

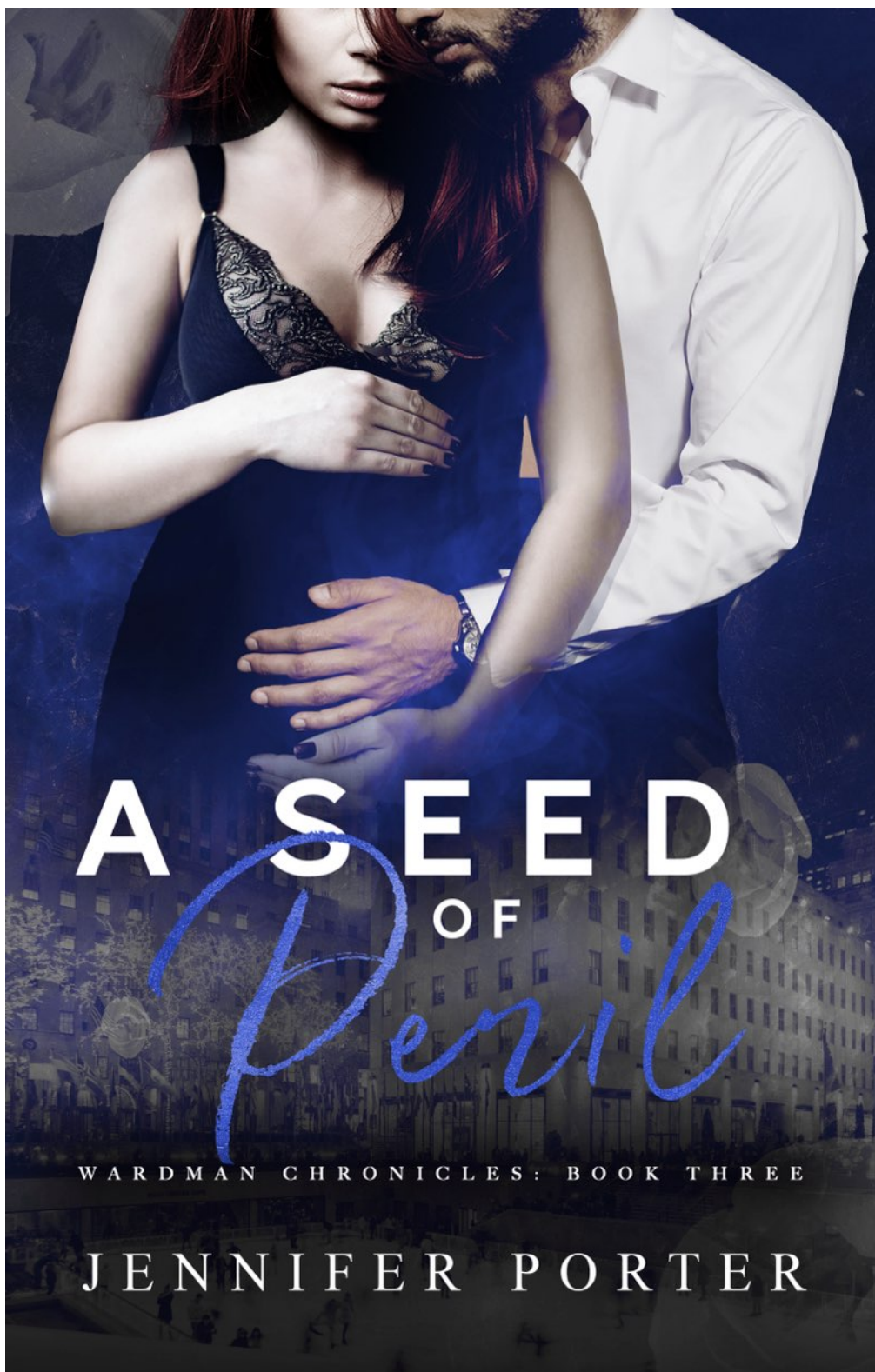
A SEED

OF

Peril

WARDMAN CHRONICLES: BOOK THREE

JENNIFER PORTER



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BEFORE YOU START READING

A Seed of Peril is an adult paranormal mafia romance meant for those 18 years of age and above. This story contains scenes of violence and sex and explores the topics of death and grief.

It doesn't shy away from blood, gore, and foul/offensive language. It also depicts the use of weaponry, such as guns and knives. You have been warned.

For a more detailed list of content warnings for this novel and any future works, please visit my website.

For all the moms out there, hug your babies tight.

*To those of you who have lost your mother, I wrap my arms
around you in the tightest hug.*

“Conquer yourself rather than the world.”

— Rene Descartes

chapter ONE

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

“LOOK, LULU, IT’S UNCLE SONNY,” Katrina pointed out.

Holding my hand and with Mr. Cat snug in her other arm, Katrina and I walked through the foyer. As Sonny waved, I greeted him with a nod and a friendly smile.

“Good morning, Uncle Sonny!”

“Good morning, Katrina.”

“Lulu, let’s ask him to come sit with us.”

I watched Sonny go back to whatever he was previously doing on his phone, which was probably updating himself on what was going on in the world today. He, along with almost everyone else, did it nearly every morning.

I swept my thumb back and forth across Katrina’s knuckles. “Later, honey. Sonny’s busy.”

She let out a defeated breath, making me smile. “Oookay,” she said, drawing out the O.

Upper Saddle River was growing on me. It was a nice, rural city with lovely greenery, beautiful wooded areas, and a

choice of parks suitable enough for the baby to see and enjoy. The residents weren't as stuck-up as I thought they would be with this being such a rich suburb. It was a pleasant and welcoming surprise. I'd already become fast friends with the older woman, who ran the nearest flower and potpourri shop. She had a familiar spirit about her—a spirit I mourned, which was probably what mainly drew me to her. Eventually, I needed to set up a time for us to chat over coffee.

I was glad Dominic made the switch out of Englewood, although I occasionally missed our old place. Despite the memories and that attached pain, that was what I missed most—the memories.

The smell of freshly baked bread in an upturned kitchen with the entertainment of the music of Italy.

My stupidly enormous shower.

Mine and Dominic's first kiss.

Nadia's laughter... And Hector's fatherly embrace.

Dominic said I could go visit the old place whenever I wanted, that he'd arrange things with its new owners, but I didn't know how I felt about that. I told him I'd think about it. Truthfully, I knew I had to pull away from the past. The mansion. People. Old histories. I couldn't truly heal from all my trauma otherwise.

I had to keep my focus on the present, creating new memories here. Maybe after the baby arrived, I would consider that road trip.

Katrina ran to the door for the sunroom, throwing it open and telling me to hurry up while she raced inside. It was one of our favorite spaces in this place. Shaking my head and smiling, I closed the door, turned on the television mounted on

the wall, and drew back the heavy, white curtains, bummed it was dreary outside yet again. I wanted sunshine—not constant clouds and fog.

Inside the mini-fridge off to the side, I grabbed a blood vial bag—my first one today. Katrina finally knew about this part of the pregnancy, but she tended to forget what the liquid actually was, and when she said it was juice or fruit punch, I didn't correct her. What was the point, honestly?

Seating myself next to Katrina on the taupe-colored, two-seater sofa, I browsed the channels for something to watch.

Taupe, dove gray, and white were the main colors in the sunroom, the furniture holding the grays. The sofa, two motion club chairs, matching ottomans, and the two lounge chairs had a nice resin wicker. Faux wood held up the side tables and the coffee table. Out back by the pool were more lusciously cushioned furniture around a dining table and matching chairs, all the same dove gray shade.

I liked the color; what could I say?

“Ooo, ooo! Can we watch this?” Katrina excitedly asked the moment I landed on one of her favorite cartoons.

“Sure.”

While she was immersed in that, I texted Dominic, asking how his morning was going. Among his few morning errands, he needed to pick up more blood to top off our stock and grab groceries to restock the kitchen.

Dominic always had someone else buy groceries. He hated grocery shopping unless it came to buying the ingredients for his homemade tomato sauce. That was strictly his thing, something about no one having the nose and eyes for the most

important components—the tomatoes, the garlic, the herbs. I didn't care. It was his niche, and it made him happy.

Dominic texted me.

We won't be much longer. Is everything alright?

Worrying about me, as usual. It was adorable.

Of course. I just miss you.

I miss you too, Bellissima.

Thinking about groceries and his spaghetti sauce made my stomach rumble.

We want your world-famous sauce.

I closed my eyes, slowly drawing in a relaxed breath, loving the feeling of our baby's movements. They weren't strong yet, but they grabbed my attention more than flutters. I remembered the first time I felt those flutters. It was the night after we moved in; I was fifteen weeks along. I was taking my morning shower. I cried tears of joy. Dominic didn't cry, but I could tell he, too, was happy by the way his smile reached his eyes.

Soon, my love. Be patient.

Easier said than done when it came to his cooking. I sent him emojis of the smiley face sticking out its tongue and the laughing emoji.

Sometimes, it dawned on me all over again that I was dating a man like Dominic, who was not only one of New Jersey's most dangerous, but a man who had taken lives without an ounce of remorse or regret. Our lives weren't in the same stratosphere in the beginning, but our souls were secretly tethered, hungry to mingle and intertwine by the flames of our personal hells—hells we learned to blend and tame together.

I guessed I always had a thing for the sexy, sensuous wolf.

chapter TWO

Friday, January 20, 2017

I STOOD on my tiptoes and tenderly nibbled and sucked on Dominic's earlobe, running my fingers down his ravishing, dark gray suit with paper-thin, white pinstripes. Reaching his slacks, I slipped my hand inside, grabbing his cock. A long, low moan rumbled deep in his chest, sending a wave of pleasure skating through me and between my thighs. My lips brushed against the shell of his ear.

"I'm really fucking hungry."

Dominic was expected at Mr. Stefano Baldomero's estate for one of the usual kiss-ass luncheons to keep the peace, where conversations were as stale as the liquor store wine they served.

I wouldn't let him leave without first teasing him. How else would he have realized he should've told Stefano no and stayed here with me?

Dominic grabbed the back of my neck and forced us closer. A ring of scarlet lit around his irises, gradually bleeding into the blue. As he parted his lips, his breathing grew heavier, fanning over my lips.

That luncheon was now a mere forethought.

My boyfriend was merciless in his lust, so rough I almost lost my footing after he crashed his mouth to mine. Our bodies were desperate for one another, rubbing and grinding as we pawed at each other.

I removed my hand from inside his slacks before grabbing and tugging on his dark purple tie, flattening my other palm against his back at his right shoulder blade. I pulled him as close as possible. Dominic cupped my ass, further bringing out that naughty, playful side I loved.

I wanted his cock—not the foreplay. I couldn't fight my cravings anymore. Pushing on his hand, I eventually gave it a playful love tap, making a tsking sound. Once he let me go, his chest rising and falling with each labored breath, I undid his belt buckle and slowly sank onto my knees, never breaking eye contact through it all.

Wasting no time, I took the head of his cock in my mouth, teasing my tongue up and down its wet slit.

“Fuck,” he groaned. He adjusted his footing and pulled my hair tie out of my hair, threading his fingers in my unbrushed mop. “That’s right, baby. You like that? You like my cock in your pretty fucking mouth?”

I made a noise, agreeing, now relaxing more of my throat as I took all of him, his pubic hairs tickling my face. I held his thigh, wrapping my other hand comfortably around his cock, fisting him as I sucked.

I looked up to see his head tipped back, lost in our rhythm as he fucked my mouth.

He moaned. “Yes, *amore*. Yes.”

More of his savory precum slid down my throat. His cock was thick, throbbing. He was ready and now at *my* mercy. We both loved it.

My own slit was slick, the temptation to touch myself too strong to ignore. I let go of his thigh and slipped my hand inside my pajama pants, fingering myself, moaning against his cock. Dominic growled, tightening his grip on my hair as he neared the unforgivable point of no return.

He hissed after I began to suck harder, finding my own release dangerously close.

“Yeah... Yeah, that’s it.”

I fought to maintain the rhythm we had going as we reached the tops of our cliffs of ecstasy. I fingered myself faster, my clit swollen and ready. Through our moans, groans, and desperate rhythms, we simultaneously lost control, swimming in our own, heavenly seas. I swallowed every drop he gave me, holding onto him while I came off my high.

Adjusting to sit more comfortably on my knees, I looked up to see Dominic standing straight, his breaths steadier. Beads of sweat gave his perfect skin a beautiful sheen. He was always a beautiful sight, whether asleep, in suits, aroused, or simply making himself an espresso.

“Full?” he wondered, lifting his brow in that playful way of his. Nodding, I took him out of my mouth and slipped my soaked hand out of my pants, staring at his soft, flaccid cock as I touched it.

I was still hungry, leaning forward and kissing the area of his skin just above his hairline.

“No.” I dragged the tip of my tongue teasingly along his skin.

He then pulled me back up on my feet, tucking his cock back into his slacks. I held his suit lapels, admiring his eyes as the last of the red that colored them faded. Fastening his belt, he brought his mouth to my ear, his words almost making me come for a second time.

“I’m fucking you raw when I get home. You’re not the only one who’s still hungry.”

BIANCA SUGGESTED MAKING me lunch today, and I couldn’t say no. I lacked any energy whatsoever to lift a frying pan, let alone throw together something as fast and simple as a salad or sandwich, and to be honest, a motherly meal sounded heavenly.

Walking back into my and Dominic’s bedroom—in a robe and my hair wrapped in a towel—I found Katrina sitting on the edge of the bed, happily kicking her legs as she waved, a smile on her face. She was so carefree, and it was continuously beautiful to witness. Bianca sat on the sofa eating one of her go-to meals—Caesar salad from the convenience store a few minutes away.

As soon as the scent of eggs found my nose, nausea hit me like a brick.

All my life leading up to the past couple weeks, I enjoyed eggs, preferably either fried or scrambled.

“I didn’t know if—”

Bianca went quiet, her upbeat demeanor vanishing after I gagged and covered my mouth in a panic, turning around,

clutching my towel and robe and running to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet.

“Oh, shit,” Bianca cursed herself from the bedroom. It went in one ear and out of the other as I was too busy puking. “I forgot, Lilith. I’m so sorry!”

“Will Lulu be okay, B?”

Sensing Bianca standing beside me, she reassured Katrina before closing the door.

“I really am sorry, Lilith.” Her guilt poured off her tongue. She knelt on the white tile floor at my side but still respected my space. I was grateful.

Certain I didn’t have to vomit anymore, I clutched my robe at my chest, slowly breathing in and out and leaning away from the toilet bowl, eventually maneuvering around so I sat back against it. I freed my hair from the towel and set it on the floor, while Bianca flushed the toilet for me.

“Are you alright?” she asked, worry and concern still plaguing her.

Nodding, I looked at her. Motherly concern glimmered in her eyes. Smiling some, I said, “I am now.”

We both shared an awkward laugh.

“It’s okay,” I assured her, readjusting against the toilet bowl. “Shit happens. Just please get those eggs out of there and open the windows.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. Bianca then got off the floor and after a moment, helped me to my feet. I closed the toilet seat cover and then sat on it, taking a few more minutes to get my bearings.

The more time I spent with Dominic's mother, the more she began reminding me of Nadia. To say it didn't break my heart would've been a lie. The way Bianca made sure I was fed, even more so now with the baby coming. Her tender touch, like when I was sick just now; it wasn't the first time she cared for me during one of my puke sessions. How she carried herself, her nature, even sometimes calling me "honey" made me do a double take.

I was finally content with Bianca being in our lives. Hell, I had even been mulling over the idea of asking her to be a godmother to the baby, which I still needed to bring up with Dominic.

Bianca also tended to frequently remind me of my mom more often than not. I missed Mom so fucking much. I fucking hated that she wasn't here.

Becoming a mother myself opened the floodgates of memories of my mom and the longing for her presence. I only hoped I'd be a wonderful mother like she was.

Tears threatened to fall at the same time Bianca came back in the bathroom from the bedroom. She put the air freshener on top of the toilet, then kneeled beside me, placing one hand on my knee.

"I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to." I could hear the soft smile in her words.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, allowing the tears to fall. She gently put her arms around me, and I sank into her embrace. She didn't talk—just held me—and I was thankful because I wasn't ready to let her all the way into my heart and mind quite yet.

Minutes later, she said, “Let me get you some water.” I could only manage a nod. Letting me go, Bianca rose to her feet before stepping over to the sink to fill a small cup with water. When she offered me the cup, I gratefully took it from her. The cool water was refreshing to my dry throat. She gathered a washcloth and wet it under the sink, wringing it out. She folded it up lengthwise while walking back over to me and dabbed my face with it.

“Why don’t you take the rest of the day and stay in bed?” she suggested. “Rest will do you good.”

“I think I will,” I agreed. With help getting back to my feet, I took the washcloth from her. “As long as you and Katrina bake some of those oatmeal chocolate chip cookies that we’re all obsessed with.” I smiled, winking.

“Cookies!?” Katrina shouted from the bedroom.

Bianca and I broke out into laughter.

FOG BEGAN SETTLING in after dinner, ruining what was my pleasant view. The gentle breeze felt wonderful, however. It made the pool’s water ripple, making me think of the beach. The ocean. I craved both but settled for this for the time being.

I had daydreamed of the sun warming my naked belly at the beach on a summer day. I practically smelled the ocean, yearning for the waves to dance on my belly. I wondered how that would feel for the baby. When I deemed it safe, I wanted Dominic and I to bring our child to the beach and sit with them at the ocean’s edge, laughing while they played in the water. Soaking up such a carefree moment, basking in that rare, begotten sense of complete safety.

Rubbing my belly, I smiled. I couldn't wait to learn whether we were having a boy or a girl. I secretly preferred a girl, but their health mattered over everything. I would love my baby regardless.

With my palms now against the stone railing of our balcony connected to our room—we had a few balconies scattered around here—I leaned away from the stone, arching my back to stretch it. With all that my body was going through, it felt the effects.

A spacious patio was off to my left at the back of the mansion. Furniture, which closely resembled what was in the sunroom, decorated the outside patio, the only differences being that the outside patio also contained a long coffee table and two extra lounge chairs. An umbrella provided shade and protection from the weather.

Concrete bordered our in-ground pool, stone tiles branching off the concrete on all sides. Past the pool on its other side, the tiles led to more concrete and the guest houses attached to the property. The houses were set up more in the way of units, lined and stacked on both ends, with a stretch of units connecting both sides.

Trimmed and manicured grass was scarce outback except behind the guest units.

The guest units were white stone, brick construction like the mansion, sharing pitched roofs made of gray and blue-ish colored shingles. Each unit contained its own parking spaces, but a lot of the men parked out in the front. A few stray vehicles were parked at the units, but those belonged to some of the men's wives.

Dominic wanted to make sure his men and their families lived comfortably, too. A handful worked out deals with him

to own and live in some of the available houses along our private, gated road. His brothers lived here in the main estate. Dominic wanted it that way, and so did they.

For a man who stopped many hearts in his lifetime, he cared for his family. He cared for those he respected and loved.

The door to the balcony opened, the familiar sound of Dominic sparking his lighter immediately following. I watched the thin wisp of cigarette smoke waft past me on my right. Looking behind me, I eyed Dominic, shirtless and only clad in gray sweatpants that rode low on his hips. The delicate stem of a wineglass filled with blood rested in his hand.

Tease. And I fucking loved it.

Looking back at the landscape, I reached behind me, opening, and closing my hand, my signal for Dominic to hand over the glass. As he approached, his warm, soft chuckle was music to my ears.

“Thank you,” I said with a little pep after he handed me the wine glass. He kept a gap between us while having his cigarette, also staring into the fog.

Warmed deer blood slid deliciously down my throat. It was this particular pick of wildlife I had a preferred taste for, its note of sweetness pure perfection.

“So,” I said, itching to ask Dominic about the surprise he arranged for me, “about all those clothes...” As I looked at him, he kept his eyes straight ahead, smoking more of his cigarette. “How much?”

He tapped excess ash off his cigarette. “No need to concern yourself.”

“How. Much?” I repeated, raising my brow, unable to hide my smirk.

Dominic sighed, cigarette smoke disappearing into the air.

Sometime under my nose, he ordered me more maternity clothes. An entirely new wardrobe.

Silk blouses, sundresses in various shades and patterns, sweatpants, leggings, jeans, tank tops, and a miscellaneous collection of shirts and tops were added to my half of our walk-in closet. Like Dominic did with his clothes and accessories, everything of mine was arranged by type, color, and size, even what was in our drawers. After living so long in my own unorganized chaos, I enjoyed the peace organization brought.

A favorite of mine in my collection was a red dress Dominic bought me. It was an evening dress with straps and a slight V-neck. It had a zipper on the back. The fabric was stretchy and breathable. He bought it in multiple sizes so I could enjoy it throughout the pregnancy. As much as I adored it, I didn't know if I would actually wear it.

Already being self-conscious, I noticed pregnancy made it worse. All I saw was the weight gain, especially in my face, arms, hips, and ass. I found myself dealing with occasional acne, thanks to hormones. It was all causing me to slowly avoid mirrors again.

From the moment Dominic accepted me into his heart, he kept telling me how beautiful I was, how to dig down deep and see that beauty. He helped me rediscover and love myself, but pregnancy was sliding me back into that old, self-destructive mindset. The self-consciousness and doubt I battled was slowly creeping back in.

Fighting Fabio and the chaos and tragedy that surrounded his takedown ignited a hell of a flame within me. I felt my strongest, most confident. Nothing could slow me down. Then, Vincent barreled into our lives, and while I temporarily talked to a therapist regarding the guilt which ate at my insides, I found my family was the therapy I needed all along. But as this pregnancy progressed, fears that I wouldn't be able to rediscover my strength, let alone just find the strength for childbirth, were, at times, overwhelming.

I no longer saw the woman Dominic helped me discover. I saw the insecure, scared, shell of who I knew I was. It broke my heart that I let those lies win, but I was at an impasse on how to break down the reconstructed piece of this fucking wall.

The safest arms in this world wrapped around my waist, guiding me into his warmth. Setting my drink on the balcony railing, I rested my head on his shoulder, reveling in the feel of our hands on my belly and his tender kisses peppering along my neck.

“Three thousand.” He brought his mouth to my ear, his feathery kisses tickling me, his breath bringing me a welcome, pleasurable shiver. “I know you’ll never be accustomed to such a lavish life, but three grand is a drop in the bucket for a man like me.” His cigarette sizzled as it was ground out into the stone. Slipping his fingers under my chin and aligning our eyes, his everlasting adoration for me in his eyes was a blessing. “Whatever my family needs, they get. Understand?”

I nodded, cracking a smile. Turning in his arms, I slid my hand along the side of his face, taking every ounce of it in before kissing him. Slow and steady—that was our pace. I wanted to savor every moment, every second.

Without warning, my emotions took hold, tears sneaking into my eyes. *Why did this man find me attractive? What was it about me he loved? He could've had prettier women; why me?*

Concern found its way into Dominic's eyes. Threading one hand up through the hair at the back of my head, he guided me closer, our bodies gently pressing together. "My love... What is it?" He rubbed his hand up and down my back.

I placed my palms against his chest, my hands the barrier between us as I took a breath.

"I'm here," he tenderly reminded me, kissing my forehead. I closed my eyes, releasing tears. They rolled down my cheeks as I parted my lips to speak.

"Why do you stay with me? I'm no catch, and I'm certainly no *soldato*." My hands were my focus; I couldn't look up at him. "All I do is let you down."

"Look at me, Lilith," he commanded, his tone gentle. I did as he said, my next breath getting caught in my throat under my emotional weight. "Don't talk; just listen."

I nodded, sniffing.

"I brought out your inner fire. I made you grab onto your inner warrior and yank her to the forefront. That was the first time you showed me and proved to me that you *are* strong, that you *have* the confidence to succeed. You're a highly intelligent woman, Lilith. No one can take that from you. No one can take your strength and your beauty, so stop letting the voices in your head win." Dominic cupped my face in his palms, absolute adoration in his eyes. "Do you know why you're my *Bellissima*?"

I sniffed again, more fresh tears escaping. “Because you somehow find me beautiful?”

He sighed, clearly fed up with my self-hatred. “There’s that doubt again.” Tilting my head back slightly, Dominic pressed his thumb to the corner of my mouth, teasing my bottom lip. “You’re my *Bellissima*, not just because of your physical beauty, but also the beauty that is your soul.”

The moment he brought his thumb close enough, I gently grazed my teeth and tongue along its tip. His tone was soft again, caressing over my skin.

“There’s beauty in every word that spills past your lips.” He moved his thumb away from my mouth and toward my chin. “In the way you treat a person, no matter how broken they are.” Suddenly, Dominic scratched my mouth with his, his lips kneading with mine as he spoke. “You’ve made me a better man, Lilith, and I’ll never stop trying to convince you of the remarkable warrior that is you, *amore mia*.”

We held each other, drawn together in a passionate kiss. Pleasure ripped through me at the spark that ignited between us here and now. After a moment, Dominic cut off our kiss and cupped my cheeks again.

“You need to see what I see, Lilith. You need to be stronger because, from where I’m standing, you’re allowing those voices in your head to win. You’re allowing yourself to be weak, and that’s not you.”

While it wasn’t easy at first to accept what Dominic was saying, he was right. I needed to stop listening to my negativity and get my head in the game. I would never see the exact beauty that he saw, but I needed to at least stop hating myself. Mr. Rosini was one of the most powerful men in New Jersey who could have anyone he wanted, and he still chose

me. He was drawn to something about me. *Something* about me held his affection. I needed to trust when he told me things like this. I needed to believe him. I had to fight harder against my insecurities.

He let me go, leaving a thin gap between us—a gap I hated. Dominic looked down at my belly, feeling it. Cradling it.

I put my arms around his neck, kissing him and nuzzling my nose against his face. “I’ll try, I promise.”

“I love you, *Bellissima*.”

“I love you, *amore mio*.”

A soft smile stretched his lips.

We let each other go again, and then, he picked up his pack of cigarettes and lighter off the balcony railing before heading back for our bedroom. As soon as I started taking a sip of blood, Dominic spoke. I stared into the fog, hearing his words.

“I was once where you are. Hearing Lorenzo berate me for years in between beatings obliterated whatever shred of self-worth and confidence I had. Constantly being told you’re a worthless piece of shit fucks a kid up.”

There was a brief silence, and I thought Dominic was back inside our room until I heard him speak again.

“It wasn’t easy. It took years to break free of those fucking chains. Hector and Nadia helped open my eyes, and then, you came along and blew them wide open. That’s what I’ll always try to do for you.”

chapter THREE

Sunday, January 22, 2017

NOT BOTHERING to change out of my black, ribbed tank top and pink pajama pants I slept in, I took another bite of my homemade salad—with steak tips and the rest of the animal blood from my latest cup as its dressing—on my way into the basement. Dominic, his brothers, and a couple more of his men had spent the morning picking up their orders of ammunition and blood.

I tried getting Katrina and Bianca to join me, but they were too engrossed with the classic game Operation®.

Every time the buzzer went off, they laughed, Katrina thinking it was the funniest thing in the world. It was adorable.

She and Bianca got along so well; it was beautiful. To a stranger, one might've thought Bianca was Katrina's granddaughter.

Stepping off the last step to the basement, I walked down the long tunnel—hardwood flooring and white-painted walls instead of cement and stone—toward what was our new and improved weapons room. The set up inside was like our old one, just much bigger. Dominic had an indoor shooting range

built inside this new weapons room, too. The only other real difference was the small, attached room that was used for extra storage space. Along with the weapons room and range, we still had our surveillance room down here, as well as a bigger and improved torture chamber.

Halfway down the main tunnel was another one that veered to the left, harboring my favorite space here—our medical facility.

Three makeshift hospital rooms and a basic operating room made up the area, and the hospital rooms were the size of fancy suites, complete with state-of-the-art medical equipment, attached bathrooms, and large, comfortable beds.

My ultrasounds and exams began taking place in our facility after I left the hospital. Down here was where I would be delivering. I preferred it, to be honest. An emergency blood supply was secured in the facility for serious-enough injuries. Regular hospital staff—doctors, nurses, an anesthesiologist, a midwife, even a surgeon—were all available. All that was left was convincing Julie Barton to quit her job and work for us.

Julie was offered a much higher wage and a better environment, not to mention a cushy benefits package, but her heart was at Englewood Hospital with the staff she worked with for five years. She did, however, agree to personally examine me here at home and agreed to be here when I delivered.

I prayed every night for Dominic to convince her to join us. I didn't want anyone else for a doctor—only Julie.

Pressing my palm to the scanner, the weapons room unlocked, and I opened the door, finding Dominic and his brothers finishing putting away the new stock.

We kept the card scanners for the rooms in the basement but added palm and iris scanners as well. It was mainly about convenience or for those who forgot their key cards... Like I did more times than I cared to admit.

Pregnancy brain, I swore.

“Hey, Lil,” Dino greeted. We bumped our fists and wiggled our fingers at each other’s hands, laughing as he hugged me with one arm, feeling my belly afterward. “How’s the baby today?”

“Good... Hungry.”

“The usual,” Dino stated.

“Yeah.” I smiled, amused. “I’m bored and wanted to see what you all were up to.”

“Work,” Dominic said, entering from the storage space in a simple black suit with a black dress shirt underneath.

I wanted to rip off his clothes.

Too distracted by Dominic’s beauty, I neglected to notice Dino use my fork to take a bite of my salad. Dominic chuckled.

“Hey!” I whined, laughing as I grabbed my fork out of his hand and stepped away from him. “Fuck that; get your own.”

Dino laughed. “Aw, who can resist such a meal so delectable?” he quipped, talking in Dracula’s voice.

“Alright, alright,” Dominic said, unable to mask his amusement. “Go on, get out.” He waved his hand in a gesture for our brothers to leave.

Anthony, Angelo, and I greeted each other on their way out. Dino attempted to steal one more bite of my salad, but I

playfully pushed him away. With just Dominic and I now in here, I ate what was almost Dino's second helping, unable to tear my eyes away from the hunk of a man before me.

“Did you get everything you needed?”

He nodded once, stepping closer to me and cupping my cheeks, guiding me in for a gentle kiss. Distancing himself, he asked, “What are you doing down here, anyway?”

“Reality shows can only entertain me for so long.”

My boyfriend's smile was always a beautiful sight. Aside from boredom, I came downstairs to let him in on what happened while drinking my first blood bag of the day.

Our baby's movements had been strengthening these last few weeks, although I still hadn't felt a real solid kick yet... Until this morning. Words couldn't describe it. I nearly cried out of joy, along with reality reminding me that there was, indeed, a living being growing inside of me.

After the shock of the moment wore off, I rubbed my belly, telling our baby for the millionth time I loved it, only to be met with another powerful kick. Watching the baby move was incredible. It always would be. It didn't hurt but felt so damn weird. Watching the skin of my belly stretch to their movements was fascinating.

I was excited to see Dominic's reaction... If I could get the baby to kick for him.

Walking away, Dominic retrieved the small box of what were bullets on the table.

“More boxes?”

He nodded. It clicked; they must've been to add to the smaller supply he left in the drawer of his nightstand. Upon

approach, I noticed they were the cheaper, standard bullets—nothing special, unlike the hollow points.

As he was distracted, I lifted my tank top up over my belly, lowering my pants at the waist a little so he could feel. “Dominic?”

He looked at me, raising his brow. I pushed around on my belly, trying to get the baby to move. I could feel his or her reaction, wriggling around. “The baby kicked this morning.”

That got Dominic’s full attention.

On his way over to me, I rested my palm on a spot toward my lower belly, where the baby finally kicked. I closed my eyes, smiling while I drew in a breath, soaking up the moment. I opened my eyes when I felt Dominic’s hand on my belly, releasing my held breath. I gently pushed around along the sides of my belly, triggering the baby to kick once more. Dominic’s eyes went wide when the baby’s foot swiped across, stretching my skin. His hand remained on my belly as the baby continued to kick and move.

Cradling the back of my head in his right hand, Dominic kissed my forehead before resting his to mine. His other hand stayed on my belly as I held that wrist. We gazed into each other’s eyes.

“I love you,” he said, “so much.”

chapter FOUR

“WHY’D you let me agree to this?” Dominic asked, rubbing his forehead, elbow on the desk we had in our bedroom, frustrated at the webpage he had open on my laptop.

The webpage for where I wanted to build our baby registry.

I laughed, and Dominic did too, unable to mask his own chuckle throughout his frustration with the online process.

“Do you want me to do it?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ll figure it out... Eventually.”

I loved nights like this. The lights were minimal. Our fireplace, complete with a white-gray stone mantelpiece, was roaring. Our windows were open, and a fan was softly blowing to add to the cooler air because, well, hot flashes and night sweats. The entire room was soothing, the comfort of my pregnancy pillow the cherry on top.

The Golden Girls aired on the flat screen television mounted on the wall above the fireplace. My attention drifted as I watched, my thoughts soon elsewhere.

My hand on my belly, I closed my eyes, soaking up the baby’s movements. The baby was most active at night; go

figure. But even though the baby being active at night made it hard to sleep sometimes, I wouldn't trade this for anything.

Through all the ultrasounds and watching the changes taking place, pregnancy was surreal. Motherhood, in general, was surreal. I never envisioned it in my life's deck of cards, but here I was, knocked up by a vampire. The more I sat on whether to give our baby *Dianidine*, the more I leaned toward a yes. Dominic and I had talked on and off about it, and he agreed but said it was ultimately my decision. If I chose to let our child grow up as a hybrid, he would help him or her become accustomed to their bloodlust, adapt to their heightened senses, control their thirsts and murderous urges, and so on.

I didn't want those struggles for our child. And Dominic admitted he didn't either. Life wouldn't be easy for them regardless, but we would do our best to make it as easy as humanly possible. This world was cold. Cruel. Unforgiving. And so was this business. What was reassuring was Dominic explaining that he wouldn't bring our child up as Hector did in terms of what were his rules, methods, and discipline. That was a weight off my shoulders, despite already long sensing that choice just by how much Dominic had expressed over time how he hated Hector's ways.

Hector put them through hell. He didn't give his sons a choice, whether it was turning them into vampires or viscerally training them. They had to learn this way of life. Had to be exposed to all its horrors and ugliness.

One thing Hector put them through that Dominic filled me in on rocked me. When teaching them basic fighting, he made the kids fight each other until one of them tapped out, bled too badly, broke a bone, or passed out from a move, such as a

headlock. It was disgusting. Dominic acquired some of his scars from those fights. Anthony got his arm broken in a fight between him and Angelo. It was an accident; Anthony's arm got caught when being pinned down and twisted too far at an odd angle. Guilt consumed Angelo throughout Anthony's recovery.

Mr. Salamone forced them to fight each other repeatedly until they were skilled to his liking.

Nadia always tended to their wounds, secretly hating every second of it because it distressed her to see them all banged up and in pain. According to Dominic, she scolded Hector frequently, begging him to let them train with a professional so their chances of injury were slim to none. Hector didn't like that idea. He took offense, accusing her of insulting him and his ways, claiming she was out of line. I guessed that day, they had a big fight about it in his office. The boys heard the yelling and shouting. Nadia never fought Hector on that issue from there on out. That was the first and only time she, in a sense, bowed down to him. I was shocked to hear, just as Dominic was equally shocked when it happened. He figured her job being threatened played a big role and that it was her first time really challenging him.

I was glad she tried to continue to fight for their safety and what was best for them, even with simpler issues, such as allowing Dominic to learn to play the piano.

I missed her. I missed her warmth. Her fearlessness and her gumption. I missed my mother, Deborah, just the same. I was jealous that Dominic's mother was still alive and back in his life. I would've given anything for the chance to have my mother—and father—here with us.

Despite his unfortunate hand growing up, I hoped Dominic and his mother did, in fact, bond again. I wondered if he secretly wanted that, too, as much as he tried to convince himself and everyone else otherwise. Nadia Edmonds would always be the mother he never truly had. *She* was his mom in every sense of the word. Bianca had a hell of a mountain to climb to regain her son's love, respect, connection, and trust.

It reminded me of how blessed I was to have earned all of those with Dominic.

I remembered Nadia explaining how hard Dominic's walls were to crack and how much of a stone heart he carried. I was one of the few privileged to lift his mask and see the true man he was on the other side. The man that, indeed, had a soul. Who had mercy and forgiveness. I fell in love with a man, who no matter how broken, no matter how icy cold, would give me the world if he could.

Our child wouldn't just have a grandmother, a slew of uncles, and a cousin waiting to spoil him or her with an abundance of love; they also would have a father who would move Heaven and Hell for their happiness and safety. Our child wouldn't have to worry about any of the bullshit their father endured under the abusive hand of his own scumbag of a father. Dominic finally understood and accepted the truth that he'd broken Lorenzo's cycle. He no longer saw himself as *that* monster.

Dominic had fought hard to be the man he was today, and I couldn't have been prouder.

I knew Bianca was proud, too, as well as our brothers.

I was excited for our future and what it held. All its growth. Its power.

“There,” Dominic declared, breaking me out of my own head. He sat away from the desk, a sense of accomplishment oozing from him. “I think I got it.”

“You sure about that?” I quipped, amused.

He left the black, mesh desk chair, stalking toward the bed. “Funny,” he said dryly, that sexy cockiness of his gliding off his tongue.

I playfully rolled my eyes, cracking a smile as he climbed over me. Dominic dipped down low and kissed me with that passion that forever brought me to my knees. Quite literally. I moaned into his mouth, rolling onto my back. Gently straddling me to protect the baby, albeit he had nothing to worry about, I threaded my fingers in his hair as our kisses grew needier, more demanding.

“*Dominic*,” I crooned, catching my breath before attacking his mouth once more. “I need you,” I begged, my words spilling into his mouth.

“How much, *amore mia*?”

Oh, don't toy with me now.

I slid my hands along his back, his arms, face, hips. Everywhere I could reach. I hugged him closer, feeling his abs and stomach, sliding my hand back up over his back. Pleasure burned in my veins, searing them as the flames of ecstasy flourished.

“A whole fucking lot,” I declared, earning me a shit-eating grin that tingled me to my core, blossoming between my thighs, making me wetter for him. He slipped two of his fingers along my slit, the sensation letting me know how soaked I truly was.

He abandoned my mouth and trailed kisses along the side of my neck and up my jawline, dragging the tip of his tongue to my earlobe, all the while inserting one of his fingers inside me. He slipped his finger out, slowly pushing it back in, repeating.

“So fucking wet for me, love.” He inserted a second finger. I lifted my hips, rocking into his hand, tilting my head back into the pillow when he reached *that* spot. “*So. Fucking. Wet.*”

Our moans and desperation sang into the night.

chapter FIVE

Monday, January 23, 2017

SNOW instead of rain clouds would've been a pleasant change of pace. The gray, rainy days were getting old. Fast.

Katrina's giggles and chatter reached me from where I was sitting at the kitchen island, a mug of vanilla chai tea in hand. It made me smile. So did the slew of kicks and ninja-like moves the baby had been pummeling me with since my morning shower. I guessed the warm water didn't just give *me* energy. Did it drive me nuts? Yes, but I wouldn't trade the feeling for anything in the world, and I knew once the baby was born, I would miss it all. Being pregnant. The movements. Hearing the soothing notes of their heart.

I placed my palm along my lower belly, like I was cradling it, softly humming one of the many songs stuck inside my head, moving my head gently to its slowed beat. Its lyrics told of a night when two people met, but unlike the singer expressing to go back to that night, I thought of the night Dominic and I met, though it was a moment I preferred not to revisit. I preferred us now, not the tension and hostility of the past.

When I first woke up to him in my life, uncertainty had filled me. Dominic had clearly wished his boss had never dropped me into his life, and there had been a silent war raging in his mind and body. Now, when I woke up and rolled over, there lay the man in whose arms I felt safest. There was no more coldness. Only the warmth of my one true love.

We had come so far. Won against all odds. What we had endured together would've had women screaming and running for the hills. It only made our bond tighter and stronger. A life without Dominic wasn't an option.

The sound of my niece's hurried footsteps took me out of my moment, and so did one of our kitchen staff dropping a stainless-steel mixing bowl onto the floor.

"Hi, Lulu!" Katrina greeted excitedly as she rounded the entrance to the kitchen. Hands behind her, she skipped to me. "Can we play with my Barbies today?" With a smile, she did her little twist, making her dress billow some at its hem.

I lightly tapped the bulb of her nose, causing her to giggle. "Sure, honey. We can play with them down here in the sunroom." As she nodded, Dino appeared in the entryway.

Barefoot in a simple white shirt and jeans, Dino greeted me, a relaxed smile following. "What's good, Lil?"

She rushed to her uncle, and he scooped her up and swung her above him for a moment as she laughed, like he was going to playfully toss and catch her. She clung to him as he stepped foot into the room.

"Just wish the weather wasn't so blah," I said. I left the kitchen island and walked over to the sink to empty the rest of my now-cooled tea.

"Can Dino play with us too, Lulu?"

Rinsing my mug, I nodded and then turned off the water. “If he wants to.” I set my mug in the sink and turned around, drying my hands with the dish towel.

“Wanna play Barbies with us, Uncle Dino?”

He arched his brow at her, leaving me silently amused. I could tell playing with dolls wasn’t the kind of relaxed afternoon he had in mind, but making his niece happy was more important.

“Sure,” he said. He set Katrina down, saying, “Why don’t you go gather your toys?” He gave her back a quick pat as she began bee-lining for the hall.

“Okay!”

To our amusement, Katrina was gone before either of us could count to two.

I set the towel on the counter, telling Dino, “Don’t worry. I’ll create a diversion where you can escape.”

He cracked a smile, his expression telling me he had this. He waved his hand dismissively.

“Nah, it’s all good. This’ll be easier than pretending to enjoy the taste of air at one of her tea parties.”

I laughed while Dino grabbed a soda from the refrigerator and pulled open its tab.

“No errands to run today?” I asked.

Dino followed me back to the island, both of us leaning against it. We watched the staff continue to work, finishing putting away dried dishes and gathering what they’d need for the afternoon. It was still slightly weird having any sort of staff handling our meals and just handling anything else. I had

been so used to Nadia doing all this. Hell, our new, more lavish kitchen was something I still wasn't used to, either.

White was the main color chosen for the kitchen, the picture window at the sink giving off a homey feel, sun shining through, lighting up the gray, granite-like tiles. The view wasn't anything spectacular; just some of the front lawn and a peek at the street with the kitchen set more in the far right corner of the mansion.

Black granite countertops surrounded our six-burner electric stove. The same granite was used for the island that sat four comfortably. Our more everyday appliances like the coffee maker, toaster, and blender stood spread out in their spots along both sides of the counter. The collection of flavored syrups, various sugars, and necessary silverware at the coffee maker gave it all a nice touch.

