seen you in weeks.”

I shot a glance toward the upstairs bedrooms. Now that work had been postponed until Papa returned, I could spend the rest of the day with Donata. But Ivan was right. I needed to spend time with my crew.

“Yeah, I can hang for a couple of rounds.” I patted his shoulder. “Go ahead, I need to talk to Galina first.”

“I’ll go with you. I’m starving.”

As soon as I strolled into the kitchen, Galina shot me a look of surprise. “What are you doing here? I was about to send Irina upstairs to bring your breakfast.” She pointed at the tray piled with eggs, sausage, blinis, fruit and coffee.

A very clear memory of Donata eating blinis on this table while I fucked her flashed in my head. I shook my head once to clear my mind, then grumbled, “Work.”

“Ah, you work too much. Sit.” She grabbed one of the plates off the tray and set it in front of me before she turned to her daughter. “Take it to the missus before it gets cold.”

Irina nodded and quickly left with Donata’s breakfast.

“What about me?” Ivan sat next to me.

“Of course.” Galina rushed to the stove to make Ivan a plate.

With a chuckle, I took in a forkful of food as more guys rushed in to eat. Within ten minutes, all sixteen seats around the table were filled. Most of my crew didn’t live in the compound, but they made sure to show up in time every morning to get some of Galina’s famous blinis. My gaze darted across the table to each of the familiar faces. These guys were my friends. I couldn’t think of a life when that wasn’t so.

My gut couldn’t be wrong about this feeling of belonging.

“This is what I’m talking about.” Ivan shoved my shoulder. “He’s so fucking grumpy all the time. You’d think the pretty doctor would’ve put a smile on his face by now.”

A peal of laughter filled the kitchen. Even Galina chuckled as she flipped pancakes on the griddle.

“I’m just glad I can sleep in my own bed again instead of sleeping outside his door.” Tore bit into a juicy sausage. “You joining us for a round of cards.”

“Yes, I have time this morning.” I took a big gulp of black coffee. “If you’re done discussing my marriage.”

“Yeah, let’s go now before Papa gets home.” Ivan stuffed the rest of his egg in his mouth, then gestured for us to follow.

In the next beat, all fourteen chairs scrapped across the terracotta tile in unison. One by one, everyone filed out of the kitchen and headed to the courtyard. I made it all the way to the stairs before Belinda caught up to me.

“Good morning.” She smiled sweetly.

“Good morning.” I sidestepped her and kept going.

“Are you joining the men?” She grabbed my arm, rubbing her tits all over it in the process.

“I am.”

“Me too. It’s a beautiful day.”

I let her hang from my arm because I didn’t have the energy today to deal with her pouting. Out in the courtyard, I took my usual seat at the head of the table as Ivan dealt the cards. He was, once again, retelling the story of how the negotiations on our last run had gone. I’d like to think that my brother was proud of me. But in truth, he liked to entertain while being the center of attention.

By now I’d gotten used to his embellishments, so I just nodded and played along. “It’s going to be a good payday.” I peeked at the two cards lying face down in front of me.

Suddenly, the air shifted around me. On instinct, my gaze cut to my suite, where Donata leaned on the terrace rail, holding a mug between her hands. My cock twitched at the sight of her in nothing but my T-shirt. Last night, I’d told her I loved her. In the moment, it felt true, real. Though, I had to admit, I had no idea why I felt that way about her. A few weeks ago, we were complete strangers.

“Are you in or not?” Ivan waved his hand in front of me.

I quickly looked at the cards in the center of the table. “I’m in.” I tossed in my chips.

“I’m out.” Tore tossed his cards in.

The rest of the game continued, while Ivan indulged in more of his crazy stories. I chuckled at his colorful descriptions and disregard for accuracy. Though the whole time, my attention flitted to Donata on a loop. Every time she sipped from her coffee, leaned in on the banister, or disappeared from my line of sight, my gaze would inadvertently shift to her.

“You’re stalling the game.” Tore reached for my cards and flipped them. “Of course, he won.” He rolled his eyes then gathered the cards to shuffle them. “And he’s barely here.”

I laughed. “It’s not my fault you’re terrible at this game.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but instead closed it and rose to his feet. In the next beat, all the guys did the same to welcome Papa as he strode across the courtyard. Ivan wasn’t wrong when he said the old man was up to something. Just in the way he moved, my gut told me he was compensating for something, as if he were in pain.

“Maxim.” He called for me as soon as he was within earshot. “My office.”

“Game’s over, guys. Get to work.” I gestured for Ivan to clear out the cards.

“Maxim, wait.” He scurried around the table. “You got my back, right?”

“You know I do. Relax. You’re good.” I patted his shoulder, then headed toward the entrance.

Before I crossed the threshold, I spared another glance over to Donata, who waved to me from the balcony and smiled. I returned the gesture, then went inside. Whatever Papa wanted with me today seemed urgent.

I knocked on the door once, then entered. Papa stood by the fireplace and didn’t even turn to acknowledge my presence. “Sit down, Maxim. We need to talk.”

And now I knew for sure Donata’s words had fucked up my head even more. For no reason at all, my heart rate spiked as I ambled toward the man I’d regarded as a father for over year. He seemed different. And for a second, I wondered if maybe he found out about Donata’s allegations.

“Is everything okay?” I sat on the sofa, facing him.

“I think you know things haven’t been all right in a long while.” He gestured dismissively then lowered himself into the chair adjacent to me. “I left early this morning to have a chat with my doctor.” He pointed toward his obliques. “It’s not looking good. Some kidney bullshit.”

“Papa.” This was not what I had expected at all. He’d been in pain for a

while now, but he always brushed it off as nothing more than the aches and pains that come with old age. “How bad?”

“Bad.” He smiled at me. “Which is why I wanted to talk to you. The doctors don’t know what the hell they’re doing. I suspect it won’t be long.”

“If there’s anything I can do. I’m here for you. You know that.” I leaned forward and braced my arms on my thighs. “Whatever it is. I’ll do it. We’re family. I should be a match if you need a kidney.”

He reached out to cradle my neck. “I appreciate the offer. And now I know for sure, you’re the right choice to keep my legacy going.”

I sat back and let out a breath. He couldn’t be serious. Yeah, the guys joked about how I was Papa’s favorite son. But the reality was that I wasn’t his son—Ivan was. He was the one who belonged at the head of the table. To follow in Papa’s footsteps was his birthright.

“Ivan—”

“I’ll handle him.”

“And the guys?”

“I don’t think any of them will be surprised with my choice.” He scoffed. “If given the chance, Ivan would burn this place to the ground. He’s my son, but that doesn’t make me blind to what he is. His greed gets the better of him every time. He’s always looking for a short cut, an easy way out. And you know this life is anything but.”

“He’s been working on it.”

In the past few months, Ivan had put some serious effort into doing better. Mostly because he was afraid he’d reached the limit of Papa’s patience. But overall, he’d matured. With proper guidance, he could be a good leader to us all. I opened my mouth to explain the nuances of Ivan’s capabilities.

Papa put up his hand. “My decision has been made. All that’s left is for you to say yes. Let me worry about the rest. You made an example of Dominic and his crew. Now, the crew knows that anyone who dares to challenge your authority as Pakhan will meet the same end.”

When my past was taken away, I lost the ability to look to the future. All year, I’d been living in the moment, focusing only on the present. But now, with Donata by my side and Papa’s offer, I couldn’t help but want a very specific future.

“It would be an honor.” I beamed at him. “Ivan will have to understand. He’s my brother. I’m sure he will.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled loudly as if up until now, he’d been afraid

I'd say no. But why would I say no? The Brotherhood was my home. The guys out in the courtyard, playing cards, were my family.

"I was hoping you'd say that." He rose to his feet. When I did the same, he moved in to hug me. "I'm very proud of you, son. Now we have a lot of work to do and very little time."

"I will not let you down. I promise."

CHAPTER 18

Belinda the Spy

DONATA

I chugged the rest of my coffee and stomped back inside. Maxim was lost in this den of thieves. He didn't belong here. I paced the length of the room as I considered my options. Seeing him playing cards with his crew made me realize that if I didn't act now, I would lose my husband forever.

Last night, in the throes of yet another round of mind-blowing sex, I seriously considered the idea of staying here with Maxim. But this life wasn't for me. And it wasn't for Luca either. If Maxim could remember, he would see that. I had to do something to make him see the truth. To make him see that his reality wasn't as scary as he thought.

His life and our love were not in danger anymore. We could finally go home and be together. But what could I do? He loved Papa, and even his crazy brother, Ivan. My word was nothing against theirs. Even if Maxim had feelings for me, my word wasn't enough.

I needed help. If Rex, Enzo and Santino were here, I could come up with a plan to take Luca away from this place. But it wasn't like I could just pick up the phone and call them. Papa had been smart to prohibit devices in the compound. Of course, if Maxim had wanted to know the truth, he could've bought a burner phone during the weeks when he wasn't home.

And that was the crux of it all. Maxim didn't want to know the truth. He loved it here.

"Argh." I stomped my foot. Maxim and Luca had this one trait in common. They could both be so fucking stubborn.

I did another round of pacing, then froze. What about my mobile? I had it on me when Ivan grabbed me outside the hospital. He took it from me as

soon as we arrived. Did he throw it away? Or did he keep it in case he had to reach out to my family and ask for a ransom?

From what I understood about Ivan, he was always in trouble with Papa for not following his rules. Maybe he figured one day my phone would be leverage of some sort. And he would be right about that. I would do anything to get it back, to be able to show Maxim pictures of us, and to call for help.

Blood pumped hard through me as a plan began to form in my head. The men were gone most of the day. Sneaking out of my suite to find Ivan's would be an easy thing. Or at least, doable. If I got caught, I could just say I got lost. Or that I was curious about the house. Omigod, this could work.

I rushed to the door, but before I reached it, it burst open. "Sorry." Irina stared at me like a deer in headlights. "I didn't think you'd be here. It's so nice out."

"It's fine. You can come in."

"I'm here for the tray." She pointed at the balcony.

"Oh yeah, sure. Thank you. The breakfast was delicious." I stepped aside to let her through.

I was prepared to check every room upstairs until I found Ivan's. But if Irina could point me in the right direction, that would save me so much time.

"Hey, do you need help with that?" I asked.

"No, I can manage."

"Right." Fuck. I couldn't just ask her to tell me where Ivan's room was. She would know I was up to something. Or worse, she might think I wanted something with Ivan. I hadn't thought about that. What would Maxim think if he found me in another man's bedroom? Would he be jealous? Or was his anger reserved only for Luca? "It's a lot of work, cleaning and cooking for so many people."

"It is." She smiled at me and picked up the tray. "Ivan's room is the worst. He leaves everything all over the place. Every day is the same thing." She pursed her lips.

"Oh, I didn't know he lived here too," I lied.

"He does. He's three doors down."

"How about that?" I covered my mouth to hide my grin. This was a sign. Going through Ivan's things was the right call, the only call. "Well, if you ever need help, I have two hands. I can help you clean his room or whatever."

"I don't think Maxim would like that." She bit her lip while she considered my offer. "I'll ask Mom."

“Please. I’m super bored with nothing to do.”

“Okay. Bye.” She waved at me on her way out.

That was brilliant. Now the question was, did I really want to wait until Irina figured out if I could help her clean Ivan’s room, or did I want to go rummage through it now?

Now.

Definitely now.

I glanced down at my jeans and bare feet. If I were home, I’d wear something more appropriate like leggings and good running shoes. But here, I was working with the bare minimum. With a shrug, I padded to the door and peeked into the hallway. When I was sure Irina was gone, and I was alone, I stepped out and closed the door behind me.

Three doors down. I looked both ways, trying to remember which way Irina had pointed. In the end, I went with my gut and chose left. As soon as I entered the room, I knew I was in right place. The suite reeked of Ivan’s spicy cologne.

When I was younger, I used to pull stunts like this one all the time. I was hoping I hadn’t lost my touch. Taking even breaths, I headed straight for his bed. It was the easiest place to hide something as small as my phone—assuming Ivan even cared enough to go through the trouble of putting it away somewhere.

I checked under the bed, the pillows, and in between the mattresses. I made to move to the bedside table when the shower in the en-suite came on. Fuck. I wasn’t alone. Ivan had been in the bathroom the whole time. If he came out now, I wouldn’t have the chance to get out. I shivered at the idea that he might come out naked.

For a long minute, I stood staring at the bathroom door, waiting for something to happen. Then, Ivan belted out a jazzy tune I recognized. Luca used to play the song in his apartment. There—another sign that I was doing the right thing. Luca’s memories were still in there somewhere, buried deep in the recesses of Maxim’s brain. I placed a hand on my forehead while my heart thumped like crazy in my throat. I could leave now or take another minute or two to finish perusing.

Fuck it.

I darted to the bedside table, making sure I could still hear the water running. When I finished with the drawers, I moved over to his desk and then the sofa. He didn’t have my phone here. I glanced up and cursed my bad

luck. One phone call was all I needed to get out of this place, to save Luca.

I padded across the room and headed for the door. Opening it slowly, I peeked to the right. When I shifted my gaze to the opposite end of the hallway, Belinda came into view. I pushed the door to close the gap but didn't shut it all the way.

"Fuck," I mouthed.

"He doesn't want me anymore, Papa." Belinda whined from the other side of the door.

Papa was here too? Fuck. Fuck.

"Are you sure the lady doctor doesn't know about his condition?" Papa's smoker voice boomed.

"She didn't say anything to me."

"And Maxim?"

"He doesn't talk to me anymore. I'm sorry. He's obsessed with her. I'm tired of begging him. I'm telling you. He's done with me."

What in the world? Belinda knew Maxim had amnesia. Belinda the spy? That little spying bitch. I really thought she loved Maxim, and that we were on the same side. I supposed having the same goals didn't exactly put us on the same team. But what about her wanting to marry the love of her life?

The water stopped running. Oh no. I turned to glare at the door, wishing it to stay closed a little longer, wishing Ivan was the type to get dressed in his closet, and not in the bedroom.

"He can't be done with you." Papa stopped Belinda's ranting. "Use your assets like you did before. The lady doctor is a means to an end. I don't like his obsession with her. It can be dangerous."

"She hates him."

Papa chuckled. "I know you're not that naive. Find out if Maxim was stupid enough to tell her he's a man without a past."

"Why did you have to bring her here?" She scoffed. "She's not like us. She doesn't belong here."

"I need her here." He let out a breath. "Do as you're told."

"Yes, Papa."

I pressed my ear to the door and listened for Papa's retreating footsteps. When I opened the door, Belinda was alone. Any minute now, Ivan would walk out and catch me red-handed. I didn't even want to think what he'd say to Maxim. What if Ivan told him I tried to seduce him to get him to set me free? Maxim would never forgive me for that.

Come on, Belinda. Get out of here.

I pressed my forehead to the wall, focusing on Belinda's movements out in the hallway. My heart thrashed in my ears, and all I could hope was that Belinda would move on before Ivan was done in the bathroom.

After what felt like hours, Belinda stomped her foot then rushed down the stairs. I didn't wait until she was out of sight. I opened the door and slipped out. With trembling legs, I scurried to Maxim's suite and shut the door behind me.

That was a very stupid thing to do. Though I had to admit, the recon mission wasn't a total loss. Now I knew for sure Papa was using Maxim for something. To add insult to injury, Papa was using Belinda to spy on Maxim. But after last night's fiasco, I was sure telling Maxim the truth would get me nowhere.

I was back to square zero. The only way to convince Maxim to leave this place with me was to convince him he was Luca Gallo. That we had a whole life waiting for us back in New York City. Pressing my back to the door, I let my legs melt down to the floor like warm Jell-O. I sat there considering my very limited options. They all boiled down to one thing. I needed to make a phone call. If I couldn't show Maxim the pictures of us, I needed to focus on calling my family for help.

"Okay." I rose to my feet. "I need a plan B. What's plan B?" I rubbed the side of my face. "The library."

I'd survived Ivan's suite. Why not a quick trip to the library downstairs and the only landline in the house?

As I made my way down the stairs, I thought about what I would say if I were caught in Papa's lair, err, office—I got lost, I was looking for Maxim, I needed a word with Papa. Actually, I wouldn't mind a few words with him. He knew about Maxim's condition, and instead of helping, he made things worse for Maxim. What kind of psychopath would tell a man with wavering mental health that his mother was raped, and that he was the product of that assault. Fucking fucker.

I stopped in front of the library. When I was sure I was alone, I opened the door slowly and stepped inside. The minute I shut the door; I sensed his presence.

"Can I help you, Mrs. Belov?" Maxim asked from the living area, putting emphasis on the missus—as if he wanted to remind me that I was his.

He sat on the sofa with his ankle over his knee, looking like the picture of

serenity. If it weren't for the intensity of his hazel eyes, I would've thought he hadn't minded the intrusion. I should be scared. But instead, all I wanted to do was climb into his lap and kiss him. He regarded me with a mix of curiosity and distrust. Oh, he knew why I was here. How could I explain that I wasn't trying to escape. I was just going to call for help.

"I was looking for you." I inhaled deeply. After the scare I'd had upstairs, my body still felt a little shaky. Or maybe Maxim was the reason for my sudden shortness of breath. "You left so early. I didn't know where we left things."

"I thought we were fairly clear. You're not leaving." He sat forward and braced his arms on his thighs. His gaze darted toward the phone on the other side of the library. "Or have you changed your mind again?"

"No," I blurted out. "I made you a promise. I haven't forgotten."

"Is that so?" He flashed me a sexy smile as his gaze swept up and down my body. "You have all the telltale signs of someone who's up to something. Your cheeks are flushed. You're trembling."

"No. Belinda startled me when I left the room. She came out of nowhere." Telling pieces of the truth always helped with a good lie.

"Lock the door, Mrs. Belov."

"What?" I shot a glance behind me. "Why?"

"Don't make me ask again, Donata."

"Oh."

He had to be kidding. There was no way he wanted to have sex with me here where anyone could find us. My pulse raced because even if my head was still going through all the different ways this was a bad idea, my body was already on board. When he looked at me like that, as if I were the last woman on Earth, I couldn't say no.

I pressed the wooden panel and flipped the latch. "We can't do this here."

"If I wait until I can get you upstairs, I will lose my resolve."

"Resolve? I reached for the back of the sofa for support. Right now, that one piece of furniture was the only thing standing between us. "For what?"

"It is very clear to me why you're here." He rose to his feet. "You need to be punished. Until that happens, you will not stop trying to escape. And now more than ever, I need you here."

"You can't be serious." I stepped back.