Our appliances were mainly stainless steel here, too. The only real difference with our major appliances were their sizes. Everything was bigger. Grander. The refrigerator was wider, still with double doors, but this one contained extra storage space and a touch screen that controlled the water and ice dispenser and allowed us to see everything inside. To the right of the refrigerator was the door to the pantry. Inside the pantry was where we kept another wide refrigerator to hold blood bags, and then a chest freezer that primarily stored our meats... Both animal and human. Those were organized separately.

White-painted wooden cabinetry stretching below the long counter and mostly above it was a fitting choice. So was our stack of two matching stainless-steel ovens at the far left end of the counter.

“Nothing that can’t be done from the office.” Dino took a sip of soda. “Dom would just send out one of his soldiers, anyway.”

The burp he let out next was gross but impressive. The way Luigi gave Dino the stink eye made us laugh, erasing the momentary sting of missing Nadia.

Speaking of soldiers, was I still considered one now that Hector had passed? Since being sworn in as one, life hadn’t been much different regarding sitting in on more meetings and being active with outside tasks. The only change was fighting alongside the family, but that was unavoidable in both circumstances. I didn’t miss having to go toe to toe with Fabio and Vincent, that was for damn sure, but I had become curious from time to time about what it would be like to go out on hits or just scope out someone before an assignment. *Would I ever get either chance? Did Dominic plan to up my rank to say, a capo?* I knew I would never become his new underboss, and that was fine. No one else but Dino deserved such a precious spot.

That was a conversation we desperately needed to have.

“Hey, Dino?”

“Hmm?”

I looked at him to see him chugging another sip of soda. “Do you think Dominic plans to keep me as just a soldier?”

Dino moved away from the island and gestured with his hand for me to follow him. He placed his palm on my back as he led us out of the kitchen, saying, “This way.”

Of course, no business discussion was permitted around the kitchen and cleaning staff. Duh.

We slowly walked down the hall toward the foyer. It was nice not having to wade through a bunch of men milling about. Unlike Hector, Dominic didn't want a lot of them hanging around here all day, every day. It came down to privacy.

The change was easily agreed upon by me and our brothers.

"I'm not sure what he wants to do about that. If it were up to me, I'd have already promoted you, but I know the main man's got a lot on his plate lately. Stick it out a bit longer, then bring it up."

If I could take away all the weight from Dominic's shoulders, I would have already.

There was no easy way to ask the one question swimming in my head since we lost Thomas. I hoped his position would stay vacant. Even if one of Dominic's men earned such a spot, it wouldn't feel right to replace Thomas. The brotherhood between them made their positions sacred. Dominic didn't trust anyone else like he did his brothers, not even me. Along with Thomas, every bit of trust and loyalty among us was earned. Fought for. It wouldn't feel right to just put anyone else in that spot. I was sure that there was a silent, mutual consensus within our group.

"Does he plan to put anyone else in Thomas's place?"

Shaking his head, Dino said, "Not for the foreseeable future."

Oh, thank God.

As we approached the end of the hall, Katrina bolted past us, her Barbies in her arms. Dino chuckled, removing his hand from my back.

"Looks like someone's ready to play," I said, amused.

“When is she ever not?”

I laughed. “Good point.” Dominic continued to linger on my mind. “Where is Dominic, anyway?”

“In his office with his mother,” Dino said as we walked further into the foyer. “He wanted to talk to her today.”

Oh? Dominic never mentioned anything about that. I hoped everything was alright.

“They must’ve got lost in conversation or something,” Dino added.

Suddenly, I wanted to be Dominic’s support rather than play with dolls. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to play with Katrina, per se, but I didn’t want Dominic facing any potential demons of his past alone. If he told me to go away, I would respect that and come back downstairs.

I got Dino’s attention and leaned in close to his ear. “Tell Katrina I had to make a quick detour.”

He nodded once and went off to join her in the living room while I ventured upstairs.

Taking a right, I headed a few feet through the upstairs hallway toward Dominic’s office. I loved how wide and spacious his new office was; mountains better than at our old place.

Sorry, Hector.

Beyond its black, double doors, a stunning black and red epoxy floor stood out the most within the rich brown and creamy beige walls and ceiling. The splashes of red on the floor made it almost resemble blood splatter. Two black cushioned sofas sat across each other with a glass coffee table between, and two darkened beige leather armchairs angled

toward each other just past the sofas. A white area rug was beneath the coffee table. Off to the right of the furniture was a pool table with a replica of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* on that wall, and off to the left side of that half of the room sat Dominic's prized possession—his Fazioli baby grand piano. A tall and wide bookshelf was anchored to the wall where the piano was, containing some classic literature, and paperweights designed to look like famous composers such as Bach and Chopin were spread out randomly on those shelves.

Up ahead of the seating area was a single step leading to Dominic's executive desk and matching black, high-back leather chair. The desk's oak was stained a mix of rich walnut and cherry. His desktop computer was toward the left corner of the desk with minimal paperwork, a desk lamp, and a landline phone also filling up some of its space. A Beethoven paperweight held his paperwork secure. His nameplate, reading his first and last name, sat proudly on the desk. Off to the left of his desk was a medium, round, oak table with three wide barrel leather chairs, the chairs a dark gray. On the other side of that upper half of the room was a mini-bar, complete with a glass shelf full of alcohol and different wines, along with storage for the drinkware and a built-in sink.

Behind Dominic's desk was an eighty-inch television mounted to the wall.

I knocked on the door, choosing not to just barge in. Hearing him tell me to come in, I opened the door and poked my head through. Dominic and his mother sat on the sofas across from each other, a glass of water in her hand and a smaller glass of golden, honey-colored alcohol in his. Probably his usual glass of Walker.

Dominic appeared relaxed, sitting back against the sofa, while Bianca, on the other hand, leaned forward a bit, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. She put her glass of water on a coaster on the table.

“I’m sorry. Did I interrupt—”

Dominic waved his hand for me to enter the room. “Come, join us.”

I pulled the door closed behind me and joined Dominic, sitting beside him. While I came up here because I wanted to be a support for Dominic to lean on, seeing Bianca teary-eyed made me feel awkward, like I didn’t belong in here after all. If Dominic changed his mind and sent me away, I wouldn’t hesitate to respect that.

Bianca sniffed, wiping her nose. “I’m so sorry, Dominic. I never stopped loving you. I wanted to make sure you knew that.”

I had given Bianca that benefit of the doubt; she may have shut down in her marriage purely out of survival instinct and wound up shutting out her son as a result, but my gut and my heart told me she never loved her son any less throughout the abuse.

As Dominic sipped on his drink—the scent telling me it was indeed a glass of Walker—I rested my hand on his and laced our fingers together, gently squeezing his hand to let him know I was here for him.

“I know,” was all he said. His tone didn’t give anything away, but I assumed he may have felt slightly awkward with it all now that I was here. Bianca was more desperate than him to repair their broken bond, and Dominic had never been good with talking about feelings and emotions.

“Please forgive me,” she continued. “No child deserves the kind of mother I was. I failed to protect you.” She paused, swallowing back more tears. “But I promise... I won’t anymore.” Bianca stood up from the sofa.

Assuming she was leaving because of me, I began to say, “Please don’t leave on my account,” but my words went in one ear and out the other as she stepped in front of her son, holding his face in her palms. Dominic tensed at her sudden touch. I gently squeezed his hand again to let him know it was okay. That he was safe.

“I don’t care what you are now or what you do. You’ll always be my *ragazzino*.” She briefly stared at him, smiling through fresh tears that dripped down her face, like she admired the man he became. She then swept her fingers through some of his hair. “I’m so proud of you.” She leaned in, kissing his forehead. She backed away and then wiped her eyes and nose, sniffing. “I know I have a lot of work to do, and I’m ready to do it.”

After an uncomfortable beat of silence, Bianca looked at the door and then again at us. “I-I’ll just go.”

Dominic freed his hand from mine, setting his drink on the table and standing up. Placing his hand on the small of her back, I watched in silence while he led her to the door. He opened the door a crack, telling his mother he couldn’t yet forgive her.

“I needed you all those years ago,” he added. “And I didn’t have you. So, understand why I’m hesitant to forgive you, let alone fully trust you again.”

Dominic’s anger crept into his words, sneaking up on him. My mind went back to that night weeks ago, the image of him falling to his knees in defeat, crying a river of tears.

Momentarily closing my eyes while silently drawing in a breath, I opened my eyes as that breath left me.

“I needed you, Mamma.” His hurt over her betrayal couldn’t be masked.

I placed my hand on my chest, my breath sticking. Mamma... He called her Mamma. Whether he completely understood it or not, that was a giant step forward for Dominic and their relationship.

He opened the door the rest of the way, beginning to guide Bianca out into the hallway. She stopped just past the office’s threshold, looking back at her son.

“I’m not going anywhere ever again. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

Nodding once, Dominic followed her out of his office, closing the door.

chapter SIX

FOR A MINUTE THERE, I didn't think Dominic was going to let me in his office, so when he did and asked me to sit with him, I was taken aback. Even though he had crushed many of his walls for me, he was still a fairly private man. When he came back inside, I planned to tell him how appreciative I was to be included in such an intimate conversation. It stood true when we were first learning about each other, and it stood true now; letting me into his past and his darkest, most sacred moments of his life was *his* decision. I would never push him. Just like he was with me, I vowed to make sure he forever knew that *I* was *his* safest place.

I walked over to the desk and picked up the remote for the flat screen, powering it on. After deciding on one of the financial advisors Dominic watched, I set the remote on the desk and walked over to the pool table, taking a pool stick from the set attached to the side of the table. I wasn't going to attempt to play; I sucked too horribly *to* play.

My curiosity ached to know everything Dominic and his mother talked about, but it was actually no one's business unless Dominic wanted it to be my business. The little bit I got to witness and his need to have me close told me whatever it was, it was uncomfortable.

I poked the organized set of pool balls with the stick, rounding the corner of the table.

Would he ever forgive Bianca? Was she truly worthy of forgiveness? Would she keep her promise? God, I hoped so. While I was still rather neutral regarding her, I wanted Dominic to have that kind of love in his life—a mother’s love.

Nadia... She was the last time he had that.

I looked at the doors when I heard the turning of its handles. Dominic re-entered his office, keeping his back to me as he pulled the doors closed. He stood there, his shoulders rising and falling with a deep breath. Remembering his drink on the table, I set the pool stick down and walked over to retrieve the drink. A fresh glass was exactly what he needed.

I dumped the old, warmed drink in the mini-bar’s sink before rinsing the glass out and the liquor down the drain.

“What are you doing?” Dominic inquired, his voice closer.

I reached into the bottom cupboard and grabbed a clean drinking glass. “I figured you’d want a fresh one after that.” Seeing him approaching me on my way to the selection of liquor, I could tell he was already spent for the day, and it wasn’t even two o’clock in the afternoon.

One’s eyes never lied.

Ravishing in a mulberry shade dress shirt and black slacks with a pair of black Oxfords, Dominic’s tired smile melted my heart. He was impeccably dressed compared to my long, royal blue muumuu and comfortable pair of fuzzy pink slippers, my hair resting in a messy bun on the top of my head.

The farther I got in my pregnancy, the more I didn’t give a single fuckity-fucking fuck to wear any clothing other than my muumuus, pajamas, or baggy t-shirt and sweatpants.

“Thank you, *Bellissima*.”

Seconds later, I smiled at the warmth of his arms as he held me close from behind, his hands under my belly. I tilted my head to the side, each of his feathery kisses along the side of my neck sending tingles down my spine. He wasn't making it easy for me to make his drink.

I shivered when his breath fanned over my ear as he spoke. “What was that?” His voice had taken on that deep, husky tone I loved.

I put an ice cube in the drinking glass, his tongue touching my neck the same time as the ice clinked inside the glass. The tingling blossomed between my thighs, my slit slick with my arousal.

Playing dumb, I asked, “What was what?”

Dominic took the bottle of Walker and the drinking glass out of my hands, setting them on the counter. Holding my hands in his, he placed his against a spot above my belly before holding me tighter against him. “The drink can wait.”

I smiled when he kissed my head. Dominic let me go and turned me around to face him. He pulled me against him, holding my face in his hands, taking me in for a passionate kiss. I slipped my hands under his arms and up around to the back of his shoulders. I clung to him, rubbing my right leg up against him. I needed him. I wanted him.

He lifted me, and as I wrapped my legs around his waist, he walked us over to the pool table, setting me on my feet. Dominic stepped back and began undoing his belt buckle, those gorgeous blue eyes staring back at me. That was when I also noticed the strained zipper of his slacks. I licked my lips

when he yanked his belt through the loops, rubbing my thighs together. I fought not to come then and there.

“Turn around,” he ordered, tossing his belt aside. Hunger raged in his eyes. “Now.”

Eager for his cock, I happily obliged, bracing myself against the side of the table. I heard him kick off his shoes, his slacks and boxer briefs going with them. After readjusting me so I wasn't as close to the pool table, Dominic placed his hand on my belly and used his leg to nudge mine further apart. I heard him stroke himself, his cock already slick with his arousal.

“I'll try to go easy, but I can't make any promises.”

Not giving a fuck, I said, “Okay.”

Dominic positioned himself at my entrance, slipping his hand inside my muumuu and sliding it up my thigh, squeezing it, his grip not strong enough to hurt me but tight enough to let me know I wasn't easily going anywhere if I tried.

“Fuck,” he growled and then thrust inside me.

I moaned, taking all he had to give.

He was rough. Fast. A beast. This wasn't our usual love making, and it felt so fucking good.

He slowed his rhythm a hair, sliding out and waiting a second before thrusting back into me. “I was glad.” Thrust. “When you.” Thrust. “Knocked.”

I was quickly finding myself near that familiar, cosmic edge. The cliff I never shied away from jumping off of. It was hot in here. My pleasure pooled, building... And building. I slipped my hand between my thighs, finding my bud and

rubbing it as I found my rhythm. “Was... Was it not going well?” I moaned long and loud, increasing my own pace.

Dominic tensed, grunting words in Italian as our skin slapped together.

“Her fucking crying.” He grunted louder, thrusting at greater speed—a speed that told me he was about to join me over the edge of that cliff. “The past.” Thrust. “I was fucking tired... Of all of it.” He slammed into me one final time, squeezing my thigh, roaring as he rode out his release.

I gasped, panting, squeezing around his cock and grabbing his wrist, riding out my own fantastic release. Our juices dripped down my thighs.

Getting better control of his breathing, Dominic let go of me and held my hips while I leaned forward against the pool table. I rested my head on my arms, catching my breath.

“So, thank you,” he said.

“I should come to your rescue more often,” I joked.

“Fucking right you should.” His chuckle that followed was just about the sexiest sound in the world.

SATIATED, I watched my boyfriend pour himself a drink.

“Was it really that bad today?” I asked him, unable to tame my curiosity any longer.

Dominic drank his first sip of Walker, looking toward the ceiling as he brought the glass back toward the bar counter. “She wants forgiveness.” He sighed, taking another sip. From here, I saw the tension in his muscles. I could practically feel

it. “She wants to fix what she fucking broke.” He turned around and walked over to his desk, stopping in front of me. Looking up at him, I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch as he brushed his hand along the side of my face, his fingers in my hair. “Thank you,” he said, his breath on my skin.

When Dominic walked away after kissing my forehead, he left me incredibly confused.

I turned in the chair, watching him taking a seat at the table.

Thank me for what? What was I missing? Did he thank me for knocking on the door? The fantastic sex we just had?

“For what? I don’t understand.”

He looked at me. “For not turning your back on me, too.” He drank a smaller sip of his drink, now watching television.

Words I once spoke unearthed from my memories.

“And you’re the light of my life. I’ll never hurt you, and I’ll never, ever run. Unless you’re coming home, then I’ll just tackle you.”

Teary-eyed, I rested my palm over my heart, smiling at how far we had come. When telling Dominic I wasn’t going anywhere, I meant it. Sure, there had been bumps in the road—small to crater-sized—but my love for the man mere feet away from me was far too fucking great for me to throw my hands up at any of those bumps. He was then and was still learning to break down his walls and overcome personal demons.

I couldn’t have been prouder.

Leaving his desk, I walked to the table and straddled his lap, leaning in for a kiss, his cheeks in my palms. He cupped

my ass and brought me in closer, his cock hard again. He rubbed his hands up along my sides, eventually settling them on my hips. His hold was firm, his body language telling me he lusted for a round two, but my body said otherwise.

“I’m too tired.”

Dominic brushed his nose up along the side of my face, kissing a couple of spots so lightly, it almost tickled. His lips grazed against my skin as he spoke. “When you’re rested.” He kissed my skin once more before pulling away to just look at me.

I was ready for a nap but not before we talked. He couldn’t leave me hanging about his mother, and I wanted to pick his brain about something else.

“What happened before I knocked on the door?”

He sat back, playing with loose strands of my hair. Being so relaxed in the moment wasn’t the norm for him—or anyone else, for that matter.

My touch and my presence always seemed to calm him. Just as he did the same to me.

“She’s wanted us to talk about the past for some time now. I thought I was ready, but I guess not.” He swept the pad of his thumb over my cheek.

The war raging within him shone in his eyes. Bianca needed to realize it was all still too soon.

I pictured that scared, broken little boy... The little boy who was confused, who didn’t understand how the ones that were supposed to love, protect, and keep him safe created such danger and loneliness. The little boy who felt unworthy of love. I pictured a dirty, disheveled ten-year-old Dominic begging for anything—food, money, someone’s time—only to

further be led to feel like a burden. I wondered if Bianca actually comprehended how much she screwed with her son's head and broke him down to an icy shell of who he really was. Nadia, Hector, his brothers, even me—we all helped Dominic break out of that shell and rediscover himself, lifting him up and showing him that people *did* in fact care about him. That he *wasn't* a burden, and that love and safety was here, with us. Blood never defined family.

“Tell her you need time and space. Her intentions may be pure, but she might not even realize she's just creating more harm than good.”

Rubbing the ends of a loose strand of my hair between his fingers, Dominic said, “I did before you showed up. And again before that, back at that hotel.”

Maybe if I talked to Bianca, she'd finally realize. I wanted them to repair their relationship, but I agreed with Dominic that it should be when *he* was ready and on *his* terms. *She* was the one that reappeared out of nowhere, not the other way around.

“What if I talk to her?”

He stopped playing with my hair and rested that hand again on my hip, contemplating my offer.

“Please,” I went on. I cupped his cheeks, leaning forward and kissing him between his eyes. “Let me be your voice when no one is listening.” Pulling back enough to see his face, Dominic opened his eyes, a smile pulling at his lips.

Nodding, he said, “Okay.” He then brought me back closer to kiss me.

The baby chose that moment to kick, stealing our attention and making us look down at my belly.

Pressing my palm to my stomach, another kick nudged my palm, and I smiled. “Seems the baby agrees,” I said, looking at Dominic. He chuckled, feeling my belly.

“What does that feel like?”

“The kicks?” I asked. He nodded. “Really, really weird.”

“It doesn’t feel like an alien’s in there?”

I laughed. “No, but close.”

Focused on my belly, I moved so Dominic could lift my muumuu over it. I readjusted against his lap. He felt around my belly, carefully pushing on it in some spots to get the baby to move more. The fascination on his face was beautiful.

“Have you thought about your appointment next week?” The baby kicked harder. Dominic made a surprised face, chuckling afterward.

Admittedly, I hadn’t thought about it as much as I probably should’ve. While Julie was explaining how my twenty-week appointment would go and everything that was to be expected, she asked us if we wanted her to attempt to determine the baby’s gender. Without hesitation, Dominic said yes. Me on the other hand... I wasn’t sure. I told them part of me wanted to know, but the other part of me wanted the surprise at birth. Dominic then said it was ultimately my choice and that he would support either.

A bigger part of me wanted to know now. While the baby’s health was the most important thing, as much as I wanted a girl, I secretly wanted to give Dominic a son the more I thought about it. Granted, the mafia rules were slowly adapting to allow women to be more involved, but there was just something about the bond between a father and son that I wanted to witness. Dominic was robbed of that bond, and I

wanted him to be able to create one and for him to understand once and for all that he wasn't the same as the men that raised him.

"I think so," I answered. Dominic looked at me, keeping his hands on my belly.

"And?"

Nodding softly, I said, "Yeah."

He went back to paying attention to my belly, and my thoughts morphed into this family and where I would stand within it. I knew Dino said to wait to talk about this, but here in the moment, it felt right.

"There's something else I wanted to talk about."

Sensing this was more serious, Dominic lifted his eyes and then his head, watching me. Leaning back, he clasped my hips again.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, well... I'm just not sure what my role is anymore."

Furrowing his brows, Dominic asked, "What do you mean?"

"Am I still a soldier?"

"Do you want to be?"

"I don't know." I began touching his tie, playing with it in my hands. Staring at it helped me get the words out. "I mean... I do... But then, I wonder if I *can* now that I'm gonna have a baby. Hector had enough faith in me, but I don't know how well I'll be able to balance both being a mom and fighting alongside you guys."

My emotions were getting a chokehold on me, and I roughly cleared my throat, hoping that would make it go away. Nope. My eyes welled with tears. I opened and closed my mouth, trying to find my next words. Dominic slipped his fingers under my chin and lifted my head, his expression his typical poker face.

“Talk to me.”

I held onto his tie, that fabric helping me keep it together.

“I just want to be a stay-at-home mom, but Hec-Hector—” I swallowed, his name catching in my throat. “Hector trusted me to be a soldier... And I don’t want to let him down.” A tear dripped down my cheek.

Dominic wiped my tear with his thumb. “If being a soldier no longer feels right to you, then let me know. If you want another position, or like you said, you just want to focus on raising our unborn, then so be it. Whatever you choose doesn’t matter. Your happiness does.”

I squeezed out more tears, taking in a sharper breath, my lower lip and chin quivering under my emotional weight. “Thank you,” I said, my voice raspy. I cleared my throat again. He wiped away the rest of my tears. “I just don’t want to make the wrong decision.”

I didn’t want to end up making a decision that negatively affected our child. Each year of a child’s life was important, but those first few were crucial, and if I stayed a soldier, how would that affect our child? Would I be able to serve those duties and the duties of motherhood? Would I be happy with both or happier just being a mother?

“You won’t,” he told me.

I sniffed. “How can you know that?”

“Because you never do.”

Those words made me crack, and I clung to Dominic, my arms around his neck, my crying messy. He rubbed his hand up and down my back.

“You’re stressing yourself, Lilith. Don’t overthink this. Go with your gut, with what feels right.” He shushed me, continuing to rub my back. “Just breathe.”

“I love you so much,” I told him, refusing to let him go.

“I love you, too.” He kissed the side of my head, his face lingering on my hair. “Always and forever, *Bellissima*. Nothing will ever change that. Not your role... Nothing.”

chapter SEVEN

“UNCLE DINO, LET’S GO!”

Dominic led me through the foyer toward the living room, his hand on the small of my back, as Katrina darted past us to join the rest of her uncles. I sipped on my last serving of animal blood for the night, comfortable in my heart and lollipop-themed pajamas. They were on clearance when I purchased them; I couldn’t resist. Katrina begged me to buy her one so we could match.

Hers was in the mail.

Snacks, ice cream, and saved leftovers from our chicken dinner—the chicken for me—were displayed on the coffee table in preparation for family movie night. Katrina complained it had been too long since our last movie night, and none of us could say no to such an adorable little spitfire.

Dino was already making a dent in the popcorn. I wasn’t surprised. I laughed, shaking my head. He stared at me, shoveling another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

“I was hungry,” he whined.

“You’re always hungry,” Katrina quipped, sending all of us into laughter.

The couch and chairs were moved out of the way to make space. Dominic repeatedly let me know I could sit on the couch or in a chair, but I didn't want to. The floor was fine. Dominic had two of my pillows and our bedroom throw blanket for me; I was all set.

Noticeably absent for family movie night was Bianca. Dominic wasn't comfortable enough having her join us after how things went this afternoon. He wound up rearranging things, so I was to be Katrina's babysitter for the foreseeable future, which didn't bother me. Once I was finished crying back in his office when we talked about what I wanted to do with my role, Dominic called his mother and expressed that he needed distance to think since he was under too much pressure. She reluctantly agreed, asking him to please reach out with his decision regardless of what he chose—to forgive her and begin repairing their relationship or deciding to walk away. For good.

Katrina was a little sad that Bianca, or B to her, couldn't come over but was excited to spend more time with me. She missed me—her words. I missed her, too and felt guilty for not spending time with her like I should've been. Luckily, she wasn't the least bit upset, especially for not playing Barbies with her earlier. After everything this afternoon with Dominic, I spaced on my commitment, profusely apologizing and crying to Katrina for forgiveness. She hugged me and said she forgave me and that we didn't always have to play with her Barbies, and she told me she loved me. I squeezed her tight after that, making her laugh by covering the top of her head with kisses.

Dominic and I walked over to our spots on the floor. He helped me onto the floor, making sure my pillows were just right and that the blanket was on me how I wanted it.

“Did you pick a movie?” Dominic asked his niece. She nodded, holding in the air what she chose: *The Little Mermaid*. I’d long ago lost count of how many times she’d seen the film. She loved Ariel’s red hair, even telling me Ariel’s red hair was pretty like mine. That warmed my heart.

“*The Little Mermaid!*” she announced excitedly.

“Go ahead and give it to Anthony so he can put it on,” Dominic instructed.

While Anthony put the movie in the DVD player mounted on the wall directly underneath the seventy-inch-wide screen television, Katrina came over to me, Mr. Cat in her arms. She snuggled with me beneath the blanket. I fixed a few strands of her hair, smiling, proud of her for her strength and resilience after all she had been through. We were all proud of her.

“Bring the food over here,” Dominic requested of someone. I watched Dino pass Angelo the food. My eyes wandered, first over to Anthony navigating the menu screen of the movie, and then to Thomas’s urn.

His absence was like a knife to my heart, twisting itself left and right over and over. Thomas should’ve been here with us. So should’ve everyone on that mantelpiece. It wasn’t fucking fair. A part of me selfishly hoped Dominic would never replace his role as consigliere. It was too sacred. Sipping on the animal blood, I swallowed my tears, successfully fighting them off.

“Lilith?” Dominic gently called my name, bringing me into the present. When I looked at him, my plate of leftovers was in his hand. He mouthed, “Are you okay?” I nodded as he handed me my plate.

“Just thinking too much.” It wasn’t a lie, but here with everyone, especially Katrina, wasn’t the appropriate place to talk about me mourning Thomas.

Katrina tapped my shoulder. “Can I have a bite, Lulu?”

Nodding, I stuck some of my mango-marinated chicken on my fork and gave her a bite.

“Mmm!” she sounded, a fan of the taste. She devoured it at dinner like we all did. I smiled, feeding her another bite, then ate a bite of my own.

The baby kicked, enjoying it, too.

“We ready?” Dino asked us. After answering him, he turned off the lights and plopped back down on the floor, stuffing his face with potato chips. Katrina giggled at her uncle’s insatiable appetite.

Sharing a bite of my side of mashed potatoes with Katrina, she snuggled under my arm, curling up against me.

“I love you, Auntie Lulu,” she whispered. “You’re the best.”

I looked down at her, kissing her head before smiling at her hushed giggle. “I love you, too, honey, and *you’re* the best.”

chapter EIGHT

Tuesday, January 31, 2017

OUR STUBBORN BUNDLE of joy didn't want to cooperate for Nurse Barton. As she moved the handheld probe around on my belly, the baby moved in the opposite direction. It was a funny game of keep-away.

The baby had become more active lately, their kicks strengthening. Each wriggle and movement was a lot more noticeable. Sometimes, I wondered if the baby was even performing somersaults in there, or as I called it, roly-polies.

“Stubborn,” I said, turning my head to look at Dominic. “Just like their father.”

He arched his brow, giving me a playful look. I laughed, winking. Julie laughed a little, her focus staying on the ultrasound screen.

Julie fiddled around further with the buttons on the machine, taking measurements, capturing some frames for us in between so we could have pictures. I requested at least one picture at every ultrasound. She hadn't talked much aside from walking us through what she was doing, and I took that as good news. The baby's weight was always in the back of my

mind, however. *Would I be strong enough to endure childbirth?*

“Would you like to listen to the heartbeat?”

Without hesitation, I nodded. Our baby’s heart was one of my most favorite sounds. And Dominic’s reaction to it always warmed my heart. I held out my hand, and he grabbed it in both of his, smiling alongside me. Our baby’s heartbeat sounded stronger with each scan. More robust. Julie turned the ultrasound screen toward us, allowing us to see our baby’s heart beating. It was incredible.

“Would you like to know what you’re having?”

I looked at Dominic again. He looked at me, his eyes inviting. Soft. He nodded once, and I nodded in return, smiling. Staring at him, I made my decision.

“We do.”

The seconds of silence felt like minutes.

“It’s a boy.”

Dominic’s eyes widened, his smile growing. “A son,” he said to himself. He brought my hand to his lips, kissing my hand.

Happy tears made their way to my eyes. *A boy. I was having a boy. I was giving Dominic a son.* I couldn’t have been happier. Dominic leaned closer and kissed me, thanking me. I kissed him again, a tear slipping from the corner of my eye.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, *Bellissima.*” He sat back in the chair, my hand still in his. He didn’t want to let me go yet.

“Your son is thriving to the fullest,” Julie said, drawing my attention back to her. “I don’t see any issues or abnormalities on the scan or in your bloodwork. You’re doing a great job, Lilith.”

Before she could turn the screen back toward her, I caught our boy sucking his thumb. Laughing, I said, “Oh, my goodness.” Dominic and Julie laughed.

“I’ll get a picture of that too for you.”

“We appreciate it,” Dominic said.

Julie turned off the ultrasound machine and put the probe back into its holder. She then began wiping the gel off my stomach.

“I’ll have some paperwork for you before you leave, along with your pictures. It’s just copies of your labs and everything I checked for at today’s scan, as well as some handy information about this stage of your pregnancy.” Both Dominic and Julie helped me sit up, my feet dangling over the side of the exam table. With her hand on my shoulder, she said, “Let me go and get that stuff for you, and then we can go over any questions or concerns you might have before you leave.”

I nodded as she left the room, turning my attention to my best friend. He cradled my exposed belly in his hands, bending down to kiss it before resting his ear against it, listening. I threaded my fingers through his hair. “I wish we could hold him right now,” I said.

Dominic felt around the side of my belly, giving it another kiss. Our son kicked in response, garnering a laugh from his daddy.

My heart and soul were warm and tingly. Since our last appointment, when Julie asked about finding out the gender, Dominic had mentioned that while a healthy baby was the goal, he wished for a son. So did I, and I had secretly felt that we were having a boy for these past few weeks. I couldn't explain it. Call it mother's intuition. We both had gotten our wish, and all I wanted to do was shout my happiness from the rooftop.

"I love you so much," Dominic told me as he leaned close, his arms at my sides. He kissed me between my eyes, resting his forehead to mine.

"I love you, too, Dominic."

Julie walked back inside, interrupting our moment. Dominic started to back up, but I grabbed his shirt, holding him close, whispering, "No."

Dominic took the paperwork from Julie and the photographs in their protective envelope. She did that each visit to make sure the photographs didn't risk getting bent or damaged. Julie brought the chair Dominic had sat in over to where she was and had a seat. We both looked at her, taking in every word. I kept a hold of Dominic's shirt, anxious. I was always anxious when hearing anything about our baby. I knew nothing was wrong, but I couldn't help it. I learned the hard way over time that life could change in the blink of an eye.

"Before we talk about any questions you might have, I just wanted to let you know you're still measuring slightly ahead, and with the labs normal and your son healthy, there's nothing to worry about. It seems he'll just be a bigger baby."

My stomach sank as I put my hands on my belly. I was glad he was healthy, but I was scared to face the reality of pushing out a large child. *Would I tear? Would his size cause*

problems during labor? Would he get stuck? Would I wimp out in the middle of pushing and give up? God, I hoped not. I wished I didn't have to go through childbirth, that I could wave a magic wand and he would just be here.

I pulled Dominic closer and rested the side of my face against his chest, just wanting to feel him right now. Smell him. He held me, rubbing my back.

“Are you okay, Lilith?” Julie asked.

“She’s nervous,” Dominic answered for me, which I was thankful for. He cupped the back of my head in his hand, kissing the top of it. “Scared,” he went on, telling Julie.

“I understand,” Julie said. “Try not to stress yourself though, Lilith. I know that’s much easier said than done, however.”

“How big will he be?” I asked her.

“I can’t say with any certainty. Ultrasounds are notorious for being off in predicting weight. Your belly is measuring at twenty-one weeks, so a week ahead, which isn’t excessive. The scan tells me he weighs eleven ounces and is measuring seven inches long. You could say he’s the size of a banana or a sweet potato.”

I moved away from Dominic’s chest, looking up at him. He cupped my cheeks in his palms, getting near nose to nose.

“Don’t be scared. You have the finest medical care money can buy. Everything will be fine.”

“He’s right,” Julie agreed. “Everything will be just fine. If any concerns do arise in the next few weeks, then we’ll discuss it, but for right now, I’m not worried.”

Nodding, I wiped the bit of tears that lined my eyes as I distanced myself from Dominic. I used my arms for support, taking a deep breath.

“Did you have anything you wanted to talk about further? Anything you want more details on or any concerns?”

I nodded. “My back and hips have really been hurting me lately. It even goes down into my groin.”

Julie nodded in understanding.

“It’s worse when I get up in the morning and move around or when I’m just standing. Sometimes when I cough or sneeze, it hurts, too.”

“Any bleeding, severe cramps, or unusual pain anywhere?” Julie asked. I shook my head. “Are you leaking any fluid?” I shook my head again. “It’s classic round ligament pain, and unfortunately, as your baby grows, it’ll only get worse. As your uterus gets bigger, those muscles and ligaments will also grow and stretch, causing the pain.

“I suggest taking up some light exercise such as walking, swimming, or maybe even yoga or Pilates. There are safe yoga and Pilates exercises for pregnant women. Any of those suggestions will help make those muscles and ligaments stronger and may help ease some of the pain and discomfort, as crazy as that may sound.” She chuckled. “Strengthening those muscles and ligaments will definitely help when it comes time to deliver.”

I didn’t want to think about delivery.

“For relief at night, try buying a pregnancy pillow if you don’t already have one, or put a regular pillow or two between your legs while you sleep. It’ll help to align your spine, easing the discomfort.”

My pregnancy pillow was my everything, and I intended to use it long past delivery. I was mad at myself for not buying one before I even got pregnant, although that might have gotten me strange looks from Dominic.

“If that’s all you wanted to discuss, I’ll go ahead and schedule your next appointment, and if you’d like, I can also email you some recommended exercises you can easily do at home.”

“I think I’m all set,” I expressed, leaning myself again against Dominic.

“Sounds good,” Julie said. “Let me go ahead and get you a new appointment card.” She stood up and put the chair back in its original spot before writing the information for my next appointment. When she came back over, she handed Dominic the card. “I’ll see the three of you in four weeks. Like always, if you need to reschedule, just let me know. If any concerns or questions should arise, call me.”

Dominic and Julie shook hands. “Thank you, Julie.” They dropped their hands. “Have you given any thought to my offer of working here full-time?”

“I’m still mulling it over, Mr. Rosini. I apologize.”

“No need,” he said. “And please, call me Dominic.”

“Of course,” she said. “If that’s all, I’ll see you next month.” After our goodbyes, Julie left the room.

Looking up at Dominic, I asked, “Carry me?”

He handed me the pictures and paperwork and scooped me up in his arms, walking us out of the exam room.

On our journey through the basement, I opened the envelope containing the pictures and pulled them out.

Watching our son grow so much so fast was remarkable to witness. It was all still surreal. I smiled widely at the picture of him sucking his thumb. I was glad to capture such a moment. He showed off his feet, too. It was cute.

We can't wait to hold you and cuddle you and kiss you, my sweet boy. We love you so much.

“It’s amazing. He looks so much different in just a month. Time is flying by so fast... It’s kind of scary.”

“Watching you nurture our unborn is what’s amazing,” Dominic said.

My stomach did its nervous dance the longer I looked at the photos. Four months... That was all I had left of this pregnancy. I bit the inside of my lip, putting the pictures back in the envelope. I held my belly as Dominic climbed the basement steps, blowing out a silent breath.

“Are you okay, *Bellissima*? I can feel you shaking.”

“I’m scared everything will go horribly wrong.” I buried my face in his shirt. “I’m scared me or the baby won’t... I’m scared we won’t make it.”

Dominic walked into our room and set me on my feet. He then closed the door and stepped up to me. “Lilith,” he said, slipping his fingers under my chin and moving my head. He didn’t speak at first, only stared. He then slid his hand along the side of my face, brushing it with the pad of his thumb.

“I know you’re afraid. I guess I am, too. Fear of the unknown will eat you alive if you let it. You can’t allow yourself to suffer when neither you nor I can predict the future. We can only take life one day at a time, and since Julie has no concerns, neither do I, and neither should you.”

Until I met Dominic, the last people that made me feel safe with just their words were my parents. I leaned into Dominic, bringing my hands to his chest and holding his shirt as he held me in his arms. He was my safe place. When he held me, I always knew everything would be fine.

“Why don’t you get some rest? It’s been a tiring morning.”

He wasn’t wrong. Between my morning shower, my ultrasound, and my physical examination before the scan, I was pooped, but then, I remembered my commitment to Katrina.

“I promised Katrina I’d take her shopping, and I wanted to visit that new thrift store that just opened.” I looked up at him. “I wanted to find some new shirts and some leggings and maybe see what they have for baby stuff.”

“You can but after a nap. Rest is more important.”

There was no point in arguing with him, so I sighed and nodded.

“Okay, but please wake me up for lunch. I’ll take Katrina and I out somewhere to eat. I know she’s been asking for a Happy Meal® for the longest time, and a burger and fries sounds like heaven.”

A chuckle vibrated deep in Dominic’s chest. “I will.”

“And Dominic, please don’t tell anyone yet that we’re having a boy. I want us to do that together.”

“Understood.” He let me go and took my hand. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

chapter NINE

THE SMELL OF DELICIOUS, unhealthy food while sitting at the restaurant drive-thru had been borderline tortuous, and as I took my food out of the bag, I fought not to become outright feral and tear into it.

My appetite was becoming rather insatiable lately, but it was a nice welcome after a lot of nausea in my first trimester. I also began noticing a slight uptick in my craving for animal blood and meat, particularly rare-cooked steak. Until I got pregnant, I preferred any and all meat cooked well-done. Not anymore. Well, except for hamburgers.

I bit into my Big Mac, savoring its flavor and smells. I chewed slowly, leaning back in my seat, sauce dripping down my hands. Thankfully, I remembered to put some napkins on my lap. Sonny got extra, plus some of those little individual wet wipes.

“Good?” Sonny asked, parking the SUV. He didn’t want anything at McDonald’s®. His loss. While he was giving me a look, I could see he wanted to laugh at my mess. I nodded, taking another bite.

“Mhmm,” I answered.

He set the soda he was sipping on into his cup holder. “How’s your food?” he asked Katrina, looking in the rearview mirror.

Katrina was sitting in the backseat of Sonny’s Escalade, eating the chicken nuggets that came with her Happy Meal®. He bought her chocolate milk to drink. It made her day. “Good! But they need to give kids more chicken nuggets. They’re cheap.” Sonny and I laughed, watching the people coming in and out of the establishment.

Taking a sip of my soda, I dug into the fries, nearly moaning in delight. I decided on a lemonade to drink. My son was a fan of my choice for lunch too, kicking me as I ate. He tended to kick and move more when I ate certain foods. Rare meat being another of his favorites.

“Lulu, can we go to the playground after we go shopping?”

“Maybe,” I said. “It all depends on when we’re done.” Truthfully, it depended on how I felt after we finished with the thrift store. If my back and/or feet hurt too badly, then I would have Sonny bring me home, and then, he could go take her to play.

“Okay,” she said, sad with my answer. It broke my heart when I had to tell her no, but that was my own guilt that I had to overcome. “Apple?”

I looked at the back seat to see Katrina offering me one of the fruits’ slices that came with her meal. Smiling, I said, “No, thank you.”

She put the apple slice in her mouth, talking with her mouth full, shrugging her shoulders. “Suit yourself.”

Laughing, I went back to attacking my burger.

“DO THEY HAVE BARBIES HERE?” Katrina asked me. “I want some new ones.”

I held her hand on our way to the entrance to Consign Hive thrift store. Sonny walked behind us, staying close. I honestly didn't mind having a personal bodyguard every time I went out. Whoever it was on each trip would linger but would give me enough space so their presence wasn't smothering.

“I'm not sure,” I told Katrina. “It depends on if anyone donated some.” I looked down at her and smiled. “But we'll see.”

“Okay! I hope they do. Katie needs more friends. She does and Stephanie does and so does Jessica. Samantha has enough friends.”

It was cute to me that she named each of her dolls and gave them the personalities she did when playing with them.

The crowd was on the lighter side today here at Consign Hive. I preferred it that way; it made it easier to browse without others practically breathing down my neck.

I had always enjoyed thrifting. It was a nice way to relax. I wanted to visit our local shop today to hopefully find more pajamas and browse the men's section for more baggy T-shirts and basketball shorts. Comfort was a necessity during this pregnancy. I would've borrowed Dominic's shirts, but my belly was getting too big for them.

“Hello,” greeted the female employee, a friendly smile on her face. She was in the middle of putting away clothes.

“Hi!” Katrina replied.

“Is there anything in particular you’re looking for today?”

I shook my head. “Just browsing.”

“Barbies!” Katrina excitedly answered, garnering a chuckle from the employee.

“I think we have some, actually.” She pointed in the direction of where the toys were, looking at me. “Around that corner, you’ll find the toys. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She carried on with her task.

“Can I go look at the toys, Lulu? Please?”

“Would you mind taking her over there?” I asked Sonny. “I want to go check out the men’s section and see what they have.”

Sonny’s expression screamed that he wasn’t keen on leaving me to browse any part of this store alone, but it wouldn’t be for long, and then I would be back in eyesight.

“I don’t think—”

“Please, Sonny. How would Dominic know?”

An awkward silence hung in the air for a moment, and then, Sonny heaved a defeated breath.

“Alright but meet us over at the toys as soon as you’re done. Not a moment later.”

“I promise.”

He stared at me for an extra second before he reached for Katrina’s hand and took her to go search the children’s toys. I knew he meant well, but browsing men’s clothes in here by myself wasn’t dangerous. It wasn’t like he would get in

trouble for it. I'd grab clothing I liked and headed straight for the toys. This place, small in square footage, had the vibe of a mom 'n' pop shop with locals as their employees and volunteers. Consign Hive was safe.

My favorite thing about this place was how well organized it was. Some bigger thrift stores I'd been to looked like a tornado ripped through them.

I nodded in greeting at an elderly woman as we crossed paths. Using a walker for support, she had to at least be in her 80s. She saw my belly and looked back up at me.

“So beautiful,” she said, her smile infectious.

“Thank you.”

I slowed my pace, checking out the shelves of books along my way, rubbing my belly. My son kicked at my touch. I couldn't wait to meet him. I couldn't believe how blessed I was. He had so much love waiting for him.

Aimlessly, I wandered the area where the men's clothing section was, taking my time and enjoying the moment. The sense of peace. Seeing the section for blankets and bed sheets, I spotted baby blankets. Thumbing through the stack, I chose a basic yellow blanket, a blue one, and two zoo animal themed ones. There was baby bedding, but I wanted to order those brand new, and I was undecided on the theme for my son's bedroom. I had been holding off on shopping for his bedroom until I made a choice.

Blankets on my arm, I came up on the men's clothing section, finding the size range I needed. The bell attached above the door sounded as someone entered the store. I wondered how the employees dealt with that bell on busy days. That would drive me nuts.

I huffed, annoyed with the selection of shirts. But as quickly as my annoyance appeared, it disappeared when a new, nearby lingering scent made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Turning my head, I spotted a tall man—around or at six feet—wearing a brown trench coat and a baseball cap. A man. His head was down, the cap hiding his eyes as he headed my way.

Thanks to when I was homeless, picking up on someone's vibe had become fairly easy. Add in the training I'd received with the family and my encounters with Fabio and Vincent, and every alarm in my head was blaring. I didn't like it. My heart began to beat faster. I gripped my phone tighter in my hand, cradling my belly in the other as I focused again on the men's clothes, pretending to search the bottom rack with all the pants and shorts on it. Dominic's advice suddenly came to mind.

Keep your head down, eyes up.

The stranger entered the men's area, one hand in his coat pocket, his knuckles peeking out of its other sleeve. Like he was holding something. A gun? No, that would be too bulky. He was clearly in no hurry, lightly brushing against me as he passed by. I froze at the feel of something cold and sharp against my arm.

“Sorry,” he mumbled under his breath.

This section was crowded by the racks of clothes but not *that* crowded. He brushed against me on purpose. He had a weapon. A knife maybe? Not wanting to cause any kind of scene and scare Katrina, I remained calm and felt his presence draw further away until we were on opposite ends of the section.

No noise. No talking. Just silence.

I didn't dare look behind me. I turned down the volume on my phone and then opened up my messages, sending a text to Sonny.

I need you NOW. Don't scare Katrina. Man here w/ a weapon alert!!!

Staring at my belly, I regretted not waiting for Katrina to finish what she wanted before coming over here without Sonny. If it had come to it, I would've thrown hands with this guy to protect me and my son, even if it meant getting hurt. I wasn't sure what agenda the stranger had. *Was he a creeper? A socially awkward man? Some kind of criminal?* I snuck a peek to my right, and there was Sonny, holding Katrina, his strides great and brisk on his way across the shop. He waved for me to come to him. Feigning frustration at the clothes, I sighed and flicked a random shirt on my way out of that section.

"Are you ready to go?" Sonny asked.

"Hell yes."

He set Katrina down next to me and stepped closer, talking in my ear. "In there?" I nodded. He took a step back and reached inside the front of his suit jacket, handing me the keys to his Escalade before opening his wallet. "Lock the doors." He passed me his credit card.

"Understood." I patted the crown of Katrina's head, smiling at her for reassurance. "Let's go pay for our stuff. Sound good?"

"Okay, Lulu." I took firm hold of her hand and walked us back toward the checkout desk. Sonny was already in the men's clothing section before I could make my first step past him. "They had Barbies, Lulu!"

“How many did you get?” Seeing her collection in her arms, I’d say she raided the doll selection fairly well.

“A lot.”

Amused, I shook my head, reaching the checkout.

After the cashier thanked us for shopping there, I told her to have a good day and walked me and Katrina out of the shop. Even though the air was cold, it was a relief. I breathed in deep, exhaling as I pressed the button to unlock the SUV’s doors. I helped Katrina into the backseat and buckled her in, shutting her door. Sonny fell into view through the shop windows after I rounded the back of the Escalade.

Hand on the handle of the passenger door, I gave Sonny a thumb’s up. He nodded once.

We got in the SUV and buckled up. Sonny started the engine. After we backed out of the parking lot, I helped Katrina retrieve her leftovers from her Happy Meal®, and then, I leaned against my seat, my head against the headrest, taking another deep breath to collect myself. Katrina was safe. Sonny was safe, and so were me and my son. I put my hands on my belly, calming down further with each kick and movement.

THOUGH I WAS thankful nothing happened with that stranger, everything could’ve gone in the opposite direction so fucking fast. From now on, I planned to take my purse with me wherever I went, bringing my .22 with me. Maybe a knife or pepper spray, too.

Who was he? Was he a local? Was it just coincidental timing, or was that planned? Was he going to hurt me? Would

Dominic let me leave the fucking house again or keep me on a ball and chain for the rest of my life? Fuck.

I stared at the ceiling, tired. Tired physically and tired of being on guard. “Who was that, Sonny?”

“Still figuring that out.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Lulu? Can we still go to the playground? It’s not dark yet, and I want to sit on the swings! I want to try to jump farther. My stupid shoe messed me up last time—stupid laces. I want Velcro! Those won’t make me mess up.”

The playground. Damn it! I covered my face, groaning. I forgot. Fucking pregnancy fog! Fucking asshole who had to ruin this fucking day! Tears sprung to my eyes. I should’ve stuck with Sonny and Katrina. He was right on being hesitant to let me wander the shop alone, and I fucking hated it. Being in this life, dating a mafia don brought with it its own set of risks, and having his child cemented me in this life. I loved it most of the time and having that second chance away from poverty and insecurity, but this business also carried with it its own insecurity. *What if that stranger hurt me? What if he tried to kill me? My son?*

A shaky breath escaped me. When I broke down, bursting into tears, Sonny placed his hand on my shoulder, trying to comfort me.

“The playground will have to be another day,” Sonny informed Katrina. “We’ll talk about it when we get home.”

“Is that why Lulu’s crying?”

There was a pause like Sonny searched for the words.

“We feel bad, but we need to get home. There’s always another day.”

I cried harder at that, the guilt massive. Her afternoon was ruined, and it was my fault. If I had listened...

“Please don’t be sad, Lulu. Like Uncle Sonny said, we can go another day. We don’t have to go to the playground today, as long as I can spend time with you.”

Wiping my eyes, I looked at her, reaching behind me, holding out my hand for her to hold. Reaching forward, she grabbed it. Katrina was an amazing kid. She was right; we’d spend more time together once we got home. I smiled, thinking about us playing with her new dolls, maybe putting on one of her favorite movies and snuggling, munching on popcorn.

“I love you,” I told her.

“I love you, too, Lulu.”

chapter TEN

IF ONLY I HAD LISTENED.

My self-scolding was on a loop since I got home.

It was my fault.

Katrina's day was ruined because of me.

What if he attacked me? What if he tried to hurt my son? I should've fucking listened to Sonny. Security knew best. Always. Why was I so fucking selfish?

The warm bath Dominic drew for me after dinner helped ease more of my nerves. He rubbed the sponge against my back, cleaning me.

“Talk to me,” he coaxed. He lathered more of my strawberry body wash—his favorite of mine—into the loofah sponge. “Please.”

I went quiet after telling Dominic what happened at the thrift shop, isolating myself in our bedroom. It wasn't as if he was angry because he wasn't.

When he got wind of what happened, he'd hardly left my side. It affected him far greater than he let on. He ordered Katrina and me to stay inside for the rest of the day with extra security situated around the premises. I saw glimpses of his

anger and frustration for his family while digging into the incident, at one time shouting the F-word and going on about the strange man being able to be in society. Dominic made countless phone calls and combed through security footage, just recently catching me up on his findings. He told me he didn't want me in the loop until he knew with absolute certainty that me and Katrina, as well as everyone else, were safe.

It wasn't just the guilt keeping me quiet... I was scared. That guy could've just been disturbed, or maybe he was under the influence of something, or maybe he was indeed just a creeper, but my gut said it wasn't random. I couldn't explain it. I had encountered enough perilous bullshit to be disbelieving of the idea that this wasn't a new seed planted for a new threat around the corner. What they found, or lack thereof, on the stranger wasn't otherwise convincing.

His name was Wyatt James. He was a drifter within Bergen County. Homeless. The police were aware of him, but because of incidents where he leered and lingered or him running off after attacking his victims, they couldn't nail him, and it also meant he hadn't been medically evaluated. That was the law for you.

Sonny confronted Wyatt, but his hands were tied on what and how much he could've done. He couldn't create a scene. If Wyatt had hurt me, then it would've been fair game, but even though our family had law enforcement in our pockets, they wouldn't hesitate to hang us out to dry if it benefited them or anyone above them.

I counted my blessings. It was all I really could do at this point and time.

"I can't get over it," I said.

“It’s over. You won’t ever see him again.”

I shook my head, wishing everyone could understand. Dominic rinsed off the soap from the sponge in the water.

“I’ll increase your security for the time being.”

I wanted to lash out. Scream. My lip and chin quivered under the weight of the tears threatening to spill. I looked over at Dominic. “You honestly believe that was some fucking random thing?”

Dominic paused. “Believe me, *Bellissima*, if it wasn’t, he wouldn’t be walking the streets a free man. No one and nothing would’ve gone untouched until I found answers, but sometimes, it’s just a case of the wrong place, wrong time. Today was nothing but an unfortunate coincidence.”

I shook my head again, staring at my hands on my lap underwater. “Nope. I don’t believe that.”

Dominic rinsed the body wash off my back. “I don’t tend to believe in coincidences either, but sometimes, that’s how the dominoes fall.” He wrung more water down my back, slower this time, sliding his hand down and gently massaging me with the sponge. “What matters is that everyone walked out unhurt and alive.” He brought his other hand past my hip to rest on my belly, pausing at my belly button. His eyes told of the fear he felt at the news. His eyes held the same fear when we locked eyes in the driveway. The first thing he did was rush me into his arms, his protective hand on my belly.

I leaned back in the tub, resting my head on the tub’s plush headrest, closing my eyes and cradling my belly, my right hand on Dominic’s. His words wrenched my heart. I swallowed back fresh tears.

“When Sonny called me, he couldn’t drive fast enough. I wanted you immediately in my arms. I wanted the feeling of our son kicking in your belly.” He drew in a deep breath. “Trust me, Lilith, I looked for ways it couldn’t be a damn coincidence. I wanted the excuse to slaughter anyone and everything in my fucking path, but that just wasn’t the fucking case.”

Sensing Dominic leaning in closer, I opened my eyes, watching as he tossed the sponge in the water. He cupped my cheeks, now face to face, the look in his eyes making me go teary-eyed again. His entire world must’ve shattered with that phone call. I knew mine would’ve. Every sense of security and normalcy was torn from under him.

“It reminded me how much I fucking love you. How much I fucking *need* you and how much I can’t fucking live without you.” He pressed his lips to mine in a long, possessive kiss. He distanced an inch, catching his breath. “How vital you are to my entire fucking existence.” I closed my eyes again at the sensation of his kiss to my forehead. His next words sang against my skin. “You and our unborn are my everything. I love you, Lilith. I love our little family.”

chapter ELEVEN

Wednesday, February 1, 2017

THE HINT of a breeze on the chilly night made the air that much colder, and it was so fucking refreshing. When I experienced hot flashes—they liked to strike at night—opening our window or turning on my trusty box fan brought me relief. Tonight, however... Restlessness and my active son were what sent me out of bed and outside. In a pair of cotton boy shorts, my sleep-bra, and my black satin kimono, I leaned forward against the guard rail of the balcony, looking out at our backyard and the homes of our staff.

Sighing, I looked up at the scarce stars, wishing Nadia was here to talk to. My chest tightened, my grief over her threatening to put me in a chokehold the longer I mourned the safety I used to feel wrapped in her arms. The way she took me out of my head and grounded me, her gentle, motherly humming ringing loud in my subconscious. With the familiar sting pricking my eyes, her melodic humming morphed into the sound of the bell above the door dinging when Wyatt entered the thrift shop. For a moment, it wasn't the winter air bringing me a chill. It was the ice in my blood.

I looked away from the stars and focused on the grass below, inhaling and exhaling. *Breathe. Just... Keep breathing.*

While my guilt subsided, the all-too-familiar dread twisted my insides. I wanted it to be hormones or stress triggering this particular feeling. I was never that lucky. Dread didn't find me often, but when it did, it always meant misery—in some fashion—was around the corner. I just never knew what or when.

The incident at Consign Hive wasn't random. At least, that was what the voice in my head wouldn't stop screaming. It just felt... Off. I knew men bothering women wasn't unusual in today's world. It was the answers found after the incident. It was all too common—a severely mentally disturbed individual failed by society and the system who harassed women on the streets because he could. Nothing remotely mafia-related traced back to Wyatt. No sketchy personal connections. Everything was clean. Cookie-cutter. Too quiet.

Was what happened really what Dominic said—wrong place, wrong time? Coincidence? Like him, I wasn't a big believer in coincidences either. There was something more. There had to be. Somewhere. I had the sense that a new threat lay on the horizon.

On cue, like he heard my thoughts and concerns, Dominic's scent carried in the breeze the moment he approached the threshold to the balcony. His warm, naked arms enveloped me and held me against his bare chest. He brought one hand up over my breasts and around to the side of my neck, cradling the side of my face. I leaned into his palm, kissing its skin. His other hand was on the underside of my belly. I held his forearm and his other hand, smiling. Turning my head, we shared a kiss.

Dominic's touch, let alone his presence, never ceased to bring me comfort. Safety. He was the soothing fire I desperately needed right now.

Staring back ahead, I broke our silence. "I could've sworn you were asleep."

"I was until you weren't there." He held me tighter and kissed my temple. "Still thinking about what happened?" I nodded. "It's over, Lilith. You'll never see him again."

That I *did* believe, but what I refused to accept was the end of any looming threats. Sure, in the mafia, you constantly had to keep your head on a swivel and look over your shoulder. You felt moments of peace; however, you never truly *had* peace, and it was a fact of life I would never get used to like Dominic and the others had, especially now that we were to be parents. Eyes were always on us. Enemies were everywhere. Whether it be jealousy, families bored with what they had and wanting more, or even those we had in our pockets could turn at a moment's notice. Nothing was guaranteed. Danger never stayed hidden, and the creatures eventually came out to play.

"Maybe not, but everyone's so damn calm, and it's driving me nuts."

Dominic turned me around, refusing to let me go. Gripping my arms, he dipped his head, his blue eyes so beautiful. I placed my palms on his chest, syncing my breathing with his.

"Trust us. Trust *me*."

"I do."

"Then, believe me when I say it's over. We're safe."

I bit my bottom lip, flitting my eyes to his chest, watching it rise and fall. "For now."

He grasped my face in his hands, moving my head back so I had no other choice but to look him in the eyes. “We’re safe,” he reiterated, clearly tired of trying to nail that in my head. I didn’t blame him. Wyatt was nothing, and Dominic wouldn’t waste his time on him. “Why do you insist that we’re not?”

“Because that’s what that annoying voice is telling me. Like you’ve said—go with your gut. Well, mine won’t shut the fuck up.”

His chuckle rumbled in his chest. “What is that little fucker telling you?”

I grabbed his hands and moved them from my face, holding onto them between us.

“That there are no coincidences, and this wasn’t something random. The dread I felt then is the kind I feel now, and I can’t shake it, Dominic. No matter how hard I try, I just can’t.” I steadied my breathing, my heart beginning to beat faster. My gut twisted, and I squeezed his hands as if that would keep me balanced. My chest tightened, and my throat tickled with the threat of tears. I fought to speak my words. “It scares me when I feel this way because I’m usually not wrong.”

Dominic’s eyes told me it pained him to see me hurt, to watch me struggle.

“What if I make some calls and have Wyatt put away? Would that ease your fears?”

Tears filled my eyes, escaping the moment I blinked, nodding. Wyatt in jail or a facility wasn’t only what I needed, but it was best for the state as a whole. If the cops wouldn’t do what was morally right and continued to leave women at risk,

then vigilante justice was best. If Wyatt bothered or hurt anyone else, that would fester on my conscience forever.

“It would,” I said, crying. Dominic removed his hands from mine and once again grabbed my face, this time dipping down to kiss me.

“Then you have my word. I’m sorry I haven’t done it already.”

Shaking my head, I told him not to apologize. Being this close to him, breathing in his heady scent of cigarettes and his Dior Sauvage Elixir cologne, all I wanted tonight was to be close to him. Not sleep. Him.

“Take me to bed.”

Immediately, he picked me up and turned around with the intention of bringing us inside. I wrapped my legs around him and wrapped my arms around his neck, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Would you like me to sing to you?” he asked, and my heart melted at his suggestion. Listening to him sing and play the piano were all the ASMR I needed on sleepless nights, only... One of his songs wasn’t what I craved. Not yet. Afterward.

We reached the balcony door when I said, “I want you to fuck me first.”

A devilish smirk curled Dominic’s lips.

chapter TWELVE

I NEEDED a release from this stress and anxiety. So did Dominic. He flipped on the light and then kicked our bedroom door shut, his hands firmly holding my ass, my nails scratching his back while I pulled and grabbed his hair with my other. We were hungry for each other. Wanton. I groaned in disappointment when he abandoned my mouth for my neck, but I leaned my head back and off to the side anyhow, moaning softly.

“Take me, Dominic. Please, and don’t you dare be gentle.”

He smirked against my skin, his devious chuckle rumbling in his chest. He then set me on my feet, lust and eagerness possessing his eyes. Those beautiful blues slowly surveyed me from head to toe and back up my body. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. I stood there, my heart racing in anticipation.

“Take it off,” he commanded, jutting his chin, a dark huskiness dripping off his tongue. “All. Of it.”

I pushed the fabric of the kimono off my right shoulder at a teasing pace, smirking. A low groan crawled up his throat.

“Faster.” He slipped his hand inside his gray sweatpants, stroking himself.

My right shoulder now exposed, I began slipping the kimono off my other, saying, “I want you to start a fire.” I nudged my head in the direction of our fireplace across the room. Dominic stroked himself on his way to the fireplace. I tossed the kimono onto the plush, royal-blue bench that stretched the length of the foot of our California king bed. When the flames began to stretch, I turned off the lamp on his nightstand.

The glow of the flames cascaded behind Dominic as he walked back over to me, his physique a whole new kind of alluring. *Beauteous*. I unhooked the front of my sleep bra, letting my breasts delicately spill out. The changes my breasts had endured made me slightly more self-conscious, but it didn't faze Dominic in the slightest. He cupped one, tenderly kneading it.

“Does that hurt you?” he asked, always making sure I was okay. I loved that about him.

Shaking my head, I tipped it back, mewling as he brushed his thumb over my nipple. I straightened my neck and brought my hand to the back of his, forcing his mouth to mine, tasting his tongue. I slipped my other hand into his sweats, wrapping my fingers around his velvety, steel length. When I gave it one long pump and traced the tip of the wet crown with my thumb. Dominic released a husky moan. I drank in his moan, his muscles tense. He let go of my breast and pushed his sweats down past his hips and thighs, stepping out of them and kicking them off to the side. I brushed my cheek against his, stroking him slowly, speaking against the shell of his ear.

“Let me taste you. Please, *Bellissimo*.” I gazed into his eyes, captivated as always with the way the color red started

off as specks that gradually bled into his icy blues the more aroused he became.

His eyebrows creased, a louder moan leaving him. “*Fuck.*”

Letting go of his cock, I took a seat on the edge of his side of the bed, taking his cock back into my hand. He was rock hard, veins prominent. More precum leaked from its tip. I stroked him again, his cock slick. I was so fucking eager to lap it all up, guiding him into my mouth.

“*Fuuck,*” he drawled, fisting my hair. He didn’t fuck my mouth. He let me set the pace, grunting as I took him to the back of my throat. I held his hip, stroking him while I slid him in and out of my mouth. “That’s it, baby. Fucking take it. All of it.”

He fisted more of my hair, cupping his free hand over mine, rocking his hips to my rhythm.

I played with his balls, squeezing them just enough to elicit a throaty grunt, my tongue lapping his juices. I wrapped my fingers around his cock as I once again guided him to the back of my throat before bobbing my head back and forth to repeat the motion. Holding his tensing thighs, I repeated the actions over and over, driving him closer and closer to the edge.

“*Sh-Shit,*” he murmured. “*Fuck, Bellissima.*” He was dancing on that fine line leading to explosive bliss when he suddenly pulled out of my mouth and pulled me to my feet, jutting his chin to the bed. “Hands and knees now.”

I did as he said, wiggling my ass for him. I gasped when he spanked me, biting my bottom lip in anticipation.

“Still,” he ordered. He then spread my legs wider, grabbing my hips and pulling me backward as he thrust inside me without warning. He did as I asked. He wasn’t easy. Fisting

my hair, he wrenched my head back as he thrust in and out of me at a brutal pace, his calloused fingers digging into the flesh of my hip.

Slipping my hand between my thighs, I began circling my clit, rubbing it between my fingers and thumb. My walls squeezed around Dominic's cock as my ecstasy ratcheted higher and higher. Dominic's breathing labored as he held his rhythm, his balls slapping against my skin.

“Come with me, *Bellissima*.”

I rubbed myself faster, cresting the top of the wave. I was hot. Swimming in the weightless sensation.

“Oh fuck,” Dominic blurted. “Fuck, fuck!” He roared his release at the same time I gasped in ecstasy, both of us crashing into nirvana, coasting through the explosion as we came down.

I rested on my elbows, pressing my forehead into the bedding, catching my breath. Our cum ran down my thighs. I pouted when Dominic pulled out, a fresh wave of pleasure rolling through my veins at his low, dangerous chuckle. In seconds, I yelped as he flipped me over and moved my legs onto his shoulders. I shuddered at the feel of him licking his tongue up my slit. He suckled my swollen clit. My moan was strained, almost breathless.

Another orgasm began building. I wriggled against his mouth, pressing against it, mewling. I scratched the bedding, digging my nails into it. I was on the rail car as it went up the rollercoaster of desire, quickly approaching the drop-off. Shit, I was so fucking close to coming again. Dominic slipped his tongue inside of me, hitting that perfect spot that had me seeing stars as he lapped up our combined cum. Lapped up every bit of me.

“You’re fucking delectable,” he rasped, the vibration of his words creating a pleasurable shockwave that nearly made me lose myself right there. When he stuck his finger inside of me, I nearly saw stars. I rode Dominic’s face, desperate as he attacked my pussy, his tongue wild. He inserted another finger, hooking them and finding that magic spot. I couldn’t take it anymore and clenched around his fingers, moaning my release into the bedding.

In safe, swift movements, I soon found myself back on my feet, the cherry wood cooling. Dominic brought one arm around me, holding my shoulder with his other hand. Steadying my breathing, I leaned back into the spot between his neck and shoulder, kissing his flesh. He cupped my belly with his hand, turning my head and bringing our mouths close together, our lips ghosting one another’s. We shared a teasing kiss. I turned around in his arms and clutched his face, crashing my mouth to his for a passionate kiss. Stopping, I stared into his eyes, watching the red diminish from his blue irises as I cupped his cheek.

“I hope you’re not spent.”

A playful, delicious smirk reached Dominic’s eyes. “Never.”

We pounced, feverishly fawning and grabbing and pawing everywhere we could.

It was going to be a long, pleasurable night.

chapter THIRTEEN

THERE WAS nothing but peace and tranquility. The fire continued to burn while my man and I laid in bed, spent and satiated. I sipped on more animal blood from its bag, about a quarter of it left. We didn't speak; we just enjoyed each other's presence.

Until I broke the silence.

"I hope I haven't been burning through your stock."

When I turned my head, I saw Dominic shaking his head, staring at the ceiling. Naked too under the sheets, one of his legs was uncovered. With the sheets messy at his waist, I was tempted to tear them away and play with his cock. I bit the inside of my lip, moving my hand somewhat closer to him as I thought about it.

"No. There are plenty of animals to sustain him. But we have enough emergency stock in the event of a shortage."

"Humans?"

He nodded. "Mhm."

On and off, I had thought about what human blood tasted like. What it smelled like. In hybrid pregnancies, it wasn't advised for the mother to regularly consume it. Something about it affecting the baby's thirst, causing its vampire side to

become stronger and more powerful, which put the mother at greater risk of complications. My curiosity hung over me, regardless. Julie only said it wasn't advised; she never said it was off-limits.

Walking two of my fingers between us and across Dominic's hip, I led them to his cock, caressing him over the sheets. A small, satisfied moan rose in his chest. He threaded his fingers together and slid his hands behind his head.

"What do they taste like?" I thought out loud.

I then slid my hand back up toward Dominic's stomach as he turned his head, our eyes unwavering from each other. The man was nothing short of a stunning beauty. It was as if God took extra time while sculpting him, chiseling his features with razor-sharp precision. His tousled hair splayed on his pillow begged to be played with.

He lowered an arm and pulled back the sheets, flitting his eyes to himself and then back at me. He arched his brow, his expression telling me he wasn't done with me teasing his cock. I first passed him my now empty bag of blood and then reached again for his cock as he placed the bag on his nightstand. I slowly stroked him, rubbing my thumb around his tip.

"Damn," he murmured, replacing his hands behind his head. "What was your question again?"

I laughed, causing his cock to stir in my hand, hardening further. Another, deeper moan left him. He closed his eyes.

"Humans... What do they taste like?"

"Well, I can say that you, personally, taste like honey-dipped dragon fruit with a hint of sweet, sweet strawberry."

Momentarily taken aback, I looked at him in amusement, shaking my head. This man...

“Wow,” was all I could say.

He chuckled, smiling.

“But no, smartass,” I went on, laughing. “I meant... Well, you know what I friggin’ meant.” I stroked his cock at a steadier pace, smirking when he wrinkled his brows and wet his lips.

“You’re asking me to describe the impossible. There is only euphoria and frenzied exuberance. That first drop of blood ignites the spark that quickly leads to pleasure so sublime... *The best sex you could ever experience holds no candle to it.*”

All his words did was make me hungrier for a taste and hungrier for more of *him*. The longer I worked his cock, Dominic rocked his pelvis into my hand, tensing and licking his lips. He bent his leg, gripped his thigh, and angled himself toward me, speaking Italian under his breath. I didn’t want him to come yet, at least not on the sheets. I wasn’t done having my fun.

I let him go. Dominic groaned in displeasure, opening his eyes. His brows drew low over his eyes as he watched me sit up on my knees, gently pushing him back down on the bed. He hummed satisfactorily while spreading his legs for me. I took him into my mouth, bobbing my head, holding his hips.

“Fuck,” he growled, fucking my mouth to my rhythm. He fisted my hair. “*Bellissima... Your mouth... Fuuuckk.*”

Dominic was close. So fucking close. I shifted and pressed my palm into the mattress, stroking him with my other hand as I sucked, bobbing my head faster. His cock was thick, filling

with his release. Power swirled through me when he began to squirm and whimper with need. A man like Dominic, a feared mafia don becoming so vulnerable, falling under my complete control and mercy... He was putty in my hands, and I loved every fucking second.

“Don’t stop,” he rasped. “Swallow every fucking drop.” He fucked my mouth faster, breathing heavier. He was right where I wanted him. “Fuck.” He fisted my hair tighter but not enough to cause any real pain. “I’m... I’m gonna... Oh, fuck.” Dominic grunted, spilling his seed down my throat as I drank every warm, salty drop. As he came down from his orgasm, he made little noises, like his release was the ultimate relief. I sucked the tip of his cock before I was done, licking his slit. He let go of my hair, and I looked up to see him staring at me, satiated. Calm.

I crawled over him and bent low to kiss him, gently taking his lip in my teeth, tugging it before letting it go. He lifted his head and kissed me with more force, more passion. Rolling me onto my back, he straddled my hips, his now flaccid cock brushing against my belly as we continued to kiss like we hadn’t in days.

LAYING SNUGGLED AGAINST DOMINIC, our son kicked, bringing more noise to the thoughts I tried shooing away in the shared silence. *Did Dominic want him to be part of the mafia? Did he want his son to take his place when it was time?* Honestly, leaving our son out of this life wouldn’t bother me. Was it ultimately our son’s choice? Yes, but I wanted him to make the choice himself at eighteen, not have it made for him beforehand.

“Dominic?” He hummed a noise of interest. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Uh-oh,” he joked.

“Oh, hush,” I playfully spoke. A low laugh rumbled in his chest.

Using his arms for support, Dominic lifted his body, giving me his full attention.

“Go on.”

I cleared my throat, trying to find my words. “As our son grows up... What if he doesn’t want to follow in your footsteps?” I watched Dominic for any sign of what he was thinking. It was no use; he was unreadable. “What if he doesn’t want to deal with this life and instead wants to venture off and do his own thing? Would he have that choice?”

“Lilith, I’ll always support our son, but he’ll be my heir. This life is what he will know and what I will train him for. I don’t want the Rosini legacy to die when I do.”

My throat tightened at the thought of Dominic dying, but I blew a breath and pushed that aside, not surprised by his answer. I could see training our son to fight, to protect himself. He should know self-defense. Hell, I’d even help Dominic teach him about finances and accounting. But the killing... That was a hard line in the sand for me. Yeah, I killed a man, but that man was Fabio, and he needed to be put in the ground. Taking lives under the guise of an oath or as a means to silence someone left an uneasy weight in the pit of my stomach, and Dominic knew this. He grew up desensitized to shit like that, to those dark, gritty layers of life and the horrors of it. I wanted our son to be as happy as he could be and to be safe

and prosper to the fullest. I didn't want him to grow up regretting his choices.

“But what if he wants to do his own thing and go his own path? Would you let him?”

Dominic sighed, moving out from beneath me and sitting on the edge of the bed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he leaned forward, pushing his hands through his hair. I pulled myself up higher against the pillows, rolling onto my side. He kept his head in his hands.

“Lilith, I know if you had your way, we'd live in a quiet neighborhood like this but with a white picket fence, and we would never have to look over our shoulders, but that's not the life we live, and it's not the life our son will live. You need to accept that.”

“But why? Why can't he make his own name for himself out from under your shadow?”

Sighing louder, Dominic sat up straight and tipped his head back, shaking it as he looked back down at his arms now on his knees. I realized my words were probably sort of harsh, but we needed to talk about this. Hash this out now and get on the same page.

“If he wants his own side gig, then whatever, but as I said, my name won't die with me.”

I couldn't stop my next words from pouring out.

“God forbid he has a mind of his own. I'd think after the way Hector forced your hand, you wouldn't do the same to your son.”

Instantly, I regretted saying what should've stayed in my head. When Dominic turned enough so he could look at me, the venom in his eyes made my heart race. I sat up slowly, my

arm holding me up. Lips pressed in a hard line, he glared, his chest rising and falling. My breaths struggled in my throat. My voice went small.

“Dominic, wait—”

“I will *never* be like that bastard, and to insinuate that I would *fathom* such a hell for my son isn’t a hill you want to climb. This kid’s role is already assigned, and that’s final. I won’t turn him, but I *will* see to it he stands with me and with this family, upholding our oath and honor.”

“But—”

“You won’t win this one, Lilith.” He turned his back to me, staring ahead. “This conversation is over.” He stood up and walked into the bathroom, grabbing its door handle and slamming the door shut. A minute later, I heard the running of the shower.

I dropped back against the mattress, staring at his pillow, eventually hugging it, burying my nose in it and inhaling his scent. Tears lingered in my eyes. I needed him to understand. Damn it, I needed him to see how forcing his son into a corner could backfire and make our son resent him. Maybe even hate him. What I hated most... I chose to stay here. Dominic told me after we destroyed Fabio that if I desired, I could leave and go back to my old life. I stayed, knowing good and well that the mafia wasn’t for the weak and the scared. And from what I saw in movies and read in books, sons carried on the ways of their fathers and kept the family going. I knew when a boy was born, their future was already written for them. I was naïve to think the rules would change with us.

Just because Dominic wouldn’t allow our son the choice to break free didn’t mean I wouldn’t make it my mission as he

got older to fight for him to obtain any semblance of his own individuality.

I quietly shed tears into his pillow, hugging it tighter. My boy kicked, and I smiled into the pillow, bringing my right leg up a little, knee bent.

“I love you,” I whispered, voice shaky.

The shower stopped running, and minutes later, Dominic opened the door and walked around to his side of the bed, getting something off his nightstand. I recognized the thud of his pack of smokes against the wood as he tossed it back on the nightstand. I didn't hear him move after that, sensing him staring at me.

“Lilith, look at me.” Quietly, I sniffed. “Lilith.”

I shook my head, not wanting him to see me in yet another moment of weakness. Hearing Dominic set down his cigarette and lighter, the mattress dipped, and his presence crept closer. We played tug of war with his pillow, him ultimately winning and reclaiming it. I turned my head to hide my face in my pillow, but he grabbed my chin and forced me to show my tears.

“You constantly challenge me, and I like that, but don't think I don't care about our son's happiness.”

I held onto his wrist. “I'm sorry I said that.” I kept my voice small.

He let go of my chin and swept stray hairs off my face and over my shoulder.

“Don't be. We both want him to be happy, but you need to understand that certain traditions are set in stone.”

“What if he *did* want to walk away from the business?”

The pain of his answer was written on his face. He let out a long, afflicted breath, weighing the gravity of his words.

“I would be disappointed... And he would be shunned, but I’d still make sure he was protected, and I would still love him, regardless.”

My chest tightened at his admission. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fucking fair.

“That’s so cruel.”

“Such is life.”

Dominic was right, and that twisted my heart the most. There was nothing I could do, which just made me feel like I had already failed my son. I couldn’t safeguard him. I couldn’t preserve any particular path for him, unless...

“Are you filling Thomas’s position?”

Dominic’s brows creased as he looked at me with suspicion, speaking with caution. “No. Why?”

After some Googling—because I wasn’t by far any kind of scholar on the mafia ranks—I learned a *consigliere* played a pivotal role in a family. As the don’s closest advisor, next to the underboss, they are one of the most trusted men. Dino had held higher authority than Thomas, but Thomas’s wisdom and advice were never overlooked. If Dino wasn’t available or couldn’t handle any situation, Dominic placed all his faith in Thomas.

Was I ready for such responsibility? Aside from offering advice and insight, a *consigliere* could be called on to mediate disputes or help in negotiations, one of those being contract negotiations. They attended every meeting, miniscule in importance to life changing. If I were sworn into Thomas’s position, Dominic would grant me access to their contacts,

including police, politicians, and those more closely guarded, like Andre.

Would I respect the position and its power? Of course, I would. I would keep proving myself worthy and that I could be entrusted with the most sensitive pieces of information. Our secrets.

I would also be able to better protect our son and be his voice when he went unheard. Consiglieres got away with telling the don no. They could argue against decisions, and no one in either of the other families could stop me. Only Dominic could override me. To everyone else, I would be untouchable as consigliere, just as I was untouchable now.

“I want it.” Dominic widened his eyes. “I want to be your new consigliere.”

The silence was deafening but short.

He caressed my cheek. His eyes told me he expected nothing less from me.

“Are you sure—”

“I’ve done my homework, and I can balance both. Let me prove it, please. You and our family mean the fucking world to me. I feel so useless as a soldier, especially with the baby coming.” Taking hold of his hand, I nuzzled my cheek against his knuckles, kissing them. “I’d be safer as your consigliere than your soldier.” Looking at him, I added, “And I feel I’d make Thomas proud.”

Dominic crawled closer and palmed the back of my head, planting a kiss on my forehead. His words felt smooth, like butter on my skin.

“You already make him proud.” He kissed my skin again. “You make *me* proud, *Bellissima*.” He pulled back, gazing into

my eyes. “Let me talk to my men. Give me twenty-four hours.”

“Deal.” I smiled.

Dominic crawled off the bed, tossing his towel in the hamper on his way to the fireplace. That was another sexy thing about him; he picked up his clothes. After putting out the dwindling fire and foregoing a fresh pair of boxer briefs, he got back into bed. I felt his breath. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed him staring.

“Never doubt my love and commitment to you and our son.”

I placed two of my fingertips on his lips. He immediately went silent. I moved my hand.

“It’s not that I doubt you because I want you to know that I *do* support our son being your next in line, and I *do* support him continuing this legacy. I just want it to be on his terms and *his* decision, that’s all. We need to come to a compromise because you’re too important to me, Dominic Matteo Rosini. And it might shock you, but I actually *do* like my new life. I mean, have you seen yourself lately? What woman *wouldn’t* want this scrumptious sexiness of a man in their bed?”

We both laughed, our tension easing.

“It’s not the money or the big house or fancy cars,” I added. “All I want and need is you.” Holding my hand, Dominic kissed it, his lips light as a feather.

“Before I met you,” he said, “women faked it, and I tossed them out with their money. They’d say what they thought I wanted to hear just so they could suck my cock and gain access to my credit card. Love wasn’t in my vocabulary—not until you came along.

“It takes a woman like you, a woman who fought and clawed her way to survival, to begin to understand and connect with me and to accept my flaws and my darkness. We’ll figure this out just as we do with everything else. I promise.”

I believed him, but I still treaded this line regarding our son with caution. Deep in my heart, I knew Dominic wasn’t saying any of this to be pitiless. These rules and oaths were hammered into his psyche by Hector from the second he got his hands on him. With time and work, my gut told me that we could shatter those glass houses and pave our own way and build our own molds, instead of piggybacking off of outdated customs. Nothing was concrete. If I had to be the one to throw the first stone, so be it.

“I love you, Dominic. Always and forever.”

Dominic squeezed my hand, filling me with reassurance and the sense of absolute safety only he provided.

“I love you, too, *Bellissima*, always and forever.”

Our breaths, like our chests, rose and fell in synchrony, our hands still intertwined.

chapter FOURTEEN

Thursday, February 2, 2017

VENTURING OUT of the house was a brilliant idea. Convincing Dominic to join me was the icing on the cake. I wasn't the only one who could've used fresh air. The one flaw was the snow—or lack thereof. I wished a storm would dump itself on us. It would've made the Saddle River Park pop, maybe bring out more people. The other annoying flaw was the personal security tailing us. Sonny and another of Dominic's most trusted soldiers, Lucas Scioli, maintained their distance from us, but sometimes, I wanted to go somewhere alone. Spend quality time with Dominic alone outside of our home's walls. But lack of security was a no-no. And now that I carried Dominic's child, personal security was non-negotiable.

Hand in hand, Dominic and I walked a path in what was the Otto Pehle area of the park. Branches of Pitch Pine trees swayed in the mild breeze, each waft of wind heavenly on this afternoon.

He made me bundle up before leaving the house, worried I'd catch a cold. Caving, I agreed to wear my winter coat but refused to keep it zipped. If I did that, I'd roast. Of course, if I had it my way, I would've left home in a tank top and pair of

shorts and broke out the flip-flops to complete the look. I settled on a nice red blouse, a pair of jeggings, and wore my belly band to help ease the strain on my lower back and hips.

Breaking out his black fedora, it complemented his black wool overcoat that he paired with his iridium gray suit. As usual, he was nothing short of stunning.

The coolness of his black, leather gloves felt good against my hand as I squeezed his, smiling at the squirrels chasing each other and the growing sound of happy children at the pond. The children and their families had taken advantage of the frozen pond to ice skate. A small group of older kids played ice hockey off to the side of the pond. One of them cheered after scoring a goal.

I smiled as I saw a small child practicing skating with her father. It was clear the little girl was nervous, but she didn't let it stop her and trusted her father as he let go of her and cheered her on.

Her eyes lit up, clearly proud of herself as she skated along the ice by herself. "Daddy, look! I'm doing it!"

Watching the man cheer on his daughter as he caught up with her made me remember the time my father drove us to our local park to go ice skating when I was five. Mom was under the weather that day. I was sad but wanted her to get her rest. I helped Dad make her breakfast that morning. I accidentally spilled milk when trying to pour some into her bowl of cereal. Dad burned the toast, forgetting to change the dial from when it was last used. He set off the smoke detector, and that made Mom come downstairs in a worry, only to burst out laughing at the scene unfolding before her eyes. Dad cleared the smoke with a dish towel, turning around to find Mom in the kitchen entryway, nearly choking from laughing

so hard. Dad then started laughing. It was a scene straight out of a movie.

I looked at the ground for a moment, swallowing away the threat of tears, and then looked back up at the pond. Dominic gently tugged on my arm.

“Do you need to take a break?” he asked.

I noticed a bench a few feet ahead and nodded. My feet were aching, another joy of pregnancy, so a break was welcomed. I appreciated it when Dominic often checked to make sure I was comfortable.

We sat down on the wooden bench. Dominic kissed my hand, leaning over to talk in my ear.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” He kissed the side of my face, and I smiled.

“Ice skating,” I said as I continued watching the pond. “Usually, Mom and Dad both took me, but there was one time it was just me and him. Mom caught the flu, so she stayed home.”

“I never learned,” Dominic casually confessed, catching me off guard. I looked at him, only to find him also watching the families on the ice.

“Wait... Never?” I was surprised to hear that.

He shook his head. “Nope,” he said with a breath. “Hector never made the time.”

My heart cracked for Dominic and our brothers being robbed of one of life’s simple pleasures.

“Did Nadia talk to him? Try to change his mind?”

“It was a miracle she convinced him to let me play the piano, much less own one.”

“Oh?” I was intrigued and wanted to know more.

“Story for another day.”

My curiosity was strong, but judging by Dominic’s tone, it was one of his more painful memories. I didn’t want to spoil the moment we were having, this semblance of peace we’d obtained, so I let the topic drop.

“Did he ever take you to Rockefeller Center?” Dominic asked, cutting through my thoughts.

I looked at him. “Huh?”

“Your father—did he take you to Rockefeller Center?”

I looked again at the pond, seeing a family call it a day. Who I assumed was the boy’s father threw his son over his shoulder as he pitched a fit, crying because he had to go home.

“No.”

“Why?”

Believe it or not, no, my parents never took me to New York City. After I ran away from my grandparents, I never made an effort to visit The Rink along Rockefeller Plaza. It would’ve just reminded me of the pain of my loss.

“I’m not sure. Dad hid his life so well, maybe he didn’t want to risk ours by bringing us to such a popular spot.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound convinced. “You said you remembered a time when it was just you and him?”

I nodded, amused at the memory of the toast. “Dad burned Mom’s toast that morning.” Fresh tears lined eyes. I bit my lip,

and Dominic quickly took hold of my hand. I squeezed it, fighting like hell not to cry.

“Maybe I can take you to Rockefeller. You can teach me and our son to ice skate. He’d love it at Christmas—all the lights and the music.”

I blinked free a few tears, wiping them away. Dominic willing to leave his comfort zone... It filled my heart with joy. Experiencing such a place with him and our boy... If only time travel existed, I would send us into the future right now. I laughed at the sudden thought of me teaching Dominic how to ice skate.

“What?” he inquired.

“Nothing. I just pictured you hanging onto the inside of the rink for dear life.”