"Deadly." He stalked toward me.

CHAPTER 19

Another Day Without You

DONATA

I kept my gaze zeroed in on the fireplace across from me as Maxim stalked around the sofa to cage me in with his body. “I saw the look in your eyes when you came in. You were planning to escape. I told you what that does to me.”

My eyes fluttered closed when he nuzzled my neck. A phone call would end it all. How could I explain to him that I never wanted to leave him? That after two years of being apart, I couldn’t stand the thought of losing him again. “I don’t want to spend another day without you.”

“Neither do I.” He puffed out a breath. “Which is why this is necessary.” He reached around my waist and undid my pants. In one swift motion, he pulled them down along with my underwear. “How many times?” He kneaded my ass.

“What?”

“Tell me, Mrs. Belov, how many times have you tried to escape. That’s how many spankings you’re getting multiplied by two, so my point is very clear to you.” He tightened his hold on my waist, pushing me harder against the backrest of the sofa.

“You wouldn’t dare.” I glared at him over my shoulder.

“How many?” He buried his nose in my hair and inhaled. “The day I was still convalescing from my shotgun wounds, you tried to climb over the wall. That’s one. The day after our wedding night, you succeeded in climbing out of our bedroom window. And today, after you promised you wouldn’t leave, you came into the library to call for help.” He kissed the nape of my neck. “How many is that? Answer me.”

“Three.” I squeezed my legs together to ease the fire threatening to consume me from the inside out.

“Times two.”

“Six,” I whispered. “That’s too many.”

“Count for me.”

In retrospect, I had done way worse things to Luca in the past ten years than try to escape his house. On more than one occasion, I saw that look in his eyes. As if he wanted to teach me a lesson, spank me until I understood all the bad things I’d done to ruin his life when he was a young high school teacher.

Maxim had the same urge. Except he wasn’t trying to control it. Not only that, but he also felt it necessary. The first blow landed between my cheeks. I stood on my tiptoes and absorbed the impact.

“Count.”

“One.” My voice quivered as tiny pricks danced across my skin. When the heat set in, he delivered the next one. Wanting to get it over and done with, I counted before he asked me to. “Two.”

“That’s good a girl,” he whispered in my ear.

As a reward, he massaged both cheeks with strong and slow strokes. A part of me was angry that he would dare treat me like this. But the way he held my entire bottom in his large hand had my whole body tingling with ecstasy.

What? No. What the hell was I thinking? This wasn’t hot. It was humiliating. I was half-naked, bent over a sofa in Papa’s library. Anyone could walk in and see me with my ass up in the air for Maxim to do with what he wanted. I’d locked the door. But who knew who had a key to this room. No doubt Papa did.

“You can’t do this to me.” I gritted my teeth when another loud smack broke the silence in the room.

“Keep going, Mrs. Belov.” He nibbled on my earlobe.

“Three.” I braced my hands on the cushions and pushed up.

“We’re not done.” He pressed his hand on the middle of my back. “Do I need to bend you over my knee?”

The picture of me naked flung over his thigh while he spanked me flitted through my mind as if I were watching it on a movie screen. It played on repeat until my nipples got hard and the spot between my legs ached with need.

“You’re so wet for me already.” He captured my mouth. “But first, we have to finish it.” He smacked my bottom again. And again.

“Four. Five.” I swallowed as he let the burn seep deep into my skin and my core. “Don’t stop now.” My body dropped heavy on the sofa while my feet hovered over the floor.

“You’re going to be a good girl from now on?” he asked, lightly brushing his fingers over what I assumed were red blotches on my ass. “Say it.”

“Yes. I’ll be good.” I clenched my jaw bracing for the last blow.

Somehow, I knew he had saved the worst for last. He wanted me to remember my punishment and humiliation forever. So that the next time I thought about leaving, I would only think of his hands on me and the sting of his disappointment.

When he struck, his hand landed somewhere between my pussy and my thighs. “Maxim,” I cried into the decorative pillow. When he didn’t move, I gave him what he wanted. My pride didn’t matter anymore. I needed him now. “Six.”

“Fuck.” He bent down and kissed my shoulder and my back as he unbuckled his belt.

I inhaled. Before I released my breath, he thrust into me—his cool skin against my burning bottom. He fucked me harder than he had in all the other times we’d been together. But somehow, this raw display of desire didn’t feel like punishment. It was him letting me know how much it hurt him every time he saw me trying to escape, how much he needed me here just like he’d said.

“From now on, you don’t leave your room.” He swelled into me without a set pace or rhythm, but somehow in tandem with his words. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I kneaded my own breast. My nipples felt like they were going to burst if they didn’t get relief. I took his hand gripping my hips and moved it to where I needed him. A flitting thought crossed my mind of how it wasn’t fair that only one part of me got all his attention. “Don’t stop.”

“You’re killing me, Donata.” He captured my mouth as he slipped his hand under my T-shirt and over my bra to properly knead my breasts. “You’re killing me.”

His words sent me down the usual Maxim-Luca spiral of raw and unadulterated desire. What I needed from him consumed all logic in my mind, until all that was left was this feral need to climax and forget, even if

for only a little while, that our lives were like opposite magnets. No matter how hard we tried to be together, something always stood in the way.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and moaned into the sensitive spot behind my ear as he found his release. My orgasm rolled through me in the same breath. I reached for his face and kissed him hard until the high wore off and reality sunk in once again.

“We can’t keep having sex all over the compound like we’re the only ones living here.” I panted a breath.

“This is my home. I do whatever I want.” He sucked on my neck. “This is your home too. I know you can’t see it now because you’re hung up on the past. But with time, you will.”

When he held me in his arms like this, imagining a new life with Maxim didn’t seem so impossible. It didn’t feel like I was jumping off a cliff with him. Slowly, the rise and fall of his chest returned to a normal rhythm. His arms fell away from me and gripped the backrest of the sofa. I fixed my jeans and turned to face him.

I ached for him. If the circumstances were normal, I would be able to surround him with friends and family. But I couldn’t even give him that. Everyone Luca loved was dead. He was alone in the world. Who was I to judge how he chose to deal with his pain? By now, I was sure his head trauma had caused the memory loss. But the fact that he was able to make new memories told me that deep down Luca didn’t want to remember his tortured past. The Maxim identity was Luca’s new lease on life, on his own terms.

“I’m willing to try.” I cupped his cheek. “Maybe one day, you’ll do the same for me.”

“Donata.” He pressed his forehead to mine.

The doorknob jiggled, and my heart almost burst out of my chest. “Someone’s here.” I pulled down on my T-shirt and tucked it back into my jeans.

“I got it.” He buckled his belt and padded toward the door.

When he swung it open, Papa rushed in. “Oh.” He pursed his lips when his gaze zeroed in on me. “I didn’t realize you had company.”

“We were just leaving.” With all the serenity I could muster, I strolled toward Maxim and took his hand.

Maybe getting under Papa’s skin wasn’t the best course of action. But I wanted to see his reaction to Maxim and I acting like a real married couple.

He had wanted Belinda to continue her relationship with Maxim to show me that my marriage was no more than an arrangement to benefit the Brotherhood. If I was going to stay here a bit longer, I had to find out what Papa wanted from me. He was using Maxim. But how? To what end? How did I fit into his plans?

I was dying to share what I'd found out with Maxim. But he wasn't ready to see Papa for what he was.

"Stay a minute." Papa gestured toward the sofa. "We have much to celebrate."

"Celebrate?" I asked Maxim as he ushered me to the sofa.

"Maxim's ascension. He didn't tell you?" Papa sat on the club chair across from us, regarding me with intense curiosity. "We're having dinner tonight to make it official."

"Another party?"

"It's a private dinner. Just us." Maxim pointed at Papa and us. "Ivan and Tore, since he'll take over my responsibilities once I'm Pakhan."

"What?" My pulse spiked. "You're going to be their leader?" Jesus Christ. What kind of Machiavellian move was that? I inhaled to regain my composure. Papa didn't need to know how fucked up I thought Maxim's new promotion was. "And Papa?"

"He has his own plans." Maxim offered Papa a kind smile.

I hated the amount of reverence Maxim held for Papa. This ascension had to be yet another ploy to make Maxim feel like he was part of the family, that he belonged here. Someone as greedy as Papa would never give up his power. No way this whole thing was real.

"Dinner will start at eight sharp. Don't be late." He met my gaze. "This is an important day for Maxim."

"I can see that." I smiled, taking Maxim's arm. "I'm sure he will be great."

Unfortunately, that was the truth. Maxim was a natural leader. The men loved him. Now that Dominic and his crew were gone, the energy in the house was lighter. Maxim had killed those guys for me, but also, for the Brotherhood. He'd proven himself to his crew and Papa. And in doing so, I lost Luca a little more. Damn it.

"I thought Ivan was your only son," I added sweetly.

Papa swallowed. No doubt he didn't appreciate a lady doctor pointing out the obvious to him. He cast aside his own son to favor Maxim. What was the

deal there?

“Ivan will do what is best for his family.” Papa’s gaze shifted from mine to Maxim. “We’ll make the announcement tonight. None of it will come as a surprise.”

“I will not fail you.” Maxim reached for Papa’s arm and squeezed it.

I glanced down at my hands. Here was another thing Luca didn’t have. In our world, he was never going to be Don, which was why more than once Enzo had accused Luca of using me to gain favor within the Society. To his family, especially Uncle Jimmy, Luca was no more than a pawn. Luca was now next in line to be Don Gallo. But that was merely a dusty title that didn’t have a crew to back it up.

More and more, I realized I didn’t have much to offer Maxim. He had no reason to want to come back to his old life. Fuck.

“Go.” Papa gestured toward the door. “Get ready for tonight. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Maxim rose to his feet, then helped me up. With a quick nod, he escorted me out. On the way back to our suite, he fell into an easy step next to me. When I glanced up at him, he met my gaze and grinned at me. God, I had missed his sexy smile. Without meaning to, I melted into him.

“You have it all figured out, don’t you? A wife, a crew, a home?” I motioned to the courtyard where the guys were back to their card game.

“Life has offered me a second chance.” He tightened his hold around my waist. “I’m not going to squander it this time.”

“What makes you think you threw away your old life?”

“A gut feeling.” He kissed my forehead. “If I’d had my shit together then, I wouldn’t be here. If like you said, you met me ten years ago, what the hell did I do with that time? Why were we not together?” He reached for the knob of our suite and let the door fall open.

“It was complicated.” I cradled his neck with both my hands. “Our love was forbidden.”

“And now it’s not.” He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and kissed the inside of it. “In every dream I’ve had of you, you’re always mad at me, and I’m desperately trying to hold on to you.”

Yeah, that would about sum up our previous relationship. But none of what happened was our fault. I opened my mouth to say that but then decided not to. Because as fucked up as our new situation was, the time I’d spent at the compound with Maxim had been the best we’d had.

He wasn't wrong to want to stay. This new life was worth fighting for—even if it wasn't real.

"I'm so confused." I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my mouth to his. "You make it sound so easy. You make me want this."

"Being with you is easy. Don't fight it." He deepened the kiss as he stepped inside.

I let out a sigh. "We can't be late to your ascension dinner party."

"We have time." He glanced down at his watch, before he untucked his T-shirt and pulled it over his head.

His abs rippled from the effort and left me speechless. Yeah, being with Maxim was easy. What we had now was the life I had always dreamed of. I slid my hand across his chest, following the edges of his tattoos all the way down to his stomach.

"You're not playing fair."

CHAPTER 20

No More Lies

DONATA

“You look gorgeous.” Maxim took my hand and kissed it. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not.” I exhaled and fixed the bodice of my cocktail dress.

“You’re fidgeting.” He placed his hand on my lower back. “How about a drink?”

“That sounds great.” I nodded.

I made to fix my top again, but then stopped. Since we entered the dining room, I’d had this foreboding pressure in my chest. When Belinda strode in with yet another dish to set in the middle of the long table, I made a beeline to her.

“Are you avoiding me?” I moved a platter a few inches to the right to make room for the new one.

“Me? No. Why?” She shot a furtive look over her shoulder.

“I asked Maxim if you could help me get ready. He sent for you, and you never showed.” I cocked my head to look her in the eyes. When she made to leave, I gripped her elbow. “Something happened?”

“Nothing. It’s been so busy today with the dinner.” She yanked her arm away and scurried out of the room.

“What was that?” Maxim glared at Belinda as she rushed past him and almost ran into Tore and Ivan.

“I don’t know.” I dropped my gaze to the red wine in his hand.

“I had Galina bring in some of that wine you like.”

“Thank you.” I took the glass and sipped. “It’s delicious.”

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Let’s take our seats.” He nodded once in Papa’s direction. “Papa’s here.”

I let him escort me to my chair. My plan for tonight was to keep my head down. For Maxim’s sake, and mine, I couldn’t let on that I knew about Maxim’s amnesia or that I suspected Papa’s plans for him. As soon as we sat down, Papa strolled to the head of the table and raised his glass. “I spoke with Maxim earlier about taking over as Pakhan when I’m gone. He has agreed. And so, it shall be.” He pulled back his chair and sat. “Eat.”

Ivan’s cheeks turned bright red as he stared at his dad who was too busy congratulating Maxim to notice.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. Good for you, brother.” He dipped his head toward Maxim.

“Thank you.” Maxim raised his glass.

“Cheers, Boss,” Tore said. “Well-deserved.”

“You too.” Maxim exchanged a meaningful glance with Papa before he added, “When it’s time, we’ve decided you’re the best one to fill my shoes.”

“It would be an honor, sir.” Tore beamed at Papa and Maxim.

“Everybody wins.” Ivan drank from his glass, then cut into his steak. “So Maxim, how’s that baby project coming along?”

“Yes.” Papa chuckled. “I hope to have good news soon.”

“We’re working on it.” Maxim reached for my hand under the table and squeezed it.

I pierced a chunk of roasted potato with my fork and shoved it in my mouth. I knew better than to say anything that might upset Papa. But Maxim should know that we couldn’t bring children into our fucked-up situation. Ever. I quickly did the math on how many years I had left on my IUD. Was two years enough time to help Maxim find a way out of this made-up life?

The rest of the dinner, I managed to keep my head down and not shoot to my feet and scream at Papa that he couldn’t keep Luca because he didn’t belong with the Brotherhood. What would be the point? Maxim seemed content, excited even. Looking around the table, the men were genuinely happy for him, including Ivan.

When the meal was over, Papa announced the men were retiring to the library to have a round of drinks. As everyone filed out, I reached for Maxim’s hand and pulled him toward me.

“We’re going to talk about this, right?” When recognition didn’t register

on his face, I added, “Babies?”

“Yes, we are.” He brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers.

“It would be insane.” I took his hand in mine.

“Donata, Papa is dying.”

“What?”

“He wants to make sure there’s a line of succession before he’s gone.”

“What for?” I stepped back. “If it mattered to him that much, he would’ve chosen his own son to take over as Pakhan. Why not give it to Ivan?”

“If you knew Ivan, you wouldn’t be asking that question.” He kissed my cheek. “We’ll talk about it upstairs.”

I stood there, shaking my head as he sauntered away. The door closed behind him, and almost immediately, it swung open again. As soon as Belinda saw me, she turned around and practically ran out.

“Oh no you don’t.” I chased after her, across the living room and down the stairs.

Before she reached the kitchen, I grabbed her by the arm and pushed her against the wall. “Why are you running away from me?”

“I’m not.” She furrowed her brows at me.

“We need to talk.” I shot a glance behind me, then gestured down the hallway to her bedroom. “Now.”

“I have work to do.”

“Go now. Or I’ll tell Maxim that you’ve been spying on him since day one.” I braced my hands on my hips. “You’re not even surprised that I know. You saw me?”

She nodded. “Papa was too mad at me to notice Ivan’s door was open.”

“Then no more lies. How do you think Maxim will react to the news that you’ve been spying on him?”

Her eyes watered as she shook her head. After a few beats, she scoffed then stomped down the corridor.

I followed her to her room, then shut the door behind me. “How did Maxim end up with the Brotherhood?”

When Belinda pursed her lips, I closed the space between us and shoved her onto the bed.

“I can’t.” She shook her head. “Papa will kill me.”

“Tough choice.” I took her desk chair and sat across from her. “You’ve been lying to Maxim since he arrived. Feeding him lies about his past because Papa told you to. You’ve been pretending to care about him.”

“I’m not pretending.” She sat up. “I mean, at first, I did it because Papa asked me. But then, I fell in love with him. We were going to get married.”

“Are you sure? That’s not what Maxim said.” I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried not to picture Maxim having sex with Belinda.

“Papa said I would. Then he found you and changed his mind.” She wiped her wet cheeks. “I love him so much.”

“You’re going to tell me everything you know. Because if you don’t, Maxim will know the real reason why you agreed to climb into his bed in the first place,” I said through gritted teeth.

Belinda had the key to unravel this whole mess Papa had created. Partly because Papa had entrusted her to spy on Maxim, but also, because she spent most of her time eavesdropping behind doors.

“Start from the beginning. How did Papa find Maxim? And don’t start with that Moscow bullshit.” I glared at her with adrenaline rushing through me like an avalanche. I had to know what Luca had been through the past year. “Start talking, Belinda. Or I will go get Maxim right now. Maybe you’ll feel more inclined to tell the truth if he’s in the room with us.”

“No.” She swallowed. “Don’t do that. I’ll tell you. But please, swear to me you won’t tell Papa.”

“You have my word. Go on.” I waited until she lowered herself to the bed again.

“Two years ago, Ivan found this hit list that was offering a lot of money.” She shrugged. “He killed a few guys before Papa found out he’d been killing Italians. He was furious because he didn’t want to start a war, but he was curious about who was paying to kill all those people and why.”

“So instead of killing them, he what? Started interrogating them?”

She nodded. “I happened to be walking by the library one time when I heard them beating up a man.”

“Maxim?”

“No, it was someone else. He told Papa about the Society, and how powerful they were. How they kept their power and money a secret, hiding behind corporations and trust funds.” She glanced down at her hands. “I stayed behind the door while they tortured him. After a few hours, I got tired of standing there, so I went to bed. The next morning, he was dead.”

“So that’s how Papa knew about the Society.” I rubbed the side of my face. “What about Maxim? How did he survive?”

“Papa knew this information could be valuable. So he allowed Ivan to

continue to hunt down the Gallops.” She furrowed her brows. “No, the Gallos.”

That word was like a punch to the stomach. Papa knew Maxim was a Gallo. Fuck. “Why keep Maxim alive?”