The day it was just me and Dad, I particularly remembered another kid, an older girl, doing twirls on the ice. I desperately wanted to twirl in circles like her, but I only fell on my ass when I tried. Dad rushed to my aid, relieved that no bones were broken.

“Daddy! Daddy, look! She’s going in circles.”

I wanted to twirl like her. She was older and didn’t fall down a lot like me. Maybe I could twirl like her? Daddy would be proud of me if I twirled like her. I tugged on Daddy’s fuzzy coat.

“See, Daddy?” I pointed to the older girl. “I wanna twirl, too!”

“With a little practice, I know you can,” Daddy said.

I looked up at him. He was the best Daddy in the world. “Can we try right now?”

Daddy thought about it before giving me that look that I knew meant no. I hated that word. And then, he smiled.

“Sure, kiddo.” He held my hand and pulled me. I was still too scared to not hold onto the edge.

He held my arms and slowly turned me around and around in circles. I laughed, having a lot of fun. It was always fun when Daddy played with me. I just wished Mommy wasn't sick today. I wanted her to see me twirl.

“I wanna do it myself!” I said, wanting to prove to Daddy I could do it.

“Okay.” He sounded scared to let me spin. He didn't have to worry. I wouldn't fall. “Just be careful. I'm right here.”

Daddy stayed close and watched me. I pushed with my right foot and held my arms out as I turned. I almost fell, so I did it again but faster, only to lose my balance and fall on my butt on the ice. Daddy ran to me, scared. I didn't hurt myself, but I was mad at myself. I couldn't do it. I couldn't twirl like that girl. She was better than me. Her Daddy must be proud of her. Now crying, I wanted Mommy.

Daddy picked me up and leaned against the edge.

“Are you hurt?” He checked me for any boo-boos. I wrapped my arms around his neck. He rubbed my back. “You're okay, Lilly. You're okay.”

“Daddy,” I cried. I wanted to tell him I was mad, but I didn't know what to say. His and Mommy's hugs always made me feel better.

“Let's get home,” Daddy said. “Maybe we can stop somewhere for ice cream.”

I nodded, happy Daddy would buy me ice cream. I loved strawberry ice cream. Mommy called me her little strawberry because I loved strawberries so much. They were delicious, especially when Mommy made her strawberry bars for me or put them on her cakes.

I lifted my head and looked at Daddy. I sniffed and smiled as he walked us out of the rink.

“I want strawberry.”

Daddy laughed and smiled. “Of course, you do.”

Dominic wiped my tears for me.

“I’m sorry for crying.” I looked at Dominic, leaning into his palm as I said, “I have no idea why I just apologized.”

We laughed, sharing a tender kiss. As I laid my head on Dominic’s shoulder, he took me under his arm.

“We should take Katrina ice skating some time,” I thought out loud. “She’d love it.”

“It can be arranged.”

“Shoot, does she know how to ice skate?”

“No idea. We can ask her when we get home.”

“Her birthday’s coming up,” I mused. “If it’s still safe enough on that ice, can we bring her then?”

On February 12th, Katrina would turn nine. We hadn’t even begun planning any kind of party for her, and a pang of guilt tightened my chest.

“We’ll see,” Dominic said. It was difficult to make plans in this business. An issue could arise at any moment. Taking her here would likely be a spur-of-the-moment gift to her. “What does she want for her birthday, anyway?”

My stomach sank at his question. Aside from missing her grandfather on a regular basis, Katrina recently expressed how much she missed Bianca. Dominic hadn't spoken of her since putting her back up at that hotel, and I didn't want to press.

I looked up and over at Dominic, my expression saying, "Really?" He then looked at me, reading my mind.

"Besides the obvious."

"Well..." I gathered the words, looking again at the scenery, "last time I tucked Katrina into bed, she told me she missed your mom."

He drew in a deep breath before slowly releasing it, but he remained tense. "I don't know, Lilith."

"Is the place across the street ready yet?"

"No. It won't be for another month."

Deciding on a change of plans for his mother, Dominic was having the vacant home across from our place remodeled for her to live, but that wasn't quite written in stone. Anything she did or said from here on out that rubbed Dominic the wrong way could cancel everything and keep her in Tenafly.

"So, you're still giving it to her?"

He waited a breath before answering. "I guess so, yeah."

I still planned on talking to her. With everything with Wyatt and that fiasco, it slipped my mind.

Bianca had tried calling Dominic at random times, but he neglected to answer. He needed a bit more time and space.

"If you want," I said, sharing an idea, "I can arrange for Katrina to see Bianca myself. I don't know where yet, but I

can also talk to her. You won't have to see her—not until you're ready.”

Dominic kissed my head. “Thank you.” He placed his palm on my belly. Smiling, I watched him feel it and then bend over to kiss it.

“I can't wait to meet him,” I said.

He sat up and kissed me, smiling sweetly. “Me, too.”

I WAS MORE than ready to be home and soaking in a warm bath. This belly band only did so much, but I was glad I got in a pleasant walk today.

On our walk, we talked further about Katrina's birthday and were going to ask her to create a list of what she'd like for gifts. We were also leaving her day up to her. Whether she wanted to go out to eat or have us cook her something special was on her. A big party or family-only affair? Her decision.

I knew of one thing she repeatedly asked for, and that was a cat. Well, specifically, a kitten. That was going to be a hard sell. Dominic wasn't big on pets, but if he had to choose, he'd choose a dog over a cat.

I was up for the challenge.

A squirrel ran across the pathway past our feet; they were friendlier here in the park. We watched a little girl feeding a group of them before we turned back around on the trail. It was adorable. We couldn't wait to bring our son out here to feed them and to also feed the ducks in the summer.

“Damn things,” Dominic grumbled, eyeing the squirrel as it climbed a nearby tree.

I laughed. “It’s your shoes.”

“My shoes?” he pondered, confused. His polished black Oxfords clacked against the tar.

“Yeah. They’re so shiny.”

“My .22 says otherwise.”

I whipped my head toward him, eyes widening, amused. “Dominic!”

“Real life lesson in hitting a moving target.”

I laughed louder, shaking my head. “You wouldn’t,” I said, picturing him subjecting those poor squirrels to target practice.

“Yes, yes, I would.” His cell phone rang, and he let go of my hand to phish out his phone from inside his suit jacket, answering the call. Switching his phone to his other hand, he reached again for mine. We intertwined our fingers. “Talk to me, Santiago.”

While Dominic attended to whatever Dino wanted, an eerie feeling swept over me, following me like a dark cloud. It was almost as if... I looked behind me, and my breath caught in my chest. My heart raced. I shook as if I trembled in the cold, only it wasn’t the cold. Down on the grass below stood a tall figure—I presumed a man, by their build and aura—wearing a brown trench coat, hands in the coat pockets. He wore a baseball cap and black sunglasses, keeping his head low.

Was I seeing things? I rubbed my eyes. Nope, he was still there. *Was this another coincidence? Was it Wyatt again?* No... It didn’t feel like that. This new stranger was taller. This wasn’t Wyatt. Fuck. The stranger took a step forward. Then another. And another as he started to approach us, some pep in

his steps. Shit! I hurried to get back in step with Dominic, tugging the sleeve of his coat.

“Hold on,” Dominic told Dino, instantly concerned as he held me close. “Lilith, what is it?”

“Someone’s coming,” was all I managed in my moment of panic, turning around and pointing to the stranger approaching us, but I dropped my arm slowly, wondering where he went. He was gone. I looked everywhere I could see to no avail. The stranger vanished as fast as he appeared. What the hell?

“What?” Dominic asked, confused. “Who’s coming?”

“There... I...” I didn’t understand. “There was someone there,” I spoke, lost in confusion. I looked at Dominic. “There was someone following us. At least, I thought...” I let my words carry in the breeze as I looked behind us once more, wondering if I really was seeing things. *Was this some strange thing that came with pregnancy—hallucinations?*

“Let me call you back.” Dominic then put his hand on my shoulder. “Lilith, are you alright?”

I looked at my feet and the path and the grass, then at Dominic, feeling oddly emotional, like I wanted to cry.

“He wore a trench coat. I swear... I thought he was going to chase us.”

Dominic took me under his arm, peering past me at the path, saying, “If there was anyone trying to chase us, I’m sure Sonny and Lucas took care of it. I’ll ask them, okay?” He looked down at me.

Yeah, maybe that was what happened. Maybe Sonny and Lucas dealt with the stranger. They were trained to be silent and swift in a situation like this. Not to alert anyone. Not to create a scene. I relaxed, gathering my bearings and easing my

breathing, leaning against Dominic and letting him help lead me to the SUV. Yeah... No. I swore on my life that I saw that man in the trench coat coming at us. Dominic made too much sense; it wasn't a hallucination.

I buckled my seatbelt the moment I got into the SUV, anxious to leave the park and be home where I knew I was safe. As Dominic walked around to the driver's side, he ended another call, putting his phone in his jacket. As soon as he entered the SUV, he started the engine and lowered his window, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in his hand. He lit a cigarette, letting the smoke waft out the window. He refused to smoke anywhere near me if he could avoid it or made sure the smoke was away from me like it was now.

Watching the passing traffic, I had gotten the feeling Dominic was holding back somehow. It was in the air. Dominic lightly danced his fingers on the steering wheel.

"I thought you'd like to know that Mr. Wyatt James won't be a threat to the state any longer."

To say my curiosity was piqued was an understatement.

"Oh?" I questioned. "Was that why Dino called?"

Nodding, he inhaled another hit off his Marlboro Red, waiting until the smoke cleared before looking at me.

"Last night, he broke into a home out on the outskirts. As Dino put it, he fucked around and found out. Ended up being shot and killed."

A sense of relief rushed through me. At least *that* son of a bitch was gone.

We pulled out onto the road, getting stuck at a red light with Sonny and Lucas behind us.

chapter FIFTEEN

I READ the last sentence of the book Katrina chose for tonight, closing it shortly thereafter. There was irony in its cover—a bat in the night. *Stellaluna*, the bat, was her name. This was one of Katrina’s favorite books.

As we got through the story, what happened to *Stellaluna* sounded familiar to what Katrina had endured since her grandfather died. Both were taken from their mothers and eventually adapted to their new families. Like *Stellaluna*, Katrina had come to understand that she was worthy of love and acceptance. That blood didn’t define family.

Katrina missed her mother, but she didn’t understand why Maria hadn’t reached out to her. We couldn’t tell Katrina the truth, that her uncles threatened her mother to stay away. But a part of me wondered if Maria did indeed miss her daughter, but something told me no. I wasn’t sure how to explain to Katrina that a real mother, mothers who loved and cared about their children, never put their hands on them in anger, bullied them, or told them they weren’t loved. All I could continue to do was be there for my niece and keep her wrapped in the warmth of security and love and acceptance.

We would never make her feel the pain that Maria did.

“That’s one of my favorites,” Katrina said in reference to her book.

I looked at her. “I know. I’m surprised I don’t have this memorized by now.” I winked, smiling.

“Can you read it again tomorrow?”

Amused, I nodded. “Of course, sweetheart.” She then put her arm around my belly and laid her head against it. I gently grazed my nails along the top of her head, scratching her scalp.

“I can’t hear him,” she said.

“He can hear you, though.”

She lifted her head, looking at me. “Really?” I nodded. Wonderment in her eyes at the revelation, she instantly put her ear back against my belly and stayed still for a moment, soon feeling a spot where he kicked. “I love you.” She lifted her head just enough to kiss my belly, feeling it for a few more seconds before sitting up and leaning against me. I took her under my arm.

“He loves you, too.”

It was silent, both of us absorbing the moment. Katrina was going to be an amazing cousin.

“Lulu, does B love me, too?”

My heart cracked at the question and the hint of her heartbreak of missing Bianca behind it.

I looked down at Katrina, finding her staring at me, sadness in her eyes while I swept strands of hair over the shell of her ear.

“Of course, she does. Why do you think she doesn’t?”

Tears glimmered in Katrina’s eyes at my question.

“Because she doesn’t come over and play with me anymore.”

My stomach twisted, my heart heavy. I had to arrange a meetup for them. Bianca’s absence was hurting Katrina, and seeing Katrina’s tears filling her eyes, I needed to figure out a way they could resume visiting each other on the regular.

I took Katrina in for a hug, rubbing my hand up and down her back. “Bianca loves you very much. There are just things going on right now that I can’t talk about, but I promise you’ll see her again very soon.”

“I will?” she asked, voice muffled against my clothing.

“Yes.” I kissed her head, hugging her tighter. Wanting to steer her mind away from Bianca and cheer her up, I decided to let her in on another plan of mine. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’m trying to convince your uncle, Dominic, to have a kitten in the house.”

She lifted her head, joy and excitement entering her eyes. I gently wiped her stray tears from her face.

“Really!? I can have one?”

“It’s not definite yet, but—”

“Oh, thank you, Lulu!” She wrapped her arms tight around me, beaming. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I laughed, hugging her back, shaking my head, and smiling. Dominic had to agree to it now. He was out-voted. I eventually moved Katrina’s arms from around me and got up off the bed, tucking her under the covers. Sweeping her hair past her shoulder and tucking some of it behind her ear, I leaned down one more time to kiss her on her head.

“Maybe you’ll get one for your birthday,” I suggested, winking again. She smiled wide, cupping my cheeks and pulling me closer so we were nose to nose, giving me an Eskimo kiss. Those were part of our routine whenever I tucked her into bed.

“I love you, Lulu.”

I held her hands momentarily as I kissed her between her eyes, telling her, “I love you, too.” I let go of her hands, making sure she was comfortable before I stood back. “Nightlight on?” She nodded. I bent over next to the nightstand and turned on the nightlight that was plugged into the outlet. I then made my way across the room, pausing in the doorway and turning to look at her. Katrina had Mr. Cat secured in her arm. “Do you want the door open or closed tonight?”

“Closed please.”

For the most part, Katrina had her bedroom door closed for bed, but on nights when she either grieved her grandfather or missed Maria, she wanted her door left open. The sounds of the rest of us settling for bed soothed her to sleep, the reminder of our presence comforting.

“You got it,” I said, my hand on the handle. “Goodnight, Katrina. Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight, Lulu.”

I softly closed her door, heading toward Dominic’s office, where I knew he was. He’d been in there since we got home from the park.

Coming up the stairs with a glass of blood in his hand was Anthony. Barefoot in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt stretched from wear and multiple washes, he was in for the

night. He and Angelo tended to go to bed the earliest. Dino, Dominic, and I were the night owls around here.

“Turning in for the night?” I asked him, sparking conversation, knowing good and well he was.

“Yep,” he confirmed, leaving the top step. “Just had to stop in the kitchen for a refresher first. Where are you headed?” He drank a sip of blood.

I jutted my chin toward the office. “To go bug Dominic.”

Aside from telling Dominic about what happened when tucking in Katrina, I figured he could use the company.

“Tell him goodnight for me.” We then hugged, giving a quick kiss to each other’s cheeks.

“I will,” I said as I pulled away, softly smiling. “Sleep well.”

Nodding once, Anthony said, “Same to you.”

As he began walking toward his room, I resumed my walk to the office, talking over my shoulder, hand on my belly. “Depends on if he kicks the crap out of me again tonight.”

A clipped burst of laughter escaped Anthony.

Not bothering to knock, I entered Dominic’s office. He was lounging on the sofa with his legs outstretched, shirtless, a glass of Walker in his hand, the bottle resting on the coffee table. He tracked every move I made as I stepped further into the room.

Jutting my thumb toward the door, I asked, “Want me to lock it?”

He shook his head. “No. Why aren’t you on your way to bed?”

“Because I wanted to touch base with you.” I put my hands on my hips, cocking my brow. “And I could ask you the same.”

A smirk barely teased the corner of his lips as he sipped his drink. Lowering the rim of the glass away from his mouth, he asked, “What’d you want to touch base on? The park?”

Dropping my arms, I said, “You read my mind.”

I did actually want to talk to him about what happened this afternoon, to see if he figured out if there was, in fact, some random guy after us. I’d bet every dollar I had that there was.

I sat down in the armchair by his bare feet, resting my hand on my belly. Judging by our son’s activity, it’d be yet another night where sleep didn’t come easy. I sighed. Dominic looked at me quizzically.

“He’s a night owl like us.”

Lifting his chin, he drank another sip of his drink, the glass almost empty. Bringing the glass back down to his lap, Dominic said, “I spoke to Scioli and Deliso. There wasn’t anybody chasing us, so you can rest easy.”

No fucking way. There was absolutely no motherfucking way I didn’t see anyone. There was a man there running after us! I knew there was! Dominic had to be lying. They all had to be lying. But why would Sonny or Lucas lie? It couldn’t have been in the name of protection; that was an excuse Dominic would’ve used. No... I smelled bullshit.

“You’re lying.”

Making a face like he was taken aback by my accusation, Dominic said, “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. There is no way there wasn’t anyone watching us. I saw him, Dominic.”

“No, Lilith, what you saw was a man minding his business. There was no threat.” He was calm, cool, and collected, as if we were chatting about the weather or congested traffic.

Shaking my head, I was ready to leap out of the chair. “What I *saw* was a man, again, watching us on our walk and then running toward me like he was after me. If they actually told you there wasn’t a man, they’re lying, too.”

“My men, especially those two, wouldn’t lie to me.”

“I want to see the cameras. The city must have them in the park.”

Shaking his head this time, Dominic dismissed my demand. “Not directly in the park, but the nearby businesses do, and we’re working on obtaining them for verification, but I believe them. They have no reason to lie.”

“No... They don’t, Dominic, which is why this makes no fucking sense.”

Dominic put his now empty drinking glass on the coffee table. “You still have Wyatt living in your head. Anyone acting like him probably comes off to you as a threat, so it makes perfect sense.”

I covered my face with my hands, letting them slowly fall, groaning in absolute frustration. There *was* a man after us. I saw him clear as day. I knew it wasn’t a hallucination or any kind of PTSD episode. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I knew he was staring right at me. His aura... It was unmistakable that he wasn’t in the park to see the sights or enjoy the fresh air. He was there for me. And when he began to turn... Then make his way towards me... Why would no one believe me?

“If there was anyone after us, I would’ve sensed it and shot him before Scioli or Deliso had the chance to. No one was getting within yards of you and our unborn on that walk. Trust me, *Bellissima*.”

I *did* trust him, which made all of this worse. I wanted to see that camera footage he talked about, then I could prove Dominic wrong, and he would’ve seen Lucas and Sonny were indeed lying. Something smelled seriously wrong, but the energy to keep stoking this fire wasn’t there, so I moved on. For now.

Sighing, I leaned back into the chair, staring at the ceiling, my arms stretched along the arms of the chair.

“What’s really going on, Lilith? The truth.”

“Katrina.”

“What about her?”

“She wonders why Maria never tries to see her... And she doesn’t think your mother loves her anymore.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“Why the hell does she think that?”

“Because she doesn’t come over and play with her anymore—her words.”

I heard Dominic pour himself a finger’s worth more Walker. Seconds later, I heard him set his glass down hard on the table. Yep, he poured a finger.

“Foolish logic,” was all he said. Then, he released a clipped, deep burp.

“She doesn’t understand, Dominic. I haven’t told her what’s going on, and I don’t plan to.”

“Good.”

I released a defeated breath, still leaning back in the chair. “I wanted to take her to see your mother as a birthday present, but I might set that up sooner. I hate seeing her so sad.”

“Fine. What did she say about Maria?”

“She’s just been confused on why Maria hasn’t tried calling her or coming over. I can’t tell her the reason behind *that* one either.” I sighed again. It broke my heart to keep secrets from that poor girl.

She had endured so much so far that some small part of me wasn’t sure she could handle the truth of her mother ghosting her. Bianca ghosting her. Kids were resilient. They understood and processed ugly pieces of their lives far better than adults gave them credit for, but I was too selfish right now to put Katrina through further heartache. I could hold her through the tears and her fears and her confusion and anger. I just wasn’t strong enough to push past my anxiety and my feeling of being uncomfortable, nor defying Dominic’s or anyone else’s desire to hide the truth. Not yet.

“Katrina will miss her mother for a long time. It’s unavoidable. Just keep feeding her whatever excuse you’ve given her until it’s no longer in her mind.”

How long would Katrina accept my excuse? When she first asked where Maria was and if she would see her again, I told Katrina there was an emergency and her mother had to leave, and I wasn’t sure when she would be back. I explained it was complicated, and I didn’t understand it all, but I let her know she would see her mom again. I had been sticking with that story ever since. I hated lying to her, but I had to until we figured out when we should tell Katrina the truth.

Restless like our son was for yet another night, I stood from the chair and wandered over to the piano. I thought about the first time I saw Dominic play it. It was the night I told him I was in love with him, as long as it took me to finally admit it. The night I threw my heart on my sleeve and meant every word I said with my whole chest. He played my favorite piece by Chopin.

I missed that—watching him play. It was like he was one with the music. It was beautiful.

Skimming my fingertips along the side of the Fazioli, I walked around it and moved the hem of my kimono out of the way before sitting on the piano bench. I sensed Dominic's staring at me, and when I looked at him, his eyes said he was waiting anxiously for whatever he thought I was about to do. I looked down at the piano keys and played a few random ones, taking my time with each note. I lacked the patience to study and learn the mechanics and technicalities of playing the piano. I just wanted to cut straight to learning to play songs, "Nocturne Op. 9" being one of them.

"Do you remember the first time you played this for me?" In the silence, I looked at him again, only to find his sharp, blue eyes still honed in on me. Smiling at the memory of me professing my love, I answered my own question while I focused back on the piano keys. "It was after I told you I love you."

"I remember," Dominic said. Amid pressing a piano key, I lifted my head, slowly taking my finger off the key. The intensity in his eyes had softened. "I seem to also remember you talking about jumping off a bridge."

Chuckling at the memory, I said, "Oh, yeah." Thinking of the rest of my desperate ranting that night, I added, "And you

said I had Stockholm Syndrome.” I playfully rolled my eyes.

“What a dope I was.”

I laughed. Dominic sat up on the sofa and swung his legs over the side, reaching forward for his bottle of Walker. He poured himself one more finger’s worth and then twisted the cap back on the bottle.

“Why didn’t Hector want you to play the piano?”

He chugged the liquor before setting the glass on the table. He took a deep breath while staring at the expensive, wooden furniture.

“The bastard didn’t make sense sometimes,” he stated as he shook his head. “Hector enjoyed classical music, but the thought of me learning to play like the composers got his panties in a twist.” Dominic rested his elbows on his knees, running his fingers through his hair. He then laced his fingers together and rested his chin on his clasped hands. “He wanted *tough* men, and me playing the piano wasn’t something powerful men did—his words. He said that only sissy boys play piano, and he wouldn’t have any sissies in his family. So, I had to quit the lessons Nadia had been taking me to, the lessons *he* approved and funded.”

“But wait,” I said, confused with Hector’s logic. “If he said you could, why would he—”

“He thought I’d try it, get bored, and want to quit. He didn’t think I was serious.”

After a moment, I asked, “And then, what happened?”

Dominic turned his head and looked at me. It was clear in his eyes this was a dark road to travel. I was ready to be his guiding light.

“He ordered Nadia to end the lessons. He wasn’t sending the teacher any more money, and if Nadia tried paying for it and kept it going, he would banish her from the family.”

My eyes widened, shocked to hear how easily Hector turned on Nadia, the woman he respected so highly.

“Nadia tried to talk him into the lessons, but he shut her down, raising his voice at her. It pissed me off to see her scared, and it pissed me off that he wanted to take away what brought me any semblance of happiness because I sure as hell wasn’t happy under his thumb.” He set his chin back on his hands, staring at the table again. “Before the piano, the only time I smiled was when I was with Ma.”

My heart sank. Hearing this side of Hector, remembering how he talked to me about Dominic, it made me wonder why he treated him so horribly. Then again, Hector did refer to Dominic as damaged goods and that he wasn’t capable of the responsibility of fatherhood. Bullshit. Dominic was already more of a father than Hector could’ve ever claimed to be.

“Did you try pleading your case?”

Dominic chortled. “He told me he was confiscating the money I had saved for what would be that one over there.” He nudged his head toward the piano. “I said fuck you and told him he was a piece of shit, daring him to touch *my* money. He called me boy, which I *fucking hate.*” Those last words were laced with venom. “I spit on his five-hundred-dollar pair of shoes. Paid for that one pretty good, but it was worth it. I should’ve kicked it, would’ve scuffed it.” He sighed like he was kicking his ass for the missed opportunity.

My anxiety rose, knotting my stomach. I wanted to know what his punishment was, wondering if the scars on his back Hector gave him were from that day. That punishment.

“You said Hector gave you some of those scars on your back?”

I watched him play with the ring on his finger—Hector’s ring.

“He kicked Nadia and my brothers out of his office, locking the door. He ordered me to remove my shirt and face the door. If I spoke or looked at him, he’d restart the beating.”

My hand over my heart, my chest squeezed at the revelation he never truly escaped the abuse. The beatings. Dominic never experienced true safety, just false promises of protection. I closed my eyes, my hand now on my throat as I continued to take it all in.

“He took off his belt and used it on my back until it bled,” Dominic continued.

I closed my eyes and took it all in.

“By then, I was on the floor, begging him to stop. Luigi carried me back to my room, and Nadia tended to my wounds. The pain was unbearable those first few days.” Dominic collected his empty glass and bottle of Walker and brought them over to the mini-bar, saying on his way, “That was the day I lost every shred of respect for Hector I had.”

While he cleaned the dirty glass in the sink, I wished for nothing more than to resurrect Hector just to chew him out myself. Lord, rest his sinful soul. I couldn’t have imagined what ran through Dominic’s head as the man he highly regarded, and maybe even loved like a father, beat him so savagely. The fear he felt when Lorenzo first turned abusive—did Dominic hold that same fear the first time Hector beat him?

As he dried off the drinking glass, I said, “I’m surprised you didn’t take out his knee sooner.”

Dominic’s shoulders shook under his tense blip of laughter.

“You suffered for your art,” I thought out loud, heartbroken. Dominic stood at the bar after putting the glass away, staring at the counter. I talked on. “You were an innocent little boy that was involuntarily swept up into a world of so much evil... People who hated themselves *so much* that they made you their victim, when all they did was end up becoming their *own* victims of their evils and failures...” Dominic looked at me, something in his eyes screaming for me to keep talking, like he was grateful I understood. Like my words were a hug in itself.

“You molded yourself into someone able to survive on their own if push came to shove,” I added. I briefly closed my eyes to release some tears. “Sure, Hector trained you to defend yourself, but you already knew how to do that and how to fight.” I looked down at the piano keys, saying, “You once told me your drawings and paintings and writing those poems helped pull you through Lorenzo’s abuse.” I looked back up at Dominic, voicing my sudden realization. “Did this piano carry you through Hector’s?”

“It gave me the peace that a person’s words and touch couldn’t.” Dominic walked away from the mini-bar and headed toward me, more relaxed. He soon stood behind me, and with his arms at my sides, he delicately touched the piano keys, like they’d bite if he wasn’t careful. I put my hands over his, letting him take the lead. “Until I heard your voice and felt your soul.”

I leaned into the crook of his neck, nuzzling against his smooth skin. The blend of his cologne and the hint of aged

cigarette smoke lulled me into a feeling of tranquility that only Dominic supplied.

“I’ll never forsake you,” I murmured. Dominic planted an affectionate kiss on my head. “I’ll never break your heart.”

“I know,” he breathed.

“Play us a song.” I looked up at him. “Please?” I nuzzled my face once again into the crook of his neck, soaking in the soft notes he played. Our son calmed as the music swelled. “You have a new fan.”

Dominic paused his melody and sprawled his hand on my belly. In the silence, the baby moved and kicked. Dominic then played a new melody the best he could with just his left hand. He became amused when his son once again relaxed. I caught a peek of the sweet smile I loved so much.

“I found out he likes the classics after I played him your favorite song.”

Foregoing playing anything else, Dominic cradled my belly in his hands, capturing me further into his arms. “*Vi amo entrambi così tanto.*”

I tenderly kissed the skin of his neck. “We love you, too.”

chapter SIXTEEN

Sunday, February 5, 2017

“ARE WE ALMOST THERE?” Katrina asked from the back seat. For most of the drive, she had kept her headphones on while she watched a movie on the DVD player hooked up in the Escalade.

“Almost,” I told her. We had another twenty minutes—give or take—until we reached the Aristos Hotel. Katrina knew I had a surprise for her today, she just didn’t know what, and that was making her impatient.

We reached NJ-17 and headed north, Anthony driving. Angelo tagged along, sitting in the back with Katrina. I hadn’t forgiven Sonny and Lucas yet for lying about the man at the park, and frankly, I wanted nothing to do with them right now. Like I told Dominic—after what they did, I didn’t trust them to keep me safe, and I didn’t want them as my personal security until they confessed the truth. Dominic couldn’t talk me out of it. After I suggested Anthony and Angelo escort me and Katrina today, Dominic agreed to the trip. Not to mention, an outing like this would’ve been great bonding time between me and my brothers.

I looked in my mirror, seeing Katrina get sucked back into her movie. I was excited to see her reaction once we made it to Aristos to visit Bianca. It was going to be a surprise until the moment Bianca opened her door. I couldn't wait to see the expression on Katrina's face.

As usual, traffic was thick, even on an overcast afternoon. My head was still on a swivel. Thinking more about the park, I wondered if there was any way that the man watching us at Saddle River Park and the man at Consign Hive were in any way connected. It was too weird for both *not* to be. *And why would Sonny and Lucas lie? Was Dominic lying?* I sensed I was being fed bullshit, and I fucking hated it.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Anthony asked me, pulling me out of my head.

Watching Angelo using his cell phone in the passenger mirror, I replied, "Too many thoughts and no pennies."

Anthony chuckled. "Okay, then how about just sharing what's going on up there."

"I'm that obvious?" I looked at him.

He glanced over at me as he switched lanes. "You didn't see the smoke?"

Pretending to be offended, I laughed and playfully pushed on his shoulder. "Very funny. You know, you and Dino should look into stand-up comedy."

"We've actually discussed it."

"I bet you have." I laughed again.

Looking back at my mirror, I let out a silent, tired breath. I could hear the smile in Anthony's voice as he spoke.

“Come on, talk to us. Katrina can’t hear anything, and in all seriousness, it’s pretty clear *something’s* wrong.”

Closing my eyes for a moment, I fought away tears, swallowing. Playing with my hands, I watched the scenery from my window as it passed by in a blur.

“They’re lying, and it hurts. I just... I just don’t understand.”

“Who’s lying?” Angelo wondered.

“Sonny and Lucas, and maybe even Dominic. There was a man watching us at the park. I know it. I *saw* him. Dominic told me they told him there wasn’t anyone there.” I shook my head. “Something’s not right.” I looked again at Anthony. “Am I crazy?”

Shaking his head, Anthony said, “No. When Dominic briefed us, he told us the same thing—you weren’t under any sort of threat. Don’t worry.”

I looked out at the traffic, letting out a breath. “I guess.” What was the point? If my instinct was correct and everyone was lying, I would have never known. I couldn’t force the truth out of them. They knew all the tricks. It was useless. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” I expressed. It was true; I was done beating this dead horse. Besides, all I had to do was wait for the truth. It always revealed itself somehow.

“Katrina has no idea—”

I cut Anthony off, hurriedly shaking my head and putting my finger to my lips, harshly whispering, “No! It’s a surprise.”

Anthony pinched his finger and thumb together and gestured that his lips were zipped. Relief rolled off my shoulders after I looked at her in the backseat to see her engrossed in the movie.

The silence was comfortable as I glanced at the GPS. It showed we had less than twenty minutes until we arrived at the hotel, our exit coming up shortly. My stomach was in knots but not necessarily because I was nervous. I took a couple days to figure out what I would say to Bianca. Today would've been as good a day as any to have my talk with her. Along with explaining to her that she needed to be patient and let Dominic come to her, not the other way around, I wanted to dig a little deeper inside her mind. Understand her side better and hear her reasoning for not standing up to Lorenzo, or at least standing up to him better than she might've tried when the shit began hitting the fan.

I looked down at my belly, placing my hand on it and running my hand down its middle. My son moved. I softly smiled. As a mother myself now, I couldn't imagine throwing my son to the wolves and forcing him to fend for himself against any kind of threat. Then again, I had never found myself where Bianca used to be. Sure, my grandparents were assholes, but as soon as I had the opportunity, I fled. Unlike me, back then, Bianca had the means to flee. The Rosinis weren't hurting for money. She must've had family somewhere who would've taken her and Dominic in.

“There's the smoke again,” Anthony joked.

A weak, hushed laugh left me. “It's nothing, I promise.” I watched Anthony merge into the lane for our exit. “What about you?” I changed the subject. “Read any good books lately?”

“*1984*.”

I looked at him, raising my brow a little. “George Orwell?” He nodded. “You believe in conspiracy theories?” I looked

back out at the window, moving my hand as I spoke. “I didn’t think you were one of those tin foil hat people.”

“Not necessarily, but I keep an open mind. You never know.”

A dry laugh escaping me, I said, “Uh-huh.”

Angelo chimed in, “You’d be amazed at the lies you’ve been force-fed; you just need to wake up to it.”

He came to a stop at a red light, and I rolled my eyes. “You sound just like Dino.”

“We think alike.”

Anthony got ahead of the traffic, cruising along.

“Don’t have to believe it. Just read it,” Angelo continued. “Trust me, it’ll make you think, if nothing else.”

Entertaining the idea, I said, “Okay, fair enough. I’ll read it.” Smiling, I held back my amusement. “I don’t wanna talk about conspiracy theories. Tell me stories. Talk about your lives. Something.” Anything.

Anthony cleared his throat. “Dominic didn’t tell you about us?”

“He did, but he didn’t go real deep into your lives—just the surface. Then again, I didn’t know whether it’d be okay to ask either. I didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Angelo assured me. “We already know *you* in and out.”

I made a face of acquiescence. *Not as thorough as Dominic, but fair point.*

“Okay then,” I said. “Spill it, both of you.”

We reached another red light.

Anthony went first.

“Well...” He was in deep thought—wracking his brain for a place to start. “I’m the oldest out of all of us. Hector didn’t find me until I was fifteen.”

“What happened?”

He cleared his throat again, and I swore I saw him grimace a little bit, like he didn’t want to dip his toes back into those waters. His hazel eyes revealed a grim picture of what I was about to learn.

“We crossed paths when I was on a walk. It was a... Pretty crappy day, to say the least.” He blew out a breath, bracing for his next words. “I lost my mother earlier that day, and I didn’t know what to feel except rage—and before you ask, pancreatic cancer.” Anthony made a left turn. “I knew I was being followed, but at that point, I didn’t give a shit. I just kept kicking a rock as I walked.

“But anyway, a Cadillac pulled up next to me, and I heard Hector ask if I was alright. He said a child shouldn’t be wandering the streets alone. I gave him the finger and told him to get fucked.”

Angelo snorted, making us laugh.

“As soon as he yelled out he could help me, I stopped dead in my tracks, pissed that he wouldn’t just go away. He got out of the Caddie and approached me from behind. I swung at him, just missing him. He told me he could take me someplace safe. Hell, I had no idea what the fuck he was up to and should’ve hightailed it the fuck out of there, but when he told me he could take away my pain, I listened. Next thing I knew, I was in the back of the Caddie with him and his armed men, telling him I wanted my mother back.”

Anthony swallowed the lump in his throat. I put my hand on his shoulder, my heart heavy for him.

“I’m so sorry, Anthony.” I took my hand away, resting both on my lap.

“Don’t worry, Lilith, but damn, I didn’t mean to throw all that on you like that.” He chuckled.

Smiling, I said, “It’s okay. So, what’s your role?”

“In the family? I’m one of Dominic’s capos.”

“Do you like your job?” I asked.

“I do.” His tone and attitude were more chipper, like his usual self.

I looked in my mirror. “What about you, Angelo?”

He shrugged nonchalantly, staring out his window.

“Born in New York like you. My foster parents gave me back when I was ten. I sat in the system for three years.”

Staring at my hands on my lap, I was blown away at how similar his and Dino’s stories were and how cruel life was to my brothers. No one deserved such painful baggage.

“Life isn’t fair,” I softly thought out loud.

“No, it’s not,” Angelo agreed. “But we found a sense of belonging... Normalcy.”

“And a second chance,” I said, lifting my head.

“Just like you,” Anthony said.

Smiling, we pulled into the parking lot of Aristos Hotel. “Just like me,” I mouthed. Anthony drove into a parking space, shifting the Escalade into park. Pivoting from any more somber talk, I asked Anthony and Angelo, “Do you guys have

girlfriends?” I would’ve asked if they had wives, but they didn’t wear rings on their ring fingers.

Angelo scoffed, tapping Katrina’s shoulder. “Yeah, right.” He told Katrina we were at the hotel. She took off her headphones as Anthony got out of the SUV. “I can’t speak for Tony, but I’m not chasing any women.”

Angelo got out of the SUV and helped me out of my seat, while Anthony helped Katrina.

Closing our doors, I said, “You just haven’t found the right one.” Angelo shrugged. “You’d rather stay single?”

Putting on his pair of black sunglasses, Angelo put his hand on the small of my back and led me to the entrance of the hotel.

“I’ve got money—I handle loads of it.” Keeping close behind Anthony and Katrina, Angelo held open the hotel door for me, staying in step with me, his hand again on my back. He spoke low in my ear. “I don’t have time for gold diggers.” Angelo walked us toward the elevator. With Katrina on his hip, Anthony walked over to the front desk.

I spoke in a whisper, not sure why I felt a pang of offense. “Not all women, Angelo. I’m not a gold digger.”

“I know.” Angelo looked ahead, pushing gently on my back, situating me in front of him and pushing the button at the elevator as Anthony finished talking to the man at the front desk. “You’re a rare exception.”

“So are others.”

Angelo’s breath tickled the shell of my ear. “I invest in money, and I invest in top-shelf pussy when I get thirsty; that’s enough for me.”

I exerted a chuckle, the elevator doors opening. Angelo helped me in the elevator, holding the door open for Anthony as he caught up with us. I stood in the corner, holding the gold wrap-around bars.

“*Unreal*,” I said, shaking my head, hiding my smirk.

“Where are we going, Lulu?”

I cleared my throat a little. “You’ll see.” I winked, amused at Katrina’s impatient groaning.

We left the elevator and walked halfway down the long hallway, stopping at room 308, the suite Bianca currently called home. Anthony put Katrina down and told her to knock on the door. She looked over and up at me, uncertain. I nodded once.

“It’s okay. That’s where your surprise is.”

She knocked on the door five times. When Bianca opened the door, she gasped, cupping her hands over her mouth, happiness filling her eyes. Katrina’s eyes went wide, her smile even wider.

“B!” Katrina ran into Bianca’s arms, hugging her tight.

“Oh, my goodness!” Bianca exclaimed, hugging Katrina. She leaned down enough to kiss the top of her head. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Katrina pulled away from Bianca and looked at me, cheerfulness in her eyes. “Thank you!” She returned to squeezing Bianca.

I quietly blew Katrina a kiss, my heart full.

ONCE WE ALL GOT REACQUAINTED, my brothers gave us privacy and headed downstairs to the hotel lounge. They told me to contact either of them when Katrina and I were ready to leave.

Katrina talked Bianca's ear off the moment we settled in. We watched television together, and I watched Katrina teach Bianca how to clap to a rhyme she knew, and I taught them how to play a card game called War. My mom and I played it once after weeks of begging her and Dad to let me play. We used to hold a weekly game night every Wednesday.

I was emotional watching Bianca and Katrina play cards, wishing I could play them with my mom one more time.

Tuckered out, Katrina fell asleep on the bed. Bianca and I crossed into the living room area. I took a seat on the sofa.

"Did you need your..." Bianca pointed to her mini fridge, hinting at the blood bag for me inside it. She was grossed out that I needed to drink it for the baby. It was funny.

"You can just bring it over here with a glass. I'll pour it."

"Oh, thank God," she expressed in relief, walking to the fridge and getting me the blood. She picked out a glass from the cabinet and walked over to the couch, handing me what I needed. I opened the blood bag as she sat down.

Pouring the blood into my drinking glass, I attempted small talk.

"Katrina had no idea she was seeing you today. It wasn't easy keeping it a surprise." I set the empty blood bag on the coffee table in a way where nothing would leak into the wood, and then I sat back against the sofa, taking a sip of blood.

"Thank you for bringing her over, Lilith. I appreciate this visit."

I knew she did. It was written all over her face. It was in the way she talked.

“I hope they’re treating you well here.”

She nodded. “I’ll admit, it’s been a little tough staying here. I just feel so... Oh, how do you say.” She lifted her hand, moving it while she thought of the right words. “Out of place.” Bianca’s eyes became watery. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingers. “I miss my son.” She looked at the area of the small kitchen and round table and chairs, on the verge of crying.

I wasn’t sure how to best comfort her, and honestly, I wasn’t sure I really wanted to. I ended up putting my hand on hers.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about Dominic.” Immediately after I said that, Bianca wore her heart on her sleeve, wiping her tears as she lay bare her emotional pain.

“I failed my son, Lilith. I failed him, and I failed myself. I’m a horrible, horrible mother.” She put her elbow on the arm of the sofa and hid her teary eyes in her palm. “I don’t even know why my son gave me a chance.”

I squeezed her hand. Hearing her admit she failed... I kept quiet.

She sniffed, lifting her head, refusing to make eye contact with me just yet.

“My husband was so loving before he found his way to alcohol. Before he...” Bianca let her thought trail off.

I drank another sip of blood. “Dominic said Lorenzo changed after he lost his job.”

Bianca sucked in a short gasp of air, her tears running.

“Our wedding day... It was so beautiful,” she reminisced. “A beautiful, Catholic church, roses of all different colors, and pews full of our family and friends.

“Lorenzo was so excited when we found out we were having Dominic. He was attentive, caring, and loving... He was everything I could’ve asked for during my pregnancy. He was at my side when Dominic was born.” She smiled at the memory. “Oh, he was such a beautiful baby. He was quite chubby.”

We shared a weak, anxious laugh.

“Lorenzo... He grew such a *hate* inside of him.” She sniffed, wiping her tears off her cheeks. I let her hand go to grab her a tissue from the box of Kleenex on the coffee table. I handed it to her, holding her hand again. She wiped her nose and cleared her eyes. “It started when Dominic was only four. Four...” The word was strained as fresh tears streaked down her cheeks.

Swirling the blood in my glass, I said, “Dominic told me just how bad it was. You don’t have to relive it.” Truth was, I didn’t want to hear again how Lorenzo beat up Dominic. I didn’t need to travel that road again. “I just want to know why... Why didn’t you fight harder to get you and Dominic out of there?”

“I had no money. Lorenzo made me give him my paychecks, and I was too afraid to *not* pay him. The one time I refused...” She clutched the tissue in her hand, holding it at her nose. “It was the first time he beat me. I could hardly get out of bed the next day.” She lowered her arm, turning her head to look at me. “I was scared.” She slowly looked elsewhere, repeating, “I was so scared.” Her words were shaky as she trembled, her voice soft.

“What about family?” I challenged. “Why didn’t you reach out?”

“Catholics don’t believe in divorce. My mother didn’t understand. She didn’t want me to sin. And Lorenzo threatened to kill them if they tried to help me.” Bianca lowered her head in shame. “I didn’t want to call his bluff.”

I sat on everything she said, absorbing it. Trying my best to develop sympathy, and while I managed to—to a degree—all I thought was that I would sacrifice myself for my son. If it were me, I would’ve arranged for my child to be in safe hands, went home, and called Lorenzo’s bluff. I would’ve reclaimed my hard-earned money and told Lorenzo to fuck off and get sober or get the fuck out. If that had cost me my life, so be it. At least my son would’ve had that opportunity for a better life.

Letting go of Bianca’s hand, I touched her shoulder.

“You did what you could, and I’m sure that deep down, Dominic knows that. After learning what Lorenzo did and how he was, I get that you felt stuck. Yeah... Your timing was kind of rough with Hector passing away, but I think Dominic is secretly grateful you’re back.”

Bianca looked at me again. The fear in her eyes faded, as did her anxiety regarding the painful memories. She turned her body and held my hand in both of hers, warmly smiling. “Thank you, Lilith, for being in my son’s life. He loves you so much.”

“He told you that?”

She nodded. “I see it in his eyes when he talks about you. You’re very precious to him. Invaluable.” She placed her left hand on my belly, her eyes lovingly fixed on it. She then looked back up at me, placing her left hand again on my hand,

and then she all of a sudden let me go and left the couch. Her hands were clasped together at her chest as she peeked at a still sleeping Katrina.

Wanting to break this awkwardness, I asked her, “Did Dominic tell you what we’re having?” Bianca turned around and shook her head. “It’s a boy.”

She beamed, turning away to again look at Katrina. I drank more blood.

“A grandson,” she said lovingly to herself. She nodded once, appearing the most content I had seen her since I met her.

I had to admit, I was happy my son would have a grandmother who loved him. No matter how I ended up feeling about Bianca, I wouldn’t deprive my son of his grandmother.

“Tell me about when Dominic was little, before everything went south.”

Bianca walked over to the kitchen area, getting herself a glass of water from the sink.

“He was such a sweet little boy. Very quiet.” She drank a sip of water.

“He still is.”

She turned around and leaned back against the counter. “He loved to draw. When he was in school, he used to make me artwork all the time. He was so proud.” When she drank another, larger sip of water, she stared down at the floor, sighing. “I shouldn’t have stopped putting them on the fridge.”

My heart broke at the image of a young Dominic staring at an empty spot on their refrigerator. Something as miniscule as

hanging up a picture your child made for you could make or break a child's spirit.

“Maybe I can convince him to show you his sketchbook.”

She lifted her head, taken aback. “He still has it?”

I nodded, realizing I was treading the opening of a Pandora's Box that I was wary of opening. *Would Dominic be upset that I told her? Would he not care? Was it even my place?* Fuck.

“Bianca... do you know what happened to Lorenzo?”

Inhaling, Bianca released her nervous breath, tapping some of her fingertips against her drinking glass. She looked down at her glass of water.

“They never caught who killed him; at least, that's what the paper said.”

“Do you know *how* he died?” I pressed.

She gave a curt nod so quickly, I almost didn't see it. Observing her for a minute, I felt in my heart that she knew the truth. Her refusal to look at me was a big tip-off, and so was her solemn expression and aura.

I downed the last bit of my glass of blood, setting the drinkware on the table. “You think it was Dominic who killed him, don't you.” I said it as a statement rather than asking her.

“I'm not angry.” She lifted her head and tenderly looked at me, like she was at peace with such a truth. “I'm glad Dominic had his closure.”

Katrina stirred, capturing both of our attention. Bianca looked at my niece in a beautiful, motherly way.

“Someone's awake.”

I PULLED BACK, my hands on her upper arms.

“Just give him time. That’s all he needs... Time.”

Bianca nodded, her expression one of understanding. “I know. I just miss him so.” She flitted her eyes downward then back up to mine. A sad smile crossed her lips. “All I want is another chance.”

“And he’s willing to give you one, but it has to be on his terms and when he’s ready. One step at a time.” I smiled.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, tears in her eyes. “One step at a time,” she repeated in a near whisper, her voice breaking.

We hugged each other again. Tighter.

Our conversation replayed like a shuffled playlist in my mind. Some talking points sounded louder than others. Certain words we said burst through the noise, echoing as they faded away. All of it back and forth and switching me from a place of anger toward Bianca into a place where I wanted us to try to be friends.

Bianca didn’t pop into Dominic’s life on such a whim to hurt him. Hector was dead, and only with him gone did she feel safe in searching for her son. She knew Dominic was alive and in better hands under Hector’s care, although, in my opinion, that was debatable. She told me she tried pleading with Hector to take her in, too, but he refused. He told her she was a *fallimento*—a failure—and it was better off for Dominic to believe Lorenzo beat her to death the night Dominic ran away from home.

Angelo and Anthony stayed with Katrina out in the hall on my request. There was something else I wanted to ask Bianca about.

I leaned back against the pointed corner of the walls. "How did you find out that Dominic was living with Hector?"

Bianca blew out an anxious breath, sitting on the side of the bed. "Hector contacted me out of the blue on a Thursday morning. I remember because one of my housemates at the shelter came to my room and handed me the phone and told me it was an emergency about my son." She touched the front of her throat, briefly looking elsewhere, like her next words were caught in her throat. Heartbreaking pain reflected in her eyes.

"Hector told me he had my son, and I needed to see him right away. A man picked me up..." She swallowed, continuing on. "And when I got there, they refused to let me see my son. My baby boy." She closed her eyes, squeezing out tears. Gasping her next breath, Bianca opened her eyes, tears still falling. "Hector berated me, told me I failed my baby. A fallimento!" She spat the insult with such venom and hatred. That same venom and hatred seeped into her eyes as she recounted the rest of their exchange.

"He denied me my son and threatened me that if I ever tried to fight to get him back, he would make my life hell. He told me that if he had to, he would kill me, that no one was taking away his son. His!" Bianca stood up and paced that side of the bed. "He said after I left his home, I would no longer exist to Dominic. He hid everything. I don't know if he sealed it or what." She stopped in her tracks, turning to face me. "He lied to my son and said I was dead. He told Dominic that his father killed me after he fled." She shook her head.

“They arrested my husband, and I ended up in a battered women’s shelter an hour away. I tried to find Dominic after Lorenzo went to jail. I went to the police and filed a missing person’s report, but... There were just too many children. The shelter couldn’t help me.” She sighed and took a seat again on the side of the bed.

Once I got home, Dominic and I were due for quite an uncomfortable and heavy conversation. He had to know. And I was ready to be his rock.

Anthony slowed to merge onto the interstate, the traffic heavier around what was now pushing dinner time. Leaning back in the front passenger seat with Katrina sleeping on me—she begged, and I couldn’t find the heart to say no—I gingerly rubbed my hand up and down her back, careful not to wake her. Thanks to the dark, tinted windows on all our vehicles, no one worried about a cop tagging us. By law, Katrina wasn’t supposed to be allowed to sit in the front until she turned twelve.

My son kicked and moved from side to side. I cradled my belly, soaking in the sweetness of this moment. I kissed Katrina’s hair, glad she had a great day. Seeing her eyes light up when Bianca answered the door was everything. It tore her up inside when we had to leave. She cried, wanting to spend the night with Bianca. I promised they would see each other again soon, and we would work out a schedule. I was prepared to stay with Katrina tonight if she needed me. I texted Dominic to warn him and to explain that he might get the bed to himself tonight. He sent me the thumbs up emoji.

“Thank you, guys, again for doing this. It really made Katrina’s day.”

“No problem,” Anthony said.

Just then, we sped up and shifted into the left lane. My internal red flags flew all around like a referee throwing flags in a game. I sat up so I could see, and in the southbound lane up ahead, I noticed a fancy sports car with those damn blinding blue headlights. Its windows were dark like ours. I couldn't make out any kind of driver. Something about this vehicle unnerved me. Studying our surroundings like a vulture on a mission, there was a flimsy, rusting guardrail along our side of the interstate. Scattered trees and bushy acreage stretched along both sides of the interstate.

As our Escalade and the sports car came closer to each other, my heart pounded, nearly leaping into my throat. My chest tightened. The driver of the sports car lowered their windows. I tried to keep my breathing steady for Katrina as I witnessed something long and black peek through the opened back passenger window.

"Shit," I whispered. I hurried and fixed my seat so I was sitting up good enough to open the glovebox for my gun. After the prior incidents, I remembered to bring it with me on this trip. "*Anthony?*" My voice shook.

"Shit!" Anthony shouted, slamming on the brakes as another car cut in front of us, coming to a dead stop. I held onto Katrina as tight as I could.

Katrina woke up, jolted by the impact of us rushing to come to a stop. "*Lulu?*" She rubbed her eyes.

My heart raced. Like the sports car, the driver of the car in front of us rolled down their windows. Horns blared. Time froze. Barrels pointed at us from both cars. Long black barrels. I saw people. Men. Their eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, and the people in the car in front of us wore bandanas to cover

their noses and mouths. Everyone in both cars had rifles. Assault rifles.

“Angelo!” I shrieked, practically throwing Katrina to him as he reached for her and dragged her into the backseat and settled her onto the floor.

Another vehicle was behind us—a black SUV. They, too, had guns.

Anthony pulled out his .38 from inside his suit jacket and cocked it in preparation.

“Lulu!” Katrina cried out, scared, reaching for me.

“Get down!” Anthony ordered.

I hunched over in my seat the best I could, my pregnant belly in the way.

Our assailants fired off their rifles.

Bullets struck our car, the noise resembling hail. Anthony slammed his foot on the gas and rammed into the car in front of us. He backed up, then sped forward in his attempt to go around and escape, once again running into the obstructing vehicle.

Because of our vehicles being made bulletproof, including the windows, none of the bullets made it through. Yet.

Katrina screamed, crying hysterically.

My son was going wild, as was my adrenaline and anxiety. Without thinking, I opened the glovebox and grabbed my gun, pulling back its slide as I sat up. A fire stirred in my veins that I hadn't experienced since I savagely massacred Fabio Pucinni.

My family taught me how to hold, aim, and fire a gun. They helped me strengthen my hand-eye coordination. I knew how to fight back, and I had the confidence to turn whatever I could get my hands on into a weapon. I was taught to kill or be killed.

No one messed with my babies. No one!

Anthony swerved sharply and quickly to the left and then the right, and I momentarily feared we'd roll over, but we didn't. Horns continued to blare around us. I held onto the headrest of Anthony's seat. With traffic impeding us, Anthony had no choice but to slide all the way out to our right and crash into the guard rail, ripping through it. The force sent some of my back and shoulder against my door, the pain radiating. We sped along the grass, branches scraping the Escalade, eventually getting back on the road.

"Lulu," Katrina whined.

"It's okay, it's okay," I reassured her, shushing her as tenderly as I could've mustered. I rolled my shoulder, wincing at the pain. Only then did it register that Angelo was on the phone.

"We don't know," Angelo told whoever he was talking to. My gut told me it was Dominic.

The gunfire tapered off the further we rode the interstate. Stray bullets pelted our back window and bumper.

"Dominic said to just get off at the next exit, and he'll meet us."

That was exactly what Anthony did as he jerked the wheel at the last second and got us onto the latest exit ramp. A hand grabbed my arm.

"Are you hurt?" Angelo asked.

I blinked rapidly, staring at him, getting my bearings. “No.” I shook my head. “I’m good.” My breaths were heavy and fast. I looked at my gun, tears blurring my vision as my adrenaline wore off. “Katrina,” I thought out loud. There were scarce cracks in the windshield. I whipped my head around to look in the back seat, shaking like I never had before. “Is—”

“She’s unharmed,” Angelo answered, taking my gun from me and putting it inside his jacket.

“Give her to me,” I ordered Angelo, sounding a hair harsher than intended. Katrina climbed over from the back and clung to me for dear life, burying her face in my blouse. I shushed her, wrapping my arms around her as she maneuvered to wrap her legs as best she could around me and my seat. “It’s okay,” I reassured her—and myself, for that matter. “It’ll be okay.”

“What the fuck,” Anthony said, sounding as if he were, too, fighting to comprehend the situation that unfolded.

The images overtook me. The cars. The passengers. Things were clearing. I saw men. Men in suits. The bandanas. The steel barrels. They aimed at us. They fucking shot at us!

“A man,” I muttered.

“What?” Anthony asked.

“It was a man. Men. Many, many men.”

“We know they were men. What else?” Angelo impatiently dug.

I blinked away tears, focusing on rubbing Katrina’s back and the road ahead. We were coming up on stores and restaurants. People. Safety.

“He... They...” I swallowed. “They wore rags on their faces. And sunglasses.”

“Did anyone get a make and model of anything? Plates?” Angelo wondered.

“I got the plate for the black car but none of the others,” Anthony said. “Goddamnit,” he gritted out.

“It was black. All of it. It sat low to the ground.” I looked at Anthony, Angelo, and then back at Anthony, the light bulb going off in my head. “Lada! It spelled L-A-D-A under the grill. No plate.”

“That’s good,” Angelo said encouragingly.

“*A Lada...*” Anthony pondered to himself, saying the name once again. “What the fuck is that?”

“Sounds foreign,” Angelo guessed.

We pulled into the parking lot of a busy restaurant, driving around to the back. People stared.

My phone rang. It sounded far away. *Shit, where was my phone!?*

“That’s Dominic,” I assumed. “It has to be.” I couldn’t see my phone. It rang again. I needed to find my phone and answer it. He was probably so scared.

Angelo handed me his phone, his contact list pulled up. I dialed Dino’s number, ringing twice.

“Lil! Holy shit, are you guys alright?” There was rustling on his end, and then Dominic’s voice cut through, his panic heartbreakingly clear.

“Where are you?”

My voice was shaky when I replied, “At a restaurant.”

“Wild Willy’s Steaks,” Anthony answered loudly.

“Are you hurt?” Dominic asked, a tense edge to his tone.

“No. We’re not hurt.”

“We’re close, just—”

I interrupted Dominic. “They tried to kill us.” I shook hard, my voice small. “Where are you?” I whined, wanting nothing more than to be trapped in his arms.

“Almost there,” Dominic reminded me, softening his tone. “Just hang on.” His words soothed me a little.

Both Katrina’s and my cries were pacified. She sniffed, snot running from her nose, which she wiped with her sleeve.

“I love you,” I told him.

“I love you, too, *Bellissima*.”

chapter SEVENTEEN

I HAD CALMED down since being shot at. When Dominic caught up with us at Wild Willy's, I urged Katrina to let Anthony hold her, eager to leap out of the Escalade and crush Dominic in my arms. After we drove down the road to a more low-key spot and parked next to each other, crushing him was exactly what I did. The moment both of his feet touched the ground, I lunged and cried into his suit, refusing to let him go.

"I'm here now."

His words carried such safety.

Katrina was snug in my arms in my and Dominic's bed, sound asleep from taking a melatonin gummy. She wanted to sleep in our room with us. I offered for us to bunk in her bedroom, but it was a big fat nope from her. Dominic had no problem with it, telling me whatever either of us needed, we would get it.

She clung to me like I predicted—metaphorically *and* literally. The ordeal frightened her and shook her up. I stayed strong for her, soothing her however I could. Singing to her. Reading to her. I made a video call to Bianca, which turned out to be comforting for me, too. Once Bianca quit panicking at the news of what occurred, she told us if we needed her, she would fetch a cab to get here if necessary.

Dominic arranged for Bianca to be transported to a different hotel closer to us for tonight out of precaution, and tomorrow, he would arrange for her to have round-the-clock security until we figured all of this bullshit out. He wasn't keen on his plan, telling me if his hand wasn't forced, he would've left her in Tenafly. He *did* cave, however, to Katrina's attachment to his mother and would tolerate her hanging around here if and when Katrina requested.

Three hours felt like days as I stared mindlessly at the door. I perked up slightly when someone turned the handle. Dominic opened the door and shrugged out of his suit jacket as entered the room. He closed the door, loosening his tie with his other hand while staring at me, reverence in his blues.

"How are you?" he asked, undoing his tie and taking it off. He tossed it on the chair in the corner and started walking across the room while unbuttoning his dress shirt.

I looked down at Katrina, feeling blessed.

"Better than I was."

I heard him toss his dress shirt on our white, plush, two-seater sofa.

"Is there anything else you or the kid need for the night?" He undid his belt buckle, waiting for my answer.

"No."

He headed for our massive walk-in closet, opening its door and walking down its stairs. He kept his belts there in their own section. His jewelry, his watches, ties, and other accessories were organized. So was my stuff, except my clothes weren't arranged by color and type and size like Dominic's. It annoyed him, which amused me.

Dominic was wearing one of his casual, basic T-shirts when he emerged from the closet. I listened to him walk to our dresser and get himself a pair of pajama pants. He then walked into the bathroom, finished changing, and tossed his slacks on the sofa.

“Did you find anything?” I asked him.

He rounded the corner of the bed and turned on his lamp. “Hold on.” He turned off the main light before walking back to the bed. “No.” He sat along his side of the bed, exhaling a defeated breath. He looked drained. Off. “Registrations were fake. Plates were useless—so were the witnesses.”

“Cameras?”

He flippantly moved his hand, shrugging. Something was definitely troubling him. It wasn't just his body language. It was in the air around us.

“I have men combing through it, but without a solid visual on any of the fuckers, we have nothing. Whoever they are...” He let his words trail off, shaking his head as he looked down toward himself. “I don't want you leaving this house until every one of them is in the ground.”

“I won't let them win.” There was no way in hell I would become a hermit for days. Weeks. Running away and hiding gave them power.

Dominic slowly turned his head and looked at me, his expression telling me it was best not to test him.

“Don't make me lock you in here.”

I raised my brow in defiance. “I'd love to see you try.”

His eyes widened, a dark chuckle escaping him. He then decided to stare off at the room.

“Dominic, what’s wrong?”

His brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Baby, please talk to me. I can tell something’s been eating at you since we got home. I know this afternoon really shook you up. It shook all of us, but... There’s something else. Not just them shooting at us.”

He looked toward me and then focused back on the room. He raked his hand through his hair, blowing out a breath.

My stomach started rolling with nerves, like I was about to receive bad news.

“*Bellissima*... Fuck.” He rubbed his face and let his arms fall, staring up at the ceiling. “Just spare me the yelling until after, alright?”

“This requires yelling?” I quipped. Finding humor, he let his arms fall, slowly turning his head to look at me.

“Deliso and Scioli lied to you on my orders.”

It was as if I were punched in the gut. *How could he lie to me? Did he think he was protecting me? In the past with Vincent and Fabio, he tended to wait to bring me into the loop, but outright lie to me? Causing me to wonder what was, in fact, reality and what wasn't?* Dominic was quite fucking correct; I did want to yell at him. I wanted to fucking scream. I poked my tongue against my cheek, closing my eyes. The look on Dominic’s face told me he knew I was pissed. I opened my eyes, making a fist with my free hand, and forced a breath through my nose, mentally counting to ten. I should’ve called him out sooner. Releasing my fist, I slowly made a fist again and then released it, doing that until I felt it safe enough to calmly say something.

“Why?” I flatly asked him.

“There’s a connection between what happened to you at that store and at the park, but we don’t know exactly how just yet or who orchestrated it. I wanted all the dots connected first.”

“Bullshit. You didn’t want to stress me out, right? You think because I’m pregnant I can’t handle it!?” I whispered-yelled, careful not to startle and wake Katrina. “Am I pretty fucking close? Because I sure as shit handled my fucking emotions when you ran off at the hospital and left me to fend for my fucking self. So don’t you sit there and think I can’t *fucking* handle this!”

Immediate regret for my outburst hit me when I watched Dominic’s shoulders sag with the same outward defeat as heard in his breath. My chest and throat tightened. Tears threatened my eyes. I had a right to be angry, but I felt I had gone too far. My tears spilled over, trickling down my cheeks. My bottom lip and chin quivered.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

Dominic looked at me, staring for a moment before he talked.

“Don’t be. I underestimated you—again.” His smile was slight, but it was loving. Warm. “I know I should’ve told you. It’s just...” Letting his thoughts trail off, he sighed and focused on the lamp at his bedside.

I extended my arm, resting what I could of it on the mattress and wiggled my fingers like I wanted him to hold it. All I wanted was his touch, even if it were only his fingertips.

“Dominic,” I strained, swallowing in hopes to vanquish what I felt were a fresh round of tears threatening me.

He turned off his lamp and laid on the bed, pulling the sheets and comforter over him. He brought himself closer to me, taking hold of my hand. I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing out tears. Quietly, I inhaled a sharp breath of air, blowing it out.

“*Bellissima*, please don’t cry. It’s okay.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I hurt you.”

“You’re wrong. I knew you would be angry. I didn’t want to scare you; that’s why I hid what’s going on.”

I nearly choked on my tears on my next breath, wishing time travel was real so I could erase my outburst. He gave my hand a squeeze, moving the pad of his thumb back and forth along the skin of my hand between my finger and thumb.

“When I got the phone call telling me about the shooting, my heart stopped beating. All I could think about was you, our unborn—everyone. I couldn’t drive fast enough. When I heard your voice, the world started spinning again. Life beat back into my heart.

“We will find out who did this, and when we do, I’ll personally gut and filet every one of them.”

I sniffed. “And you said you weren’t a romantic.”

Our chuckles were hushed but lighthearted. I held his hand tightly.

Was he still holding back regarding the shooting? I had a gut feeling, although I wasn’t upset. In my heart, Dominic wouldn’t intentionally hurt me. He was constantly protecting me and acting on what he thought was in my best interest. It was frustrating, but with how Dominic was raised and what he endured in his life, he was the way he was, and I had to remember to understand that.

“You didn’t find *anything*?”

“All we know is that a *Lada* originates from Russia. I called Andre, and he’s on the case. I’ve also involved Guido. It’s a waiting game until all of us touch base again.”

My stomach knotted, a sort of dread creeping in. Russia. That car came from Russia. It was all I processed. All I repeated in my head as panic found me.

“Relax,” Dominic said. “People drive foreign cars all the time. Don’t read too much into it. Just breathe, please.”

But I *did* read too much into it. *Russia? We had enemies in fucking Russia? Well, the mafia was everywhere... But Russia?* My stomach wrung tighter with anxiety. Dominic *could’ve* been right; maybe the make of that car was a coincidence. Then again, we both scoffed at coincidences.

Dominic deeply inhaled and then slowly let it out. I copied him, knowing that was what he wanted me to do—breathe with him. We breathed again. And again. And again until I calmed down.

“Do you have enemies in Russia?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

Seriously, Dominic.

“Yeah, that’s reassuring.”

“I promise, Lilith, no foreign enemies are on our radar. Like I said, until I hear from my contacts, it’s a waiting game.” He brought my hand to his lips, kissing it. “I’m sorry I lied to you, and I’m sorry for what happened today. Whoever they are, we’re on *their* radar, and I’ll find out why. They made a grave mistake today.”

“Did Hector have foreign enemies?”

He kissed my hand again, exhaustion in his eyes, but it wasn't the tired kind. Hector hid Fabio from them until he struck. *Was it the same in this case with the shooting? Those two strangers? Were those guys connected to the shooters?* Thoughts swirled.

“We're exhausting that avenue, too.”

“I don't suppose you could let me in on those findings, too?” His eyes flitted down to the bed as he breathed in through his nose, his chest expanding before he released his tense breath. “Dominic, look at me.” When he did, I pulled his hand toward me, giving him a pointed look. “It's clear to me you don't want me as your consigliere, but I am carrying our child, and because of that, I don't expect to be a spectator on the sidelines anymore and definitely not after being fucking shot at. I was ready to go to war then, and I'm ready now because it wasn't just mine and our son's lives on the line.” I blew out a short, steadied breath at the memory. “You didn't see and hear how scared Katrina was. The panic in our brothers' eyes, no matter how much they fought to hide it.” I hardened my stare. “No one pulls shit like that against us, against me and our son, and gets to go back home and drink and laugh about it at the fucking round table.”

Dominic took me in for a few heartbeats before asking, “When did you turn from a mouse to a lion, *Bellissima?*”

I freed my hand from his and rested it on Katrina's sleeping form.

“When you gave my life purpose.” I looked down at Katrina, her arms around me, one of her hands on my belly. My son moved against that spot. I smiled, growing more tired.

Dominic rolled over, fixing the sheets and comforter to his liking. A peaceful silence took over until his low, gravelly

voice hugged me in its warmth and seduction in the darkness.

“For the record, *amore mia*, I never said no.”

I lifted my head and looked up at him. His eyes were closed.

“You’ll be sworn in from your acting position as consigliere after our son is born. I want him there to witness it.”

A small, breathy chuckle escaped me. “Dominic, he won’t remember that.”

“I’ll have security save the footage.”

I smiled cheekily. “Of course.”

He smiled smugly.

“Goodnight, *amore mio*.”

“Goodnight, *amore mia*.”

I waited two heartbeats.

“What was the vote?”

Dominic waited two heartbeats.

“It was unanimous.”

chapter EIGHTEEN

Thursday, February 9, 2017

MY SON LET me sleep in this morning, and after him going wild in my belly last night, I took full advantage.

Everyone's fear and anxiety over the firefight three days ago disappeared. Now, a lot of us were outright livid—mainly Dominic. He expected either a call back from Andre, Guido, or even both of them sometime this week, hoping for the rest of the puzzle pieces for this mess. He wanted all the pieces before bringing me into the fold, and I guessed I was okay with that, but I still expected to be given more than mere breadcrumbs. Dominic still refused to let me all the way into the business. I knew it wasn't to be cruel or secretive and that women weren't normally included so deep into that side of this life to begin with, but I *was* carrying our son, and with all the risks endured involving both of us, I was irritated by the walls still in my way.

I finished lathering my hair with conditioner and stood under the shower head, rinsing my hair. The warm water soothed my aching back, hips, and breasts. With each week that passed, pain developed in new places, and increased aches possessed me everywhere else. It was worth it, though.

My cell phone dinged, alerting me to a new text message. Done with my shower, I turned off the water and fetched one of my towels hanging on the other side of the sliding shower door. I wrapped my hair in the towel and stepped out of the shower, wrapped myself in the other towel and then crossed the bathroom to check my phone. The text was from Dominic.

Meet us in my office asap for a meeting

Like I had the ability nowadays to hurry off anywhere.

Just got out of the shower. Give me 20-30 to waddle on up there lol

I added the laughing emoji and the one where it sticks out its tongue before pressing send. It showed he read my reply, but he left it at that. I imagined him rolling his eyes, and I was amused.

I wondered if this emergency meeting was because Dominic received word from his contacts. God, I hoped so. The mysteriousness surrounding the shit that had happened was driving me crazy. My patience about it all was less than paper thin. I wanted answers. Now. It had gotten under all our skin that the pricks responsible for shooting at me, Katrina, Anthony, and Angelo still walked the streets.

With one towel hooked over my arm, I texted Dominic to let him know that I was on my way. I tossed my phone on the bed, wrung my hair again in the other towel, and tossed those into the hamper. My hair was a mess, but I didn't care. Picking out a pair of pajamas, I threw those on and went to go see what the fuss was about.

REACHING THE OFFICE, I didn't bother to knock, making my way inside. Dominic and our brothers sat around the coffee table. Their conversation stopped, all of them focused on me.

Closing the door, I said, "I thought I felt my ears burning."

"Nice of you to join us," Dominic remarked, winking. In a stunning charcoal gray suit that flattered his toned body, he leaned back in the armchair with a drink in his hand, his ankle resting on his other knee.

I wanted to kick everyone else out and tear his suit clean off him and ride him until dawn, but I had a feeling that after the meeting, I wouldn't be simping for his cock.

"Ha, ha," I said sarcastically, making my way to the other armchair. Dino moved as if he were going to help me sit in the chair, but I waved my hand dismissively. "I need some blood, though."

Dino left the sofa and got me a blood bag, opening it before handing it to me. I smiled and thanked him, settling into the leather.

"Is this about the shooting?" I asked.

Dominic nodded once. He was stoic; an unpleasant conversation was on the horizon.

"That bad?" I assumed.

He sipped his drink, the two ice cubes clinking against the glass the loudest sound in the room.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush. Peitrov and I talked at length early this morning. The incident at the thrift shop and what you witnessed at Saddle River Park were both orchestrated by the same set of men—Jonathan Cox, Maddox

Stone, Alexzander Romero, and Bryan Hunter. These same men had a hand in the shooting on Sunday.”

I should’ve been scared at this information, but a sense of relief swept through me. I wasn’t crazy.

“So, *they* shot at us?”

“No,” Dominic said. “Different men. We’re still gathering names and intel on those assailants.” Dominic indulged in another sip of his drink, waiting a heartbeat before carrying on with the worst of the findings.

“Peitrov and Sollami traced said set of men back to a man named Nico Nasuti. Nico worked for DiSanti. We don’t know if Nasuti is taking orders from someone or working alone, but all of us feel Nasuti’s a puppet. Sollami needs more time to find the ringleader. Whoever it is knows their way around technology, but they’re not impenetrable.”

“You okay, Lil?”

I quaked as if the temperature in the room plummeted, but I wasn’t cold. My stomach knotted. My heartbeat quickened. I stared at my lap, then up at Dominic, and then around the room until I kept my focus on the coffee table. With my free hand, I wrung the fabric of my pajama pants at my thigh, trying to control my breathing. My chest grew tight. I swallowed, my throat dry. I was quiet, afraid to move. Afraid to speak. All I thought about was Nico. He survived. We didn’t kill him when we raided Vincent’s home. He had been out there among us this whole time, and we were clueless. *Why now? Why us? Why me and my son?*

“Oh, my God,” I said under my breath. My breaths were coming in quicker. Faster and messier. Tears blurred my vision. “He’s out there.”

“Lil?” I registered something happening to my hand. I turned my head and saw Dino holding the bag of blood I was holding. “Dom, she’s not okay.”

It was as if my head was underwater as I stood up out of the chair. My thoughts raced. Everything raced around me. Voices. People. I aimlessly wandered away from the chair, bringing my hands up towards my chest, clasping them.

Nico Nasuti was alive. The DiSantis were still a threat. We were still in danger.

I flinched at a sudden touch and quickly found myself being spun around and brought against Dominic’s front. He held me flush with his body. His scent. The rise and fall of his chest. Safety. I registered safety and security, and I unleashed streams of tears and clung to the lapels of his suit, crying into the expensive fabric.

“Give us a moment,” Dominic calmly spoke. He cradled the back of my head in his hand.

“What about this?” Dino asked him, referring to the bag of blood.

“Set it back in the fridge.”

When the doors closed, Dominic cradled my face in his hands and tilted my head back so I could see him. He leaned in close, our noses an inch apart.

“We’ll get him, *Bellissima*. I need you to promise me you won’t worry yourself sick over this.”

I sniffed. “I-I can’t promise that.”

“Try—for me. For our unborn.”

Our son—we needed to keep him safe, too. No one could try to harm him again. I wouldn’t allow it. As long as Nico

walked the streets, our whole family was in danger.

“Why me? W-What did I do?”

Dominic let go of my face and brought my head to his chest, at his heart.

“We don’t know exactly, but I have a theory it’s an eye for an eye situation at play.” Dominic rubbed circles on my back. “As much as I hate to wait, we’re at the mercy of Peitrov and Sallomi. Everything I’ve told you is all I know right now. I don’t want you, Katrina, or my mother leaving this house again until Nico and his fall-guys are confirmed dead, and I don’t care if I have to lock you inside to do it.”

“Okay,” I squeaked, the word muffled by his jacket.

He kissed my head. “I have every available man on this, and I will be in communication with the other families. We have cops in our pocket. The FBI. I’ll pay off and kiss whoever’s ass I need to make sure my family’s safe. I know my track record isn’t great, but I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

I let go of his lapels and wrapped my arms around him, fisting bunches of his jacket and squeezing him tight like I did when I saw him after the shooting.

“Don’t let me go,” I cried. “Please don’t let me go.”

“I won’t, *Bellissima*. I’m here. I’m right here.”

chapter NINETEEN

THE HEAT OF THE SOFT, crackling fire caressed me. I wrapped the throw blanket from the couch back around me, trapping the warmth. I was unable to sleep, and it was becoming a common occurrence; whether it was due to the pregnancy or my racing mind was unclear.

Today, Dominic assigned the task of handling the business and its affairs to Dino and sent Anthony and Angelo into town on errands, one of them to the grocery store. Bianca and Katrina spent most of the day hanging out with me in the living room, and it was welcome company. When Bianca dozed off in the chair, Katrina covered her with the throw blanket. It was such a beautiful moment.

I looked up at the urns, focusing on Hector's. It was a black, marble design with red trim. He sheltered us from Fabio and Vincent and was, in general, a fairly private man, even with those who were closest to him. *Was there more about Vincent we had to figure out? How did Nico survive? And why on Earth was I in his sights?*

“What are you hiding from us?” I muttered under my breath to Hector's urn.

Payback for killing Vincent could've very well been Nico's motive. We killed someone important to him, and now,

he wanted to avenge the same. We handled the Pucinnis and the DiSantis, and I knew we could handle Nico and his merry band of bitches, but was it only those five guys? *Well, Nico had a boss, but how big or small was this spider web? Did it end with Nico's boss or spread farther and wider from there?* This was the shit that was preventing me from comfortably closing my eyes for more than five minutes at a time.

I sighed, beginning to choke up. I looked down at my belly, rubbing it with both hands. People just needed to leave us the fuck alone. In all reality, I had enough sense to understand that was a pipe dream, but I held hope. Specks of it, but hope, nonetheless. *Was I really ready to raise my son in such an uncertain life?* I closed my eyes, letting a few tears fall.

A provocative blend of aged cigarette smoke, cedarwood, and a touch of lavender infiltrated my nostrils. I turned to see Dominic joining me in the living room. Barefoot and shirtless, the waistband of his sweatpants sat low on his hips, teasing his V-line. I clenched my thighs, turning my back to him and stepping a few paces away from the fireplace. I held it together seeing him in that suit this afternoon; I was a frayed thread short from completely unraveling and taking him where he stood. Not that he would have objected.

“Why are you crying?”

I dabbed at my eyes with my fingertips and the backs of my knuckles, saying, “You caught that, huh?”

“Mhmm.”

I stood by the entertainment stand, my back still turned.

“I just want peace, Dominic.” I let out a breath that screamed I was done with the worrying and anxiety and

constantly having to look over my shoulder. “I wish we didn’t have to raise our son in such an uncertain and precarious life.”

“I wish that every day, but this is the life we live, and I swear to do my best to be home every night.”

It hit me fast—extreme sadness. I pinched the bridge of my nose, fighting yet failing to keep my tears at bay. The thought of waking up without Dominic absolutely fucking crushed me. I refused to think about it. I couldn’t think about it.

“Lilith,” Dominic said benevolently.

“Why does this keep happening? Why can’t people just leave us alone? I’m so damn tired of having to look over my fucking shoulder.”

Dominic’s scent hung closer.

“It’s so exhausting, worrying all the time. I just want to relax and have no worries.”

His hands slid slowly down my arms, gently taking me in his and pressing me into him. He trailed light kisses down along the side of my neck to near the front of my throat. I leaned my head back on his shoulder, inviting his affection. He palmed my belly with his right hand and held my upper arm with his left to keep me still. I parted my lips, a breathy moan escaping me.

“You need to relax?” The way he asked, I knew exactly what he had in mind to relax me. The throaty huskiness of his voice went straight down between my legs, making my clit ache that much more.

“I do,” I murmured. “Why me? What did I do?”

Dominic pulled the throw blanket back and past my shoulders, kissing them. He removed the blanket, setting it

down next to us on the floor.

“I hurt him; now, he wants to hurt me.”

He brought his hand to my front, bringing it up between my breasts, up along my chest, and to my throat, spreading his fingers out on my skin, curling them around my throat. He squeezed just enough to apply pressure but not anywhere near tight enough to hurt me. I slightly tilted my head back, and he drew a line with the tip of his tongue from behind the shell of my ear, down and around it, and up along my cheek. He released the pressure on my throat and turned my head for a better angle, pressing his mouth to mine, drinking in my moan, savoring my taste.

“Another bitch... Like the rest.”

His dark chuckle reverberated in his chest. I arched into him, brushing my ass up against the tent he pitched in his sweats, nearly losing it right then and there. He switched hands, sending his right hand from my throat, snaking it down my body, and slipping his fingers inside my underwear. I parted my lips, breathing harder, needier, at the feel of his fingers.

“Always so damn wet for me, *Bellissima*.”

I rolled my hips against his hand, gasping as he slid his finger inside of me. I ground against his hand, weak-kneed. With the angle of his hand, it caused my clit to rub up against the heel of his palm, driving me closer and closer to that edge of ecstasy and pleasure. I arched into him even more, rocking faster and harder into his hand, desperate for relief from this hungry ache that had me in its jaws, amplifying and soaring me higher and higher into that familiar, satiating explosion of euphoric bliss.

“Please,” I rasped, almost there. I closed my eyes, moaning. Moments from cresting over the edge.

“Please what?”

He knew what I wanted. Tease.

“Please...” I licked my lips, parting them, my throat and mouth drier. “I need to come. I’m going to...” My words got lost as I was losing control of everything else.

He slipped a second finger inside me, throwing me closer to the point of no return.

“I can’t,” I panted. “I’m... Oh, fuck...”

Dominic more firmly pressed the heel of his palm against my clit, moving it faster, sinking his fingers as deep in me as he could.

He forced our mouths together, his words washing over my tongue like rich, fine wine. “Come, *Bellissima*.”

Opening my eyes, I gasped, moaning loud, my walls squeezing his fingers as I soared over that crest. I caught my breath as I got my footing, riding out the incredible orgasm. He took away his fingers, my come coating them.

He licked and sucked my come from his fingers, leaving some on his thumb. He brought his thumb to my mouth, pressing it against my lips for me to take it into my mouth. Hesitant at first at the idea of tasting myself, I closed my lips around his thumb, meekly sucking on it.

A seductive, hungry, and dark growl rumbled in Dominic’s chest as he pulled his thumb out of my mouth, and then, he let me go. I became lost in that moment without his touch, spinning on my heels to see him spreading the blanket on the floor by the fireplace. He stepped out of his sweatpants and

then his boxer briefs. Fisting his still-hard cock, he beckoned me over with a single finger before slowly sinking to his knees on the blanket.

I pulled my nightgown above my head and tossed it aside. Dominic gripped my hips when I grasped his shoulders, helping me kneel on the blanket. Once I was straddling him, he laid on his back, his fingertips sliding around to cup my ass before massaging the soft flesh. Fuck, it felt good. I gently grinded against him, pressing my hands against his chest as I leaned into it for balance.

Flecks of red popped into his irises. I loved when they changed color, reflecting the predator living within. My desirable, charismatic predator.

I pushed back onto my legs, stroking his cock with both hands. Closing his eyes, Dominic pressed his sprawled fingertips into the flesh of my thighs, his moan tearing up through his chest.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked, referring to Nico and his bullshit.

Slipping his tongue out between his lips, Dominic opened his eyes, more red trickling into them. His stare was piercing. Focused.

“Kill.”

One word. One simple instruction.

I raised my brows. “All of them?”

“Every. Single. One of them.” He squeezed his eyes shut, pulling his lip into his mouth, his breath hitched.

He rocked his hips and fucked my hands, eliciting a squeal from my throat when he suddenly stopped and reached out,

grabbed my ass and forced me forward, making me let go of his cock and lean into his chest again for support and balance.

He shook his head, growling out, “No.” He then lifted me and lined up his cock with my entrance, impaling me. The way I stretched around his cock, it was kind of painful, sinfully good pleasure I would’ve paid for with my soul if there was a way to capture that sensation in a bottle to bathe in forever.

We as humans never knew when our time in this universe was up. I relished in Dominic’s touch, taste, scent, and affections every waking chance I got.

The fire hissed, just as Dominic did after I sat up on my legs once more, the new angle driving his cock in deeper. Gripping his wrists, my head fell back on my shoulders. We found our rhythm, our shadows dancing together with us.

“Dominic,” I moaned breathily.

“Lilith,” he ground out, his tone painting an image of an animal in the wild shielding itself in the thicket, anxious to sink its teeth in its taunting meal.

Maybe he would’ve sunk his teeth into me. With a lot of the vampires nowadays, it was part of mating. Biting the flesh of their lover, almost always in the throes of an orgasm, brought them closer with their mate, the taste of their blood like an aphrodisiac. I secretly yearned for such a moment during sex, but I was too afraid of the risk of him accidentally releasing venom in the height of his pleasure. He didn’t want to chance that either. Still, I dreamed of a day where we would set aside our reservations and just do it.

“Touch yourself,” Dominic ordered.

I wasn’t yet the most comfortable getting myself off in front of Dominic, but I happily obliged. In this moment, it was

right, and as I rubbed my clit, all my worries and anxiety melted away. I wanted to get one hundred percent past my shyness masturbating for the man I loved. I closed my eyes and found my own satisfying rhythm amongst the rhythm we shared.

A low, sultry growl rumbled in his chest. “That’s it, *Bellissima.*”

His thrusts became faster. Hungrier. His grunts and groans told me he, like me, was waltzing toward that dangerously delicious point of nirvana.

My head fell back even more, my mouth slightly open. Recognizable warmth enveloped me. My stiff nipples ached against my cotton bra, the material making them sensitive. The head of Dominic’s cock kept repeatedly sweeping against my sweet spot in the perfect way. I arched my back some, breathing the words, “*Amore mio.*” My nails dug into his skin as I sank my teeth into my bottom lip. The warmth overtaking me was climbing, as was this feeling of floating on a cloud. I rubbed my clit faster. Pressed harder. Moaned louder.

My hips moved faster, like I was shifting into some weird, feral, starved being. He drove into me unforgivingly, holding me almost painfully tighter. Our skin slapped together, our bodies slick with sweat and our arousal.

Dominic murmured words in Italian. It could’ve been sweet Italian nothings for all I knew. Whatever he was saying, it soared me into the throes of release. I fucked myself as fast as I physically could, riding Dominic wildly.

Moans.

Groans.

All pushing their peaks.

“Fuck,” Dominic rasped. “I’m close.”

I writhed. I cried out. Arching further, stars danced across my vision, and a scream tore from my throat as I tensed, my inner walls squeezing around Dominic’s cock in a chokehold.

He drove into me again.

Again.

One final drive into me and Dominic unraveled underneath me, grunting, filling me with his own explosive release.