“He was bleeding and unconscious when the bounty hunters brought him in. I volunteered to bring him here to my room until he was able to talk.” A smile pulled at her lips. “He was so beautiful, like a fallen angel. I didn’t want him to die. He was with me for days. When he finally woke up, I realized he didn’t remember anything about himself. I told him we were lovers, and he believed me.”

“I thought you started all that because Papa asked you to.”

“He did. But that was after I told him about what I did.” She sighed. “I just wanted to know what it would feel like to kiss him.”

“Of course you did.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. I had come a long way from my status of jealous girlfriend, but Belinda was really testing my limits. “So what? Just like that? Papa decides to keep him?”

“Yes.” She released a breath. “After Maxim woke up, they spent hours in Papa’s library.”

“He tortured him.” I covered my mouth. “Fucking asshole.”

“No, he didn’t.” She reached for my hands. “Papa wanted to see if he could turn him.”

“Make him a brother?” I met her gaze. “So Ivan knows who Maxim really is, same as Papa, but he plays along. Why?”

“Papa told him to. He said it would be our secret.”

“Who else knows?” I asked.

“Just the three of us.”

“Do you know how fucked up this is? Maxim is a prisoner here, and he doesn’t even know it.” I ran a hand through my hair.

“That was a year ago. Things have changed. Everyone loves Maxim. He’s Papa’s favorite son. Ivan loves him like a brother. That’s not a lie.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“But everything else is.”

“Not anymore. He belongs here.”

“No, he doesn’t.” I raised my voice. “He has no idea who he is.”

“Why do you care?” She pouted.

“Maxim is my husband. Our destinies are linked. If he dies, I die.”

What was the play here? I had no idea what to do. For weeks, I’d been

dying to put together this puzzle. I couldn't understand how a member of the Gallo family, one of the original five families who founded the Society, ended up playing the role of the good son to a Russian mobster.

As incredible as Belinda's story sounded, I believed her. The timing was right. Jimmy Gallo was the first to fall two years ago. That night after so many were killed in one fell swoop, I made Luca promise me he would never look for me again. I was so afraid for his life. Leaving the country was the only way he could survive.

He never came back because he fell into Papa's trap.

Papa was a smart man. He had to know he couldn't keep Maxim forever. Even now, he was starting to remember. He still didn't trust his broken memories. But one day, it could all come back to him. What was Papa's plan then? Kill him?

"You heard what Papa said tonight?" I asked.

"No, I was in the kitchen."

"I thought we were done with the lies." I glared at her.

"I heard. He's the next Pakhan."

"You and I both know that would never happen. Do you think Papa is going to leave his Bratva empire to an Italian?" A cold shiver ran down my spine at the thought that maybe this was all a game to Papa. To see how far he could go, how much he could mess with Maxim's brain. "Even if Papa was demented enough to do it, Ivan would never allow it."

"I don't know."

A prisoner of my own desire. That was what I had become. I should've left the minute I found out Maxim was Luca. I stayed because I needed his touch, because I couldn't think when he was near. When we were alone in his suite, it was easy to fantasize about a life where we were husband and wife.

But every time I was alone, I couldn't ignore the fucked-up reality we were living. Maxim didn't exist. When a wave of anxiety and terror flooded my mind, I put my head between my knees and sucked in a breath. I held it for several seconds, then released it. I had to come up with a plan before I reunited with Maxim upstairs. This time, I had to stick with it. No more letting him seduce me into staying.

Papa was already beginning to suspect that I might know more than I let on. Was the whole Pakhan deal a test? A chance for Maxim to prove his loyalty? Nothing made sense. The only thing I knew for sure was that I couldn't stay. I needed help to rescue Maxim. If he ever told Papa that he was

starting to remember, that he felt like he'd met me before, his life would be in danger.

"Are you okay?" Belinda patted my shoulder.

"I am." I slowly sat back. When I met her gaze, I realized what I had to do. I had to leave Maxim. "I need your help."

"No." She shook her head. "I know what you're thinking. I can't. Maxim knows I tried to help you escape. I can't do that again. He would be so mad at me."

"That's why we can't fail this time. I promise you. He won't know it was you who helped me." I took both her hands in mine. "If I stay, I'll have to tell him the truth. All of it."

She glanced upward. Her tear-stained cheeks made her look so young. For a second, I considered asking her to run away with me. But the compound was her home. She would never be happy in my world, surrounded by strangers. I would know.

"Is the delivery truck back on schedule?"

"It is." She bit her lip. "Galina complained to Papa. He didn't know why Maxim had changed the drop-off location. So he just told her she could have her deliveries back. I thought Maxim would tell Papa why he'd done it. But he didn't. I guess he didn't want to get us in trouble."

"Believe me. I got in trouble." I met her gaze. "Are you going to help me?"

"Okay."

"Great. First, I'm going to need pen and paper."

CHAPTER 21

A Not-So-Great Escape

DONATA

Just because our plan to escape hadn't worked the last time, it didn't mean it wouldn't work this time around. More than my freedom was at stake. Before I left Belinda's bedroom last night, we agreed that the best way to leave the compound would be to hide inside the delivery van. The driver had a thing for Belinda. She assured me she'd be able to distract him long enough for me to climb in the back.

The last thing to work out was to say goodbye to Maxim. Every time I thought of leaving him, my chest hurt. I didn't want to be apart from him for a single day. But things had really gotten out of hand with Papa. I was sure he was planning something. I didn't buy for a second that he was dying, or that he wanted to leave it all to Maxim, who wasn't his son or Russian.

I got the sense that Ivan wasn't happy about Papa's pet project, but he didn't dare disagree with his dad. I couldn't blame him for that. Papa was terrifying. The cruelty in his eyes sent a cold shiver down my spine every time he looked at me. What did he want with me? Why make me marry Maxim when he knew Maxim wasn't one of their own? His plan didn't make sense at all.

Maxim stirred in his sleep. For once, he didn't seem to be having a nightmare. I hoped that whatever he was dreaming about was a good memory. I scooted to his side of the bed and pressed my body to his. With a deep breath, he shifted toward me and gathered me into his arms. I belonged with him. Always. I hated that we couldn't be like this forever.

I glanced at the clock on his bedside table. When I realized it was almost time to go, I wrapped my arm around his waist and kissed his chest. If he

woke up now and remembered everything, we could escape together.

“I love you,” I whispered on his warm skin. “So much.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks as a sense of dread washed over me. *It's not goodbye.* I repeated those words over and over in my head. One day soon, I'd never have to see him go again. My eyes fluttered closed as I breathed in his scent. I wanted to leave here with this moment tattooed on my soul.

I kissed his lips then slowly slipped away from him and out of bed. From between the mattress and the box spring, I retrieved the letter I'd written to him last night in Belinda's room. She'd offered to give it to him, but I didn't trust that once I left, she would change her mind about helping me. As stealthy as I could, I placed the note inside Maxim's book. With a bit of luck, he'd find it tonight after I was gone. He had to believe I was doing this for us.

When he stirred again, I backed away and padded to the bathroom to get dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. According to the plan, Belinda would wait for me in her room at four in the morning, then help me hide in the pantry before Galina showed up at half past the hour to receive the weekly delivery. Belinda was expected to be there to help as usual. She assured me Galina and her daughters wouldn't suspect a thing. Her plan was solid and well thought-out but also dangerous.

With one last look at Maxim's sleeping form, I opened the bedroom door slowly, then shut it behind me. My heart thrashed in my ears while I silently tiptoed down the stairs and across the living room. As soon as I reached Belinda's room, her door cracked opened.

“Put it on.” She shoved a sweatshirt into my arms, then took me by the hand and pulled me to the kitchen.

In all the times I'd been here, I'd never seen a way out. But that was only because I'd never been inside the massive pantry. I'd assumed the room would be small with a few shelves, but it was almost as big as Maxim's suite.

“I had no idea,” I whispered, staring at the floor-to-ceiling shelving units lining the walls.

“Galina has to feed an army every day. Where do you think all the food comes from?” She moved a bin out of the way and pointed at the rolling door across the way. “The van will back in over there. Don't come out until I tell you to.” She gestured for me to crawl into a small nook behind a bunch of boxes.

The minute she turned off the lights and left me all alone, panic set in. My chest tightened painfully as the minutes ticked away. For a moment, I

considered going back upstairs and staying with Maxim. But I'd come this far, I couldn't chicken out just because I didn't like the dark. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and thought of Luca. I pictured him up on stage teaching his Ethics class, and all the time his gaze would cut to me as he paced back and forth. I wanted that Luca back.

"He's late again." Galina's voice broke the silence a second before the lights came on.

"Five minutes is not so bad." Belinda laughed softly. "And you wonder why the guy doesn't like you."

"I don't wonder. Don't care if he brings me what I need. I hope he found better tomatoes this time."

Their chatter eased my nerves a bit. But as soon as the door rolled up, my body tensed again. I listened to Belinda argue with the guy about how the sack of flour didn't feel like the right weight. She continued to argue about everything while the two guys unloaded crate after crate. By the time they finished, my legs were numb, and my neck hurt from being balled up for almost an hour.

"Don't leave without trying some of Galina's cookies. A treat for your troubles," Belinda insisted.

"Come in and have some." Galina grumbled. "I baked them last night."

"I knew you cared." Belinda chuckled. "Go on. I'll stay and finish up in here."

A few beats later, the boxes in front of me shifted to the side and Belinda appeared with the biggest smile. "We have less than a minute. Hurry." She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the back of a white cargo van. "We're always the last stop for them. They'll go back to the store from here. Remember, don't talk to anyone. Don't ask for help because they won't give it. Everyone in town is loyal to Papa. And stay down."

"Got it." I hugged her then climbed inside. "Thank you."

"Good luck." She slammed the doors shut.

Yeah, from here on out, I was going to need all the luck. I leaned against the side panel, then let my butt slide all the way down and braced my head on my knees. The van rumbled to life, and within seconds, it rolled away from the house. To my surprise, we were on the road for quite some time, which meant the compound was several miles away from the town. I only hoped I wasn't too far from New York City.

The van finally came to a stop. I held my breath, while I waited for the

men to open the door. When they didn't, I decided it was safe to come out. With a quick peek through the window, I turned the handle and pushed with my whole body. Tears filled my eyes at the sight of the empty parking lot and the big sign on the grocery store that read: Brighton Beach Groceries. I had made it out, and I wasn't too far from the city.

The screeching of tires in the distance sent my heart into overdrive. I scanned the area for a place to hide. Belinda had warned me not to ask for help. So, I knew not to even try my luck at the coffee shop, the grocery store, or the Hookah bar. In the end, I ran to the alley and ducked next to a dumpster.

"Just breathe." I placed my hand over my chest to calm the thumping of my heart. "It's not him. It can't be."

That person driving like a bat out of hell couldn't be Maxim looking for me. To get here this fast, he would've had to figure out I had escaped pretty much as soon as the van left. I had to calm down and think how I was going to get home.

With my heart still up in my throat, I leaned over and peeked at the SUV as it swung into the parking lot. The vehicle had barely come to a stop when Maxim sprung out of the back seat. He looked furious as he stalked toward the grocery store.

"Check the van." He pointed a finger at Ivan.

Ivan jerked into action and did as Maxim asked. He also stopped a couple of guys on the street and talked to them. By his gestures, I could only assume he was asking them if they'd seen a woman about as tall as him with blonde hair.

Fuck.

How long could I stay hidden before they found me? I waited until he'd gone inside the Hookah shop to break into a run toward the street at the end of the alley. As soon as I turned, I came face to face with Ivan.

"A not-so-great escape." He grabbed me by the elbow, pulled me into a supermarket and didn't stop until we'd reached the bathrooms in the back of the building. "How did you even think this was going to work? Do you have money? A phone?"

"No." I yanked my arm. "I'm not far from the city. I can walk. Even if it takes me all day. I can make it."

"Maxim would find you faster than you can say Upper East Side." He rubbed the stubble on his cheek as he paced up and down the short hallway.

“Fuck. Fuck.”

“You’re not taking me back to the compound?”

“Shut up.” He pointed a finger at me. “I’m trying to think.”

I gave him a whole thirty seconds to think. If he was on the fence about sending me back, I could convince him to help me. “Money. I can give you a lot of it. My family would give you anything you want.”

“Anything?” His head snapped up at me.

The greed in his eyes made me shuffle back in fear. I’d seen men do some pretty shitty stuff for a million dollars. I thought of the first night I’d spent in the compound prison cell. He had said I was worth way more than money. Now that his own father had cast him aside in favor of Maxim, who wasn’t even Russian, I’d bet he was desperate to prove his worth. What could I possibly give him in exchange for my freedom?

“The Jersey warehouse. That’s what I want.” He pressed his lips together. “The Italian pigs drove us out a few months ago. I want our territory back.”

I knew exactly which warehouse he was talking about. It was the place where the Brotherhood had installed a sex-trafficking circle, selling women at auction like they were cattle. Aurora, Enzo’s wife, had gotten caught in their web. She was sold to an old man. Luckily, Enzo was able to get her back.

“The Pandemonium, was that your idea? Selling women to make a buck?” I met Ivan’s gaze.

“The auction was their choice.” He sneered. “You can ask any one of them. Do we have a deal?”

I had no idea if Rex would agree to let the Brotherhood back in Jersey, but I had no choice. Ivan was my ticket home. “We have a deal.”

“Okay.” He nodded several times. “I can make this work. We need to get you out of Brighton Beach like right fucking now before the rest of Maxim’s crew gets here.”

“You mean more guys are coming to look for me?” I pressed a cold hand to my forehead. I was trapped. “Tell Maxim you asked around and that no one has seen me. Make him call off the search. And then maybe you can drive me to the city.”

“You have no idea what you’ve done, do you?” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Maxim was breathing fire when we left the house. He’s not going to stop until he finds you.”

“There has to be a way. Let me call my family. They’ll stop him.”

“No.” He glared at me. “If Papa finds out I brought them here, he’ll kill

me. Stay here. I'll tell Maxim they saw you leaving town in a cab minutes ago. Let's hope he decides to give chase." He dug into his pocket, fished out his wallet, and handed me a couple of twenty-dollar bills. "That should cover the bus fare out of here then you can jump in a cab. Fuck you'll need exact change. Wait here."

He ran back to the front of the store. When he returned five minutes later, he gave me a bunch of coins. "Okay. There's a bus stop outside the store. You want the B route." He glanced at his watch. "It will be here in ten minutes. Make sure you're on it. I will keep Maxim away from here for as long as I can to buy you time."

"Thank you, Ivan. I promise this is for the best." I squeezed the money in my hand.

"I know." He furrowed his brows. "Papa made a huge mistake bringing Maxim into the fold. And now you. The old man has lost it. He's putting all of us in danger." He regarded me as if looking for better parting words. In the end, he scoffed then strode off.

I stood there frozen as his words played in my head on repeat. If Maxim didn't take the bait, I had no way of getting out of here. I had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide in this town. Putting my hoodie over my head, I made my way to the entrance. The young woman working behind the counter glanced up at me for merely a second before she went back to wiping down the checkout conveyer belt. I hesitated when the automatic doors opened for me. I had this feeling in my gut that Maxim would turn the corner and see me before I got on the bus.

The hissing sound of the bus kicked my butt into gear. My entire body was on high alert as I ducked my head and made a bee line for the bus stop to the left of the store. Holding the coins in a death grip, I did the best I could to keep my breathing even while I waited for my turn to board.

By the time I climbed the steps and found a seat in the back, my hands shook like crazy and there was nothing I could do about the tears rolling down my cheeks. By some miracle, I had managed to escape Maxim.

CHAPTER 22

Find Luca Gallo

MAXIM

“Tell me now. Where’s my wife?” I shoved Tom, the delivery guy, into a chair in his father’s office.

“I don’t know. I swear. I didn’t bring a woman with me. I would never do that.” He recoiled when I stepped toward him.

“She disappeared. You’re the only who came in and out of the compound. Did she ask you for help?” I hated the idea that Donata might’ve offered him more than money in exchange for a ride out of the compound. “What did she give you as payment? She has no money.”

“What? Nothing. I don’t know your wife. I only talked to Galina and Belinda. I unloaded the crates as always. Then Galina offered me a cookie. I left. That was it.” He spoke fast, repeating the same thing over and over.

He never saw Donata.

“Did you check the back of your van before you left?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“No. Why would I?” He let out a shaky breath. “Maxim, you have to believe me. I would never do anything to fuck up our business with Papa and the Brotherhood.”

I glared at him and the beads of sweat streaming down the sides of his face. This asshole took Donata from me. I wanted to wrap my fingers around his throat and squeeze until he stopped breathing.

“Find my wife. Or you will answer with your life.” I gripped the front of his T-shirt. “I’m not leaving until she’s returned to me. Go.”

“I’m sorry.” He scurried out of the room.

Out in the parking lot, Ivan crossed the street at a trot. “The guys will be

here in ten. But an old lady in the Hookah shop said she saw a blonde woman that fit Donata's description get in a cab. She was headed out of town."

"Get in the car. Where's Tore?" I climbed behind the wheel in the SUV.

"Here he comes." Ivan motioned for Tore to double time it, then got in the passenger side.

"Where's the fucking key, Tore?" I shot a glance over my shoulder.

"Here." He tossed it to me from the back seat.

Hot blood pumped hard and fast through my veins. The idea of never seeing her again made me want to punch a wall. Whoever helped her would pay dearly for this betrayal. As for Donata, she was never leaving the suite again. First I had to find her. I careened out of the parking lot and headed toward the main road out of town.

"There's a cab over there." Ivan pointed to the left.

I swerved over to the next lane and floored it. The adrenaline and rage gave me an odd sense of clarity. Donata was the mission. And this cab driver was in the way. When I caught up to it, I couldn't see the woman's face. I switched lanes and rammed my side of the vehicle against his.

"Pull over," I called out.

As soon as he did, I pulled in behind him and jumped out. I stalked toward the yellow car with a million things going through my head. She lied about wanting to stay with me. Everything she did had been a calculated plan to get me to let down my guard. All the times we were together had been an act.

I opened the passenger door and froze. The woman staring up at me in terror and with tears in her eyes wasn't Donata.

"Where the fuck is my wife?" I asked Ivan as I stomped back to the car.

"Get out of here." Ivan shoved the cab driver back into his car and slammed his hand on the roof. He shuffled toward me with his hands up in the air as if I were some wild animal who needed to be handled with caution. "She could be anywhere by now, brother. She's gone."