I slowly straightened, both of our breaths labored. Red bursting brightly in his eyes and his fangs showing, Dominic pulled himself out of his own moment of bliss and looked at me lazily. He rubbed his hands up and down my sides, trailing one hand around and in between us, collecting our mix of juices on his fingers. He brought his fingers up to his mouth, licking them.

“*Così delizioso.*”

“Yeah, I don’t remember what that one means.”

Dominic burst into laughter, and it was the perfect musical crescendo for such a moment. He gingerly lifted me off him and eased me down so part of me laid on the blanket and the rest of me against him. He grabbed hold of my butt cheek and playfully squeezed.

“I wanna go again but not *that* soon,” I bantered.

Kissing my head, Dominic moved his hand up to the small of my back. His other hand banded around my belly. Looking over at him, I caught him staring at my belly, awe in his blues as our baby boy kicked and stirred. The wonderment in his smile reached his eyes.

I thought of the threat to our family. I replayed the moment I learned the DiSantis weren't fully erased. Those who ignored the past were doomed to repeat it, and something in my gut told me Hector still had plenty of skeletons in his past. Skeletons crazier than Fabio. Slicker and more resourceful than Vincent.

We weren't done combing through history that had been left hidden. Not even close.

"We can't lose you, Dominic." My throat tightened as I choked on the words, suppressing any sign of the fresh tears racing toward my eyes. "There has to be something we're not seeing. Something else Hector kept hidden." I swallowed, waiting a beat. "I feel it."

Dominic lifted his head, holding a confident stare, the amazement in his features gone and replaced with the features of a man ready and willing to burn the world to ash for his family. He settled his fingers under my chin, grazing the pad of his thumb in a pattern along the skin of my jaw. I captured his wrist in my hand, rubbing it and part of his hand.

"We'll bring it all together, and then, we'll bring it all down."

chapter TWENTY

Sunday, February 12, 2017

IT WAS FIVE A.M., and while I missed the feel of my bed and sleep, I stood in the kitchen at the island stirring pink cake batter in a mixing bowl, determined to give Katrina the best damn homemade birthday cake possible. It was her first homemade birthday cake, after all.

I stirred angrily as her heartbreaking admission from last night stuck with me.

“She never made me one. I had those gross ones from the store.”

“Does she not know how to bake?”

Katrina shrugged. “She had better things to do.”

“Did she tell you that?”

She nodded.

I understood that sometimes, parents didn't have the energy to slave away in the kitchen for a birthday or two, or they didn't know how to bake, but not giving your child something as simple and special as a homemade cake, even if from a box, because it was inconvenient... I considered that

lazy. Then again, it seemed as if Maria only went above and beyond for her daughter when it made *herself* look good.

Shaking my head, I set the bowl down and went over to the oven, selecting the temperature to preheat the oven. I walked back over to the island and started preparing the cake pans with parchment paper.

Katrina wanted a pink cake with chocolate frosting. So, I whipped up a simple recipe for white cake and added pink food coloring. Once it was in the oven I planned to make the chocolate frosting, and while stacking the layers after they cooled, I had strawberry jam in the fridge to spread over each layer. I wasn't the best at writing anything with frosting, but I doubted Katrina would have cared if the words "Happy Birthday" were neat or messy. This cake was specifically for her to eat. Dominic ordered a huge sheet cake for the rest of us to indulge on at the party.

Her party... Admittedly, I was nervous. We rented out a dining hall. Along with our family and the spouses and children of some of its men, the Baldomero and Maccarone families were attending, along with included spouses and children. It wasn't necessarily safety that I was worried about, although with Nico still on the loose, safety was a constant concern.

I hadn't met these families yet. *Would they like me? Were they nice? Would they accept me?* Oh, God, I hoped I didn't accidentally make a fool of myself somehow. That was all I needed... To appear inept. I didn't want to let Katrina down, either. Her party had to go off without a hitch. It had to be perfect. I would make it perfect for her. I had to.

The oven beeped, letting me know it was time to put the pans in. I finished emptying the batter, jiggled the pans a little

to help even out the batter and combat the air bubbles, and went ahead and slid them into the oven. I closed the oven door and set the timer for forty-five minutes. I began cleaning off the island and counters and putting the ingredients back to their respective cupboards. Leaning against the counter by the oven, I scooped some of the leftover batter along the inside of the bowl and enjoyed a taste. I technically wasn't supposed to eat raw batter, but sometimes, the temptation was too great. Oops.

My son moved around with each bite. He enjoyed it, too. He always kicked and moved with more pep when I ate certain foods like meats and his daddy's cooking. Dominic's homemade oatmeal was one of our favorites.

The front door opened and closed, making me pause. Then, I remembered Dino went for a run. He must've returned.

"Dino?" I called out, waiting.

Footsteps drew nearer, squeaking with each step.

Appearing at the kitchen's threshold, his matching gray hooded sweatshirt and sweatpants dampened from the rain, Dino slipped off the hood and wiped his face with his sleeve, strolling into the kitchen.

"What's up?" he asked.

I held out the mixing bowl for him, raising my brows. He made a beeline for it. I laughed as he dug right in and salvaged what he could of the batter.

"The fuck are you doing up at the crack ass of dawn?"

My laughter tapering off, I went ahead and gathered what I needed to make the frosting. "I'm doing what Maria was too lazy to do." I began measuring the amount of butter I needed,

catching sight of Dino pulling together his brows. “She couldn’t be bothered to bake Katrina a cake.”

“Ever?”

I nodded. “Ever.”

“Fucking bitch.”

A smirk curled my lips as I put the butter in the pot, turned the bottom left burner on the stove on low, and began measuring out the cocoa.

Dino set the mixing bowl in the sink and filled it with water to soak.

“Thanks,” I said, appreciative of his kind gesture.

He grabbed a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. The cap snapped as he twisted it off the bottle.

Attending to the butter again, I stirred it, feeling grateful for having the big brothers I did. Sometimes, I wished I had known them years ago. Maybe I wouldn’t have had to survive on the streets and endure shady and dangerous shelters. Maybe... Maybe they could’ve fought off Fabio sooner... And I would’ve still had my parents here. Nadia.

I sighed, adding the cocoa to the pot and stirring.

Life went the way it did for a reason. *If I had gotten mixed up with this family sooner, would everything have panned out the same way? Would Dominic and I have still hooked up? Would I have still gotten pregnant? Would Dominic still have taken Katrina in? Would Hector have been around to see his granddaughter thriving?*

“You good, Lil?”

I swallowed away the rush of emotion that overtook me before it had the chance to gain any real traction.

“Just my usual overthinking...” I wasn’t sure I wanted to finish my sentence. I was already emotional over Katrina and her lack of experiencing a homemade cake. Fucking hormones.

Dino came up to the stove, leaning against the piece of counter next to it. I sensed him staring. I didn’t need to look.

“Spill it.”

“Sometimes, I wonder what it’d be like if Hector ordered me here sooner.” The butter and cocoa mixture was thickening, so I reached along the counter and dragged the other mixing bowl next to the stove so I could soon pour the chocolate inside it to cool.

“Don’t torture your mind with the what-ifs. Trust me. It fucks you up.”

He was spot on. If I had lost myself in more what-ifs, I would’ve found myself drowning in heartbreak. I was blessed and grateful for what I had now, and I had to keep myself in the present. Out of the dark trenches of my mind.

I turned off the stove, continuing to stir the chocolate mixture as I lined up the pot above the bowl. Carefully, I emptied the chocolate into the bowl and gave it another few stirs before setting it aside to cool. I measured out the rest of the ingredients.

Moments later, I set the remaining ingredients aside. “It’s hard sometimes,” I offered as I readied the electric mixer, making sure I had it on the correct setting to whip up the frosting.

Dino put his hand on my shoulder as I was attaching the proper beater to the mixer, getting close enough so his breath warmed my outer ear. I stilled, my hand on the machine.

“You ain’t the only one who imagines the what-ifs.”

I met his gaze, his emerald eyes speaking for him.

Dino Santiago would’ve forever wondered... What if the universe aligned in our favor instead?

THE PAVILION GOLD banquet hall was fairly calm; then again, we were the only ones here aside from the staff. We got here early to set up for the party. The room we were holding it in was impressive, resembling a ballroom. Neutral tones with a touch of gold made it pop and paired well with the theme Katrina requested—Barbie, of course.

I thought it was cute except for all the pink. Pink napkins. Pink paper plates, cups, and plastic silverware. Pink streamers. Luckily, the tablecloths weren’t straight pink, although they had pink elements. Looking down at my dress, I laughed a little, shaking my head in amusement. From my closet, I chose my baby pink wrap hem cami dress with spaghetti straps and a simple, white cardigan for a more modest look.

Decorations were in their final phase. Katrina’s cake was in the refrigerator. She was on her way with Dino and Bianca and would arrive just as the venue came together. Perfect.

I weaved through the crowd of our family’s men and their spouses and kids, spotting Dominic across the room. His eyes soon found mine. He was happy to see me and was checking me out, ignoring the group conversation he then excused

himself from. He leisurely made his way toward me, dressed in a simple, wine-colored, button-down dress shirt and black slacks. So delicious and so fucking divine.

“You should’ve sported some pink,” I said, joking with him.

“Forget it,” he said with a straight face, cracking an amused smile the moment I started laughing. He took me into his arms, staring lovingly at me. My arms slid around his torso.

“Do you think she’ll like this?” A part of me worried that Katrina wouldn’t be happy with the decorations or even all her presents. It was silly, but I wanted nothing less than for today to be one of the happiest days of her life. *Would she play well with the other children? Would she like them?* I didn’t realize I was thinking out loud until Dominic put his finger to my lips.

“She’ll love it.”

Those words and his simple touch—they put my worries at ease.

He slid his fingers under my chin, holding my gaze. “You worry too much.”

“This is true, yes.”

We shared a chuckle.

“What do you think’s going to happen? She’ll get here, see everything, and run for the hills?”

“Add in some screaming for dramatic effect.”

Dominic shook his head amusingly, placing his hand on my belly. “Does he need more blood?”

“Not right now.” I brought my left hand to the back of Dominic’s head at its base and squeezed his hair between my fingers, bringing him face to face for a kiss. “But I’ll need *you*,” I spoke low against his mouth, “later tonight.”

A low, titillating growl escaped him, and then, he reclaimed my mouth, making a noise of frustration as he put his finger to his earpiece, pausing our kissing session to listen.

“Is she here?” I asked him. He nodded as he lowered his arm and pulled away. “To be continued,” I said seductively, squeezing his hair between my fingers once more, my nails grazing his skin.

Heading for the door, I looked around one more time, nodding in approval. She would love this. She deserved nothing less. Walking outside, I spotted the Escalade pulling into the parking lot. As soon as the vehicle stopped moving, the back right door flew open, and Katrina jumped out of the SUV and ran toward me.

“Lulu!” She held Mr. Cat under her arm. Her dress was adorable. In a pink lemonade shade, it flared at the waist, its floral brocade pattern a perfect touch.

I held out my arms, embracing her in a hug.

“How’s it goin’ in there?” Dino asked.

Letting go of Katrina, I looked up to see both Dino and Bianca standing a few feet away. “Just waiting for everyone to show up.” I hugged them, telling Bianca it was good to see her.

Bianca pulled back, motherly love shining in her gaze. “It’s good to see you, too.” She smiled. Walking alongside her, all of us headed toward the venue.

Katrina ran ahead of us.

“Wait!” Dino called out, walking faster, taking longer strides to catch up with her. He held her hand, saying, “Stay with us.”

I couldn’t fault her for being excited, and I understood Dino’s perspective. We all shared it. With Nico on the loose, we had to be extra cautious. Keep our heads on swivels.

“Hold on,” I told Katrina as I got close. She looked back and forth between me and the door, antsy. I wanted to see her reaction.

When I gestured for Dino to go ahead and open the Pavilion hall’s front door, Katrina made a mad dash to get inside, stopping just feet away from the threshold. I made my way past my brother and Bianca to see Katrina marveling wide-eyed at the space, her smile wider.

Everyone greeted her with, “Happy birthday!”

I bent over and gripped her shoulders. “This is all for you, sweetheart. Happy birthday.”

She spun around and clung to me, her hug strong. “Thank you, Auntie! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

EVERYTHING WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH. Katrina got along well with the other children. I managed *not* to make an ass of myself around the other families, and to everyone’s shock and surprise, Dominic pulled Katrina aside after she opened her presents and told her she could have a cat. The catch—it had to be kept in her room, or if she took it anywhere else in the house, it had to be on a leash. That was fair because who wanted to search high and low in this mansion to find it? With

all its nooks and crannies!?! Dominic told me to help her figure out what breed she wanted and to let him know.

It was all she talked about until we got home.

“Ow,” she said, reaching her hand back as I ran her brush through a small knot in her freshly-washed hair.

“I’m sorry. I think that was the only one.”

“It better be,” she grumbled to herself.

“Katrina,” I scolded, failing to stop from laughing at her sass. I had a sensitive scalp too, so I understood. I sprayed one last spritz of detangler on her hair, threading her brush through it. “Have you thought about what kind of cat you want?” She shook her head. “That’s okay; you’ve got plenty of time.”

I threaded my fingers through her hair to make sure I tackled all the knots and rats’ nests.

“Lulu, is there any cake left?”

“The one I made for you?” She nodded. “We do; it’s in the fridge.”

“Can I have some?”

Putting her brush down on her bathroom sink, I started to separate her hair so I could style it into a loose braid. She liked how it made her hair wavy.

“Tomorrow, I promise.”

“Pleeeeeease,” she whined.

She wound up loving her cake. After having a couple slices myself, I was impressed. I made a note in my phone of the recipe to make sure I wouldn’t forget it

“It’s late,” I said. “I don’t want you getting a tummy ache or a sugar rush.”

Pouting, she huffed, dropping the subject.

“What was your favorite thing about today?” I asked her, nearing the end of her braid.

“That cake.”

I laughed. “Okay, aside from the obvious, what else did you like?”

She made a face like she was in deep thought. “Presents,” she answered. “Definitely the presents.”

When we gathered around while she opened her birthday gifts, I lost track of who gave what. Thankfully, Dominic had that taken care of. I’d hate to be the one responsible for writing and addressing those thank-you notes.

One of her favorite toys was a pink ride-on Lamborghini. Dino found that one. It had LED lights and an mp3 player. She shared it with some of the other kids before she ended up driving it throughout the parking lot. And all the new Barbies and Barbie accessories... I was certain we’d need a tote to store it all in.

I secured Katrina’s hair tie and cupped the sides of her face in my palms, bending over and kissing the crown of her head.

“I’m glad you had a good day.” She smiled, thanking me. My hands now on her upper arms, we looked at each other in the mirror. “Let’s get you tucked in.”

“Okay, Lulu.”

She followed me out of the bathroom, passing me as I turned off the light.

“Did you have fun today, too?” she asked as she climbed into bed.

“Yeah,” I said, thinking about how fast the afternoon flew by, the laughs and the small talk, and just the importance of family. I walked over to Katrina’s bookshelf to select a bedtime story. “Yeah, I did.”

Dominic formally introduced me to Stefano Baldomero and Alessandro Maccarone. They both took a fast liking to me, congratulating me on my pregnancy. We chatted about Hector, but briefly, mainly regarding when I was sworn into the Salamone family. Sometimes, it kind of felt like they were sniffing me out, maybe even trying to phish for some sort of intel, and I mentally prepared myself for that. Women weren’t *soldatos*. This was unfamiliar territory, and with meeting me for the first time, none of them trusted me yet. That was obvious with Caterina Maccarone.

Mrs. Baldomero—Mia—was an absolute sweetheart, but Caterina... I was on her radar. While Mia and I became fast friends, Mrs. Maccarone looked at me as if I weren’t anyone special. I brushed it off, but it was still a tiny thorn in my side I couldn’t dig out.

I leaned on Dominic about it on the way home, learning that the Maccarones were never really fond of the Salamones to begin with. They felt the same with the Baldomeros. Alessandro hated any kind of competition, and although our families maintained peace and a long-standing truce, us and everyone else were still seen as rivals. Dominic didn’t give a fuck about Alessandro—his words—as long as he stayed in line and on our side. He told me not to lose sleep over Caterina, that she probably thought I was secretly after her husband. After I stopped laughing, I promised Dominic I wouldn’t let her bother me.

“What story would you like?” I asked Katrina, turning around to see her arranging her new addition of stuffed animals next to her on the bed.

“I don’t want a story tonight.”

Looking back at her books, I was a little bummed I wasn’t reading to her but also kind of selfishly thankful because a warm bubble bath and an early night was calling my name.

Speaking of stories, I heard some doozies at the party. Apparently, Stefano’s right hand, Ivan Braccia, beat a man to death with his own prosthetic leg that he originally lost after a tango with his chainsaw.

Thank God I’d developed an iron stomach over the years.

“Do you just want to hit the hay, too?” I asked as I placed tomorrow night’s story choice on top of that spot of books on the shelf so I wouldn’t forget.

“I want you to be my mom.”

Stunned, I turned around to see Katrina fighting tears. I heard them caught in her throat. She sat on the mattress with her legs crossed, hugging Mr. Cat. *Why was she sad? Was she grieving Maria again?* She was her usual self at the party, but I sensed a shift when we took her out for her birthday dinner. I thought maybe she was grumpy from being tired.

She cried into her stuffed animal, mumbling something else, but I couldn’t understand what. I hurried over to her and sat along the side of the bed, taking her into my arms. That was when the dam broke. Katrina’s loud crying gutted me. I rubbed circles on her back, doing my best to soothe her, reminding her to take a breath when she ended up choking and coughing through the weight of her cries.

It warmed my heart to be appreciated and wanted in such a way, but it cracked and split at her pain and that particular loneliness I was all too familiar with. I had cried myself to sleep wishing for mine, just as Katrina had. I was that same mournful, little girl who listened for hours to see if my mother would miraculously walk through the front door, except I wasn't mourning the living. My mother didn't choose to leave my life. The rejection and self-blame Katrina must've felt... It was unimaginable.

“Can you be my mom?” she begged.

Holding back my own threat of tears, I kissed her head, gently rocking in place. I cradled the side of her head in my hand, holding her to my chest. I wanted her pain to be mine. Her heartbreak. Her fear and, undoubtedly, her feeling of abandonment.

“If that's truly what you want, then I'd be honored to be your mom, but just know, it's okay if you ever change your mind.”

She sniffed. “Can I call you mom?”

I moved so I could tuck my fingers under her chin and tilt her head up, angling it so she could look at me. “You can call me whatever you're comfortable calling me.”

She cracked a smile so slightly, I almost missed it before she moved away from my hand to once again curl herself against my chest, sniffing.

“I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you too, baby, so, so much.”

chapter TWENTY-ONE

Tuesday, February 21, 2017

BECOMING TIRED, I excused myself from spending time with my family and headed into the kitchen for my last serving of blood for the day. I was down to two bags, but I found myself craving red meat more often, preferably cooked rare. Bloody. Julie said it was normal for such a growing boy. Like *that* helped my nerves.

I skipped warming the blood this evening, not in the mood for that, closing my eyes as my first sip slid deliciously down my throat. As I walked out of the pantry, I turned off the light and walked through the kitchen and into the hall, heading to Dominic's office. I sensed something had been off all day, like he was hiding information again. He'd declined to join everyone for a family movie and card game, and Dino had even told me Dominic had a lot on his mind. I knew he meant the deal with Nico Nasuti, but... There was more to it.

These past few days, Dominic had become unusually restless at night, tossing and turning more than me. It hurt my heart watching him struggle. I wanted in his head. I wanted to carry whatever emotions he was battling. I hated watching him navigate his internal battles alone.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I could hear faint music coming from his office. Was he...? The closer I got, the more familiar the pleasant crescendo sounded. Notes from Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata spilled into the hallway as I gently opened the door. I quietly stepped inside the office, standing just past its threshold, in awe.

Lost in the haunting opus, Dominic kept his head low, swaying with the music. Shoulders slouched, he worked the keys like the master of his craft that he was. My presence didn't appear to bother him. I closed the door as quietly as I could, staying near it.

He switched between slouching and sitting up straight, depending on the intensity of the notes. For softer notes, he seemed to caress the piano keys, handling his instrument with poignancy and grace. I wanted to close my eyes and immerse myself in the music, but Dominic captivated me too much for that to happen. Carefully lifting his wrists, he pressed harder on the keys as the notes strengthened and sharpened, wrapped up in the emotion and passion he was lost in. Throughout the difficulties of the melody, he maintained control.

Normally, he was the king of his castle, but in this time and space, Dominic exposed his vulnerability, and it was beautiful. His spirit shone with peace. Joy. Light instead of darkness.

I looked down at my belly, watching my son's movements slow down, catching on to the fact that what was one of Beethoven's most famous pieces had a calming effect. The way his daddy recreated the sonata relaxed him. I smiled. Dominic gained another fan.

Coming into more settled notes, Dominic neared the end of the sonata. Sitting straight, he pressed the proper keys, the

final note fading as he released the keys until there was only silence. He opened his eyes, keeping his head down.

Taking a few steps further into the room, I said, “I hope I didn’t interrupt.” Our son kicked, back to becoming active.

Lifting his head, Dominic stared ahead, easing back into the present. “No.” He almost looked lost, but that left his eyes as fast as it snuck into them. He then turned his head, our eyes meeting.

I caressed my belly. “We’re disappointed you stopped playing.”

His brows drew lower over his eyes. “We’re?”

I nodded, looking at my belly. “You have a new fan.” I lifted my head after a moment to see Dominic with his hand out.

“Come.”

I walked over to him and slipped my hand inside of his, curling my fingers around his hand. Standing behind him, I held his other hand and wrapped my arms around his bare chest, leaning into him. I kissed his cheek.

“Come to bed.” I rested my chin on his shoulder. “Please?”

“Soon.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong.” He looked at me. “You’ve been holed up in here all day. You’re avoiding us.” He looked back out at the room, sighing. I kissed his shoulder again and once more rested my chin on it. “Let me in. Let me help.”

He was clearly restless, his silence speaking for him. A part of me regretted inquiring.

He opened up, holding his focus on the room.

“You were right; Hector *did* have more skeletons in his closet. We found out that his wife had a hit on her by a group known in Russia as the Aleskis. They run that country.”

My stomach sunk. Part of the group that shot at our family; their car was Russian. *Were the Aleskis after us now?*

“We don’t know why they targeted Maria specifically,” Dominic explained further. “I’m still in contact with Peitrov as to any kind of motive, and I’m in the process of arranging some of my men and a handful of men from the other families to temporarily settle in Russia so we can gather more intel. The Baldomeros and Maccaronos are on board.”

“Are they after us, too?” I asked, my voice small.

“The Aleskis?”

“Yeah.”

“Doubtful. I’m only arranging this as a precaution. I’m mainly curious about what triggered them to resort to murdering his wife and their unborn son. In this business, women and children are typically off-limits unless our hand is indisputably forced and the only way to save our skins is to break such a golden rule.”

I freed my hands and walked around Dominic, stopping a hair ahead of the piano. I loosely hugged myself, my uneasiness dancing on the tightrope of making me ill.

“Lilith?”

I looked back toward the floor before slowly turning around, biting the inside of my lip, fighting to will away the fear coursing through me, threatening to make me emotional. I began to shake. All of this was eerie, and dread swirled in my gut.

“They won’t do to me what they did to her... Will they?”

“*Bellissima...*” Dominic left the piano bench and pulled me into his arms. I found comfort in his heartbeat. I clasped my hands together and kept them under my chest, staring at his biceps. “They won’t hurt you or our son. Hector’s gone, so anything outstanding anyone may have held against him automatically settled by default with his death, and his death was Vincent’s doing, not the Aleskis. Hector’s death was a revenge killing; nothing more.”

“But they already tried.”

He held me a little tighter. “The only way we can get to the bottom of that attack is to find Nasuti and bring him here for interrogation.”

“Who gets to do that?”

Another bout of thick silence hung around us, and then, it hit me.

“No,” I said, voicing it as a plea instead of a statement.

Dominic separated us, his hands on my upper arms. My eyes hesitated to find his, and when they did, my fear was confirmed.

“My best men and I are heading to New York in the morning. We’ll be gone for up to two weeks.”

I shook my head, shrugging out of his grip and taking a step back.

“My mother will be here to take care of you and Katrina, along with Lucas and Sonny. Protections will be in place around the premises and beyond.”

“No!” I shouted, frustrated he didn’t find another way to go about this without having to leave my side. It wasn’t safe

out there. If something happened to him...

“We have no choice,” he said, his tone hardening, same as the look in his eyes. “Once we get him in the chamber, we’ll force him to explain what the fuck is going on.”

“You can’t do this,” I choked out, hurriedly wiping fresh tears off my cheeks. “You can’t...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry!? When the hell were you gonna tell me? After you left?”

He held his hands up defensively. “I know you’re upset, and—”

“You’re damn right I’m upset!” I shouted, spreading my arms out and letting them fall to my sides. “For all we know, that damn family could be waiting for you to find Nico, and then bam, they’ll go after you, too.”

“That’s highly unlikely.”

“But not impossible.”

Dominic sighed and walked past me, undoubtedly to pour himself a drink. I wished I could chug a glass right now.

I turned around, shaking with anger and wanting to tie him up so he couldn’t leave. I only had a few more hours with him before he went on a wild goose chase, knowingly inserting himself into a seriously potentially dangerous situation.

“So, that’s it... I don’t get any say whatsoever.” He stayed quiet, chugging his glass of Walker. “You honestly thought I’d go along with this?”

He set the glass down hard on the mini-bar’s counter, leaning into it.

“It’s non-negotiable, Lilith. Try to understand.”

“Understand!?” I balled my hands into fists at my sides, clenching them hard enough to risk breaking the skin, pounding them against my thighs. Tears burned in my eyes. I stared at Dominic’s naked back, breathing hard through my nose, cracking a few of my knuckles, heat flushing through me.

I wanted him to stay here. I didn’t want him to risk his life. *What if this was some kind of ploy to get him far away from me so Nico could send more of his goons out here to try another attempt on my life? What if an emergency came up regarding the pregnancy?* He couldn’t leave like this. Not so soon and not to another state.

When he turned around, I couldn’t find the words. I wanted to run.

And ran, I did.

I spun on my heels and took off for the doors, throwing them open and running out into the hallway.

“Lilith.”

More tears spilled down my face.

“Lilith!”

Supporting the underside of my belly in one hand, I reached the stairs, reaching to grab the railing with my free hand when Dominic sprinted out of his office.

“Leave me alone!” I shouted, holding my belly as I ran down the stairs as fast as I physically could.

“Lilith, stop!” he ordered.

I ignored him.

Dino and everyone else stood at attention in the living room, cautiously making their way into the foyer.

“Lil?”

“You knew!” I seethed, snapping at Dino. Pointing an accusing finger at him, I shouted, “All of you fucking knew!”

“Knew what, Lil?” Dino asked, appearing genuinely confused.

He was quite the actor.

“Lilith, what’s going on?” Bianca asked, keeping Katrina hidden behind her, speaking in that concerned, worried way mothers did.

“I told her about the trip,” Dominic admitted, sounding close but not close enough to be within arm’s reach.

Shaking and sniveling, I stood frozen, trailing my eyes over everyone, feeling cheated and hurt. Cheated out of a goodbye. *What if tonight was the last time I saw them?* They planned to up and leave without so much as a peep. I could’ve woken up tomorrow to an emptier home. To the man I loved miles away.

“We’re just scopin’ out the bastard,” Dino said. “We’re comin’ back.”

I stared at him for a couple of beats, my lip quivering, my vision blurred by tears. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to fly off the handle and give everyone a piece of my mind... But I didn’t have it in me.

So, I ran to my bedroom and slammed the door.

chapter TWENTY-TWO

Wednesday, February 22, 2017

STUBBORNNESS WAS an unfortunate trait of mine. Well, in situations like this. Holding a grudge was another. I hadn't spoken to anyone since breaking down over the news, and while Dominic was in our stupidly large walk-in closet changing into a suit and packing his bag, I lay in bed, silently crying into the pillow, still pissed that he was leaving, debating whether or not to try one last time to convince him to stay.

He would've only been a few hours away in New York, but anything could've happened on this trip. I knew Dominic was able to handle his own, especially with any wannabe gangsters he might've encountered or the occasional tweaker, but Nico Nasuti belonged to a dangerous family before he was forced to survive on his own. Nico could've easily whipped up his own family, so to speak, and brought into it with him everything Vincent DiSanti knew and hammered into his mens' psyche's. Nico already found patsies to stalk and attack us on his behalf.

Did any other DiSanti members survive? If so, did Nico recruit them, too? Dominic was readying to walk himself into

a dark, gritty, volatile wolf's den, and it angered and scared the fucking shit out of me all at once.

Dominic reentered the bedroom, closing the closet door. His eyes skimmed over my face as he set his bag down on the bench at the foot of the bed. After a moment, he cautiously approached me, bending over to sweep the stray hairs from my face with his fingertips. My eyes were closed the entire time, but I still shivered when his lips brushed my forehead.

“If we finish early, I’ll notify you. You have everything you need while I’m gone.” He put his hand on my belly. “If an emergency arises, I’ll make it back here as fast as I can.” He removed his hand from my belly and touched my hand that wasn’t under my cheek, sweeping up and down my thumb with his finger. His warm breath fanned my face. “Look at me.” It wasn’t a command but a gentle request.

I opened my eyes, immediately overcome with fresh tears.

“I love you, *Bellissima*.”

“D-Don’t go,” I choked out.

He kissed my face. “I have to.”

Life felt unsafe the moment I lost his touch. His scent. Those magnificent blue eyes.

“No,” I whined as he picked up his bag.

I was afraid to tell him I loved him for fear it would be our last exchange, and when I heard the bedroom door open and close, I flung the sheets and comforter off me and got out of bed as fast as I could, rushing toward the door. The door slammed against the wall as I yanked it open to rush into the foyer, the love of my life a blurred figure feet away from the front doors.

“I love you,” I whispered, squeezing out a stream of tears. The click of the latch of the double doors was loud.

Me and my stupid fucking stubbornness.

It was cold. Desolate without him. Without any of them. Hands together in front of me, I mindlessly wandered further into the foyer. Hopefully, he heard me tell him I loved him. He had to have. Vampires had scarily excellent hearing.

The walls closed in around me. The air was suffocating. My stomach twisted, and my heart raced. I opened my mouth to speak but closed it, repeating the motion as I stood under the wide, dulled strip of moonlight bleeding through the windows upstairs.

Rules were in place that I couldn't call him unless it was an emergency, and the call had to be via Sonny or Lucas. They had disposable, untraceable phones for this assignment.

I couldn't text.

I couldn't call.

He was out of reach. It was just me, myself, and my guilt.

Dominic was more than capable of stalking and kidnapping Nico. He was bound to return from any mission. He knew how to fight. How to stay alive. Too much mattered here at home; he wasn't going anywhere. I always underestimated him, secretly knowing the truth and secretly holding onto my act of my naivety to help fuel me to fight for his change of mind.

Knowing he was capable didn't make the assignments easier to bear.

“Lilith?” Bianca asked cautiously, her flowery voice cutting through the thick space.

I sobbed on a sharp intake of air, blinking my watery eyes and keeping them on the front doors.

“Oh, honey,” she said in her motherly way, like she took pity on me. “It’ll be okay.”

“No... N-No, it won’t,” I muttered, again sharply pulling in air with my next breath. I began loosely hugging myself in my attempt to keep the dam from crumbling apart.

Bianca entered my space, standing inches from me. She tucked a damp strand of my hair behind my ear and then wiped at my cheek.

“Yes, it will.” She then tenderly took my right hand inside of hers, her squeeze to my hand her way of telling me she was there for me. “You have to have faith.”

My words breathlessly tumbled, broken. Desperate.

“I’m afraid th-they won’t come home. I want him home. I can’t talk to him; I can’t talk to a-anyone.” My spit got stuck in my throat upon swallowing, my mouth drying. “I want him... Home.”

“Come on,” Bianca urged, guiding me to my room. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

Once inside my room, Bianca helped me into bed. I chose Dominic’s side to lie on. His scent was everywhere. I buried half my face in his pillow, sniffing and then spilling tears. I pulled the bedding closer to me as Bianca tucked me in.

Their safety and my fear of them getting hurt consumed my thoughts. I loved them all so much.

My son kicked and wriggled around, reminding me I needed to be strong. I couldn’t let my paranoia about anything happening to Dominic or my brothers persevere. I placed my

left hand on the bedding over my belly, sliding my other hand underneath the pillow.

Mrs. Rosini placed her hand on my shoulder. “They’re coming back. I believe that, and *you* need to believe that.”

I sniffed.

“Let me tell you something. When I thought my baby boy died, my world collapsed. Despite what he may have told you about me, I love him with all my heart. The loneliness took such a toll. I barely ate. I barely slept. I was a zombie in one of those monster movies; nothing fazed me.

“I walked away from religion years into my and Lorenzo’s marriage, but while I mourned my son, I rediscovered the Lord, and my faith carried me through the pain. Maybe *your* faith can help *you*, too.”

Like Bianca used to feel, religion wasn’t a big thing with me. Not anymore, anyway, but I was blessed to have her in our lives. She had been gravitating, for me, into more of a good friend and no longer an acquaintance or just someone I had to coexist with.

Maybe I could try her way. Maybe... I could lean on God.

“I know in my heart Dominic would want you to know that he is out there to make things better for all of us. I see the love and devotion he holds for you, Lilith. It’s beautiful.”

I smiled, my eyelids gummy from all my crying. Dominic did love me, and I loved him. We would do anything for each other, no matter how painful.

Being away from me and our son must be nothing short of torture for him.

“Stay,” I weakly pleaded before I could stop myself.

She stepped away and shut the door, momentarily leaving me to wonder whether or not I would be sleeping alone, but I quickly relaxed when she walked around the bed to what was normally my side and got into bed, lying next to me. After she pulled on the covers, she held my hand, which was under Dominic's pillow.

Her white, cotton, floral-themed nightgown brought back memories of one similar that my mom owned.

“You have to remember just how strong and brave you really are, and remember, absence always makes the heart grow fonder.”

It became difficult to keep my eyes open. My body grew heavier. It wasn't long until I drifted off, still holding Bianca's hand.

chapter TWENTY-THREE

Saturday, March 4, 2017

THE BRIGHTNESS of the winter's sun shone through the window between the gap in the curtains. I rubbed my tired, irritated eyes with the heels of my palms, groaning and stretching my legs. Dragging my hands down my face, I slowly opened my eyes, adjusting to the sunshine. My son kicked my bladder, and I rushed to hold myself between my legs, breathing through the discomfort and threat of pissing myself.

“Good morning to you, too,” I sarcastically greeted my son while rolling over onto my left side. I then waited a few breaths before leaving bed and heading into the bathroom.

Finished in the bathroom, I re-entered the bedroom and changed into the clothes picked out for me on what was normally my side of the bed. Before Dominic left, he selected outfits for me from our closet and arranged with his mother for her to set out my day's outfits each night prior. He didn't want me to risk falling down the closet steps, nor did he want me lifting a finger unless absolutely necessary.

Fine with me.

I adjusted the waistband of my leggings, smoothing out the fabric over my belly. After I finished dressing—putting on the oversized t-shirt—I secured my hair into a ponytail.

Stepping into my pink slippers designed to look like a pair of flip-flops, I stretched my lower back, grabbed my phone off the nightstand, and faced another day without my king.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, MISS. WARDMAN,” Luigi greeted, crossing paths with me in the foyer as he walked through the front doors for his shift.

Secretly, I was happy Dominic demoted him from his title as a soldier to cooking our meals and fulfilling minor requests like serving us said meals or cleaning the chamber after rather... Bloody fun sessions. The dirty, I’m-better-than-you-look was ingrained in my memory from our first encounter, and I carried no respect for him since, despite his attitude thawing toward me. I wasn’t sure if Dominic had done something that day or what, but Luigi did a 180. Didn’t mean I trusted him, though.

“Please,” I said, hiding my annoyance at his formality. “It’s Lilith, and good afternoon.” I faked a smile to keep the peace. Luigi smiled. Whether genuine or not was to be determined.

“Where are you off to?”

“We’re checking the mail,” Katrina answered, her mitten-covered hand in mine.

He gave a tight nod. “Enjoy your afternoon.” He walked away, heading off to start his shift.

Good riddance.

Letting Katrina open the door, we stepped outside into the chilly, dreary air. While she was bundled up to protect her from winter's cold, it was refreshing to me. Regrettably, I chose a pair of leggings instead of shorts.

Thin patches of old snow crunched under our feet.

“When are my uncles coming home?”

Over the past couple of days, Katrina had asked about her uncles and why they weren't here. That was impossible to answer considering I, too, had no clue as to when they were coming home. I remembered Dominic telling me no more than two weeks. It had already been ten days.

“I think in another four days,” I guessed. “We just have to be patient.”

“Where did they go?”

I didn't want to lie to her, but what information I knew wasn't exactly appropriate to explain to a nine-year-old.

“I don't know, but it must be important.”

“Are they fighting the bad guys that tried to hurt us?”

A pang of guilt struck my heart. We had no choice that day but to break down all that chaos for her. Luckily she was surrounded with all the love and attention and comfort she needed. I hated she was in the crosshairs of those thug assholes.

“They are, honey.”

“Why does it take so long to get the bad guys?”

Talk about a complicated and complex answer. I searched for the words as we descended the driveway.

“It’s complicated. It depends on where the bad guys are and if they’re easy for your uncles to find.”

“You mean they hide?”

“Some do, yes.”

“Like hide and seek?”

I smiled at her analogy. Honestly, politics was the main reason bad guys escaped justice and accountability in this day and age; there were far too many limitations.

That was why we flipped off so-called politics and served our own retribution.

“Actually, that’s exactly what it’s like.”

“Nobody can hide from *my* uncles,” Katrina proudly stated.

I hid my smug smirk, stifling a chuckle. *If you only knew...*

“Damn right,” I agreed.

Michael and John were on guard duty. Certain people here I had grown more attached to versus the rest. Granted, all of them had been around since day one, but those two, in particular, I had developed stronger friendships with. I could always count on Michael and John.

They turned around to discover me and Katrina.

“Miss Wardman,” Michael acknowledged. “How can we help you?”

“We want the mail!” Katrina exclaimed, bringing a smile out of the rest of us.

Nodding once, Michael left his post to go to the mailbox. I stood near John, waiting. A breeze moved over my skin. This cool air was never not refreshing.

Looking back and forth between John and the end of the driveway, I contemplated asking him if he heard when Dominic and his men were due back home. But it was pointless. Dominic gave every man here strict orders to keep quiet. They weren't going to break their word.

“How are you holding up?” John asked me out of the blue, walking toward me.

I shrugged my shoulder, maintaining focus on Michael as he looked through the thick stack of mail on his way back up the driveway. I let Katrina go help him.

“Best I can,” I said. “I just want them home.”

“We all do,” John expressed sympathetically, briefly putting his hand on my shoulder.

I swallowed away the worry his kind gesture triggered, smiling at the sight of Katrina talking Michael's ear off.

“I just hope them getting Nico will put an end to all this bullshit,” I said.

Nico was the common denominator. Taking him out meant it would stop the weird encounters. Any future attack attempts. That made sense to me. We got Nico, and then we could take down everyone even remotely connected to him. Maybe then, sleep would find us much easier every night.

Katrina ran up to me with some mail in her hand. Michael held the rest of the stack of envelopes and had a small package under that same arm.

John nodded once and walked back to his post.

“Here you go,” Katrina said, holding up the mail.

I took it from her and thumbed through it. Junk mail for me. And nothing exciting for Dominic or our brothers.

“Thank you,” I told both Katrina and Michael. I held out my hand for Katrina to take.

“Did you need anything else?” Michael asked. He was one of the few who continually checked on me, especially when Dominic wasn’t home.

I shook my head. “I’m good.”

“I’ll go ahead and get these delivered then,” he said in reference to the mail. Either Michael or John had the daily task of handing out the mail to all on the property.

If my feet and hips weren’t as sore more often than not, I would’ve volunteered to do it just to give me something to do.

“Thanks, Michael,” I told him as he began walking further up the driveway. Katrina and I followed him but strayed onto the grass up ahead.

“Lulu, when is the baby coming?”

“You’ll have to wait until June.”

She grumbled under her breath, something about being impatient and it being too long of a wait. I hid my amusement, a slight smirk creeping on my lips, but my smirk quickly faded when thinking about how fast this pregnancy felt like it was going. I was about to hit week twenty-five. Only fifteen more weeks, give or take. *Was it really that little left?* It seemed as if just yesterday I found out I was pregnant.

Was I ready for this? Would I ever be?

HER GIFT RESTED in my hands. I brushed its leather with my thumb, sweeping over the bottom corner in a diagonal motion,

almost mindlessly at this point as I stared at it. I had kept it tucked away, too emotionally weak to touch it. Until today. Until life became too much to handle, and I needed a healthy outlet.

Nadia needed to be here. My parents needed to be here. I needed them. Bianca just wasn't suitable enough today. Her words and her wisdom weren't what my heart needed. What my heart needed were the pages I poured my soul into. The pages of a sacred place I found solace in, where I could reach out to those that gave me strength. Hope.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I opened my journal to a new page, staring at its cream paper. The last time I wrote in this was on the night of Hector's death. I was heartbroken over his loss, and I was struggling with the news and reaction to my pregnancy prior to news of his senseless murder.

My thoughts raced. The words were there, just jumbled. Adjusting in my gray power recliner in what would soon be my son's bedroom, I kept staring at the blank pages, my pen in my hand. It killed me that I couldn't talk to my parents and Nadia in real time. Written words had to do.

March 4, 2017

Dear journal,

It's not fucking fair. Mom. Dad. Nadia. Thomas. You all should be here. Why did God need you so fucking badly? Didn't he realize how your deaths would fuck up so many of us? It wasn't their time! And it's not Dominic's time or Dino's or Anthony's or Angelo's, so

don't you fucking think about it, God. You hear me? Leave. Them. Alone! They need to come home safe.

I need my brothers.

I need the love of my life. I need his smell. His touch. His taste. His laugh. His gorgeous eyes. I need to hear him call me by my pet name when he tucks me into bed. I need him to tell our son goodnight. I need his protection. His tenderness. Our son needs him, too.

This mission had to happen, but I don't like it. The bad guys had to be stopped. Too many enemies have already taken too much. We can't let any more gain any kind of upper hand. Look what happened in the past. No, they can't get ahead. We can't let them take anything else from us.

I don't even know what to fucking say. It feels like I have nothing and everything to say all at once. I don't know how to get the words out, even this way. It's not the same. I don't want to write letters to ghosts. I want to call them. Hug them. I'm going through so much without all of you, and I don't know how I do it.

Mom, how did you survive pregnancy? How did you deal with your fears? All this discomfort? Did you also worry that you wouldn't be cut out for this mothering thing? Because sometimes, I feel that way, like I don't know if I can handle all the responsibility. I know that's silly, but all of this has happened so fast, it feels like I haven't been able to catch my breath yet. Literally.

Is Nadia keeping you company up there? I imagine you two are the best of friends. She would've made an amazing grandmother. Much better than the one I ended up stuck with. How about Dad; is he still crazy about you? Now, that was a stupid fucking question; of course, he is! The deep love and strong bond you both shared reminds me of the way me and Dominic are.

I love him so much. I can't picture life without him, which is why I desperately want him home. If he's here, I'll know he's safe. And alive. We still need to get everything ready for our baby. I can't do that alone. Dominic's so excited to be a daddy. I've dreamed of the moment he holds our son for the first time, and it's always the most beautiful sight. It

makes me teary just sitting here thinking about it.

Please Mom, Dad, Nadia, Thomas, and hell, even Hector... Please keep an eye on Dominic and our family. Shower them with your protection and strength. They need to come home.

For the love of fucking God.

L.M.W.

As I cried my few remaining tears, I closed the journal and tipped my head back against the headrest, eyes closed, taking it all in. Penning those words was a spiritual and emotional cleansing long overdue. I tuned in to my son's movements, smiling. These past few weeks, I had thought more seriously about what to name him. I came up with a first and middle name, growing attached to them. I hoped Dominic would like my choice, too.

Dominic...

I missed him. Severely. This place was too quiet without him and our brothers. Bianca was also becoming restless with his absence. We both worried about him. We both wanted him and everyone here and safe ASAP.

Yawning, I stretched in my recliner, wondering what else I could do today to pass the time. The closer it got to Dominic being away for two weeks, the longer the days felt. Time moved slower than a slug.

I could play with Katrina.

Maybe soak in the tub.

Take a nap?

Yeah... A nap sounded wonderful. Last night, this pregnancy was hell on my back. My son decided it would be fun to make himself comfortable on my sciatic nerve. I ended up in tears from the pain and asked Bianca to bunk with me. She helped me find a position that eventually forced the baby to move, and then, he found entertainment in kicking my bladder.

It was a no-win situation, and I dreaded the worsening aches and pains as his birth approached.

Sighing, I pressed the button on the miniature remote with this chair to tuck the reclining piece back into place. Once safe, I put the remote in the built-in pocket on the side and carefully stood up. My lower back and hips ached under the pressure my son created the bigger he grew, the belly band I religiously wore no longer providing as good of relief. I needed to ask Julie if they had better bands on the market or if she had any more helpful tips to combat the aches and pains.

I picked up my journal, pen, and cell phone and made my way to the door. Maybe Bianca, Katrina, and I could have some kind of slumber party tonight. Yeah... That was a distraction all of us would enjoy. Katrina had been wanting to sing to the baby anyway. It was adorable.

When I opened the door, I immediately stopped, my hand frozen on the handle as I stared at the man standing in front of me, shaken. In a nicely pressed suit that was black as sin with his arms behind his back, he said my favorite word.

“Bellissima.”

chapter TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU’RE HOME!” were the only words I could conjure up at that moment. I launched myself at Dominic, throwing my arms around his neck and pressing my body to his. He was here, in the flesh. I looked up at him, dumbfounded and on cloud nine all at once. “You’re really here.” My cheeks ached from smiling so widely.

“I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, I’ve missed you, too,” I voiced, my longing for the man I loved nearing its boiling point before this moment. I then nudged his head forward to capture his mouth with mine in a passionate, frenzied kiss. We shoved our tongues in each other’s mouths, rearing to suck our lips off at this pace.

“Knees... Up,” Dominic said breathlessly.

Trusting him, I secured my hold on his neck and hopped just enough for him to grab the back of my thighs. My thighs squeezed his hips. He walked us out of our son’s room and directly across the hall without breaking focus, soon opening our bedroom door. Turning us around, he leaned over.

“On the chair.”

Knowing what he meant, I dropped my journal, pen, and phone onto the armchair near the door.

Kicking the door closed, he then walked us to our bed and set me down on my back, my legs still wrapped around his waist as we continued to consummate our mouths. Dominic unwrapped my arms and slipped a pillow behind my head. Suddenly, he pulled away and stood tall, lust clouding his eyes as he unfastened his belt, yanking it through its loops and tossing it aside. He hurriedly unbuttoned and unzipped his slacks, pushing them and his briefs down his thighs, letting them fall around his feet. His fingers wrapped over the band of my leggings and underwear, swiftly yanking them down. I yelped in surprise, biting my lip and parting my thighs.

“I guess you *have* missed me, haven’t you, *Bellissima*?”

He was right. Fuck, was he so fucking correct; aside from just being physically away from him for so long, my body craved this. Yearned for this. One night while Dominic was away, I tried getting myself off. While it quenched my thirst slightly, it wasn’t the same.

Nodding, I closed my eyes, Dominic’s nakedness an angelic vision in my head. I lifted my arms above my head as I heard him stroking himself, his cock slicked with precum. He brought his cock to my entrance, a pleasurable, tingly sensation blossoming within me as he pushed the tip of his cock inside. His hot breath fanned over my face as he leaned down, pinning my wrists to the mattress.

“I’m going to fuck you, then we’re getting our hands dirty.”

“How dirty?” I asked, taking myself back a bit with how seductive that sounded.

“Bloody.”

Nico Nasuti...

I opened my eyes. “You got him,” I breathed.

My gasp turned into a loud, drawn-out moan as Dominic rammed his cock into me.

“Eyes. On. Me,” he commanded, sending a pleasurable slither through my veins.

He pulled out and then drove back into me.

In.

Out.

I comfortably wrapped my legs around his waist, squeezing my thighs, grinding against him in a need for more. He touched his forehead to mine, rocking his hips faster. Driving into me harder, grunting. The way his face twisted, he was close. My pleasure heightened, my heart racing. It was warmer. Much warmer. Sweat beaded on Dominic’s brow. The euphoric feeling I had desperately wanted had me in its control.

I was teetering on that edge.

So was Dominic.

I arched my back, moaning, rubbing my breasts against his chest.

“Fuck,” he growled against my mouth.

I moaned. He groaned. One final rough thrust, his come spilt into me as I unraveled, milking him of every last drop.

We panted, catching our breath and coming down from our highs as we gazed into each other’s eyes, drunk off our orgasms.

“That was...” he said, struggling for the words. “That was...”

“Wow,” I lazily finished for him.

We laughed, both of us smiling.

Everything was fine again. The world resumed spinning. Nothing would have ruined this moment, no matter how hard it tried. Dominic was home and safe and unhurt.

Pulling his face away from mine by just a few inches, he let go of my wrists and cupped my face in his palms. He just stared like he was taking in every line on my face. Every blemish. Tattooing me into his brain.

I only imagined the hell he endured just by having to be away from me for so long.

“So many sleepless nights,” he murmured.

“So many,” I agreed, remembering my absolute restlessness the first four days after he left. That was hell.

This right here, with him... This was heaven.

“So...” I spoke up, Dominic’s words from earlier replaying in my head, “he’s in the chamber, isn’t he.” It was a statement rather than a question. Why else would he have called for us to bloody our hands?

That sexy, dangerous... Mischievous smirk I loved possessed his lips.

chapter TWENTY-FIVE

BEHIND THAT DOOR was the man who arranged the hit on my life. My baby's life. Katrina. Anthony and Angelo. All of us dodged bullets on that afternoon—literally.

I wanted to see him suffer.

I wanted him to bleed.

Beg for mercy he wasn't deserving of.

I looked down at my belly, rubbing it, and then looked back up at the red, steel door—red symbolizing shed blood. I swallowed, working through my anxiety of facing who could've been my maker.

Justice was coming today.

Justice was promised in the chamber. Always and forever.

Dominic and Dino walked through the tunnel, carrying one of those fancy recliners for guests we had in each makeshift hospital room in our unit.

“Did you remember to grab me some blood?” I asked both of them, turning around to face them. After a beat, Dominic sighed.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

I stifled my laughter.

“Let’s get this in there,” Dino suggested. “I’ll run and get it for her after.” Another beat passed. “Can you get the door, Lil?”

Dino set down the chair and shoved his hand in the pocket of his jeans, phishing out the key for the chamber. He handed it to me and picked his side of the chair back up. I held the key card over a built-in sensor just above the door handle until the light flashed bright green and the latch clicked, unlocking the door. I gently pushed on the door and then immediately pulled the handle, walking backward and off to the side as I opened the door. It wasn’t a light door by any sense of the word but not impossible for me to open.

I kept my head down as Dominic and Dino entered the chamber, gathering the courage to confront Nico Nasuti. It wasn’t that I was afraid of Nico because I wasn’t. Whenever I thought of being shot at and how close it came to my son and loved ones getting injured or dying, it choked me up, especially the thought of losing my son. The bond I already felt with him was intense, and I didn’t care if I had to walk barefoot over burning coals, jump out of a window twenty stories high, or die to save him, I would do whatever it took. The thought of losing him ripped my heart out.

Walking just past the room’s threshold, I lifted my head long enough to see Nico suspended in the air far down by the back wall, his wrists bound by steel shackles that connected to a set of chains hooked to a rail. The rail was bracketed into the ceiling. He was stripped naked—marks and cuts already marring his skin. He faced the wall, straining to make noise, like he was either drugged or dazed.

Dominic loosened my grip on the door's handle and closed it, the latch system loud as it clicked into place. He then stepped in front of me, firmly gripping my arms.

"If at any time you want to leave, just say so."

I nodded, looking past him at one of the tables lined with tools. Just then, a loud crack of a sound, like leather striking flesh, filled the space, followed by Nico's anguished hollering. Dino, using a long, black strap, was lashing Nico over and over until Nico sagged, letting the chains support him while blood oozed from his open wounds..

Dino angrily threw the strap off to the side, then delivered a swift kick to the back of Nico's thigh, eliciting a pained groan from him.

"Lilith," Dominic called, not as a command but still with enough authority to redirect my attention. "You shouldn't be in here. You're at risk of losing control."

"Caving to my thirst," I finished for him.

Was I about to put my child at risk and ultimately myself over my curiosity? Nope. Nico being a hybrid meant I had to fight even harder. If I gave into the temptation of ingesting his blood, the baby might have lived but my chances were... Grim.

"Yes," Dominic continued. "So, if you start to feel yourself losing that control, I need you to remove yourself from the room immediately. Do you understand?"

Nodding, I cradled my belly, looking at it. I had a hell of an internal fight on my hands between suppressing my emotions and subduing my thirst. Our son was worth the fight.

Dominic let me go and turned in Dino's direction, walking toward him and Nico. "Drop and unhook him."

Dino walked over to the pulley system and lowered Nico to the floor.

“Let’s get him in the chair,” Dominic ordered as Dino turned the key in one of the shackles, unwrapping it from Nico’s wrist.

After he was freed, Dominic and Dino dragged Mr. Nasuti to what was the new and unused wooden chair bolted to the floor and strapped him to it by his wrists and ankles. A drain was installed underneath to catch a person’s blood, waste, and whatever other bodily fluids were spilled.

Like a lightbulb had gone off in Dino’s head, he told his brother he’d be right back and then saw himself out of the chamber.

While Dominic made his way toward one of the tables, I watched Nico squirm. His breathing subtly began to quicken while he licked his parched lips. Shifting in the chair, Nico fought against the restraints, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

As the man I loved approached the man we all wanted to decimate, a manila folder in Dominic’s hand, Nico clenched and unclenched his fist, shifting position just enough for his back to touch the chair. He waited, lips parted slightly, his bated breaths slipping through. I sensed his angst. His trepidation. We all did, and we all smelled it. Nico was in deep, but he continued putting up a bold front.

Dominic opened the folder. “Make this easy, Nasuti.” He then picked up a thin stack of files out of the folder and stood in front of Nico, holding it up in front of him.

Nico’s eyes widened before his poker face returned. But the alarm bell had already sounded in his head, and he had a

death-grip on the arms of the chair.

“Your compliance,” Dominic said, switching to the next photo in his hand, “lets them live.” He showed Nico another photo, holding it closer to his face. “Make a choice; tell us what we want to know, and I’ll call off my men, and just maybe, *maybe* I’ll show you mercy.” Dominic moved in closer to Nico, dropping his tone to a bleak level. “Or you’ll die with their blood on your hands. I have men stationed at their homes, waiting for my signal.” Dominic stepped back and stood tall, dropping his arm.

“Can I see those?” I asked Dominic. He held out the photos, so I took a step closer, grabbing them from his outstretched hand.

In the first photo, a middle-aged woman, presumably Mrs. Nasuti, was wiping her brow in her front yard. Tall with black hair teasing just past her shoulders, she wore a simple blouse and jeans with light brown gloves covering her hands, and a wheelbarrow was resting off to the side. She held a gardening hoe in her other hand, unaware of being spied on.

Switching to the next photo, a blonde circled with a red marker—decades younger—laughed with a group of girls her age, equally unaware of the danger which lurked. She emitted such innocence. A pure heart.

Shameful.

Shuffling through the rest of their surveillance photographs, the timestamps revealed these weren’t the work of Photoshop. Those most precious to such an evil man were oblivious collateral damage to their loved one’s games. They weren’t surviving this either. Too risky to our own lives and our bottom line. Was I sympathetic? To an extent. But with all

Nico had done, I ultimately wanted to watch him and his remaining world burn.

Dino came back into the chamber, blood bag in hand. I gladly took it from him, thirsty, wasting no time opening it.

Taking a cigarette out of its pack, Dominic put it between his lips and gestured with his fingers for me to give him the photos as he walked toward me. I met him halfway and handed him back his leverage against Nico.

He lit his cigarette, blowing the smoke in Nico's face. The bastard didn't flinch.

"All I want to know is why." Dominic gave the photos to Dino and then stood in wait, finishing what he was saying. "Why attack my family? Is this an eye for an eye thing?" He brought his hand up, moving it in a circle, pretending to try to figure out what we had already suspected. "Let me guess... You're jealous, just like Vincent was. Am I on the right track?"

"Fuck you," Nico gritted through his clenched jaw.

"No," Dominic said, inhaling another hit of his cigarette. As he exhaled, he said, "Not interested." Nico thrashed in the chair, baring his teeth like he was readying to attack had he not been confined by the leather straps. "What I *am* interested in is the why, Nasuti. Just give me a motive. Give me names... Then, we can discuss a deal."

My heart was screaming at Dominic, screaming not to cut deals with gutter trash like this former DiSanti bitch. But in my head, I knew this was a tactic. He wouldn't let Nico leave alive. So, I observed, hushing my emotional impulse.

"You think I'm stupid?"

"Uh, yeah," Dino said.

Dominic rolled his eyes.

“I ain’t giving you shit,” Nico seethed.

“Not even to save those two women you seem to care so much about?” Dominic challenged.

“Women are off-limits; you said so yourselves. Your fucking family has prided themselves on that.”

Balancing his waning cigarette between his lips, Dominic removed his phone from the inside breast pocket of his jacket, pulling up a video and showing Nico. I moved in for a better view.

It was a video of Mrs. Nasuti bringing bags of groceries into their home. The time and date in the corner showed it was from a handful of hours ago.

For people with their kind of money, learning they lived in such an average-looking house in their neighborhood was a surprise. Then again, not everyone flaunted their wealth. I was honestly a tad envious. I loved my new home and all its luxuries, but I had days where I mourned the simpler life. Well, simpler in regard to involvement in the mafia.

Nico was expressionless.

“If you ever want to see them again,” Dominic began, inhaling another nicotine hit, “you need to start talking. I don’t hand out mercy without getting something in return.”

Nico scoffed. “They’re dead, regardless. I know how this works.”

Dominic shook his head, lowering it as he put out his cigarette with his fingertips. After tossing it, he slipped his phone back into his jacket pocket and stepped away from Nico, walking over to the table of torture tools.

“Dominic Rosini doesn’t give anyone *mercy*, so just fucking do it already. Shoot me, stab me, gut me; I don’t give a fuck.”

“Those are too easy,” Dominic said. Gathering something off the table, he turned around to make his way back over, something small and shiny in his hand.

“What is that?” I asked him.

As he drew closer, what he held became more visible—thin needles. Longer than a sewing needle but shorter than one found in a syringe. Taking my right hand, he placed all but two of the needles on my palm and then closed my fingers around them before guiding me closer to Nico.

Apparently, I was volunteered to assist.

Dominic stood to Nico’s left, holding one of the needles between his teeth, and silently grabbed Nico’s hand. He began forcing the first needle under his thumbnail, slowly pushing it in further. Nico cried out, writhing in pain. Dominic took the second needle from his mouth and repeated the process with the nail of Nico’s index finger.

I smiled a little inside, handing Dominic another needle.

He teased it to the tip of Nico’s middle finger. “Who’s your boss?”

We were met with silence.

Dominic began pushing the needle under that nail, eliciting a pained screech from Nico, whose breaths were fast and uneven. Fresh sweat started beading along his forehead.

“Who’s. Your. Boss?”

“Fuck you.”

I handed Dominic more needles as he finished up with Nico's hand. He stepped over to Nico's right, playing with the remaining needle between his fingers.

"Just give me a name, Nasuti, and I'll stop all of it." He lifted his head, staring at Nico. "It's that simple."

"Fuck. You."

Dominic's disheartened sigh spoke for all of us. Grabbing Nico's pinky, he pierced Nico's flesh with a needle and pushed it beneath that nail bed, completing the look on the rest of that hands' fingers. Blood trickled out of each finger, dripping onto the chair's wood, soaking into it. Taking a few steps backward, Dominic towered over Nico, expressing his approval of his work.

"It'll take a lot more than that, asshole," Nico muttered.

"I know," Dominic calmly responded and then sucker-punched Nico in the face. His head flopped backward like a person experiencing extreme whiplash. Dominic punched him again in the face.

His ribs.

Stomach.

Nico choked as he coughed and fought for air, bruises slowly beginning to pop up on his face first.

"You should've taken the easy way," Dominic taunted, taking out and lighting a new cigarette, but instead of enjoying it, he burned it into Nico's flesh just under his left eye.

I brought my hand to my nose, not a fan of the scent.

Through Mr. Nasuti's anguished groans, Dominic continued to burn him in various places. Cheek. Throat. Inside

of his elbows. Two of his fingernails, his nipples, and on his penis. That last spot forced a howl out of Nico.

Dino's sly chuckle was perfect timing. We had the bastard in front of us; we just prayed he would talk. Throw us a bone. We all knew Nico wouldn't leave the chamber alive. It was even clearer that whoever called the shots didn't give a fuck about Nico's fate; otherwise, they would've already landed on our doorstep or gone after Dominic and his men before anyone left New York.

I thought about Anthony and Angelo, out there making sure any loose ends in New York were indeed tied. I thought about the others that were still there alongside our brothers, watching Nico's wife and sister, waiting on any sort of command. Everyone would be home by dinner, but still... I hoped they stayed safe. Who knew the eyes watching them.

Lifting his chin at Dino, Dominic's solidarity nod spoke of a silent mutual consensus between them. Then, Dino casually walked over to Nico and landed a brutal undercut beneath his rib cage, literally knocking the air from his lungs. Dino threw four more undercuts in that spot, springing backward on his heels with his fists up, shuffling his feet like he was a boxer in the ring.

"You 'gon feel the pain, motherfucker," Dino declared before punching Nico's right eye.

As Dino beat up Nico, I wandered over to where Dominic was at the nearest tool table. He had a long, black, slender object in his hand. It reminded me of a baton, just without the attached piece at the top.

"What is that?"

He mulled it over. “A taser.” I just eyed it when he held it out to me, and when I looked back up at him, he was already staring. “Just push the button.”

“Me?” I asked, not expecting the opportunity. Dominic inched the taser closer to me. I looked back up and over at him, behind me at a slumped Nico, and back at the taser.

I could do this. Giving Dominic my empty bag of blood, I took the baton-like weapon from him and started walking towards Nico. I was surprised by how light it felt.

“Oh, shit,” Dino quipped. “Start talkin’, man, cause that fucker right there,” Dino pointed at the taser, “fuckin’ hurts.”

Nico sat slumped forward, exhausted. Weakened. No doubt feeling emasculated.

I wanted to hurt him.

Bad.

I wanted to brutalize him—make him feel the same panic and fear I did when I was being shot at. When I thought we were going to die. My son stirred in my belly, making me remember how scared I was that something would happen to him.

My mood changed. My aura. I wasn’t apprehensive. Not anymore. As my smirk snuck across my lips, I adjusted my hold on the taser and rested my thumb on the button. With my shoulders back, head held high, I moved toward Nico, holding out the taser.

“Hey,” I said.

Nico grunted, barely lifting his head. I pushed the button. The taser gave off a buzzing sound, which got Nico’s attention.

I jabbed the head of the taser into the deeply bruised spot under his ribs and pressed its button.

Immediately, he stiffened and sat up straighter, his whole body rigid as he absorbed every ounce of the voltage coursing through him. He couldn't speak, only grit his teeth in agony. Drool spilled from between his teeth, dribbling off his lips and past his chin.

“Lilith.”

Ignoring Dominic for a handful more seconds, I reluctantly lifted my finger off the button and stepped back. Nico slumped forward, hanging his head, his breathing slowing and evening out.

“Who’s callin’ the shots?” Dino asked. “You ain’t doing anyone any favors. You’re not going out a martyr, and I’d bet your sister and your wife would smack you into fucking submission if they knew just how much you hold their lives in your fuckin’ hands.”

Lifting his head, Nico snapped at Dino, baring his teeth as he shouted, “I don’t care! Do it; kill them. Whether it’s you assholes or him that kills them, they don’t got much longer!”

“Him?” Dominic pondered out loud, cutting through the moment of silence. “Now we’re finally getting somewhere.” He placed his hand on the small of my back. I turned around, staring into his eyes that told me he’d had enough and was running out of patience. “Sit down and relax. You did good.”

I smiled softly, nodding. I handed him the taser and let Dino help me over to the recliner, making sure I was comfortable after helping me take a seat.

“A name, Nasuti,” Dominic pressed, fed-up, holding the taser like he was ready to put Nico through another round.

Head tipped back, exhaling a drawn-out, defeated breath, Nico said, “What’s the point?”

As the voltage ripped through him again, he arched off the chair, curling his toes.

I couldn’t begin to imagine how painful it was to be electrocuted.

Good.

“How many volts?” I asked Dino just as Dominic laid off round two.

“Nine mil,” he answered.

I widened my eyes. Nine million!? Holy fuck.

“I refer to ‘em as the industrial version of tasers. Way more fun and way more damage,” Dino explained, almost as if he were gloating.

Dino was correct... That *was* fun.

“I can do this all day, Nasuti,” Dominic said. When he pushed the button on the taser, Nico flinched at the hum of electricity.

“Fuck—”

Nico made a noise of fear as Dominic thrust the taser forward like he was about to tango with it for round three.

“Alright! Alright,” Nico said, caving. “Jesus fucking Christ... I’ll fucking give you a goddamn name. Alright!?”

I flinched when he was unexpectedly tazed again. It lasted a few seconds. I gave Dominic a what-the-hell look, but he didn’t notice. Taser still in his hand, he stood with both hands behind him in wait.

“What was that for?” I asked him.

Without taking his eyes off his target, Dominic said, “Just had to be sure.”

“Don’t fucking shock me again, and I’ll fucking tell you.”

The damage was taking its toll on Nico. I wanted him to endure more. After the names, after the details... I wanted him to suffer until his final breath.

“His name, Nasuti,” Dominic bellowed, at the end of his own rope.

“Dante... Dante Vitis.”

The name didn’t ring any bells with me.

“Why is that name so fucking familiar?” Dino pondered.

“Because he worked with us.”

I swallowed, my throat tighter. *How many of them made it out of that slaughter alive? Surely not that many, right?*

“How many of his men are still alive?” I thought out loud.

“A few of us,” Nico divulged.

“How many?” Dino asked.

“Just us and Frankie Belfi... And Brendon Marks.”

“Who pulls the strings?” Dominic dug.

Nico slowly lifted his head, glaring at his captor as best as he could. “What?”

“The puppeteer. Who is it?”

“I just fucking told you!”

“Dante’s slow, and the others were too low in Vincent’s chain to carry any real power. None of them, not even you, could arrange and execute a formidable plan that clean. You’re

all pawns, otherwise you'd still be ghosts. So, I'll ask you again—who. Is. It?"

"I'd rather be dead," Nico scoffed.

Rolling his eyes, Dominic prodded Nico's stomach with the head of the taser and put him through his longest round so far. Nico's face reddened. His body clenched as he made tight, strained sounds. The moment it stopped, he gasped, his chest heaving as if life was blown back into his bruised and battered body.

"Son of a bitch," Nico breathed as he stabilized himself.

"You're in too deep," Dominic reminded him. "Even if I *did* let you go, your grave's already dug. Whether it's one of us or your boss, it's over. Do the right thing, Nasuti. Save your family."

Scoffing, Nico said, "You can't save them. No one fucking can." He looked down at himself. "He'll find them. He finds everyone."

A tense silence hung in the air for far too long for my comfort.

"His name is Vladislav... Vladislav Aleski. He controls all of Russia with an iron fist."

My stomach dropped. My heart raced. I got out of the chair as fast as I could in a panic, standing close to Dominic. Loosely hugging myself, I shakily asked Nico, "What does he want?"

Turning his head toward me as he talked, Nico explained, "Your savior over there took out one of Vladislav's biggest suppliers of young girls—cost him close to a billion. With that much of a hole in his profits... Yeah, he's pissed."

It couldn't be. Oh, my God, it couldn't be. How did we not see it? Dominic was wrong; Vladislav wasn't done with us just because he killed Hector. No, he wanted more. More blood on his hands. Our blood.

“We all got hits?” Dino wondered. Nico nodded. “How much?”

“Twenty million... Each.”

This couldn't be happening. Fuck. My palms moistened with sweat.

The rest of us looked at each other. We knew this mess was too big for just us to clean. *Could the other families help us? Would they be enough?* I paced, my throat parched.

“Call it off,” I blurted out of panic.

Nico's cheshire grin made my blood run colder.

“I can't.” He looked at Dominic. “*You're* the ones that seem to be in too deep.”

“Who can?” Dominic asked. When Nico stayed silent, Dominic backhanded him hard enough, I was surprised it didn't break his neck. “Who!?”

Spitting out blood, Nico said, “Sweet talk Dante for that because I don't fucking know.”

Dino threw his hands in the air, walking away aimlessly. “Great.” His arms flopped back down at his sides. “Another fucking goose chase.”

“He can't be far, Santiago.” Dominic pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling hard.

“Why don't you talk to Luigi,” Nico suggested, his smirk returning.

We all froze, rooted where we stood.

Luigi... Our Luigi?

"Excuse me?" Dominic questioned as if trying to grasp what we all clearly heard. "Luigi Filippo?"

Nico Nasuti's silence was our answer.

"What about him," I demanded as a statement rather than a question, clenching my jaw and flexing my fingers into tight fists at my sides. I approached Nico, ready to go off. Memories of my threatening incidents replayed while I thought about the shootout. Nico had goons he paid to scare me and put everyone on edge. They tried—and failed—to throw our family completely off course.

"You wanna reach Dante, don't you?"

"But why would I talk to Luigi..." Dominic said. His thoughts trailed off, coming to a grim realization.

"Those strange men," I said, turning and facing Dominic, beating him to it. "That attack... It wasn't a coincidence. They knew where I would be. When. Someone had to tell these guys. Someone who knew our schedules." Thinking back to the days of the incidents, Luigi worked every single one. That still didn't exactly explain the other missing puzzle piece. "But how would *he* know? He's a housekeeper—well, our chef, too, but... I mean, it's cliché that a maid knows all, but—"

"There's someone else," Dino interrupted, talking his thought out loud.

"Don't ask me," Nico interjected, cutting us all off at the pass. "I only know what they want me to know."

Dominic swiftly fished out his gun from inside his jacket, aimed it at Nico, and then shot him execution style. The

silencer lessened the noise, and the padding on the back wall absorbed the bullet.

Blood streamed from the hole burned through Nico Nasuti's head.

"There's another mole," Dominic said as he lowered his arm, holding his gun at his side. As he talked, he looked back and forth between me and Dino. The rage in his eyes as they turned red spoke volumes to his hurt and betrayal and how badly he likely wanted to tear Luigi apart. "Someone else who has ties to Vladislav and wants to bring us down."

Emotional over our new, greater threat, I swallowed away tears that wanted to spill out, hurriedly wiping away the little bit that did escape.

"How do we find him?"

Our eyes locked. "We start with Filippo." He turned toward Dino. "And call Angelo." Dominic walked away. "Tell him he's in charge of disposing the bodies."

chapter TWENTY-SIX

WE STORMED out of the basement and headed upstairs, furiously stalking through the foyer and into the kitchen, where Luigi was.

Thankfully, Bianca and Katrina were ushered outside per Dominic's order before we got upstairs. They didn't need to witness what we were about to do to the traitor.

The staff on shift, including our new man of the hour, turned to look at us and stood in suspense. It was easy to tell something was wrong by the anger bleeding through our pores and the tension riding our shoulders.

"Get out," Dominic gritted, low and dangerous. The staff scattered like bugs exposed to bright light, including Luigi. Pointing at Luigi, Dominic bellowed, "Not you!"

Maneuvering through everyone, I hurried to keep up with Dino and Dominic. One second, they were next to me, and in a flash, there was Dino grabbing Luigi from behind by the collar of his jacket.

I couldn't help but cringe when Dino slammed Luigi's face onto the counter. Blood poured from his shattered nose as Dino glared straight into his eyes.

“Piece of shit!” He slammed Luigi’s face onto the counter once again before jerking him back to his feet. Wobbly and disoriented, Luigi failed to get a grip on Dino’s wrist, let alone fight him off. “You think we wouldn’t find out, huh!?”

The anxiety of it all made my stomach start to ache. Honestly, while I wasn’t as surprised as I expected since learning that Luigi was working for the enemy, I was taken aback that it had gone undetected for as long as it had.

What drove him to betray us? Was it a dislike for Dominic? Me? No, that wouldn’t make sense. I didn’t trust him from the start. Aside from a mysterious general dislike for me, I didn’t sense any deep-seated hatred. Was it due to Hector trusting me so quickly and, in turn, incorporating me into his inner circle? Did he want a say? Or was Luigi mad that Dominic took over as don? That in itself would’ve come as a complete surprise because it was so damn obvious who was next in line. If he felt any type of way, he should’ve aired his grievances to Hector before he died, not turn on his family, the ones who gave him some kind of sense of belonging. Importance. Was it because he was demoted to one of the chefs? Was it before Hector was killed? Was that the moment Luigi betrayed us? Betrayed his oath to this family?

Just as Dino geared to drive Luigi’s face into the counter for a third time, I blurted out, “Wait!” Dino and Dominic looked at me. Luigi was too fucked up to differentiate his right from his left. “If you kill him now, we’ll be back to square one.”

“Fuck this asshole,” Dino gritted, his eyes burning red.

I walked towards the men, my hand out as I was about to ask Luigi if he even knew his name at this point, but movement to the right caught my eye. Dominic drove a

serrated knife into one of Luigi's kidneys, prompting him to gasp, horror in his features.

"What are you doing!?" I cried out, frustrated with how messy Luigi's interrogation was. Literally. I went ignored.

"You have sixty seconds, Filippo," Dominic alerted, his tone dangerous. "I want to know about your involvement with Nico Nasuti and Dante Vitis. Why? When? And if you know a man by the name of Vladislav Aleski."

Gurgling and choking sounds were all Luigi could make as blood pooled up into his throat and spilled from his mouth. Dominic twisted the knife by a quarter inch, making Luigi groan in agony, his expression pained.

"Talk, Filippo!"

After spitting out blood, Luigi finally made words.

"They needed... Someone on the inside..."

As he began to sag, Dino jerked him back up straight. Another agonizing cry ripped through the kitchen.

"They offered... I... I..."

"Offered what, prick?" Dino questioned.

"Who made the offer?" Dominic asked. "Nasuti?" Luigi nodded. Barely. "What was it?" Dominic continued. "Money? Loyalty? What!?"

"Both." Luigi spit out more blood.

With tears in my eyes from the stress of it all and the turn of events, I asked, "Why, Luigi? Why would you hurt us like this?"

Hearing me upset further angered Dominic and Dino, their eyes nothing but red, their fangs drawn.

Slow to turn his head, Luigi looked at me the best he could in his position. What I saw in his eyes was regret mixed with excruciating pain as the life slowly bled from his eyes. Whether it was genuine or because he was about to die, it cracked a small piece of my heart, nonetheless. *Did he think he had it so bad with us that he had to sign his own death certificate? Why couldn't he have just talked to us?* Now, thanks to him, the family and then some were in danger.

More blood spilled past his chin. "I... Had no... Choice... I—"

Mouth open, he widened his eyes in terror as Dominic pulled out the knife. Blood and bodily fluids leaked onto the floor, flesh and tissue caught on the tiny points of the blade, in its divots.

With an evil smirk curling the corner of Dino's lips, he leaned in toward Luigi, saying, "See you in Hell." He then bashed Luigi's face on the counter until he was unrecognizable and lifeless, throwing Luigi away from him and letting him fall to the floor in a blood-soaked, crumpled heap. Dominic tossed the knife in the sink, his employee's blood on his hand.

Excuse me—former employee.

Staring back and forth between both men in shock and filled with worry, all I could think to say was, "What do we do?"

Dominic walked over to me and pressed his shoulder into mine, that half of his body teasing me. It wasn't at all threatening but attractive. That scared me, and quite frankly, I was scared of myself here.

He killed his own family member without hesitation and in a gnarly way. He was a criminal. An intellectual gangster with

a macabre complex who knew his way around a knife like he did a paintbrush or his Fazioli. And I loved that. I loved *him*— a man that other men respected and who all feared crossing.

“We bathe the streets with their blood.”

chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

HOURS after we cleaned up the messes that were Nico and Luigi, Andre called with information. The surviving DiSanti men took whatever money they had and fled the country, presumably to Russia. We were pretty sure they had joined up with Vladislav and his family in exchange for their protection. Like Nico said, Andre confirmed that Vincent was Vladislav's go-to for underage girls, and that without Vincent's picks, Vladislav had bled him dry of millions. We were at the top of Aleski's hit list, but as of right now, none of them were making any movement. That gave us a leg-up to prepare. Dominic phoned the Baldomeros and the Maccarones, and they were on board with supplying us with everything they could give and protecting their empires alongside us.

Andre also warned us of the now very real threat of another mole. Scouring Luigi's phone records, they showed he was in frequent contact with Dante Vitis, but there was another phone number Luigi frequently had contact with, though we couldn't trace it to anyone due to it being a burner phone. We did determine that whoever this other mole was, they had knowledge of our schedules and routines. That, at least, shortened the list of suspects.

Snugly curled up under the throw blanket, I reclined back in the chair, feeling my son move.

My monster was coming for all those other monsters who dared prey on us. On Dominic. She was coming for the ones who made their pain his pain. Who replaced his safety with chaos. They became our nightmare, so she was going to be theirs alongside the rest.

I was coming for those who threatened my son's safety, too.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked, my voice soft.

“Gotta take it one step at a time,” Angelo said. When he and Anthony walked through the door four hours ago, I hugged them tightly, thankful they were okay and unharmed.

One step at a time; one day at a time. We had every set of eyes and ears on the Aleskis as we could. We couldn't walk around in fear. We couldn't live in fear. That was what they wanted. Power and control. We refused to relent.

“How do we find the other mole?” I wondered.

“We sniff the fucker out, lure him in,” Dino answered, anger and hurt lacing his words. We were all angry and broken-hearted.

“How?”

In the chair across from me, Dominic simply said, “Patience.”

Something I'd never build enough of, but I had to find a way. If we got ahead of ourselves, we'd fuck this up and likely run off our latest traitor. We had to play our cards right. We were still figuring out how big this web truly was. We had the Aleskis to deal with, as well as the birth of my son. As much

as Dominic's advice made sense, it wasn't easy to pull myself away from work and hand them all the reins. I wanted to be part of the investigation and intel, but everyone collectively insisted I should focus instead on the baby and centering myself to a place of peace and preparedness.

We all stared into the flames, letting the silence hang comfortably around us.

"Can I run a baby name by you guys?" I blurted.

"Yeah," Dino said.

"Vincenzo Matteo Rosini."

Their eyes fixated on me through this new, collective silence. I sensed their approval.

Dominic left his chair and walked over to me, placing his palm on my belly and leaning down toward me. I closed my eyes as he kissed my face.

"I like that."

Vincenzo was a name of Italian origin and meant "to conquer." Someone who was victorious. Matteo meant "gift of God."

Our son was definitely a gift to our lives, just as Dominic was a gift to mine. I looked at my belly and smiled. Vincenzo needed me. I wasn't going to fail him in my fight for this family, nor the fight to safely bring him into this world.

One foot forward. One day at a time.

chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

Sunday, March 12, 2017

HAVING MY FAMILY HOME, all together in celebration of this new life soon to come into the world, was truly a blessing.

They threw me an incredible baby shower. There were two cakes—one just for me and a larger for everyone else that came from our local bakery. The main cake was chocolate with baby blue frosting and had a tiny pair of white and baby blue colored shoes on top. Dominic allowed Bianca to head the party planning, and I thanked her for such a wonderful job.

She'd kept the party small with only me, Dominic, my brothers, and Katrina as guests. I made sure she understood how appreciative I was.

The food the guys cooked and prepared for the party was too much. Literally. We handed out leftovers to the staff and their families. It all gave way to a good nap when everything was said and done.

I finished applying my liquid foundation and switched to my powdered one, beginning to blend that onto my skin. And then, I added a touch of blush afterwards.

Staring at myself in the bathroom mirror, I wondered what Dominic was up to. As the baby shower wound down, he told me he had his own surprise for me that he wanted to personally hand deliver. He instructed me to meet him in the foyer in what was now ten minutes and to dress all fancy like we were going to some expensive and inclusive restaurant. With my makeup mostly put away, I picked up my tube of red lipstick, took off its cap, and contemplated wearing this color. I never could really pull off red lipstick, but it went with my dress.

I chose my maroon, contrast mesh V-neck with rouching at the waist. Reaching mid-thigh, it hugged and flattered me, the breathable fabric a plus. I was grateful for my ability to zip it up myself because I wanted this outfit to be *his* surprise.

I twisted the Flamenco red-labeled lipstick out of its tube and applied a light coating on my bottom lip to see if I liked it, quickly deciding on it. Rubbing my lips together, I dabbed tissue on them to blot away excess lipstick.

With my wet hair left to air dry, I fixed it again, threading my fingers through it and making sure it settled just right as I smiled seductively, like a woman up to mischief, but in reality, I was pleased with the hot, sexy mama staring back at me.

“Let’s do this,” I said to myself, my lips making a popping sound after once more rubbing them together. I turned off the bathroom light and headed out of our bedroom.

Catching sight of Vincenzo’s bedroom, I smiled at the handmade name plate hanging on the door. Dominic took the time to source its designer. On the letter V, a king’s crown dangled like it was hanging off its left side tip.

In his room were all his gifts—clothes, toys, furniture and a cherry wood toy box, along with some baby books and

necessities like bath time accessories and diapers. Oh, the mountain of diapers. And wipes. My brothers pitched in and put together a gift basket full of toys for Vincenzo. Bianca was working on a baby quilt, but I wasn't allowed to see it until it was finished.

Vincenzo moved and wriggled around, aggravating my already aching back, hips, and pelvis. I glanced down at my belly and rubbed my hand over it, telling him, "I love you kid, but you're killing me today." He kicked in response. I laughed as I walked the rest of the hall.

Entering the threshold of the foyer, I gasped.

So many red rose petals were on the floor, scattered far and wide, but it wasn't too overwhelming. The lighting centered around the foyer, dimming the further out it shone. "Oh, my God," I whispered, my hands fluttering up to my lips in a prayer-like gesture.

Moonlight Sonata played through our speakers. I walked around in awe, hanging out by the left staircase when I noticed Dominic stepping into the foyer. He took my breath away in his blood red suit with thin, black pinstripes, his hair slicked back. Holding a rose, he slowly took me in from head to toe, his heated gaze sweeping over my body like a caress.

"Wow," he marveled seductively. My heart raced in anticipation as he walked toward me. The comforting scent of his cologne and click-clacking of his shoes tamed my butterflies. "You're simply beautiful, *amore mia*."

"So are you," I admired, then cautiously asked, "What did I do?" I raised my brow.

Chuckling, Dominic handed me the rose. "Nothing. Happy birthday, *Bellissima*." I held the rose, trimmed of its thorns,

close to me as sweet nothings were whispered in my ear, all of it in Italian.

I turned my head toward him. “Where did you send everyone?”

He planted feather-light kisses under my ear. “Hotels.” His kisses trailed to my jaw.

“They’re safe?”

“Sonny reports back to me every hour.” His mouth found mine. “My men are watching them.” He kissed me, taking his time, spreading his palm over the side of my face. “We can’t live in fear.” He kissed me again, long and passionate.

“Is *anyone* here?” I wondered, tearing myself from a mouth so sweet.

“Scioli, the guards, and my crew downstairs.”

Surveillance—they never left, only rotated shifts.

“Can you do that more often? Kick everyone out?”

Dominic positioned one hand on my back and his other on my belly, startling me when he dipped me. He assured he’d never drop me after I grabbed his arm instinctively, holding on tight. Leaning down closer, his breath tickled my face. His sensual blue eyes gazed into mine.

“Just say the word.”

I softly moaned at the feel of Dominic’s lips against my neck. I let my head fall back, slightly turning it to welcome him licking and suckling my skin.

“You make me so happy,” I moaned.

In what I liked to call Dominic’s love bites, he gently grazed my throat with his teeth, gently taking my skin between

his teeth. The pressure wasn't enough to hurt me—only enough to send a wave of tingly pleasure all the way down to my toes. He pulled back and stared into my eyes, his gaze unwavering as he slowly guided me upright, sliding his hand up to the back of my head. His stare had me in a chokehold, his eyes burning with a need and desire I was all too familiar with, but there was something else. A certain focus. Maybe even a hint of the butterflies.

He touched the side of my face, pushing his thumb against the corner of my lips before dragging it down my bottom one, very briefly touching his forehead to mine before teasing my mouth, grazing my lip between his teeth, then slowly letting it go. Startling me again, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and slammed his mouth to mine for a powerful, possessive kiss. My hands latched onto his arms before I slid them up to his shoulders for better balance.

I didn't know what came over him at that moment, but wow! Panting, I pressed my palms to his chest.

“Are you okay? You seem a bit on edge.”

“Always observant.” He winked, a hint of a shaky smile on the corner of his lips.

I pressed my palm to his face, his clammy skin confirming my suspicion. “I have to be,” I winked, too, “especially when a brave, brutal man such as yourself looks like one of those boys in high school trying to get the courage to ask out his crush.” I took a step back, my brows furrowing. “What's going on with you?”