As the vehicle pulled away, I braced my hands on my knees and screamed. Last night, she'd fallen asleep in my arms after we had sex. Now she was out of my life for good.

"She had no money. Or a phone." I lifted my gaze to meet Ivan's. "She couldn't have done this on her own. Someone helped her. And I'm going to find out who. When I do, the asshole will pay with his life."

"Maybe Galina or Belinda saw something." Tore stepped into my line of

sight. "Let's go home."

"Let's go. If Belinda did this, she will be sorry she ever met me." I climbed into the back seat and let my head fall back. "Fuck."

Tore put the car in gear and merged into traffic. A part of me wanted to stay and keep looking for her. But that was a fool's errand. Hiding wasn't Donata's style. She knew she had to keep moving. Ivan was right. She was long gone.

By the time the SUV crossed the compound gates, the adrenaline rush had subsided, leaving me with a numbing ache in my chest. As drained as I felt, my conversation with Belinda couldn't wait. Out of everyone in the house, she was the only who didn't agree with my decision to marry Donata.

I took long strides across the courtyard and headed straight for the kitchen. As soon as I entered, Galina and Belinda shot to their feet. The horror on their faces told me they knew why I was here, why I was on this war path.

"Maxim." Belinda burst into tears. "We didn't know she was going to try and escape."

"She didn't try, Belinda." I prowled toward her. "She succeeded. You helped her, didn't you?" I reached for her throat. "Don't lie to me."

"Maxim." Galina gripped the edges of her apron. "Belinda was with me the whole time. She couldn't have done it. It's not her fault."

"What makes you so sure?" I released Belinda to glare at Galina. "My wife is gone. Someone helped her. And I want to know who." I raised my voice.

Galina's body jerked, as her eyes filled up with tears. "I was here all morning. I never saw her. Did you ask the gate guards?"

"Of course I did. They didn't see her either." I fisted my hand and slammed it on the table. "Fuck." I stormed out of the kitchen.

Ivan caught up with me at the top of the stairs. "Do you think the Italians will retaliate? I mean, there's a good chance she knows how to get back here. What if she brings a whole army to get her revenge?"

I stopped to look at him. "I hope she does."

"Maxim, you're not thinking straight. Let's talk it over with Papa." He pointed at the library door.

"I need to be alone." I shook my head.

"Fuck. We should've asked for a ransom when we had the chance."

"Shut the fuck up." I stared at him. "Is that all you can think about?"

Money. She's my wife, Ivan."

"Okay, yeah, I get it." He swallowed. "You fell in love with the enemy. You lost yourself in the game. Or did you forget why she was here in the first place? It was all to avenge your mother's death. She got in your head." He jabbed a finger at his temple. "That's what the Italian pigs do. She used you."

"Shut up." I punched him square on the jaw. When he dropped to the floor, I hovered over him. "I haven't forgotten about my mother and what she had to endure."

"Enough, Maxim." Papa ambled toward us. "You had your chance to make her pay and you didn't. Now she's gone. You need to let it be."

"What?" I squinted at him. "She's my wife."

"So what do you suggest we do? Face the Society? With a hundred men when they have thousands?" He reached for the nape of my neck. "Let her go. We have work to do here."

"That's it?" I freed myself from his grip. "You bring her here, and now you're giving up?"

"By now she's with her family. And you're with yours. It's done. Hmm?" He patted my shoulder then returned to the library.

I glared at the closed door. Papa couldn't help me with this. No one could. But Donata had another thing coming if she thought she could leave me. She belonged with me. This marriage was far from over. I didn't give a fuck if Papa and Ivan were content with letting Donata go.

Numb, I trudged down the hallway and into my suite. The space felt eerily empty and quiet without her energy filling every lonely corner of the room.

"Why did you leave? I would've given you the world." I sat the edge of the bed. "Donata. Donata."

Bracing my elbows on my thighs, I dropped my head into my hands. What I needed to do now was come up with a plan to get her back. I rose to my feet and paced the length of the room. How the hell was I going to enter Italian territory without them knowing? Maybe Papa was right. Going in with a hundred men wasn't the answer. But if I went there alone, I was sure I could get to her.

"Fuck." I grabbed the vase filled with flowers that Donata had left on the bedside table and hurled it against the wall. "You lied to me." I clenched my jaw, picked up the book sitting next to the lamp and threw that too.

It fell on a puddle of water and rose petals. Next to it, an envelope peeked

out from underneath the wet cover. I rushed to pick it up because, somehow, I knew Donata had left me a letter. With my heart drumming out of control, I ripped it open and removed a hand-written note and a torn page from a book.

Dear Maxim,

Please don't hate me. I know it doesn't look like it right now, but I'm doing this for the both of us. My love for you has no limits. I promise, one day soon, I will come back for you. Wait for me.

I love you with all my heart.

Donata

P.S. If you want answers, find Luca Gallo.

I turned the page, desperate to read more. But that was all she'd written. She hadn't said goodbye. Did she intend to come back to me? The rage that'd clawed at my insides since I found out she was gone, slowly began to dissolve. I re-read her words twice more, then stared at the ripped page from my book and then at Luca's name.

Was this supposed to be a clue? I picked up the book and flipped through it until I found the spot where the page fit. Right next to it, Donata had scribbled an address in the Upper West Side. Could it be? Was this Luca's home? Why would she send me there?

"Is that why you left?" I ran a hand through my hair. "You want me to remember."

"Luca, please. You have to remember us. You are Luca. My Luca. The only man I've ever loved." Her words echoed in my head.

Did I want answers bad enough to find this Luca Gallo? Papa had warned me to let the past be. It was easier to live with amnesia if I didn't try to remember, but Donata had given me a breadcrumb to follow. I couldn't ignore my past anymore. I had to know. I had to know if Donata was telling the truth.

I strode to the door. A voice in the back of my head screamed at me not to go. Once I pulled back the curtain, there would be no going back. My life with the Brotherhood would be over. Damn it, Donata. I took the page with the address and stuffed it in the back pocket of my jeans.

You left to force my hand. You knew that would be the only way to make me see the truth.

I shut the door behind me and rushed down the steps. By now, Papa had called off the search. The men had returned and gathered in the courtyard. When they saw me leave the house, their laughter died down. I surveyed their

faces. Suddenly, nothing about them felt familiar. For the first time since I arrived a year ago, the sense of belonging wasn't there.

Jesus, was Ivan right? Was Donata messing with my head?

"Are you going out?" Ivan joined me. "I'll come with you."

"No." I waved my hand in dismay. "I need to be alone."

"You're headed back to town." The pity in his eyes was like a punch to my gut. "Papa said—"

"I know what he said." I puffed out a breath. "I need to clear my head."

Before Ivan invited himself again, I made my way to the SUV. Luckily, Tore had left the keys in the ignition. I hopped in and drove off. When I reached the entrance, my body tensed as I waited for the guards to open the gate. No idea why, for a split second, I thought they would refuse to let me leave.

"We'll see you later, Maxim," one of the men called out as he waved me through.

"Thanks." I put the car in gear and drove off.

Donata's idea was insane. She was sending me into the wolf's lair, and I was stupid enough to let her lead me there. I didn't bother following the less conspicuous route like we'd done the night we kidnapped Donata. Instead, I took the shorter route, not giving a shit if the Italians decided to come after me.

An hour later, I stood at the address Donata had left me. The door of the brownstone loomed over me like some sort of magical portal. I couldn't ignore my gut anymore. Something terrible was hiding beyond the threshold. But I'd come this far, backing out wasn't an option. I wanted answers, now more than ever.

With a heavy heart, I walked up the stoop and knocked on the door. While I waited, I considered what I would say to whomever showed up. I could try for facts. Or at least, what I thought were the facts. I had barely decided to go with the amnesia story when the door swung open.

A man in his early sixties blanched as soon as recognition registered in his eyes. He knew me. For a long while, we both stood there staring at each other. I wracked my brain, looking for the right thing to say. When I opened my mouth to speak, he beat me to it.

"Jesus Christ, Luca. I thought you were dead."

CHAPTER 23

Broken Memories

MAXIM

The man stepped out and brought me in for a bear hug. Who was he to me? He seemed old enough to be my father. Why did Donata not mention him before? Especially after she learned what'd happened to Mom.

“How do you know me?” I asked when he pulled away from me, wiping his eyes.

“I don't understand.” His gaze flicked to the street then back to me. “Do you not remember me?”

“No, not really. May I come in?” I glanced over my shoulder. A gut feeling told me that lingering at the door was dangerous.

“Of course.” He let the door swing open. “This is your home.”

I trudged past the threshold and into the vestibule. This house was like nothing I'd ever seen, and yet it felt familiar because I'd seen it so many times in my dreams. The more vivid one was the one where Donata and I had sex. I lifted my gaze to where I knew a beige sofa would be. A shock of adrenaline rushed through me when I found the piece of furniture exactly as I had dreamt it.

Had Donata been right all along? My nightmares were broken memories fighting to find their way back to me.

“I'm Alfred. Does the name mean anything to you?” He gestured for me to sit in the living area at the far end of the room. When I shook my head, he continued, “I've been in your service for over ten years.”

“You work for me? Doing what?”

“Butler. Among other things.” He offered me a weak smile. “What happened to you, Luca?” Alfred asked tentatively. “When I woke up after the

accident in Dumbo, Enzo's family's neighborhood, you were gone. There was blood everywhere."

"The car accident, that happened in Brooklyn?" I had a recollection of flipping over in a car. Papa said it'd happened in Moscow. "There were two men after me." I lowered myself down on the cushions.

"Yes." He sat across from me. "I was with you that day. Wait. Do you mean to tell me that for the past year, you've what? Been living with amnesia? Where?"

"It's a long story." I put up my hand to get him to slow down. As it always happened when I tried to remember, the splitting headache had already kicked in.

"Can I get you a drink? Sounds like we have a lot to talk about."

"Yes, we do."

Alfred stood and disappeared into the next room. When he returned, he had a glass of red wine for me. "It's your favorite." He set a napkin on the coffee table and placed the glass on top.

That was Donata's favorite wine. "Did she put you up to this?"

"I'm sorry? Who's she?"

"Donata sent me here. Did she ask you to tell me all this? Just to mess with my head." I pinched the bridge of my nose to ease the pressure building behind my eyes. "Did she?"

"Why would you say that?" he asked patiently.

"I don't know." I pressed my thumb and forefinger to my eyes. "I wanted it all to be a lie."

"Have you seen her recently? Where?" He dug into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "We have to notify Signora Vittoria. They've been so worried."

"It's too late for that. She's probably home by now." I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth, and then, reached for the wine and took a big gulp. "She's all right."

"The day of the accident, you were in Dumbo because you wanted to see her. I stopped you because it wasn't safe. You were still being hunted by pretty much everyone. The Russians found you. Is that where you were this past year? They took you as their prisoner?"

"No, they didn't," I mumbled.

Not two hours ago, I thought of Papa as the only father I've ever known. Now I wasn't so sure.

“Donata was taken about two months ago. Everyone was fairly certain the Russians had something to do with it.” Alfred pursed his lips. “I did what I thought you would’ve wanted me to do. I looked for her, but it was as if the Earth had split open and swallowed her whole.”

“She was with me. We took her.” I rubbed the side of my face. “I wanted revenge.”

“Sir?”

“I’ll explain everything. Just give me a minute. Being here, I feel less disoriented. Like I can trust my memories again.” I rose to my feet and surveyed the appealing aesthetic of the room. “I’d like to take a look around.”

“Of course. Like I said, this is your home.” He gestured toward the stairs. “Perhaps you’d like to start with your bedroom? Fourth floor.”

I nodded then trudged up the steps. Even if some of the smallest details escaped me, a lot of the bigger things felt familiar—like the sitting area beyond the landing, the bedding in my bedroom, and...I glanced up at the top floor. Ava Conti. Her name flashed in my head right before I heard the loud bang of a gun.

My heart raced because I knew what I would find when I reached the library. Slowly, I pushed the door open and welcomed in the nightmares. Donata had said I had killed Ava’s murderer. That he’d been my first kill. And that my mind kept going back to this moment in time because this was the catalyst for the next six years of my life without Donata.

The murder board lay exactly as I had left it a year ago. “I meant to take it down. But I couldn’t.”

“I know.” Alfred appeared in my peripheral vision. “When you disappeared, I didn’t know what to do. It didn’t seem right to put it away without your permission.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” I peeked at the different pictures, newspaper clippings, notes written in my handwriting. “Is this her, Ava?”

“Yes, Sir.” Alfred ambled to the desk and took out a folder filled with more photos of her and papers. “It’s all here.”

“Did Donata and I live here?” I took the manila folder from him.

“For a brief time. Do you recall?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Most of my memories of her are more of a feeling than anything else. It seems our story always ends the same way. I keep losing her. Over and over. She’d be there one moment, and then, gone the next. And I can’t tell if I’m remembering something or just going insane.”

“You were on the run for a long time. Being with Donata was nearly impossible.” He offered me a kind smile. “Though you never stopped trying.”

“Tell me everything. I need to know how I ended up like this.”

Alfred spoke calmly as he narrated my own life to me. He talked about Uncle Jimmy, the feud between the original crime families, my role in his fucked-up game of chess. A game that landed both Donata and me in the hospital. His thirst for revenge led him to a manhunt that lasted almost six years.

Then came the final blow. My entire family was dead. That was something Donata had omitted from her story. I didn’t blame her. If I couldn’t believe the good parts, there was no way I’d be receptive to something as tragic as losing parents and siblings in one fell swoop. To be the only survivor, unable to help, had to have been hell.

My story with Donata was chaotic to put it mildly. She’d stalked me for years before I admitted to myself that I had feelings for her. *You’re my dirty little secret*. My own words echoed in my head. Our love was forbidden. She fought for us when I wouldn’t. I didn’t deserve her.

When Alfred finished, I sat in silence for a long while. In that time, my headache went from throbbing to dull. When he asked again what’d happened to me, I told him everything I knew about Papa, the Brotherhood, and my time with Donata at the compound. Saying the words aloud helped me put things in perspective. The dreams and broken memories were no longer a jumbled movie, but two separate timelines—one that belonged to Luca and another one that belonged to Maxim.

“Have I ever been to Moscow?” I asked.

“Yes, many times.” He furrowed his brows. “Why do you ask?”

“So it’s possible the memories of me walking the city are real.” I rubbed my temple.

“I believe so. What happens now, Luca?”

I winced at my own name, and the memories of all the times I wanted to kill Luca Gallo because I was jealous, because no matter how long he’d been gone, Donata was still in love with him. Could I ever be that man again? The only man she ever loved. Before she left, she’d said she loved me. Was that true? Had Donata fallen in love with Maxim too? For many nights, I convinced myself she had.

“There’s only one thing I can do.” I braced my forearms on my thighs. “I need to return to the compound.”

“Is that wise?”

“I don’t know.” I stared at the fireplace until all the details were just a blur, background noise to all the thoughts swirling around in my head. “I don’t know who I am anymore. Donata’s Luca died in that car accident a year ago. All that’s left is this. And it isn’t enough. It’s why she left.”

“I would let her answer that for herself.” Alfred released a breath. “You can’t speak for her.”

“Then let her speak.” I opened my arms. “Where is she? She’s gone, Alfred.”

“She’s home. That’s different.”

“Different.” I chuckled. “Why do I get the feeling we used to do this a lot?”

“Because when it comes to Donata, your common sense goes out the window. That hasn’t changed.” He shook his head. “I used to think that all you needed was a good whack in the head to start thinking straight. I was wrong.”

“I refuse to live the rest of my life without her.”

“Then come home.” He clicked his teeth. “Stay.”

“I can’t.” I had doubts about everything except this one thing—I had to see Papa. I had to return to the compound and find the last piece of this maddening puzzle. Otherwise, I would never have peace. “I have to figure out what the Brotherhood is to me. I can’t just walk away.”

“If that’s your wish.” He shrugged. “Would you like me to stay or—?”

“I need you here, old friend.” I squeezed his shoulder. “I should go.”

“I’ll walk you out.” He stood and I did the same. When we reached the vestibule, he stepped in front of me and opened the door. “I hope to see you soon, Luca.”

“Thanks for everything.”

On the drive back to the compound, Alfred’s stories bounced around in my head. If I had given Donata the chance to speak her piece, would she had stayed? Probably not. Because even though I knew who I truly was now, I still couldn’t be the man she wanted me to be. I still felt more at home at the compound than in a swanky Upper West Side brownstone.

What came next? I supposed only Papa could answer that question. He had a whole future laid out for me. Was that real? Or was that yet another way to beat me into submission, to get me to play the role of the favorite son.

I thought of all the times he repeated over and over that we were family,

that our revenge against the Italians was the most important thing, how my mother suffered and died because of them. Why the lies? Looking back, he did treat me like I was his own blood. Nothing made sense.

As soon as I pulled into the back parking lot of the compound, Ivan rushed across the lawn. “Where the hell did you go? You’ve been gone all day.”

“I needed to clear my head.” I strode past him.

“Well, that’s great. But Papa has been looking for you. He’s pissed. He thought you went into the lion’s den just to get some pussy.” He talked fast, the way he always did whenever he was scared. “You need to let her go. You had your fun. Now she has to go home, knowing she was yours. Who would want her now?”

I stopped in my tracks, doubled back, then slammed him against the wall. “Don’t you ever speak like that about my wife. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. It was a joke.”

“She’s off-limits.”

“Okay. Got it.” He released a breath. “So where were you?”

“I need to speak to Papa.” I covered the length of the corridor and the courtyard in record time. This conversation couldn’t wait any longer.

When I reached the library door, I stopped to consider my words, what I wanted to say to Papa. And then it hit me, the stories about my mother, and my time in Moscow, Papa didn’t start them. He hadn’t done this alone.

“Jesus Christ.” I scanned the living room. When Ivan appeared in my line of sight, I grabbed him by the collar. “On second thought, you and I need to talk first.”

“We’re talking.”

“Not here.” I shoved him toward the kitchen. “Let’s find Belinda.”

I didn’t bother knocking on her door. I barged in on Belinda. Her hair was wet, and she was wrapped in a bath towel. When she saw me, she let the top fall loose around her breasts. As usual, she tried to use her naked body to seduce me, even though I had Ivan in a tight grip next to me. I had been so stupid. “Sit down. Both of you.”

“Maxim. I can’t do this again with you. I told you I didn’t help her escape. She left because she hated it here.” She grabbed the dress on her bed and pulled it over her head.

“Do you know who I am?” I growled.

The look she exchanged with Ivan was all the answer I needed. My

brother and my ex-lover knew I wasn't Maxim. Not only that, but they also insisted on the lies. On a daily basis, they inundated me with made-up events from my past, just to confuse me, to keep the farce going.

"I'm glad you're opting for the truth this time." I gritted my teeth.

"Max."

"Shut up, Ivan." I pointed a finger at him, then at Belinda. "You, start talking. Why am I here? Why all the goddam theatrics?"

"You should ask Papa." Belinda's eyes filled up with tears. "I don't know anything."

"Yes, you do." I stalked closer to her. "Do I need to beat the truth out of you? I'm at the end of my rope here. Don't push me. You won't like what you get."

"Okay. I saved your life. When you woke up you had no memories." She swiped her cheek, then continued, "I fell for you, Maxim. I swear."

"How did I get here?"

With a low sigh, Belinda glanced at her hands then finally told me the truth. There was no Moscow. At least, not when it came to Papa and the Brotherhood. Papa hadn't rescued me. He was the one who put a bounty on my head. Belinda kept me alive, so he could interrogate me, like he'd done with other members of the Gallo family. He wanted information from me, and when he couldn't get it, he decided to keep me.

"He loves you, Max," Ivan added when Belinda's crying got so bad, her words were inaudible. "Like a son. You're one of us. Whatever bullshit happened is in the past now."

"That bullshit." I hovered over him. "It's my whole fucking life."

"Don't make any rash decisions." He let out a nervous laugh. "That's my job, remember? Talk to Papa. We're not the bad guys here."

CHAPTER 24

A Plan to Rescue Luca Gallo

DONATA

I shut off the water and donned my fluffy bathrobe. The shower had managed to wash away the ordeal from this morning. Though my hands were still shaky, and I couldn't stop crying. I stared at the mirror and burst into a sob. The escape had been terrifying. Not because I thought Maxim would hurt me if he found me, but because our futures had been on the line. I was convinced that the only way to make Maxim see the truth was to bring him home.

But carrying a six-foot, two-hundred-pound, grown man out of the Brotherhood compound would've been impossible. Luca had to see it for himself. By now, he'd probably read my letter and figured out my clue. Did he go in search of the truth? I'd tried calling his house, but there was no answer. I didn't even know if Alfred still lived there.

In the past year, I'd gone past his brownstone in the Upper West Side many times. I never rang the doorbell because I thought Luca was out of the country. Never in a million years would I have guessed he was in Brighton Beach, living as someone else.

"What now, Maxim?" I ran my hands through my wet hair. "How do we close this chasm between us?"

I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do. No, I couldn't drag Maxim out of the Brotherhood compound. But Rex, Santino, and Enzo could. They were my only option. We had to stage a plan to rescue Luca Gallo, and it had to be done tonight.

Bracing my hands on the sink counter, I let the cold from the marble stone seep through my skin and into my bones. I needed a cool head tonight.

This battle wasn't over. It couldn't be. Not until Luca came home with me forever. I untied the bathrobe belt and let it fall at my feet before I padded to my closet to find something to wear—definitely tight pants and a tight top, just in case I had to jump a fence later tonight.

I put on makeup, mostly because I didn't want Aunt Vittoria to worry too much. She almost passed out when she came to the door and found me standing there, scared out of my mind. I thought of the night she came to my parents to bring me with her for good. She'd been like an angel sent from heaven. I wasn't that little girl anymore, though. I could hold my own.

When my face looked presentable, I made my way downstairs to wait for the guys. I had wanted to call them as soon as I got home, but Aunt Vittoria talked me off the ledge, saying I needed a hot meal, a shower, and a nap.

"On second thought, start with the shower." She'd said after she hugged me for the tenth time.

I'd never seen her lose her composure like that. She was truly worried about me. "Wow, what's all this?" I stopped at the dining room door.

"Dinner." Aunt Vittoria beamed at me. "I don't know what those beasts were feeding you. I got you a little bit of everything. In case you were missing Pina's cooking."

"It looks amazing." I ambled around the table and picked a few pieces of cheese from the charcuterie board. "Are they coming tonight? This cannot wait anymore."

"They're on their way. Rex called." She inhaled and then looked upward. "I'm glad we have a few minutes alone. There's something I think you should know."

"Oh no." I raised my eyebrows in mock surprise. "Not a 'there's something you should know' conversation. What are you going to tell me, that I'm adopted?" I leaned toward her and whispered, "I know."

"It's actually the opposite." She placed her hand on the back of the chair.

I always admired her grace and delicate gestures. Aunt Vittoria could be terrifying, but somehow, she always managed to do it with a touch of elegance. Though, tonight, there was something new shining in her eyes—fear. She'd been scared she would never see me again.

"If I didn't know any better," I popped a strawberry in my mouth, "I'd say you're stalling."

"I'm not." She stood taller. "I am." She winced. "Give me a second. I never thought I would find myself in this situation. Given the circumstances,

and everything that's happened in the past couple of months, I think it's best you learn the truth. The whole truth about your birth."

"What?" I furrowed my brows. This was going to be heavy.

"Looks like we're right on time." Santino barged into the room. "She already knows." He slapped Rex on the back.

"It's crazy, isn't it?" Rex asked. "We're siblings."

"Oh, Rex." Aunt Vittoria rubbed the creases on her forehead. "I didn't tell her yet."

"What?" I repeated. "Siblings? What the hell does that even mean?" I asked Aunt Vittoria. "What are they talking about?"

"Maybe we should wait outside." Enzo pulled Santino toward the door. "Let them talk."

"No." Santino shook his head. "I need a hug first. It's so good to have our queen bee back." He wrapped his arms around me and planted a kiss on my cheek.

"It's good to be home." I released him then threw my arms around Enzo's neck. "Thank you for coming."

"I would've come earlier, but we were told to wait." He winked.

"Yeah. I needed a shower." I turned to face Rex. "Where's my hug?"

"Of course." He swallowed, then brought me in for a tight squeeze. "Those fuckers are going to pay for what they did to you. I promise."

"Thank you." I met Aunt Vittoria's gaze across the table. "You were in the middle of a confession. Go on. Siblings?"

"We should go." Rex kissed my forehead, then wrangled Enzo and Santino out of the room.

"What's going on? Dad and Rex's mom? That's crazy, right? Even for Dad."

"I should probably start there." She inhaled. "My brother and his wife were not your biological parents. You're my daughter. My and Giovanni's daughter."

"I'm sorry." I squinted at her. "As in the late Don Valentino." I pointed at the door. "As in Rex's dad."

"Yes."

"Wait." My eyes flicked to her. "You're my mother. And you're telling me this now? Almost thirty years later?"

"Like I said, given recent events, I thought it would be better if you knew."

“Yeah, you thought right. Why didn’t you tell me before? You let me grow up as an orphan.” My voice cracked, as I thought of all the times I wished Aunt Vittoria was my mother. “Why would you do that to me? It’s too cruel. Even for you.”

“For your own safety, Donata. I did it for you. Do you know what Jimmy Gallo would’ve done if he found out you were my daughter. And not only that, that the new king was your father. Out of spite, he would’ve killed you.” She gripped the back of the chair until her knuckles turned white.

“I know what he’s capable of. Remember? We warned you about that coup he was planning. He wanted to kill Rex’s dad.” I stopped to clear my throat. “My dad.”

“Jimmy Gallo killed Giovanni. Stabbed him thirteen times.” Her eyes watered. “I’m sure he thought it to be poetic.”

“What? How do you know this?”

“Giovanni told me before he died.” She swiped her cheek. “He was the only man I ever loved, Donata. I don’t regret what we had. Not a single moment of it.”

“This is too much.” I pulled up a chair and sat.

“The night Giovanni died; I promised him his killer would be brought to justice. If not for him, then for our children, you and Rex.”

“Omigod.” I covered my mouth. “You had the Gallo family killed.”

“Michael Alfera pulled the trigger, so to speak. But yes, I gave the order.” She lifted her chin. “I kept my promise to a dying man, who in the end, only wanted to keep his children safe.”

“None of this would’ve happened if you had listened to me. We told you Jimmy Gallo couldn’t be trusted. For six years, you let him play this cat and mouse game with Luca.”

“I know. You have no idea how many times I regretted that decision. But we have rules. We had to abide by them.”

I scoffed. “Were you following the rules when you slept with Rex’s dad?”

“I deserve that.” She nodded. “One day, if you let me, I would love to tell you the whole story.”

“Oh, you have a love story? Are you fucking kidding me?” I banged my hand on the table as tears streamed down my cheeks. “You did this to him. Luca is trapped in a nightmare because you sent the Brotherhood to kill him. They kidnapped me because of you.” I screamed at her. Not a second later, Rex, Enzo and Santino burst through the dining room doors. I stared at their

blurry figures then wiped my eyes. “You heard me right. Luca is alive. The Russians tried to kill him. He survived, but he lost his memory. For the past year, he’s been communing with them thinking he’s Maxim Belov.”

“Belov?” Enzo exchanged a meaningful look with Santino. “As in the leader of the Russian mob who started a human trafficking ring in Jersey a few months back? They took my wife and son.” His whole face turned bright red. “Tell us where they are. They will pay for everything they’ve done to our families.”

This was not how I thought this conversation would go. All I wanted was to get Luca back. But would he still love me after he learned the truth? My own mother ordered his execution. He’d been a man on the run for two years because of her.

“Let me help you.” Aunt Vittoria met my gaze. “We’ll bring Luca to safety. I promise.”

“What about the prize on his head?” I glared at her. “Are you still paying bounties for any remaining members of the Gallo family?”

“No.” Her gaze cut to Enzo for a moment. Enzo’s dad was her accomplice in this. After a moment’s hesitation, she continued, “The bounty hunters were Michael Alfera’s idea. When he was killed, the whole thing went away.”

“No, it didn’t. Luca was captured a year ago. Michael died way before that.”

“I swear. It wasn’t me.” She exhaled. “I tried to help him. I warned him. The night he was here, he survived the ambush because I sent him a letter.”

“How generous of you.” I scoffed.

“Michael was on a war path when Rex took over as king. And you know that. If I had shown any kind of favor toward Luca, he would’ve guessed it was because of you. He would’ve killed Luca himself.”

“She’s right, D.” Enzo placed his hand on my shoulder. “Dad wanted to see the Society gutted from the inside out.”

“I wonder who gave him that idea.” I glared at Aunt Vittoria.

As much as I wanted to stand here and fill the room with vitriol, I couldn’t forget about Luca. I couldn’t let my emotions put him in danger once again. Aunt Vittoria had done a terrible thing in the name of love and family. Her reasons were worthless to me. Because no matter how much she’d done this to protect me, a hundred innocent people had died by her hand—Luca didn’t deserve to live on the run for years. He didn’t deserve to

lose his parents and his sisters.

Aunt Vittoria was cruel and vile, same as Papa. They both thought the end justified the means. I needed a monster to fight Luca's monster.

"You want to help? Fine. Bring Luca home." I ached for him. I ached for all the injustices he had to endure. "But know this, when he's safe, when it's all over, you will never see me again." I stormed out and ran straight to the grand staircase.

I wanted to slam my bedroom door behind me and never come out. But the night wasn't over yet. I stopped with my foot on the first step, gripping the banister tight. We had to work together to come up with a plan to get beyond the compound gate.

"Fuck." I swallowed my pride and anger and turned around to face them all. "Well? Do any of you have any idea how we get in?" Santino opened his mouth, and I raised my hand. "No Molotovs. There are women and children living in the house."

"We use numbers." Vittoria strode past us and headed for the library.

"What do you mean?" I followed her to her desk, where she pulled out a map of New York and set it on the table. "As in bring a legion with us."

"Exactly. A crew needs members. As much as the Russians love carnage, they love money more. To make money, you need a crew. If we show up with..." She motioned toward me. "As you said a legion of men, they won't fight. Even Belov should be able to do the math on that one."

"You came up with that idea rather quickly." I glanced down at the map.

"I've been thinking about it for two months. Day and night, I had thought of nothing else. They deserve to be punished for what they did."

For Luca's sake, I let her righteousness be. But I hadn't forgotten that we were in this mess because she took her thirst for revenge way too far.

"I don't know where they are exactly. They get their deliveries from Brighton Beach." I blew out a breath. "This morning, all I wanted to do was to get away from the compound and get help. I didn't pay attention to the route. I'm sorry."

"You've given us plenty." Rex stepped closer. "Their compound can only be in one of these two areas."

"Did they let you outside?" Santino asked. "What did it smell like? Beachy?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then they're most likely inland." He pointed at a spot on the map north

of Brighton Beach. “I’ll send a few scouts and see what they see. I know we scoured Brighton Beach before, but we didn’t look that far.”

“We have to strike as soon as possible.” Enzo met Vittoria’s gaze across the desk. “They’ll be expecting retaliation. But they won’t be expecting it, say tonight?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I interjected. “It has to be tonight. I can’t stand the thought of Luca being under Papa’s thumb for another day.”

“Papa?” Santino raised an eyebrow.

“It’s what they all call him. They think of him as a hero, a father figure of sorts. He brainwashed Luca somehow.” I gritted my teeth, then remembered another key point. “By the way, he knows about the Society. While his son Ivan was cashing in the bounty hunter fees, Papa was interrogating prisoners before killing them.” I pursed lips and refused to look at Vittoria. I blamed her for all of this. “Who knows how much intel he was able to gather the two years he spent torturing members of the family.”

“We’ll find out for sure tonight.” Rex braced his hand on the map.

“He’s all yours.” An odd sense of calm washed over me. Luca would be home soon. “We leave at midnight.”

CHAPTER 25

Call It a Request

MAXIM

This morning when I woke up in an empty bed, I had envisioned the day would end differently. The rage that flooded my senses when I discovered Donata had escaped made me numb to any other feeling. I was on a mission to find her. Instead, I found Luca Gallo. Trepidation replaced my anger. For the first time, since I arrived at the compound, I was scared.

I didn't think Papa wanted me dead. He'd had a million opportunities to do that in the past year. The thing I feared was his cunning ability to talk people into doing things they didn't want to do. I feared I wasn't strong enough to leave him.

The fire crackled across from me, while Papa poked at it to rearrange the wood. He still hadn't answered my question. Why me? I had other questions, but this was the most important. By Belinda's account, the Brotherhood interrogated and killed nine members of my family. I was supposed to be number ten. Why did he save me? How was I supposed to move on knowing they killed my family? Their acts were unforgivable.

"I don't know," he finally said. "At first, I only wanted information. For a while now, I've had a special interest in the Society. How it works. Why it exists. And most of all, how it had endured for over a century." He scoffed. "They're thriving. And what are we doing? Killing each other over a woman. We're better than this."

I chose not to point out that I killed Dominic because he asked me to. Dominic challenged me because Papa refused to acknowledge that maybe his claims had merit. I wasn't family. I was never one of them. I was the enemy. Dominic and his crew died because of Papa's ego.

“And here they are.” He raised his hands to the heavens. “The Society, controlling everything from behind the curtain. Criminals living in plain sight with their hands in every aspect of our world: the government, the stock market, legislature, cars, booze, and everything in between.”

“You seem to know everything about them. You don’t need me.”

“By that time, I realized that you had become someone important to me.” He took in a deep breath. “You’re like a son to me, Maxim. I never lied about that.”

Maxim.

A part of me wanted to tell him not to call me that because it wasn’t my real name. But the truth was, Maxim felt more real to me than Luca. He’d made sure of that. He offered me a place where I could belong. He wanted me to be Pakhan, to lead the crews.

“You didn’t lie about that. But you lied about everything else. Do you even have a sister?” I regarded his weathered features. No matter the truth and his horrific killings, something inside me still craved his approval. I still wanted redemption for him. “Was she ever assaulted?”

“No.” He braced his elbow on the arm rest and rubbed the creases on his forehead. “You needed a past. I gave you one.”

“And Maxim?”

“He was my oldest son. Killed a few months before you arrived. I thought I would never recover.” He clicked his tongue. “And, then you showed up.”

“You had to know this would end at some point.” I stared at the roaring fire, puffing out red and yellow sparks as the wood surrendered to the flames. “I was never going to be Pakhan.”

“No. Ivan would not have allowed it.”

“Why the charade?”

“I wanted to give my son a wakeup call.” He shrugged as if the reason for the farce wasn’t important. “You see how he is. He has no vision for the future. Everything for him is the now. He makes dumb mistakes. With you by his side, I believe he could do great things.”

“So you lied and kept me here to babysit your kid.” I scoffed.

“No.” He swallowed. “No, Maxim. I kept you here because I need you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I’m dying.” He laughed. “I guess I didn’t lie about two things. The doctors, they’re useless. They say one thing and then it’s another thing. All they want is money. I decided not to play their game.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to end it before my kidney does me in. I see what the disease can do to a man. That won’t be me.” He leaned forward. “I owe you nine lives. Take mine. Let my son live.”

“No.” I shot to my feet. “You want to do right by me? This isn’t the way. I’ve worked beside you for a long time. This plan isn’t you. Hell, it’s not even a plan.”

“Call it a request.” He put up two fingers. “There’s a second part to it. You’re one of them. But you’re also part of us. Without your help, Ivan will get the crew killed within the year. What we need is a truce or maybe a contract with the Society.”

“You’re willing to make a deal with the devil? The Italians can’t be trusted. You taught me that.” I braced my hands on my hips. “You think they’ll listen to me? My entire family was slaughtered, and they didn’t raise a finger. They don’t give a shit about me.”

“But the pretty doctor does. She’s the key. She will do whatever you ask.” He shook a finger at me. The dead-set determination in his eyes made him look younger than his seventy-six years. “She was an experiment that turned out to work exceptionally well.”

“She escaped.”

“Because she thinks she can have more. You, without the Brotherhood.” He smiled.

Papa’s brain was a beautiful Machiavellian mess. The worst part was that he wasn’t entirely wrong. His insane plan wasn’t as crazy as it sounded. If his end goal was his crew’s longevity, using me to broker a peace deal was the right course of action. He was literally prepared to wash away his sins with his own blood.

“She knew me from before.” I wanted him to know that. I wanted him to know that if we were having this conversation, it wasn’t because of his grand experiment. “Did you know that?”

“No. That became apparent later. A happy coincidence. The bride you stole was already yours.” He nodded, biting his lower lip. A thing he did whenever he was satisfied with something. He’d waited a whole year to cash in. “Even if she hadn’t been. I think with time, you would’ve won her over. Ask her. She will do as you say.”

“What makes you think I want to help you? You’re not actually family.” I glanced down at my fisted hands. Yeah, that part right there was the truth that

hurt the most. Without the Brotherhood, I was nothing. I had nothing. “This isn’t my crew.”

“Are you sure?” He pointed at my chest. “Look in there. Tell me you won’t do anything you can to save them. The minute I’m gone, if you’re not here, the Chicago Pakhan will move in and pick apart our family.”

“We’re not strong enough to fight back,” I said mostly to myself. “But the Society could crush them like bugs. We might even be able to expand.”

“That’s it.” He clapped once. “You got it. Your lady doctor will make that happen. All you have to do is ask.”

“What if I want to leave?”

“You don’t have to.” He rose to his feet and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Stay with us. As they say, Ivan can be the head. But you’ll be the brain. You can run things your way. He will agree, especially now that he understands that I’m willing to entertain an alternative solution. An Italian as their Pakhan. You decide, son.”

“My choice?” I smirked.

“I think Belinda and Ivan have proven they can keep a secret.”

A life with the Brotherhood was a future that right now felt impossible to let go of. There was only one problem with that. Donata would never agree to stay with me. This night was a new level of fucked up if I was considering kidnapping my wife again. A whole day without her was excruciatingly painful. I refused to spend the rest of my life without her.

“*Don’t make me take by force what’s already mine.*” I’d said those words to her on our wedding night. She was mine. Her beautiful face had appeared so vividly in my mind, that I didn’t recognize the real Donata when she entered the room.

CHAPTER 26

We Came to Save You

DONATA

His gaze met mine across the room. I ached to run to him and throw my arms around his neck, to hold him and never let him go. But first, I had to deal with Papa. That man was a master at messing with Maxim's head. Maxim knew the whole truth and he still wanted to be here. After I spoke with Alfred earlier tonight, I waited for Maxim to come to me. But he didn't. He left me no choice. I wasn't leaving the compound without my husband.

"What are you doing here?" He took a single step forward.

The second Santino, Enzo, and Rex filed into the library, he moved to block Papa from our view. Maxim was willing to give his life for the guy who'd killed his family. His fear of being alone in the world made him blind to everything. "You went through all that trouble to escape. I didn't think I'd see you so soon."

"We came to save you." Santino flanked me on the left. "You look like shit by the way."

"Your men are outnumbered three to one." Enzo prowled around the sofa to get a better look at Papa. "Not much of a security team."

"They put themselves in danger for her." Papa said in Maxim's ear, though he said it loud enough for all of us to hear it. "Now you know what you have."

"Enough." Rex slammed the door shut. "Old man, we're here to collect our friend. Kindly, let him go. And we won't kill every living thing under this roof."

That had come out a bit dramatic, but based on Papa's hardened expression, Rex had hit a nerve. Papa cared if his crew lived or die? Could've

fooled me. Slowly, I approached Maxim. The sofa separating us might as well be a dark abyss.

“Come with us. Please,” I begged, and I didn’t even care that my friends heard the desperation in my voice. “You don’t owe him anything.”

“He’s dying, Donata.” Maxim braced his hands on his hips.

“And you believe him?” I raised my voice.

“I do.”

“He’s been lying to you for months. He created a whole identity for you. Luca, think about it. Think about how insane that is. Those are the machinations of a psychopath.” I scanned the room, looking for the right words to change his mind. “Do you honestly believe he’ll make you Pakhan when he dies? You know that’s impossible.”

“It’s not about that, Donata. You asked me to wait for you.” He exhaled and winced as if something as simple as breathing hurt him.

I was hurting too. His gaze raked over my body as he leaned ever so slightly toward me. And fuck me if I didn’t react to his apparent desire. He wanted to hold me, but duty kept him glued to the floor right next to Papa.

“Now I’m asking you. Wait for me.”

Wait for me.

Those were his exact words the last time he left me. We had done the right thing, and in doing so, we erected the biggest wall between us. For years, I saw him once a month or every other month. I couldn’t go back to that life, where I was barely alive. I couldn’t spend the rest of my days, waiting for Luca. I wanted all of him, not just the scraps.

“No.” I raked both hands through my hair. “You can’t do this to me again. You keep leaving me. I can’t stand it anymore. I came here for you. Why are we still here?” I stomped around the sofa so I could face him properly. “You belong with me.” I cupped his face.

“Donata.” His eyes fluttered closed. “You don’t understand.”

“Don’t do this.” My voice faltered. “If you stay, there’s no going back. With him, whatever is left of Luca will be gone forever.”

“This is my choice.” He peeled my hands off his cheeks. “Go home, Donata.”

I slapped him. He slow-blinked and stood there like a statue—immovable. So I hit him again. And then again. Anything to get him to snap out of it. Papa could kill him in his sleep whenever he decided.

“He’s using you. Don’t you see?” I shoved at him, but he didn’t budge.

“When he’s done with you, he’s going to kill you.”

In the next beat, a pair of arms wrapped around my body. Enzo spoke softly in my ear. “The man has made his choice. Let him be.”

“I can’t. You don’t understand. He doesn’t want this. He wants to be with me.” I pointed at Papa. “That old man brainwashed him somehow. Luca, you remembered. When you went home. Alfred said you recognized the brownstone, the furniture, your bed.”

“Donata. Don’t make this harder than it already is.” He clenched his jaw. “You never should’ve left.”

“Is that what this is? Punishment for escaping. Do you think I wanted to live under Papa’s thumb? I left to get help.” I glanced back at Rex. “We came back for you.”

“Take her,” he muttered.

“Donata, let’s go.” Enzo practically dragged me out of the library. “I know you had it in your head that between the three of us, we could carry him out of here by force. But you know better than anyone that that’s not how it works. He found a home here.”

“He loves me.” I let Enzo usher me across the courtyard where our people had the entire household on the ground with guns held to their heads. “We were happy.” I briefly made eye contact with Belinda, Galina and her daughters.

“Come on. It was stupid enough for all three of us to come on this expedition. Let’s not linger.” He put me in the back of our SUV and then climbed in behind me. “Drive,” he ordered, and within seconds, the car rolled across the yard and headed out.

“Why is it always like this with us?” I sobbed into Enzo’s shoulder. “After all this time, we could finally be together. And he just went and found another thing to stand between us.”

“You fought for him. That’s all you can do.” He held me tighter. “He needs to fight back.”

“Today could’ve been a massacre. If I had wanted, I could have all of his people killed.” I wiped the tears off my cheeks. “He didn’t care.”

“First of all, going in guns blazing is not your style. You did the right thing. A peaceful takeover was the right call.” He blew out a breath. “Even though all I wanted was to see that old man get beaten to a pulp for what he did to Aurora and my son, Leo.”

“I’m sorry.” I hugged him. “That must’ve been hard for you. If we had

threatened his life, his people would've fought back. They stayed put because Maxim didn't call for them."

"Like I said, it was the right move." He let out a small laugh. "What now?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe it's time I let Luca Gallo go. For my own sanity, I can't play these wicked games with him anymore. That reckless girl from high school no longer exists. It's just me now."

"That sounds like a good plan to me." He kissed the top of my head.

CHAPTER 27

The name is Luca Gallo

MAXIM/LUCA

Two months ago, I never would've thought I'd find myself lurking about in the antechamber of a secret enclave, waiting to see the king of the Society. The small living area didn't look familiar at all. I'd gotten used to the difference between not remembering and not knowing. I was certain I'd never been here before, which made sense given how Luca was twenty-third in line to be the next Don Gallo.

My jaw clenched painfully at the thought. So many had died, that now the title of Don belonged to me. As far as Alfred knew, I was the only one left. I wanted to believe that I wasn't the only survivor, that more members of my family managed to live through the threat hanging over our heads for the last couple of years. Maybe now that I had returned, they would know it was safe to come home.

I ran my hand over the bust guarding the double doors to the boardroom. The silk wallpaper, the ornate furniture, the art, it all screamed old money. Not that any of the decor was done in good taste. It was all just old and expensive. Luca's house had a better style. I shook my head to remind myself that his house was mine—his life was also mine.

"Don Valentino will see you now." A tall and burly guy in what seemed like an expensive suit appeared in my line of sight. "Right through here." He pushed the heavy wooden door open.

The next room was more of a library that reminded me of the one at the compound. Tall bookshelves filled with leather bound books lined the walls. The fireplace was the focal point to the right. Though to the left, the piece taking up most of the space was a huge table, with a lion head carved in the

center of it. Someone took their branding seriously.

Rex sat at the head of the table, looking like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. A feeling I was familiar with.

“Thank you for seeing me,” I said as soon as he lifted his head from the papers in front of him.

“I didn’t have a choice.” He sat back on his throne-looking chair. “You have something I want.”

“That seems to be the recurring theme as of late.” I chuckled. Whereas I knew for sure I’d never been in this room before, I had a feeling Rex was, at the very least, an ally. “I’m here to make a deal.” No sense in beating around the bush.

“Sit.” He gestured to the seat to his right, which I found odd since the closest one would be the one on his left.

No point in arguing, even if I had something Rex wanted, what I needed from him was much bigger.

“You still drink whiskey?” He stood and ambled to the bar cart and poured two glasses. “First things first.” He set the tumbler on the table. His lips pursed. By the time I figured out what he meant to do, his right hook had already connected with my side. “That’s for breaking my sister’s heart.”

Fuck. “That was not my intention.”

“Oh.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Another recurring theme. You yanked her chain all through high school, harassed her in college, and now you decided you’re done with her.”

“Is that what she told you?” I cradled my left side with my right hand.

“It’s what I saw.” He sat and motioned for me to do the same.

He waited patiently as I ambled around him to get to the other side of the table. As I pulled the chair out, I realized why he’d offered me that particular seat. The chair was engraved with the Gallo family crest, a stag rearing on its hind legs. I’d seen it when I went home last week and met Alfred again.

“What can I help you with?” he asked when I lowered myself into the chair. “Maxim, is it now?”

“The name doesn’t matter. I’m here on behalf of the Brotherhood.” For everyone’s sake, I hoped Donata was right about Rex wanting peace. “I’d like to broker a deal between us.”

“Let me guess.” He shuffled through some papers until he found the one he was looking for. “Ah, here it is. The latest report on the Bratva in Chicago. They’re looking to expand to Brighton Beach.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s what I do.” He regarded me for a beat. “You want the Society to take that monkey off your back. What are you here to offer?”

“Peace.”

“Not enough.”

“Then tell me what you want.” I braced a hand on the table’s smooth wooden surface. “You said I had something you wanted. Without your help, our crews won’t survive. So I’m willing to give you whatever you want.”

“I want you to claim that seat,” he pointed at me. “Officially. As the new Don Gallo.”

“You trust me enough to bring me back into the fold?” I scoffed. “What if Donata is right? What if Papa has brainwashed me beyond repair.”

“Has he?”

“No.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you come with us? You wouldn’t be here having to beg for their miserable lives.” His jaw clenched. “I’ve never seen Donata so hurt. You tossed her aside like she meant nothing to you.”

“I didn’t come here to explain my actions to you. Just know that Donata means everything to me. I had to send her away for her own safety.” I raked a hand through my hair. “The situation with the Brotherhood is complicated. But with your help, I can fix it.”

“What do you need?” Rex met my gaze.

“Soldiers,” I said. The plan was as simple as that. We needed the ability to protect the compound and our people, to show them that the hit we took in Jersey didn’t make us weak. “We’re convinced the Chicago crew will move in to encroach on our territory. Their Pakhan has a vendetta against me. After what happened in Jersey and the retaliation that came with it, they seem to think we’re ripe for the picking.”

“I can offer you the same men that came to save you a week ago. They’re already familiar with the area and the location.” He grabbed his phone off the table and typed on it quickly. “When can you come home, Luca?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Even if all my memories remained fractured and unreliable, I remembered enough to know that there was a time when the idea of home with the Society seemed so impossible. By some miracle, I was still alive, and the Society was offering me a second chance.

Was I ready to return? Not quite. I had one more thing to do—a promise I made to Vittoria a long time ago. The words swirled in my head like a

faraway dream. But I knew them to be real. They never stopped being my compass. Even when I was lost in my own mind.

“They killed my family, Vittoria. Whoever did this to us will pay. So here’s my promise to you. I will have my revenge. And then I will return for what’s mine. Donata.”

“Soon.” I rose to my feet. “When will the men join us?”

“Give me twenty-four hours.” Rex stood and offered me his hand. “One bit of advice...don’t wait another two years to make it up to Donata. She’s out there actively trying to forget you.”

Actively? As in dating other men? What the fuck? The urge to send it all to hell and go after her hit me like an avalanche. This need I had for her consumed my thoughts day and night. But I couldn’t make the same mistake twice. This time, I planned on keeping Donata forever. I had one more task to do.

THAT NIGHT, I delivered the good news to Papa. Now that he had no secrets to keep, he seemed less worn out. “I knew you could do it, son.” He raised a glass to me. “With the new men, we’ll be able to expand into Chicago. Like the Society, maybe one day, we will rule them all.” He knocked back his shot of vodka.

“Of course we will.” Ivan poured another round of shots. “It’s all thanks to Maxim. Thank you, brother.”

The fireplace crackled with large orange flames that made Papa’s form cast a distorted shadow on the floor. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Papa was glad we were going to war. He hated to have the threat of the Chicago crew hanging over our heads.

“Let’s not count our chickens before they’re hatched.” I sat on the edge of the sofa armrest. “Just because the Society made a promise, it doesn’t mean they’ll keep it.”

“You’re right, son.” Papa braced his hand on my shoulder. “It’s too early to celebrate.”

“Maxim.” Tore burst through the library door, looking like he’d seen a ghost. “They’re here.” He panted a breath. “The Chicago crew.”

As soon as he uttered the words, the alarm in the compound went off.

They were bound to attack sooner or later. I'd hoped we would have one more day to get ready. "Get the women and children to the kitchen. And gather all the men."

"Yes, Boss." Tore rushed out the door.

"I'll call Rex." I took two steps toward the landline on the conference table, then remembered I now had a phone. "Fuck," I muttered under my breath then fished it out of the front pocket of my jeans.

A hint of fear registered in Papa's eyes as he ambled toward me. Not a minute ago, he'd been daydreaming about being the Pakhan to rule them all. And now here he was silently asking and expecting my protection. The mindfuck.

"They're early," I said when Rex himself picked up the phone.

"Jesus." He blew out a breath. "Can you hold them off? My men are on their wa, but they need more time."

"We'll do our best."

"Luca." He paused for a moment. "Don't put your neck on the line for them. They're not who you think."

"I got it handled." I dropped the call.

"What did he say?" Ivan poured himself another shot. "Are they coming or what?"

"They're on their way." I turned to Papa. "You should go down to the kitchen. You'll be safe there."

"Yes. Let's go now." He snapped his fingers twice to get Ivan's attention. "Leave the booze. And move."

I grabbed my gun off the table, darted to the door and opened it slowly. The intruders couldn't have made it inside the house yet, but I had to be sure. The quiet living room made the hair on the back of my neck stand out. It was the calm before the storm.

"It's clear." I motioned for them to follow me.

Before we reached the kitchen stairs, two men appeared at the entrance. Somehow, they had gotten through our line of defense, which meant, it was only a matter of time before the rest charged through the main house.

"Get down." I shot a glance over my shoulder, just as Papa grabbed Ivan to use him as a human shield. "Down now." I lifted my arm to aim at the intruders. I got the first man square in the chest, but the second one managed to shoot before he hid behind the door.

"Maxim," Ivan called for me.

“Fuck.” I stared at Ivan on the floor with his shirt covered in blood. I made to help him but headed for the front door instead.

Out on the courtyard, I found the second man dead on the cobblestones. When I lifted my gaze, I came face to face with one of Rex’s men, the one who’d led me in to see Rex this morning.

“Is the cavalry here already?”

“No cavalry. Just me.” He holstered his gun inside his suit jacket. “Rex sent me in in case you needed help.”

“Jesus. Well, I need help.” I ushered him inside the house.

“I’m Frank.” He offered me his hand after I locked the door behind me. “Mr. Gallo.”

“I know.” I shook his hand. “Call me Luca.”

Papa met us halfway. “The kitchen is not safe. They’ll come through at any moment. We need to leave.”

Frank glared at Papa before he turned to me. “Rex gave me specific instructions. If things got bad, my only job is to bring you home safely.”

“Where Maxim goes, I go.” Papa dipped his head in my direction.

Frank’s eyes flicked over to mine, waiting for a response. For a whole week, I’d been dragging my feet. Not because I was still scared but because I wanted Donata to be wrong about Papa. I wanted a reason to let him live. I glanced at Ivan on the floor. The son who did everything to please his father. Even though he knew he could never win his favor because Papa’s fatherly love had died with his oldest son Maxim.

Galina stood by the stairs, her whole body shaking as she scanned the room. She’d come up when she heard shots. The fact that she was here mainly to make sure Papa was okay made my blood boil. The asshole was ready to jump ship and leave them all to die.

I gripped him by the collar of his dress shirt and shoved him against the wall. His face paled as his eyes widened in surprise. Did he think I was his fucking puppy? “I didn’t kill you before because I was waiting for you to make this right, not for me but for them. But now I see that’s not going to happen. You don’t give a damn about your people.” I pressed my forearm to his Adam’s apple.

“What do you want?”

“You owe me nine lives, Dimitri Belov.” I pressed the barrel of my gun to his temple.

“You can’t be serious. I’ve been like a father to you.” His lip trembled.

“I had a father. A mother. Sisters. A family.” I squeezed my eyes shut, then glared at him with all the hate burning a hole in my chest. “You killed them for money. You tortured them!” I screamed in his face, gripping his shirt tighter.

“That was Ivan. You know that.” He panted a breath as a bead of sweat streamed down the side of his face.

“Yeah, it was his idea to cash in on the bounties. But it was your idea to torture them for information about the Society.”

“We both want the same thing, Maxim. Think about that.” His gaze cut to Galina weeping over Ivan’s body.

“The name is Luca Gallo. And no, we do not want the same thing. You want glory and power. I stayed to save your people from you. They don’t deserve to die because of you.” I stepped back and aimed at his head.

“Dimitri Belov, on the murders of nine Gallo family members, the Society has found you guilty. The punishment for torturing and killing innocent people is death.

And will be carried out immediately.”

“What is this?” He furrowed his brows.

I pulled the trigger as the usual flitting images from my nightmares flashed through my mind. Memories of a time when life was precious to me. I wanted to get back to that version of myself. I pushed the fractured scene out of my mind and focused on Papa’s lifeless body on the floor, his brains splattered on the wall, and blood pooling around him.

It was done.

Nothing would ever stand between Donata and me again. No more revenge, no more psychopaths to get in our way, no more goodbyes.

“Luca.” Frank placed a hand on my shoulder. “The cavalry just arrived.”

CHAPTER 28

Meet You a Thousand Times

DONATA

“How do you like working in the ER?” Liam, the hot doctor from work, asked from across the table.

He’d been asking me out since I started working at the hospital three years ago. I never even considered him an option, but things were different now. I wasn’t waiting on Luca anymore. The sooner I got back into the dating pool, the sooner I would move on with my life.

“I like the chaos. It keeps me on my toes.” I sipped from my wine.

“Me too.” He beamed at me. “I’m glad we’re finally doing this.”

“Yeah.”

I drank some more, doing my best not to think about Luca and what he could be doing right now. No doubt he was spending most of his day with Belinda. She finally got what she wanted. She had Maxim all to herself. Crap, I had to stop thinking about him. He’d made his choice, and I wasn’t it.

“What do you think?” he asked with a polite smile.

Shit. I had no idea what he was asking. He’d been talking for the last five minutes. I completely lost track of the conversation.

“I’m sorry. I spaced out for a second.”

“Would you like to order an appetizer? The beef tartare is supposed to be the best here. What do you think? You want to split it?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” I gripped the menu and read through the options. “Beef tartare sounds great.” I lifted my head and my whole body jerked in surprise as Luca entered the restaurant and approached the hostess podium.

In the next breath, his eyes met mine across the room. Flutters spread from my stomach up to my chest as he sauntered toward me. He’d cut his

hair short again, and even shaved his beard. I swore I could smell his aftershave from here.

And, of course, he looked beyond hot in a dark three-piece suit. The same style he wore when he was teaching at Columbia. At the compound, he mostly wore jeans and a T-shirt. It should be illegal to have this much grace and confidence—all the things that made Luca Gallo my own personal brand of heroin.

No, it didn't matter if he was the most handsome man in the room right now. He left me. He chose to go with the Brotherhood. We were over. I hated him. I hated his soulful gaze, his soft lips, his tall form.

He stopped at our table and glared at my date with murder in his eyes. "Liam Brian Mancini. You're in my seat."

"How do you know my name?" Liam turned to me. "Do you know him?"

"Not going to ask again. Leave now." He gripped the back of his chair and moved it back while Liam was still sitting on it.

"I'm on a date here, pal." Liam shot to his feet.

"I'm not your pal. And no, you're certainly not on a date with my wife." Luca stalked forward and hovered angrily over Liam.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. She didn't say." Liam swallowed and moved out of the way. When he turned to offer me his hand as a goodbye, Luca stepped toward him and blocked him.

"You touch her again, I'll break your fingers." Luca could be so terrifying when he wanted to be.

"How dare you?" I shot to my feet to glare at him properly. "You have no right to come here and make a scene." I gestured toward Liam's retreating form.

"Sit down, Donata. We need to talk." Luca growled.

"I have nothing to say to you."

With a smirk on his face, he prowled toward me and whispered in my ear, "we either have a conversation here or at my place. Your choice." He let out a long breath. "I personally would rather talk in private in my bed."

"In your dreams." I pursed my lips.

"Always in my dreams." His gaze dropped to my cleavage.

When I didn't make an effort to sit, he bent down and put his arm over the back of my thighs. I shuffled back and slapped his hands away. "Are you insane?"

"Yes. Insane. Desperate. Wounded." He slowly stood tall as his intense

gaze bore into mine. “I’m not leaving until you listen to what I have to say. Five minutes of your time is all I want. Is it going to be here or at my place?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” I lowered myself into the chair.

“Good.” He unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat. “You look beautiful tonight.”

“Bite me.”

“Don’t tempt me, Ms. Salvatore.” He motioned for the server. When the guy showed up, Luca ordered a glass of red wine.

“What do you want?” I sipped my drink.

“I wanted to explain why I couldn’t leave with you the night you came to rescue me.” He reached for my hand, but I pulled it away.

“I don’t care.” I wasn’t going to let him use his wiles to confuse me again.

“If I had left with you that night, Dimitri Belov, Papa, would’ve seen it as a personal insult. He would’ve sent someone after me. I’m done running, Donata. I couldn’t stand the idea of yet another psychopath standing between us.”

“Where is he now?” I met his hazel gaze. “He let you out?”

“He’s dead.” He drank deeply from his glass. “I killed him last night.”

“Omigod.” I covered my mouth and shot a glance over my shoulder, hoping no one had heard Luca’s confession. “You could’ve said all that to me and not just cast me aside like I was nothing.”

“I had to. I wanted Dimitri to believe that you meant nothing to me, that I chose him over you.” He placed a hand over his heart. “After you left, all I could think about was finding you to bring you back. But you made me see that what we had wasn’t real. That it couldn’t be until I found myself again. I went to the Brownstone and saw Alfred.”

“I know.”

“It’s over with the Brotherhood. Please believe me. I never doubted my feelings for you. I only stayed to make sure his people were safe. And to end him.” He pursed his lips. “Ivan is gone too.”

“I can’t keep doing this with you.” I pushed my chair back. “I can’t.”

I rushed out of the restaurant with tears brimming my eyes. I didn’t want him to see me crying, to see how much his words affected me. Outside, I hailed a taxi and left without looking back. What did he think was going to happen tonight? Did he really believe he could barge in, scare my date to death, and make it all better? He was so wrong.

The next day, I went to the hospital before my shift started to apologize to Liam. He didn't deserve to be treated like that. Except when I tried to talk to him, he made up an excuse and took off before I could get a word in. Of course Luca got to him. Damn him.

"Dr. Salvatore. I heard you were back." Ida rushed past the nurses' station and hugged me. "How was Paris?"

Right. The cover story. After Ivan, Tore, and Maxim-slash-Luca kidnapped me, Aunt Vittoria told everyone I'd gone to Paris on holiday. The hospital was all too happy to accept her sizable donation and put my job on hold for me. Ida had no idea what I'd gone through. No one did outside my circle—Rex, Enzo, Santino, and Aunt Vittoria.

"It was good." I smiled.

"Oh, before I forget. You got flowers." She beamed then disappeared into the office behind the nurses' desk. When she returned, she had a ginormous floral arrangement on wheels. I'd never seen orchids and pink roses put together into such an intricate and beautiful design. "I think someone has a crush on you." She handed me the card. "Liam, maybe? That poor man has been pining over you for years."

"He's over it now," I said.

The elegant writing on the envelope sent my heart into overdrive. I was beyond pathetic if my name written in Luca's handwriting was already beginning to melt my defenses. Luca never played fair. I ripped open the envelope and stared at his message, while fat tears smudged the words.

Forgive Me

I was angry at Luca for excluding me from his heroic plan. But in truth, what was there to forgive? That Luca wanted to do the right thing? That he cared about the people who became his family when he had none? Or that he wanted to once and for all remove all obstacles so we could be together, forever like we always talked about?

My heart ached for Luca because in all the time I'd spent waiting for him, he was out there, more alone than ever, and fighting for his life. I'd been so stupid. I had to find him. Where the hell was he?

I grabbed my phone from the front pocket of my scrubs. As soon as I did, a text from a private number came in.

Private number: your final assignment is due tonight.

Me: who the hell is this?

Private Number: Don't be late, Ms. Salvatore.

I typed into my phone as I scanned the empty hospital hallways. I glared at the screen with my blood pulsing hard through my veins. And there it was again, the pull that Luca had always had over me—this aura of danger and intrigue that followed everywhere he went. It lured me in like a moth to the flames.

Private number: Once upon a time, there was a rich girl. She was indelibly beautiful. But like all gorgeous creatures, she was incredibly spoiled and rotten to the core. One night, she decided to leave her ivory tower and go for a walk in the dead of night...

She trudged through the dark forest looking for her knight. The woods were a dangerous place, plagued with thieves and wicked men. But she knew she didn't need to be afraid, that her knight would always protect her.

Luca was back. He remembered us.

Tears brimmed my eyes as I read his text again. I recalled the assignment from six years ago when Luca finally allowed himself to have feelings for me, to recognize that I had always been his dirty little secret because he had wanted me even when our love was forbidden.

So much had happened since then. I wasn't a naive princess looking for her protector. Though I was still, as always, waiting for him.

"Fuck." I placed a hand on my forehead.

I rushed down the corridor, half-expecting Luca to be there waiting for me. But instead, I found Alfred behind the wheel of a black Escalade. With a quick glance heavenward, I let out a small laugh, then ambled toward him.

As soon as he saw me, he climbed out to open the door. "Ms. Salvatore. Good to see you."

"I bet your life was boring when he wasn't around."

"He managed to keep me on my toes even then." He chuckled.

"Where are you taking me?"

"He's waiting for you." He offered me his hand.

I took it and climbed into the back seat. By the time Alfred turned right onto Central Park West, I was a complete mess. I wanted this nightmare to be over. I wanted a new start with Luca.

"Bow Bridge." Alfred stopped just before 74th Street and shifted his body to beam at me.

"Thank you."

The minute Alfred drove away, I glanced down at my scrubs. I had been in such a hurry to see Luca, I didn't think to change into something more date

appropriate. I supposed when it came to Luca, norms didn't apply. I trudged down the walk path that led to the bridge. As soon as he came into view, I fought the urge to run to him. I was afraid he would disappear, or someone would come and take him away from me once again.

"You remember." I asked when he was within earshot.

"The good and the bad." He pushed away from the railing. "I was afraid you wouldn't show."

"What would be the point of that? Destiny would only find another way to bring us together again." I smiled at the ground. "And also, you're stubborn as hell."

"I was prepared to grovel for years if necessary." He reached for my face and slid the pad of his thumb over my lips.

"You call this groveling, Professor?" I braced my hands on my hips. "You're not even on your knees."

"True." He stalked toward me as his gaze surveyed my eyes. When our bodies were inches apart, he dropped to one knee, and fished out a black box from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "The time I was lost in the dark, a feeling I didn't understand kept me grounded, pointing me toward truth north. The minute you came back into my life, I realized that feeling was my love for you. If I met you a thousand times, different lives, different versions of me, I do believe I would fall in love with you every goddamn time."

"Are you asking me something?" I wiped tears off my cheek.

"Would you marry me, Donata Salvatore?"

As if I could ever say no to Luca Gallo. My Luca. "I have loved you all my life, Luca. Of course, I'll marry you." I threw my arms around his neck as he rose to his feet and did a half turn with me in his arms.

"I love you, Donata. Always." He bent down to kiss my lips.

"I love you too." I got lost in his hazel eyes. Luca was all mine, and I was his. "Wait. What about Maxim? Even if Dimitri made him up, I'm pretty sure that wedding was real." I cupped his smooth cheek.

"Maxim is dead. And I don't mean figuratively. He was Dimitri's oldest son. He was killed two years ago. I suppose I was the replacement." I shook my head. "Your marriage to him is void. It was technically never real."

"Gross. He made me marry a dead man. Papa was demented." I gripped the lapels of his suit jacket. "I'm so sorry you got caught up in his craziness."

"It's all over now." Luca took the three-carat pink diamond from its box and slid it into my finger. "Until forever," he whispered. "Let's go home,

Donata.”

Home.

We’d been wandering aimlessly for years. Our time to go home and live our love was finally here. I slipped my arm around his waist, and together we strolled down the path back to Central Park West.

“Can I ask you something?” I glanced up at him.

“Anything.” He kissed the top of my head.

“The first assignment. You wanted me to wear that dress and meet you in Central Park. What were you planning to do?” Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

“Hmm.” He growled in my ear. “Teach you a lesson you would never forget.”

My breath hitched.

Epilogue

DONATA

With my gaze fixed on the cityscape, I stepped onto the terrace to find a moment of peace. Caterina, Rex's wife, was the hostess type. Since Rex and she got married two years ago, she'd made a point to gather everyone for Christmas brunch. Last year, I attended because I had skin in the game. I had a bet with Rex that Santino would never show up to a Christmas shindig with friends, family, and children.

To my surprise, he'd made it. And I had to pay up. I leaned my hand on the smooth surface of the terrace wall and craned my head to peek into Rex and Caterina's penthouse apartment. Santino was deep in conversation with his pregnant wife. I had no doubt she was the reason for his change of heart. Enzo and Aurora stood next to the huge Christmas tree near the grand staircase, literally just gazing into each other's eyes. Of all of us, those two deserved this much love and happiness.

"Red is definitely your color." Luca wrapped his arms around me and kissed my neck. "You look beautiful."

"You look okay." I hugged his arms, lifting my face to squint at the bright sun.

For so many years, we had to live our love in hiding. Even though Luca had returned to me months ago, I still couldn't get used to being here with him—to be living our love in the light. No more sneaking into my bedroom in the middle of the night, no more running, only us.

"Your mother wants to talk to me." He held me tighter. "Should I be concerned?"

"Yes." I turned around to face him. "Actually, you should run."

“I’m never leaving your side again.” He chuckled. “You’re stuck with me.”

“I love being stuck with you, Don Luca Gallo.” I kissed his lips.

With a sigh, he buried his fingers in my hair and deepened the kiss. He’d been so worth the wait. “I’m sure it’s business related. No rest for the wicked, I suppose.”

“She can be intense. But I do believe her heart is in the right place.” I pressed my forehead to his cheek.

Aunt Vittoria...Mom, Mother? Jesus, I still hadn’t decided what she was to me or what I should call her. She had done a terrible thing to Luca’s family. But in a very twisted way, her actions were the reason Luca and I were finally married. My heart had forgiven her the same night she threw all her resources into getting Luca back for me. But for Luca’s sake, I felt as though she needed a longer period of contrition. She couldn’t go around murdering entire families. Even if she’d done it to make sure Rex and I were safe.

“It’s okay for you to forgive her. I already have.” He cupped my cheek. “I thought she was like Papa.” He shook his head. “Dimitri. But she isn’t. Everything she did, she did it for you.”

“Luca.” I threw my arms around his neck. “Thank you.”

“I should go see what she wants.” He kissed my forehead, then stepped away.

“Good luck.” I beamed at his retreating form. The man was impossibly beautiful in a dark suit. I wanted to go home and spend the rest of the day with him, in bed, possibly naked.

“I still can’t believe you and Mr. Gallo are married now.” Aurora handed me a glass of champagne and sipped from hers.

Luca hadn’t been Mr. Gallo to me for years. But I could see why Aurora still thought of our high school years as a recent thing. She’d been gone for eleven years. The time Enzo and I spent in college helping Luca find his ex-fiancée’s killer, we’d thought Aurora was dead. Ironically, Ivan Belov and his crew were the ones who got her out of her hiding place in Spain and brought her to Jersey where Enzo found her again.

Funny how destiny always found a way.

“I’m so happy for you.” She hugged me.

“I’m happy for you too.” I pointed at her son, Leo. “I can’t believe you and Enzo have a ten-year-old kid. Yikes. How is that going?”

“Leo loves Enzo.” She took a deep breath. “Enzo is a great dad. They both just jumped right in. There was no awkwardness between them. Just father and son.” Her eyes watered.

“I’m glad.” I drank from my glass. “Who are the guys talking to Leo? I don’t know them.”

“Oh.” Tears spilled onto her cheek, and she quickly wiped them off. “They’re my twin brothers. Signoria Vittoria helped them escape when Angelo ordered their execution. She hid them like she did with me. They even went to college. Now they’re back. My whole family is back, thanks to your mom.”

The word was like an electric shock to my system. Of course everyone knew Aunt Vittoria was my mother, and that Rex and I were half-siblings. Oh, jeez I had so many questions about that.

“Yeah, that seems to be a recurring theme with Mom.” I smiled at the diamond ring on my finger. “She does have an odd way of helping people, doesn’t she?”

Aurora chuckled. “Our world is nothing if not unconventional. I’d say her methods are par for the course.”

“I guess you’re right.” I laughed.

“Stop monopolizing my wife’s time.” Enzo stepped onto the terrace and placed a possessive arm around Aurora. When she glanced up at him with stars in her eyes, he leaned in and whispered, “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“You guys are so adorable; I think I’m getting a little nauseous.” I drank some more bubbly.

Both Aurora and Enzo’s heads snapped to me. “Oh no. Are you?”

“What?”

“You’re nauseous?” Rex asked from the double French doors. “As in...?” He let the question linger.

“Omigod, you guys. No.” I put up both hands as if to fend them off. “I am not. So not. Pregnant. Luca and I want time to ourselves.”

“Sorry.” Rex furrowed his brows. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that.”

“Her face though.” Caterina laughed. “That was priceless.”

“Wait. Did I hear our queen bee is pregnant?” Santino and Luce joined in.

“Congratulations.” Luce and her big belly bounced a little. She was due on Christmas Day. She was waiting for her water to break any minute now.

The holiday season was her favorite time of year; there was no way she was going to miss this brunch. “I know this looks like a lot of work, but it really isn’t. It’s been great.”

Santino cleared his throat and leaned in and whispered in my ear, “this morning we had sex for the sole purpose of getting the baby to move along. She’s high on hormones. Don’t believe what she says.”

“What?” Luce slapped his arm. “I love being pregnant. Sure, it feels like I’ve been pregnant for years. But it’s been a sweet experience.”

“First of all.” I glared at Santino. “TMI. Second of all, I’m not pregnant.” I said it louder so the people still inside could hear me. “I’m not pregnant,” I repeated to the six of them.

“I believe you.” Caterina wrapped her arm around mine and pulled me toward the opposite end of the terrace. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you about Dad.”

Michael Alfera, the man responsible for killing most of the Gallo family, was Caterina’s and Enzo’s dad. While Enzo wasn’t surprised that his dad had done such a horrific thing, Caterina was still struggling with the idea.

“I’m sorry Luca had to go through all that.” She glanced down at her hands. “After Mom died, Dad wasn’t himself.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that after her mom died, Michael Alfera simply returned to being the monster he’d always been. “All’s well that ends well.”

“We’re not responsible for the sins of our fathers.” Rex put his arm around Caterina and kissed the top of her head. “Donata doesn’t blame you for what Michael did. And neither does Luca.”

“He’s right.” I met Rex’s gaze, then I realized he wasn’t just talking about Michael. “Talk to her.”

“Are you going to be one of those little brothers who’s always in her big sister’s business?” I teased, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Fuck no.” He furrowed his brows. “You’re my only sibling. I’m still trying to figure out how it all works.”

“You’re doing just fine, Rex.” I hugged him.

I hadn’t forgotten that when Luca came to him for help, Rex put aside his distrust and hate for the Russians and provided the soldiers Luca needed to fight off the crew trying to take over Little Odessa. He’d done it for me. Because he knew that losing Luca would’ve killed me. In my book, he was the best brother anyone could ask for.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I beamed at them. “My husband has been gone long enough. I think he needs rescuing.”

“I think you’re right.” He winked at me.

Rex’s library was past the living room and down the hallway. As I got closer to the door, the chatter and laughter from the party died down. The minute Luca’s deep voice filled the air, my heart rate spiked.

“How long have you known me, Vittoria?” he asked. “Did you really think I would fall for this?”

“It’s not a trap.” Vittoria said sweetly. “I have information. And you have a need. That’s all. Take it or leave it. Free of charge. We’re family now.”

Luca chuckled. “Is this you trying to be a mother? Jesus. You need help.”

“Is this you trying to be a good husband?” She fired back. “How long do you think it will last? Can you look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t care to look at the list of all the people who collected a bounty from Michael. You don’t care?”

Jesus fuck. Vittoria was out of her mind. Anger pooled in the pit of my stomach. Though when I barged into the room, my legs didn’t respond. Truth be told, I wanted to know the answer to her question too. He’d gotten revenge on Papa for what he did to Luca’s family. What about the others? The Irish, the Mexican Cartel, even the FBI had made use of Michael’s kill list.

“Dimitri Belov was a unique situation. I tried to let him go. If I had, sooner or later, he would’ve come for me. He would’ve put Donata in danger out of spite. You more than anyone understood how his mind worked. The people on your list are of no interest to me.” He clicked his teeth. “This isn’t a test, is it?”

“I wanted to make sure you were not going to leave my daughter again to go off on some vengeful quest.”

“No, that’s not it.” Luca exhaled loudly. “What you really want to know is if I have any desire to take my vengeance on you. After all, the people who cashed in the bounties were only able to do so because of you. Because you unleashed the hellhound on my family.”

“I had my reasons.”

“I know about your reasons. Donata told me. Don Giovanni Valentino’s murder couldn’t go unpunished. You did the right thing. It was heartless.” He scoffed. “If life were more congruent, we would never have to make tough choices. But in our mafia world, we don’t have the luxury of self-righteousness. I know that now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I let the door squeak open. Luca turned to face me, while Vittoria looked at me with remorse in her eyes. I would like to believe that she was sorry she had to do what she did, that we’re safe because she had done the impossible to make it happen.

“Donata.” Vittoria ambled around the desk. “I had to be sure.”

“I know, Mom.” I smiled at her. “Conventionalism has never been your forté.”

“No.” She let out a small laugh as tears pooled in her eyes. “Mom?”

“Yeah.” I met her halfway and hugged her. “You were there when I needed you the most. Over the years, I knew I could always count on you. I guess I was just mad that I spent so many years wishing you were my mom.”

“Every day, I wanted to tell you the truth. But it wasn’t possible. Michael would’ve taken you from me.”

“I know.” I swiped my cheeks. “I have to know though. More than once, you suggested I marry Don Giovanni. And then, later, you even suggested Rex. How did you think that was going to work out? You’re lucky I always thought of Rex as a brother.”

“I had to play along. If I had refused, Michael would’ve known I was hiding something.” She shook her head. “I was never going to let it go that far.”

“Thank God.” I still had so many questions. “Maybe after the holidays, we can have brunch just the two of us. I’d like to know more about you and dad.”

“I would love that. How about tomorrow?” She reached for her phone on the desk, typed for a few seconds then turned to me. “My day is wide open.”

“How about that? Our first mother-daughter date.” I had hated being mad at her, not being able to see her, or confide in her like I used to. Somehow, I now had Luca and a mother. My life couldn’t be much better than this. “It’s over now. He can’t hurt us anymore.” I reached for Luca’s hand and held it tight.

“No one can.” Mom beamed at me, then at Luca. “We finally have balance.” She paused for a moment. “And a sure-fire way to ensure peace.”

I played silly games when I was in high school. They were a way to imitate her, learn from her because she was the best at it. My mother had played the most dangerous game of chess I had ever seen. And won. I had a feeling it all started when I was born and brought us to this very moment.

She was without a doubt the most powerful Don within the Society. One by one, she had replaced those who threatened her family—Jimmy Gallo, Michael Alfera, the FBI agents, the Russians. When the time came, I had no doubt she would move the final piece on the chessboard—me.

“How far would you go to keep the peace?” She looked at me with renewed confidence in her eyes. “To keep your family.” She shifted her attention to Luca.

“You want me to un-seat Rex, don’t you?”

I wasn’t even mad. The woman was brilliant. I couldn’t fault her for that. The other original crime families had made a mess of everything with their endless bloodshed and greed. If it hadn’t been for my mother, the Society would’ve perished. She’d opened the door so I could one day become queen.

“Only if he loses his way. We’re the guardians of this secret enclave, Donata. Never forget that. We must remain vigilant.” She brushed my hair away from my face. “Rex is a good king. I’d say for now, you can enjoy the spoils of your victory. And remember that no matter what, I will always be here for you.” She nodded once at Luca and strolled out of the room.

“That’s my mother.” I pointed at the empty door. “Always two steps ahead.”

“I don’t think she’s wrong in this, Donata.” Luca stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “Of all the other late dons, she’s still here because she understands the game better than anyone else.”

“I know.”

“When the time comes,” Luca cradled my neck and looked at me with so much love and devotion in his eyes, “You would have my vote, my queen.” He kissed me softly. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Gallo.”

And this was the reason why marriages between the five original families had been forbidden since its inception...

THANK you so much for reading *Wicked Knight*, Book #2! I hope you enjoyed Luca and Donata’s forbidden love story. If you did, please do consider leaving a kind review. It lets me know you’d like to see more books like this one.

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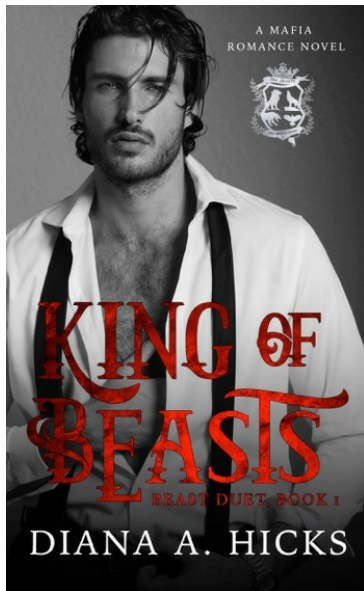
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Caterina Alfera, an angel lost in a world of beasts.

I didn't ask for her.

Destiny brought her to me.

And now I can't let her leave.

She's mine to keep.

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King of Beasts

(BEAST DUET, BOOK 1)

CHAPTER 1

Do You Have an Invitation?

CATERINA

“Five more minutes.” I hit the screen on my phone to snooze the blaring alarm.

When nothing happened, I opened one eye to make sure I tapped the right button this time. Then I saw Dad’s serene face on the incoming call. I scrambled to sit up and quickly pressed the device to my ear.

“Hello? Dad?”

“Caterina, it’s me.”

“I know, Dad. What’s wrong?” I squinted at my watch. “It’s one in the morning.”

“I know. I’m sorry to wake you, Bells. I need a lift.” He puffed out a breath. “You said last week, I could call any time.”

My entire body sunk deeper into the mattress. “*I need a lift,*” was code for “*I spent all my money gambling and now I don’t even have money for a cab.*” Dad’s addiction was getting worse.

“Text me your address. I’ll come get you.”

“I’m at the Crucible.”

I stopped midway with my mouth open and feet hovering over the hardwood floor. *Fuck me.* Why that place? “Okay. I’ll, um, I’ll be there shortly.”

“Thank you. You’re the best daughter an old man like me could ask for.”

“I’m on my way.”

“I am so sorry to do this to you, Bells. You have no idea.” His breath rustled on the speaker.

“See you soon, Dad.” I tapped on the screen.

These middle-of-the-night calls were getting out of hand. I had a job to go to. I couldn't sit here and listen to Dad drone on about Mom. I was hurting too. A pang of remorse washed over me. I was all the family the old man had left. Dad needed me. And I seriously doubted either of my two brothers would hop on a plane right now, wherever they were, to come to the city and help us out. I had to handle the Crucible all on my own. Putting aside the dread building in the pit of my stomach, I donned a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt.

The Crucible was a super fancy, by-invitation-only, nightclub in Midtown Manhattan. It was owned by one of the most ruthless mafia kingpins in the city. It was more than a club. It was a place of debauchery, for lack of a better word, that catered to patrons' deepest and darkest desires. In Dad's case, gambling.

I considered my tennis shoes for a moment, then decided to go with knee-high boots. Literally, the only sexy accessory I owned. While I didn't care what their snooty bouncers thought of me, a nicer outfit might increase my chances of getting in without having to call in a favor.

At this hour, I wasn't sure if I would get a cab quickly, so I decided to get an Uber. As if the universe were trying to reward me for being a good daughter, my assigned driver was only a minute away. I grabbed my keys and headed out to meet him at the curb.

My Chelsea apartment wasn't too far from the Crucible. With light traffic, we made it to the night club in twenty minutes flat. The cool, spring air rustled pollen off the sidewalk. I smiled at the whirlwind and thought of fairy powder. Something like that would come in handy right about now. Dad's gambling addiction was getting so bad, I was willing to give fairy tales a shot.

I blinked to clear a bit of dust that made its way into my eyes and darted inside the high-rise. In the main lobby, a chandelier hovered over my head and cast twinkling lights on the Italian marble. Even though I couldn't exactly hear the music playing a few floors up, the thumping of the DJ beat trembled against the walls and the soles of my boots.

"May I help you, Miss?" The man behind the receptionist desk called after me before I reached the elevator bay.

"I'm just going up to the Crucible." I offered him a friendly smile, trying not to feel so out of place and out of my league.

"Do you have an invitation?"

“No, I’m not here to stay. I’m looking for my father.”

An invitation from the Crucible owner wasn’t something that was easily obtained. Only the most powerful were allowed in. Dad fell into that category not so long ago. Though in the past couple of years, after Mom passed away, Dad’s position and wealth had deteriorated significantly.

I blamed Rex Valentino for all our problems. In so many ways, Rex kept Dad a prisoner in this place. Rex afforded Dad the opportunity to gamble for days at a time. He took advantage of Dad’s suffering to suck him dry. Our family money was all but gone.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you in.” He tapped his earpiece as his eyes glazed over me. After a quick nod at the security camera to my right, he smiled at me. “This way, Ms. Alfera.”

I opened my mouth to ask how he knew my name, but I already knew the answer. I glared at the camera and imagined the all-powerful Mr. Valentino with his arms over his chest, watching me on his monitors, studying me like I was some kind of bug. I pulled on my coat and fastened the buttons. Rex had a way of making me feel like he could see through my clothes.

Of all the other times when I had come looking for Dad, this was the first time he decided to let me in. Why now? I supposed his reasons didn’t matter. I didn’t have time to stand here and question his motives. Dad needed my help. When he had called earlier, he sounded sad and defeated, as if he had gone too far this time. Had he?

Given the beast that managed this club, I’d bet he’d encouraged Dad to lose even more money. I didn’t have any kind of cash with me. My job as a creative director at A-List, an advertising agency, afforded me a nice apartment in the city and a few luxuries. But it would never be enough to pay for Dad’s gambling debts. All I could hope for at this point was to come to some sort of arrangement with Mr. Valentino, so Dad could come home and get the help he needed.

With my heart thumping in my throat, I followed the security guard into the elevator. I had no idea what to expect of the exclusive club that took up most of the forty-story building. I pictured an old school casino with a smoky bar that smelled of bleach and cigars, like something from a goodfella’s seventies movie, something cliché and cheesy.

My heart broke thinking how Dad had fallen prey to the release he was offered here. Though, I understood why he kept coming back. Two years was nowhere near enough time to get over Mom. Most days I still picked up my

phone to call her. Only to realize that the number on my contacts wasn't hers anymore.

The pressure in my chest tightened like it did every time I thought of her. I inhaled and focused on the task at hand instead. I still had one parent left, and he needed me. Falling apart now wouldn't help either one of us.

"Here we are." The security guard smirked at me as if he knew something I didn't. I ignored him because his smugness was the least of my problems.

"Which way?" I glanced up when the elevator door opened and sucked in a breath. "This doesn't look like the gambling room. My father is Michael Alfera. He asked me to come for him." Somehow, I managed to keep the begging tone out of my words.

A tinge of recognition mixed in with trepidation touched his eyes. When he spoke again, the knowing smirk from before had disappeared. The name dropping had worked. Even if Dad was past his prime, in his time, he had been revered, if not feared, as much as Valentino was now.

He had met Mom when he was in his fifties. For her, Dad turned his life around and became the man she wanted him to be—good and decent and kind.

"Mr. Valentino has asked that you wait at the bar. He will find you," he said over the loud, sensual music while he held the elevator door open.

I turned my attention to the opulent scene in front of me. Not what I had expected from someone as ruthless as Rex. Shimmering chandeliers, set at intervals, hung from high above. I counted twenty of them before I decided it wasn't worth the effort. Their reflection on the massive windows made the warehouse look like it went on forever. The gold and blue accents and high-end finishes were everywhere—from the velvet furnishings and smooth marble floors to the ritzy wallpaper and shiny banister—not a single detail had been spared.

My escort patiently waited for me to peel my gaze away from the velvet sofas and club chairs grouped together where two couples were engaged in a make-out session that was about to become something else. When a nipple popped out in a confusion of arms and legs, I quickly turned away from them.

My gaze landed on the next set of couches where a woman sat seemingly by herself, eyes closed, mouth slack. By the way she kept writhing in her seat, I didn't think she was alone. Every group of people acted like they were in their own living rooms, minus the privacy. I supposed that was the purpose of it all. I wasn't a prude, but this was a bit much for me at two in the

morning on a Tuesday. In six more hours, I had to be at work.

“Ms. Alfera.” The security guard motioned toward the bar at the far end of the room to get my attention. “This way.”

I snapped out of my trance and even managed to follow him without falling on my face. I accepted the bar stool he offered, glad to be away from the sexual commotion on the main floor. What the hell was a seventy-year-old man doing in this place? This wasn’t Dad. Or, at least, not the Dad I knew.

“Ms. Alfera.” The bartender set a glass of rosé in front of me.

“No, thank you.”

“My apologies. I was told this was your drink. I can get you anything you want.”

The wine was my go-to whenever I needed a drink, but it wasn’t about that. “I’m not here to mingle. And who told you that was my drink?”

“Mr. Valentino always makes sure his guests have everything they need. It makes the experience much more memorable.”

I swallowed and then started coughing. With a kind smile, the bartender pushed the glass toward me, and I took it. Maybe a little liquid courage would help. “I’m not here for any kind of experience, or whatever it is you do here.” I motioned toward the multiple set of living rooms along the main floor. “I’m here to collect my father. Would you please let Mr. Valentino know I’m tired of waiting?”

“Of course.” The bartender nodded and walked away.

“Wait,” I called after him, but he was gone.

I fished out my phone from the side pocket of my coat and dialed Dad. After several rings, the call went to his voicemail again. No doubt his moment of clarity was gone, and he was somewhere in this building gambling away what little money he had left.

“Phones are not allowed in the Crucible,” a female voice whispered in my ear. “I’m surprised they didn’t take it from you on the way in.”

“I’m looking for someone.” I turned to meet the woman’s gaze.

She had that perfect “just been fucked” hair, and her cheeks were a pretty pink. The smile on her face was bright enough to light the room. “I’m Sofie.” She offered me her hand. “It’s my first time here. Gosh, I feel like I can finally breathe. You know what I mean? That feeling when you just get shit off your chest and then you can truly breathe?”

“I don’t, actually.” My lungs worked just fine. My sex life, on the other

hand, was sort of on hold at the moment. I glanced down at my hands to hide my frown. My entire life had been on hold for the past two years while Mom lost her battle with cancer.

“Hmmm.” She leaned on the counter suggestively. “Did you enjoy the show? Earlier?” She pointed at the spot where I was sure I had ogled her for a good five minutes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...you know. I’m not here for any of that.” I shook my head several times.

“That’s okay.” She beamed at me. “We’re moving down to room twenty, if you want to join us.” She pointed left to a cluster of deep blue sofas dotted with gold decorative pillows.

My heartbeat spiked at the idea of joining her group. That wasn’t me at all.

“Um, no, thanks. I’m good.” I reached for my glass and took a big gulp of wine. Where the hell was Dad?

And then I felt it. His presence had a way of sucking all the air out of the room. The hair at the back of my neck prickled. Instinctively, I drew my coat closer and checked the buttons. I lifted my gaze and found his reflection on the mirrored panel behind the bar. His form was no more than a shadow as he approached the top of the grand staircase that led to what I assumed was the VIP loft. He gripped the golden banister and leaned slightly forward as if he were searching the room. Even though it was dark, I swore I could feel his gaze on my back, willing me to face him.

I slid off the barstool. A part of me wanted to run out and never come back, but I still didn’t know where Dad was. With a shaky breath, I braced myself and turned around. But when I did, he was gone. Did I imagine the whole thing? I had hated Rex for so long, maybe I was starting to hallucinate about him. Why did he think everyone should bow to him as if he were some kind of king? *He wasn’t*. He was a criminal, a nightmare, a heartless thug who didn’t care how much he was hurting Dad and me. I wanted to knock some sense into Dad for putting me in this position.

Whatever game Rex thought he had going on was over. I was done sitting around like a good girl, waiting for Dad to magically appear. He was obviously not on this floor. I pushed off the counter in a huff, pissed off that I had let this much time go by. In my defense, it was two in the fucking morning and I was beyond tired—not just from lack of sleep but from my entire life.

Intense heat hovered over me before his hand brushed my lower back. My body jerked in surprise and raw nerves because, this time, I was sure Rex was real and standing right behind me. He'd come out of nowhere and now had me caged in against the barstool. I reached for my wineglass and downed the rest of it. Great, the man had officially driven me to drink.

"Shhh." His long fingers appeared in my peripheral vision. Then the rustle of his dark suit had me thinking he had stuffed his hands in the pockets of his trousers. "Why so jumpy?"

"I'm not." I managed not to slump my shoulders or do anything else that would indicate I was cowering at his mere presence.

"How long are you going to pretend you don't know me, Caterina?" Rex's smooth, deep voice was loud and clear over the music. When he released a breath, a puff of warm air traveled from the nape of my neck and settled between my legs.

Yet another reason why I hated Rex Valentino so much.