Was I getting bad news? Was he buttering me up before a big disappointment? Were the roses and his best, breathtaking suit just to soften the blow?

He, too, stepped backward, blowing out a breath, staring at me for a beat. Fiddling with his cufflinks, clearly distressed about something, he told me to turn around or close my eyes. Just not to look at him. Eyeing him suspiciously, I cocked my brow, closing my eyes shortly after.

“Is it anyone in the family?”

“Huh?” he questioned, puzzled.

“The bad news you’re about to throw at me—no one’s hurt, are they?”

Although his lighthearted chuckle brought me a sense of ease and calm, I was still royally confused.

“No, no,” Dominic assured. “Nothing like that, I promise. Just don’t look until I tell you to.”

He walked up to me, taking another deeper, steadier breath. His cool hands took hold of mine. His scent... I could smell the adrenaline rush. I could almost feel his racing heart. *What the fuck was going on?*

“I have something I want to say.”

He made a noise of disapproval when I opened my eyes and then touched my eyelids after I closed them, like he was holding them closed.

“No.” That word was soft-spoken. Controlled. Meek. After two beats, he created a thin distance between us, saying, “*Voglio passare la mia vita con te, Lilith Marie Wardman. La domanda è: vuoi passare il resto dei tuoi soldi con i miei?*”

Whenever Dominic spoke in Italian, it did something to me. Something that made me want to remove his clothes and make sweet love all night long.

“My love is all I got out of that.”

Dominic laughed for a moment before composing himself.

“Lilith, I fell in love with you from the first moment I saw your photograph. The stunning red of your hair. Your soft, brown eyes. Your smile. I loved it all, but my damn soul held me back.”

A tightness wrung in my chest as I thought of the demons he overcame.

“I remember the night I first touched your supple skin. Smelled your strawberry hair and your luscious blood flowing through those veins. I wanted your touch, your flesh against my flesh, and your undying love. And now, I have all those things, and it brings back something I’ve seldom felt—hope.”

I swallowed the urge to sob sappily, hold Dominic in my arms, and rock him while I professed my love yet again.

“When I heard you tell me you loved me, I felt that same hope. I felt something that was taken away from me time and time again. The night we laid together was a night I’ll cherish forever. Telling you that I love you was the greatest challenge of my life. Greater than growing accustomed to this life and to this world... And now, impending fatherhood.

“When you told me you were carrying my child, it made things between us all that more real, and it scared me. I acted foolishly and went into that dark place in my mind to rethink who I was as a man and reexamine my priorities. Now, as I watch our unborn blossom and thrive inside of you, I couldn’t be prouder.”

My heart skipped a beat. I heard and sensed him moving.
What was he doing?

“I want to spend my life with you, Lilith Marie Wardman.”

Those words... The volume of Dominic's voice lowered. Oh, my God, was he... Oh. My. God.

“Open your eyes.”

I gasped, tears rushing to my eyes, my chest tighter as I clasped my hands over my mouth in a prayer position. Dominic was resting on one knee, a small box in his hands. In that little black box, an enormous diamond sparkled on the silver band it was set on.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” I rapidly nodded, my tears running down my face. “Yes, oh, my God, yes, I'll marry you.” I grabbed a chuckling Dominic by his lapels the second he stood tall, passionately kissing him. “Fuck yes, I'll marry you,” I breathed.

He laughed against my mouth. I smiled, gushing over Dominic Matteo Rosini all over again. His step back broke our kiss, and I looked at his hands as he pulled out a silver chain from inside his jacket. As he put my ring on the chain, he said, “For now, I want you to wear this around your neck.” He told me to turn around and then swept my hair over my shoulder. I held it as he put on the necklace. He must've remembered how my hands tended to swell lately. That small sentiment made me smile.

I let go of my hair and looked down at my ring, placing my palm over it and holding his hand with my other as he brought me into his arms, wrapping them around me. It was a whole new embrace, one that showed me how far he had come and reminded me why I was so damn proud of him. I was glad we fought for what we wanted. For each other.

I sniffed, tilting my head back to lean against his shoulder, bringing my face to the bend of his neck. “This feels like a

dream I never want to wake up from.”

“This isn’t a dream. I never planned on falling in love, but from the moment I found you—”

“*Found?*” I smirked, unable to help myself.

“...Good one.”

We laughed, gently swaying to our own beat. I continued to lose myself in the tranquility of it all.

This night was everything I could’ve dreamt of. One of my biggest wishes came true tonight, and I just wanted to go on the roof and shout my love for Dominic and my happiness to the residents of all of New Jersey.

“I’ll stand by you,” I sang the lyric to the song by The Pretenders, one of my favorites.

“I’ll stand by you,” Dominic sang.

I snuggled tighter against his body. “Won’t let nobody hurt you.”

We sang the chorus one more time before just standing still and taking in this picture-perfect moment.

“Are you hungry?”

Well... That was quite a broad question these days.

“I mean...” I let my words trail off, amused at myself for dipping my mind into the gutter.

When his breath fanned against the skin of my neck, tingles erupted. His next words had me clenching my thighs.

“My queen is such a naughty, naughty girl.”

“What do you expect?” I sassed, a taste of sarcasm on my tongue.

He grazed my earlobe between his teeth, sliding his hand up along my body, slipping his fingers inside the dress at my breast. “I’m taking you out to eat, and then, I’m bringing you back home to fuck you senseless.”

I arched into him, pressing my ass against his noticeably hard cock. “Will I be able to walk after this senseless fucking?”

Squeezing my breast, he purred, “Not if I can help it.”

MRS. LILITH ROSINI.

Had a nice ring to it.

Speaking of rings, I couldn’t get enough of mine. I did ask him if my hands swelling was why he wanted me to wear it this way, and he confirmed my assumption. I was quickly growing used to wearing it on this chain.

“Where are we going again?” I asked, enjoying the scenery along the interstate.

“Rossanos.”

“Do they have steak?”

Amused, Dominic nodded. Good; I was craving a bloody steak.

I looked out of my window, everything feeling surreal. I was getting married to my best friend, the man I loved and who I’d take bullets for. The man who just needed to be listened to and given a chance. The man who saw my faults and my history and refused to throw me away like everyone else had prior to him. Like how some threw him away.

I thanked God every day for granting me a second chance, a way out of the hell I lived. I thanked *Him* for connecting me with my new family, and now, I thanked *Him* for blessing me with my own little family.

Our convoy of security kept up with us.

“They won’t come into the restaurant with us, will they?” I knew the answer, but with the latest going on, I wasn’t sure if Dominic adjusted the rules.

“No. They’ll surround the place and wait. If it wasn’t safe, we would’ve eaten in tonight.”

Dominic must’ve been just as nervous as I was. There was an enemy out there we couldn’t see that could pop up at any moment like in that game of Whack-A-Mole. Another of ours was working for Aleksi. It was a betrayal unimaginable, and their suffering when we caught them would be astronomical.

Making a noise of discomfort, I adjusted in my seat, hand on my belly.

“Is everything alright?”

Nodding, I said, “It’s that damn ligament pain again that Julie explained to us.”

What I neglected to tell him because he didn’t need the unnecessary panic was what I felt this morning in the shower. It was separate from my ligament pain. It was the same tightening of my belly that I experienced previously occasionally. It lasted less than a minute, but this time, I felt a strange pulling sensation reaching into the sides of my belly, almost like something was tugging those ligaments.

I felt around my belly. Beneath my belly button was hard, that hardness spreading downward.

“Are you sure?” he suspiciously asked. He reached over and put his hand on my belly, pushing on it. I felt my body relaxing at his touch, the tightness easing. “Should I turn around?”

Shaking my head, I turned to see his worry and concern. Smiling, I put my hand on his and gently squeezed.

“Don’t let me spoil our plans please.”

He focused back on the road. Just as I was about to do the same, my belly tightened again, stronger and catching me off guard. I clutched my belly with both hands.

“Ow,” I groaned, wincing. Vincenzo stirred, not helping matters.

Taking his hand away, Dominic muttered, “Like hell you’re fine,” and then warned me to hang on as he hit the brakes and sharply turned, cutting through traffic in an illegal U-turn. I held onto my belly and the short handle above my door, groaning louder at the pain rippling through my lower back, hips, and groin.

Horns blared and F-bombs were thrown around left and right, including some middle fingers.

I took short, slow breaths through the pain.

Dominic immediately dialed someone on the car phone as soon as he forced his way back into traffic.

“Get on the phone with Julie and tell the staff to get everything ready... I don’t know. Just fucking do as I say!” He roughly hung up the phone, pressing his foot on the gas and weaving through traffic as fast and as safely as he could.

Some fucking celebration this turned out to be.

chapter TWENTY-NINE

DOMINIC HELD MY HAND—JUST as on edge as I was—while we waited for my ultrasound to begin.

We made it back home in ten minutes, each of those minutes dire. *Did I drink enough blood today? Was it labor already? Was Vincenzo in danger?* I recently experienced Braxton Hicks contractions, and I momentarily wondered if those were what was going on, but they weren't this painful. *Did I unknowingly do something wrong?* Dominic never let go of my hand the entire ride, only when he had to when he exited the Escalade.

Dominic moved a few of my stray hairs from my face, his warm, inviting smile what I needed, but his eyes told me he was scared like I was. He couldn't quite hide it.

"It'll be okay," I mouthed to him, but was I trying to reassure him or myself more?

Our OB-GYN on staff—Amy—finished applying the gel to my belly.

Julie couldn't make it here on such short notice. She was at Englewood Health tending to one of her patients who needed her more—an eighty-year-old man who would soon be with the Lord. He didn't want to die alone.

Amy moved the transducer over my belly, redirecting mine and Dominic's focus to the machine. We waited in anticipation to see our son, to know if he was okay. If I was okay.

"You said you're not experiencing pain anymore?"

"Yeah," I answered, nodding.

Deep in her own concentration, the doctor pressed more buttons on the machine, continuing to move the wand around. I searched for signs in her eyes, even in the way she was breathing, for any indication if the results would be good or bad. Nothing. Damn it.

"Well, the good news is I'm not seeing anything alarming. Your baby looks fine, and I'm not finding anything of concern with your uterus. I'm honestly not sure what happened."

I slowly released my breath as I looked at the ceiling. I was relieved to hear Vincenzo was okay but worried maybe it was something we weren't seeing. Like she read my mind, Amy said she would have blood work done as soon as this scan was over.

"Labor?" Dominic asked.

"No," Amy declared with confidence. "It might be stress, or we can check for dehydration. It could even be just because the baby is growing. That's why I want to run a blood sample."

Thinking about Braxton Hicks contractions, I asked if that could be the culprit. I remembered reading online, that, while rare, they might be painful for some women. Carrying a hybrid, I sort of expected that my pregnancy, or elements of it, wouldn't play out as what was printed in all the books.

"That very well could be, too. Actually, now that you mention it, I wouldn't be surprised if that is exactly what's

going on.”

Amy suddenly turned the monitor toward me and Dominic, Vincenzo’s heartbeats playing strong and fast. Our boy was curled up on the right side, unbothered by everything. I cracked a smile, tears burning my eyes. He was comfortable. He was okay. He wasn’t in distress. I wanted Vincenzo on my chest and in my arms.

As Amy turned the monitor back around to face her, Dominic brought my hand to his mouth, peppering it with kisses. Lost in my own tunnel vision at the sight of our son and listening to him, I forgot Dominic was beside me. I looked over at him.

“He’s okay.” More happy, relieved tears spilled past my temple. “He’s going to be okay.”

“And so are you, *Bellissima*.” Dominic stood up from the chair he sat on and kissed my forehead, touching the side of my face. He kissed me, holding steady, gazing into my eyes with love and contentment radiating from his eyes.

Amy turned off the machine and put the wand in its holder. She wiped the gel off of my belly, but none of that mattered. All that mattered in this moment was Dominic’s rough palm cradling my cheek and the way his eyes told me the fear that weighed on his heart and mind tonight was gone. The alarm blazing in them on our way here nearly reduced me to tears. Not in the handful of instances where I had been hurt or in danger had I seen panic like tonight.

“I love you, Lilith.”

I placed my palm along the side of his face. “I love you, too.”

“I’m going to go grab what I need to collect some of your blood for the lab, and then, we can go ahead and get that out of the way so you can get some rest. I want to keep you here tonight for observation.”

“Done,” Dominic agreed with Amy, his stare unwavering, challenging me to argue with him on the decision. Our focus was unwavering from each other.

Amy closed the door on her way out of the room.

Vincenzo moved around, becoming restless. I brought my left hand to my belly, palming it, my other hand still clasped in Dominic’s. He wrinkled his brows.

“Is everything alright?” He broke his gaze and looked down toward my belly. He rested his palm on it, and Vincenzo settled.

“Everything is perfect,” I thought out loud, my heart full of happiness.

Lately, our son was gravitating more toward his father’s voice and touch. Their bond was one I was eager to witness.

Dominic looked back into my eyes, keeping his hand on my belly, kissing me.

“I’ll move whatever mountains I have to so you and our unborn are safe.”

“I know.” I smiled.

“I’ll use every resource I have.” He kissed me again. “Pull out every stop I have to.”

Nodding, I repeated, “I know.”

“I don’t want a scare like this to ever happen again.” He touched his forehead to mine, closing his eyes. “Ever.” His

voice shook with the word, coming out at just above a whisper.

I touched his bicep, rubbing it up and down, closing my eyes. I slid my hand up past his shoulder until I found his neck, holding its nape. I matched my breathing with his, refusing to release him until he let go of the anxiety and heartache creeping back into him.

“Your pain,” he said, pausing like he was collecting his thoughts, but he couldn’t. I opened my eyes, seeing fresh tears coating his. A single tear fell past his cheek.

Like he had told me numerous times, my pain was his pain. Well, it went both ways. Him fighting to hold himself together twisted my heart. It weighed on my chest. Wanting to get his mind off tonight’s emergency, I suggested an idea.

“Can you help me with a bath after Amy gets done?”

He nodded. A few more teardrops rolled down his cheeks. I kissed his forehead.

I breathed sympathetically. “I know, Dominic... I know.”

chapter THIRTY

Monday, April 24, 2017

CHOPIN SOUNDED through the hardwired bathroom speakers—my personal request. It helped me think while I relaxed in the warm bath water, wringing my foam body sponge, the crescendos failing to erase my fears and anxieties.

Would I survive? I knew our medical care was the best of the best, but was that enough? Would things go horribly wrong? These uncertainties consuming me were like leeches that wouldn't let go, mulling in an endless, shuffled loop, teeth latched in deep. I had no one to really lean on—at least, no one who could personally relate. I had to figure out how to weather these thoughts and apprehensions alone, and fuck if I knew where to start.

Leaning back in the tub, I held the sponge close to my chest, bringing my left leg toward me as I lowered my other. I stared at the ceiling—in particular, the lighting. Closing my eyes, I released a weighted breath, my hands resting just above my belly.

I thought of my mother, and my throat tightened. Tears threatened the backs of my eyes while I talked to her, choking

back a rush of emotion.

“Why do I have to do this without you, Mom? Huh?” Tears rolled down past my temples. I squeezed more free. “Why the fuck do I have to do this without you?” My words came out more as a raw, throaty whisper, and I lost my hold on myself and cried. In my next breath, I forced the words, “I need you, Mom. I really fucking need you.”

After a few minutes, the bathroom door opened, and I knew it was Dominic before he stepped over the threshold. He gently closed the door and approached the side of the tub that sat toward the center of the room. He tried taking the sponge from my hands, presumably to hold one, but I refused to let go. He then swept his hand up along my forehead, bending down to kiss it. His breath was the warmth I needed.

“What’s wrong?”

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I gasped with my next breath, fighting for that self-control once more, my eyes opening.

“I can’t do this. I... I can’t.” I closed my eyes again, releasing more tears, my next words strained. “My mom...” I let go of the sponge and brought my hands to my face, covering my eyes, shaking under the weight of my sobs. I heard Dominic lower to my level, touching my arm.

“Nothing is going to happen to you or our unborn.” He brought his hand to my belly, staring. “You need to understand and trust that what I have put in place for you for this pregnancy will prove that.” Flattening his palm just under my belly button, he looked at me as he said, “You need to remember what you’re capable of.”

Fresh tears pricked the backs of my eyes. My next breath was strangled. His bare arm brushed against me as he reached into the water to grab the sponge. Still holding my hand, I lowered my leg back into the water at the same time he gingerly brought the sponge to my chest and wrung it, comforting warmth running down.

“Reignite your inner fire, *Bellissima*.” He dunked the sponge in the water and repeated the process, trailing the sponge up and down the length of my belly, submerging it and then retracing it, wringing the water at the center. The bath water cascaded over my belly, the sensation soothing.

Our hands still in one another’s, Dominic leaned over me, his mouth flirting with mine as he brought his right hand to the side of my face, capturing it in his palm. A feathery kiss stroked over my lips and then another before wetting my lips with his one more time.

“You’ll never walk alone.”

He was right, and I was foolish in thinking he wouldn’t be at my side. That he wouldn’t offer me his strength to lean on and take from when I struggled to maintain the grasp on my own.

Dominic began kissing me, his rhythm delicate. He accepted my tongue, pouring more passion. I squeezed his hand, pulling from his strength as I threw the rest of mine into not crumbling apart. My breathing steadied. My anxiety settled some. I relaxed into his palm, sliding my other hand up along his side and bringing it past his neck and down past his shoulder blades. I spread my fingers, lifting and pressing my breasts against his naked chest in need. A breathy moan snuck out.

“What do you want?” His voice was deep and smooth like silk, his words humming against my mouth.

My nipples hardened.

“You,” I murmured, and then, Dominic stopped kissing me and pulled away. I released his hand.

He stood up and undid his belt, then unzipped and unbuttoned his slacks, and I watched them fall past his thighs to his feet. His cock was rock hard as he kicked his clothes aside and climbed into the tub with me. Dominic turned on the tub jets and straddled himself above me, holding onto the porcelain for support as he lowered himself within reach for another, longer, more passionate kiss. I spread my legs, pressing my pussy up against his pelvis, bucking my hips, thirsty for his cock. I kept my hands at his sides, feeling along his body, making noises of need against his mouth.

“Please.” My plea rode on a moan. I brought my knees up, gliding my thighs up and down his, lowering my right leg into the water but not all the way. I moaned louder as my clit tingled with pleasure, a weak shudder coursing through my body.

Skipping foreplay, Dominic lined his cock at my entrance, and I gasped as he stretched me open, quickly finding his rhythm. Splashes of water threatened to spill out of the tub as he increased his pace. His pelvis rubbed against my clit in all the right ways, bringing on that familiar haze.

We groaned and moaned into each other’s mouths, our breathing becoming labored. I dug my nails into his flesh, evoking a groan from deep within Dominic’s chest. He stopped kissing me and started kissing the side of my neck, paying special attention to where the carotid artery was. Water

splashed over the edge of the tub as I arched at the same time he rode me harder.

The haze intensified. A fuzzy, warm feeling spread through me, akin to wrapping a fleece blanket around me while sitting by a crackling fire in a cozy cabin on a cold, winter night. More water spilled onto the tile floor. I pawed at Dominic's back, raking my nails up and down. Sinking my nails into the back of his neck, I panted, fisting some of his hair, begging him to never stop. He trailed kisses to the spot under my ear, kissing its shell.

"You need to come, don't you," he rasped.

"Yes," I breathed, raking my nails against his scalp. My release was so close, I swore I could almost touch it. "Fuck." I closed my eyes, paradise dangling on a string.

"Then come."

I gasped, the warmth of his breath bringing me to ecstasy as my walls squeezed his cock. After another, harder thrust, he loudly groaned his release, emptying deep inside me. My throbbing pussy milked every drop. Dominic bore some of his weight on me while coming off his high, soon lifting off me.

When I opened my eyes, I found him staring, lust still in his red eyes. I touched his cheek, brushing my thumb on the corner of his bottom lip. Sweat beaded on his brows.

"You always know how to loosen me up."

A smug, playful smirk snaked across his lips.

chapter THIRTY-ONE

Monday, May 15, 2017

I LEFT the women's restroom of Kostas yet again, my frequent trips to take a piss outdoing itself with each passing week. Numerous times, I considered temporarily living in our bathroom. Five more weeks. I felt blessed to be pregnant, but I just had to get through five more weeks. Might as well have been an entire fucking eternity.

I glanced out the window on my way back to our booth, wanting to one day enjoy a meal at a table outside. Kostas had a few four-seater tables in front of their restaurant. Sitting in one of those chairs now would've made my body ache. I dealt with enough aches and pains as it was.

A little girl at a table with her family waved and said hello as I walked by. She couldn't have been older than four or five. I returned a small wave and gave her a smile, nodding in acknowledgement to her mother. I looked forward to family outings with my son. I wanted him to see the world. I wanted him to have opportunities I only dreamed of.

Vincenzo kicked, stealing my attention. I placed my palm over that spot on my belly, smiling to myself.

Anthony's laughter reached my ears. He, Dominic, Angelo, and the man of the hour, Dino, conversed over their meals, laughing and stuffing their faces without a care in the world. Katrina took a bite out of another zucchini fritter off her plate—the actual name of her dish was a tongue twister—while Dominic, sitting next to her, gave me a slow once-over, trailing his eyes up and down, his lip curving just enough to clue me in to the dirty thoughts milling in his mind.

He never tired of my body. Even in my current state. It made me feel good. Wanted and secure.

Helping me into my place at the curved booth, Dominic made sure I was good and comfortable, resting a protective arm along the top of the seat behind me. He took a bite of his serving of a dish called *Pastitsio*, tuning again into the chatter. To anyone, *Pastitsio* looked like traditional lasagna, but instead of lasagna noodles, the dish used tubular noodles. Ground lamb replaced ground beef, and the menu listed additional layers of béchamel sauce and tomato sauce that had hints of cinnamon and nutmeg. The melted, stretchy cheese on top made it perfect.

Mouth full with the first bite of his second gyro, Dino flipped off Anthony—in that special, brotherly way, of course. I chuckled, clueless on what happened as I gathered more of my Greek salad onto my fork, dipping it in the cup of tzatziki sauce I requested on the side.

Vincenzo also enjoyed my dinner, squirming and kicking in the particular way he did whenever I ate something he agreed with.

Dominic angled closer to me, dipping his head to speak in my ear.

“Just say the word, and we can go home.”

Subtly shaking my head, I whispered, “Absolutely not.”

Today was Dino Santiago’s twenty-ninth birthday. He chose this place to celebrate. Like hell was I going to allow my minimal discomfort to spoil the evening. A massage, my body pillow, and if necessary, a warm bath before bed would do the trick.

Dominic kissed my ear. “Okay.” He pulled away, resuming his meal. I put my hand on his thigh, considering myself the luckiest woman in the world for having him as my protector.

Selected crew stood guard outside the restaurant—Dominic’s orders. We sat at the booth down at the other end of the establishment. No windows, only walls. He had a clear enough view to be able to spot anything out of the ordinary, including unwanted guests. With the other mole walking free, chances couldn’t be taken.

Our waiter approached the table.

“Is there anything else I could get for any of you? Refills?”

When I looked up and over at Dominic, he was shaking his head.

“I want more of these,” Katrina said, showing the waiter—who could’ve passed for fresh out of high school—her last zucchini fritter.

“Manners,” Dominic reminded her.

With a toothy smile, she asked, “Please?”

I smiled, amused. Dominic let out a small chuckle, shaking his head.

“Certainly,” the waiter said, then turned on his heel to fill her order.

“Lulu, can I have some?” She eyed my salad. When she passed me her plate, I added enough salad to her plate for a few bites, handing it back as she thanked me. She poured what was left of her ranch dipping sauce on it, chowing down.

“We gotta hit this place again,” Dino said to none of us in particular. He began helping himself to another portion of his gyro “Fucking good food.” He chewed in bliss.

He wasn’t wrong. The food was delicious. The staff was friendly. I once again took a moment to admire the Mediterranean-style furnishings that paired beautifully with the modern color palette of blues, soft creams, and brown wood tones. Patterned tile made up the floor. Artwork hanging on the walls paired with the tourist attraction decor brought it all together.

The waiter returned and gave Katrina a fresh plate of fritters, leaving immediately after. She waved her hand like she was trying to cool it off, blowing on it before Anthony took the plate and began cutting the fritters in half, telling her it would help them cool faster. She drank more of her soda, picking back up on coloring an activity sheet the waiter gave her with our menus.

“Too bad you can’t just up and move this place to Saddle River,” I jokingly suggested.

“They should build one in that plaza at the mall,” Dino added. “Would be a smart investment.”

“Yeah, talk about a missed opportunity,” I agreed, stealing a bite of *Pastitsio* from Dominic’s plate. I playfully smirked when he amusingly lifted his brow.

“Dip your hand in the cookie jar,” Angelo spoke up. “Then, you can make that happen.” He looked over at

Dominic, anticipating his answer.

Staring off past his brothers, Dominic silently mulled over the idea. After a handful of beats, he said, “I could...”

“What about any of the other families?” I wondered aloud.

“Kostas is still within our territory. Stefano and Alessandro have no say.”

“Why can’t you share, Uncle Dominic?”

All our eyes landed on our niece.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Dominic answered her.

“Why?”

He cut another corner off his *Pastitsio* with his fork. “It just doesn’t.”

She huffed, picking up a half of one of her fritters. “Sharing is caring, you know.”

Dino burst out laughing, the rest of us unable to stifle our own. Dominic shook his head again, lips parted as he amusingly smiled.

This was the epitome of happiness. Love. Celebration. Good food and *la mia famiglia*.

Toward the end of our meals, my anxiety crept in for a quick second as wait-staff started singing “Happy Birthday” and making their way to our booth. I instantly relaxed, smiling as Dino pretended to act bashful, stifling a laugh. They put one of their small, one-layer cakes in front of him, a single-lit candle in the middle. The chocolate frosting made me nearly drool. Four staff members stood side by side diagonally to us as they wrapped up the song, speaking the last lyric in Greek.

“*Chrónia mou pollá.*”

They made sure we were all set and then dispersed.

I looked over at Dominic, a sneaking suspicion that he was behind that. The reverence of his expression and in his eyes as he watched his brother thank us was my confirmation.

“Make a wish!” Katrina exclaimed. She laughed when he pretended to shake off his faux nervousness.

In the seconds I watched Dino stare at the candle, a certain kind of emotion flashed across his features. It wasn't quite sadness, but a man who maybe wanted time to slow down.

What he wanted could never be wished for. Time travel wasn't real.

He blinked, effectively pulling himself out of his head, and playfully blew out the candle. We did a mix of clapping and cheering, wishing him more happy birthdays.

If I had a magic wand, I would've granted him every wish he desired. Taken away every tear he shed in secret. I would've pieced together his fragmented heart and sucked the darkness that had a hold on his soul because such silent pain shouldn't afflict any man, much less Dino.

Jessica Santiago would still be alive if I had that magic fucking wand.

“LULU, SIT WITH ME!”

Katrina grew more attached to me as the weeks passed but only felt comfortable calling me her mom when it was just the two of us. *Was she scared any of her uncles would object? Was it even fear at all?* I made it a point to discuss it with her when

I deemed it appropriate. And when I figured out *how* to approach it.

She bounded up into the Escalade, waving at me and Dino from the back seat. Angelo must've said the right thing because she nodded and decided to wait patiently as he finished buckling her in. Anthony hopped in the left seat of the last row, Angelo sitting in the middle row on the right. Dominic walked around the front of his vehicle, our bag of leftovers in hand.

The chocolate cake was devoured. No crumbs.

Our security got in their vehicles, headlights shining as the engines purred to life.

“I’m glad I picked this place,” Dino said. “That’s one of the good things about Jersey—fantastic food on every fucking corner.”

With my arm around his back and his hand on the small of mine, Mr. Santiago and I casually walked to the SUV. It was a beautiful night. Low 60s. Clear skies. I wanted to be sure he was okay after what happened when he made his birthday wish. He was never one to easily bring anyone into his truth, no matter how well he trusted them.

“Vincenzo liked it; I know that.”

“Then, it’s settled; we either up and move this place closer to us, or we make a location in Saddle River happen.”

Smiling to myself, I wondered, “Can you actually do that?”

“Put one in town? Yeah, just gotta write a big enough check.”

“Or take over as owner of the company as Angelo suggested.”

Dominic started the engine of the Escalade, patiently watching his brother and me. Before we left Kostas, I told him I wanted to catch up with Dino. Check on him.

“Dino?”

“Yo.”

Cracking an amused smile, I finally asked him, “Are you okay?”

“Course I am.”

Nope. He did his best to sound convincing, but I heard it—his mask.

“Eh, maybe try that again?”

Dino slowed his steps. “What are you getting at, Lil?”

He stopped walking immediately after I did, slipping his hands in the pockets of his jeans, creasing his brows. It was clear he was desperately scrambling to figure out my angle. With my hands on my lower back for support, I leaned a little more into my right leg, now standing diagonal to him.

“I saw it, Dino.”

His brows furrowed more. “Saw what?”

“You taking off the mask for that split second.”

“Lil—”

“When Katrina asked you to make a wish.”

Relaxing his features, Dino looked toward the ground, lazily kicking it and scraping the toe of his sneakers against

the pavement. He lifted his head first, and then, his eyes lined up with mine.

“What about it?” he snapped.

I knew he didn't intend for those words to have any bite, but it still threw me momentarily off, like a quick, sudden slap. I shifted support to my left leg, clearing my throat a little.

“You don't have to suffer in silence. That's all I wanted to tell you.” A ghost of a smile possessed his lips. I held out my hand for him to hold. “Let's go home.”

chapter THIRTY-TWO

Sunday, May 21, 2017

WHEN THE GENTLE breeze swept past, it was refreshing, even rejuvenating against my exposed skin. It was the perfect day, and the sun was shining at its highest point. As I stood outside on the upstairs balcony, I soaked in its rays. I brought my wine glass to my lips, smiling. On the grounds below, Bianca and Katrina were sitting at our stone fountain. Katrina wanted to play outside and have a picnic, but Dominic was stern in keeping her within the property lines. The ice between Dominic and his mother had finally begun to thaw, so when I suggested she be the one to entertain his niece, he didn't object.

It wasn't as if he had to worry, what with our armed men all around and plenty of cameras.

In the next couple of weeks, Bianca would temporarily move into the mansion so she could be near while we prepared for Vincenzo's arrival. Her stay would also count as a test run of sorts. Dominic gave the green light for Bianca to watch Katrina unsupervised. If all went well, Katrina would get her wish of slumber parties with Bianca.

Vincenzo kicked, happy he was no longer being chased around with the ultrasound wand. My thirty-six-week appointment was this morning, and my fear of childbirth had only gripped me tighter. Not quite crippling but hovering over that line.

Julie told us Vincenzo was eight pounds and was in the ninety-sixth percentile. I was scared, to say the least, at the news, but she followed up by saying she saw nothing wrong and that he was healthy and all was still normal. Since he was this large already, I for sure needed weekly scans to assess whether it would be safe to deliver him naturally or schedule a cesarean.

That kind of surgery concerned me, but if it meant me and my son lived, then so be it.

Lost in my thoughts, I neglected to sense Dominic come up from behind, his touch startling me as he held my upper arms, thinning our gap to kiss my cheek. I leaned into him, immersed in his scent as I drank another sip of blood.

“I take it work is done,” I stated instead of asking. After our shopping trip today, he spent time in his office taking over paperwork from Dino.

Dino and the rest of our brothers helped unload and put away the bags of Vincenzo’s new clothes, toys, and additional stock of necessities like bath items and bottles and diapers. Dominic had a rather... Stressful outing. He hated shopping for anything other than new guns or suits.

Dominic rolled his eyes, stepping away and further into the aisle. I laughed but then just as quickly threw myself into a section of baby booties, fawning.

“Aren’t these cute!?” I grabbed a pair off the wall and dangled them in front of me for Dominic to see. He nodded and then once again paced. I dropped my hand, standing there, intending on tossing the booties and a pair of each of the other designs into the shopping cart. “You know, you could at least pretend to enjoy yourself.” I reached for more pairs, filling up the crook of my elbow.

I looked in time in our shared silence to see Dominic’s wide, toothy smile. I burst out laughing, dropping the booties in the cart. I shook my head, staring at our full cart as I took a few steps down the aisle, sidling up next to Dominic. “If you want, we can pay for this stuff and split. My feet hurt anyway.”

“Thank God,” he muttered, resting his hand on the small of my back as we walked together.

Exiting the aisle, I glanced around to make sure nobody else needed to pass us, inadvertently spotting a section across the way that had lamps, one of them horse-themed. Tears rose into my eyes as I gasped, overcome with grief, remembering how Nadia loved horses. I wasted zero time taking off for that lamp like my life depended on me reaching it before anyone else.

A heavy sigh trailed behind me.

“For now.”

Dominic gently lifted my belly, literally taking the weight off my pelvis. Alleviation rushed me like a wave, and I sighed in contentment.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

Katrina suddenly lost herself in a fit of giggles as Bianca began to tickle her, and I smiled, asking Dominic, “What’s on your agenda for the rest of the day?”

“I don’t know. I guess I could go over our stock again to make absolutely sure we have enough.”

He sounded off, like he was distracted or dreading whatever he had to tackle next.

Leaning forward, I placed the glass of blood on the railing, then angled my arm back to where I was able to capture his face with my fingers. I turned my head to see him staring intently out at the bright sky. I craned my neck, peppering his cheek with kisses.

“You’ve counted and re-counted that damn blood at least a hundred times. What’s wrong? And don’t you dare lie because I’ll smell it.”

A ghost of a smile snuck across his lips.

“It’s just hard to look most of my men in the face the same way after what happened. Trust is vital, and without it, there is no family.”

Luigi backstabbing him was a personal blow. A knife to his heart. Knowing we had another snake in the grass was getting into Dominic’s head more than he wanted to admit.

I turned his head so we could look at each other.

I slipped my hands down along the top of his, gently grazing his skin and knuckles with my nails. The whispering wind caught the hem of my kimono and kissed the bare skin of my chest.

“We’ll figure out who. Please don’t get too far in your head over this.”

“You’re preaching to the goddamn choir,” he said flatly. I let out a breathy ghost of laughter. “We have a traitor. I can’t sit idly by while they traipse in and out of my home.”

Dominic's next words scraped along my jaw as he dipped his head, his voice gruff and strong. "Around what's most precious."

I nuzzled my face along his, momentarily closing my eyes.

"You can't play this any other way but slow."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"All we probably can do is set some kind of trap."

"Lure them."

"Every criminal messes up eventually, don't they?"

Dominic pulled me more into him, his breath fanning the shell of my ear. My knees nearly buckled at the sound of his dark, seductive, soft growl.

"Fine. I'll try your way."

"Remember," I said seriously, "it's a work in progress."

He gave a shorter, throatier growl, then rested his forehead against the side of my head. Tender times such as this felt surreal.

I had always assumed I'd live and die alone. Being engaged and weeks shy of bearing my first child weren't in my bingo cards, but here I was, embracing it and this way of life with open arms, the silver around my finger warming under the sun.

Our son kicked, and I fell again into the weight I carried as Dominic slowly released my belly. I guided Dominic's hand to where Vincenzo's foot was. He kicked once more, square against his daddy's palm.

I fondly gazed at my belly. "I'm counting the minutes."

Dominic moved his other hand up along the side of my belly and toward its center. “Me, too, *Bellissima*.” He kissed my temple, continuing to talk against my skin. “Me, too.”

chapter THIRTY-THREE

Sunday, June 4, 2017

BLINKING, staring anxiously at the ceiling, I suddenly registered Dominic squeezing my hand.

“Lilith?” My name rolled off his tongue just above a whisper.

My incessant cycle of thoughts faded away like a plume of smoke. I rolled my head to find Dominic staring, like he wasn't sure if he should be concerned. I inhaled, looking back at the ceiling as I slowly released my breath.

“I must've zoned out.”

His diminutive chuckle scratched at my nerves. “Daydreaming, are we?”

I fucking wished.

My mind refused to pump the brakes on my intrusive thoughts. *Were we truly ready if Vincenzo came today? What was Dominic going to do? I wasn't ready. What if Dominic passed out during delivery? No, Lilith, that's absurd. He has gutted men and eaten their flesh; surely, he could handle childbirth. But what if I needed him and he wasn't there? Was*

our other mole in the family planning something against me? My son? Oh, God, I was already turning into a horrible soon-to-be wife. Get a grip. But was I overreacting? Did we really have contracts on our heads? Were we strong enough to take on the Aleskeis? Did we have to? What if Dominic missed his son's birth because of all of this?

Julie removed her latex gloves with a snap.

“You haven’t begun to dilate, but your cervix is beginning to soften.” She then helped me move my feet out of the stirrups, leaving the sheet across my lower half.

“That’s good, right?” Dominic asked, apprehensive.

“Yes,” Julie assured. She slid on a new pair of gloves to begin my sonogram. She squeezed the cold gel on my belly. “I also noticed your son’s head has dropped some more since your last visit.”

That only added to my web of thoughts.

“What?” Dominic asked.

Julie moved the wand to different spots on my belly.

“Your son’s head has descended into Lilith’s pelvis.”

“Is he okay?” I wondered aloud, unblinking at the ceiling, my focal point for this appointment.

The silence that followed was fleeting, unintentionally loud in its own right.

“He looks great,” Julie told us in her comforting way.

Overcome with emotion, I swallowed away the feeling in my throat and parted my lips, my gasp soft and silent as tears burned my eyes. I blinked, a teardrop sneaking out.

Dominic squeezed my hand tighter, letting me know without words that he was right here with me on this journey.

Julie finished using the wand. “These next couple of weeks will probably feel like an eternity, but you’re almost there. I promise.”

I squeezed Dominic’s hand as I messily wiped tears off my temples. “Are you sure?” I asked her nervously.

“You have my word.”

Nobody’s word could be trusted lately. It was at that moment that I related to Dominic on another level. The way he explained trust just weeks ago—I got it now.

“Can I hear him?” I asked, breaking the silence.

Julie smiled. “I was just about to get to that.”

As Julie moved the wand around, she flipped a switch on the machine and played Vincenzo’s heartbeat.

“His heart still sounds good and strong.” A few more beats passed. “Feeling anything strange lately? Don’t worry—this is just routine.”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Any bleeding?”

“No.”

“Concerning pain or just anything you have a question about?”

“Just those Braxton contractions and pressure.” I drew in a deep breath before slowly releasing it. “I just want this to be over.”

Julie took off her gloves as Dominic helped me into a sitting position. I leaned into my arms for support.

“Well, as always, if you experience any of what I asked or if you notice anything unusual, don’t hesitate to call me. No matter what. Because the way I look at it, better safe than sorry.” She smiled.

Choosing Ms. Barton as my doctor was the right decision. Her smile alone made everything easier to bear. Just like Dominic’s arms did whenever I was in them.

She entered something into the ultrasound machine. “If neither of you has any questions, then I’ll go ahead and grab your photos.”

“What happens if Vincenzo doesn’t get here on time?”

Julie angled away from the machine. “As we’ve previously discussed, we would try to induce you if you went too far past your due date. A c-section is a last resort.”

After reading about the induction process and some of the stories from mothers in my research, having that done scared me. Would labor and delivery go as normal considering Vincenzo was a hybrid? I had to figure out a way to jump start labor naturally.

Looking down at myself, I let out a defeated breath. “Okay.” I was frustrated that the control I wanted for my birth might be taken from me. I was tired of that lack of control.

“A minute?” Dominic asked of Julie, although she didn’t have a choice.

“Sure,” she said, her footsteps fading until she closed the door.

Dominic placed his hand on my shoulder. “Talk.”

He wasn’t upset or annoyed. He wanted to listen. To solve my problems. Erase my worries, fears, and anxieties.

Helping me up the rest of the way to where I sat along the side of the hospital bed, I lifted my head, finding Dominic's eyes. Tears pricked the backs of my eyes. Opening my mouth to speak, I looked at his hands, taking one of them in both of mine. He inched closer, adjusting my tank top back over my belly.

I stared down at our joined hands, trying to figure out how to word my concerns and what I was feeling. "I'm just so sick of it all, Dominic." My voice was hushed, emotional exhaustion thickening my words. "I'm sick of being scared. Everything hurts, and I can't sleep anymore." A tear fell when Dominic swept strands of hair behind my ear. "I'm scared—"

Julie opened the door, but she ended up placing the ultrasound pictures in their usual envelope on the nearest safe enough spot and gingerly hurried back out of the room. Bless her.

Dominic slipped his fingers under my chin, our eyes meeting once more. "Go on, *amore*."

I smiled weakly, but it left as fast as I found the energy.

"I'm scared of the Russians, too."

He cupped my cheek, leaning down close enough to feel his breath. "I told you we have everything under control." Our faces brushed against another.

"What if they want to hurt our son?"

Dominic murmured, "Then, they'll regret the day they swam from their fathers' sacks."

I nuzzled my nose against him, savoring his scent and closing my eyes.

“Now,” he went on, “let’s get you into a warm bubble bath.”

“I love you.”

“And I you, *regina mia*.”

He slid his arms beneath me before lifting me against his chest, cradling me like I was something precious.

REGARDLESS OF MY anxiety about the impending birth, Vincenzo’s bedroom brought me peace. Calm. Whenever I walked around in here, admiring the decor all over again each time, it temporarily locked away the somberness of needing my mother and Nadia. There were moments I silently shed a tear. Lying in bed at night. In the bathroom. Becoming a mother was a major plot twist in my life that I needed my mother and mother figures for. Without them, I was lost and unprepared.

Sure, I had Bianca to lean on, but her words of encouragement and advice weren’t doing it. There was a hole in my heart that she never could fill.

I envisioned my mom and Nadia freaking out together about being grandmothers. I imagined Nadia gushing about how proud she was, especially of her son. It made me laugh and then immediately stabbed me in the heart and twisted on its way out.

I fought off tears before they gained momentum, finding myself at my baby boy’s wooden crib.

Its simple coat of white contrasted perfectly with the pale blue walls and dark blue molding.

Was I ready for the sleepless nights? Was Dominic?
Staring into the crib made things so much more real. Soon, he would be looking up at me from inside it, no longer kicking and moving inside me. I swept the maroon chiffon fabric of my open split maternity gown off my belly and felt around my lower abdomen, sweeping my hand up along the middle.

“I’m tired of carrying you, little big dude,” I said with a smile. “I can’t wait to hold you.”

On the wall his crib stood against, a rustic, gold king crown was mounted above, fine mesh secured up inside that draped over the top of the crib. A capital V in a decorative font was placed just below the crown.

Vincenzo was indeed in line to be king of his father’s empire. We wanted him to live a life without worry, fear, and having to constantly peer over his shoulder for threats, but we knew that was impossible. We at least had confidence security would keep him safe in our absence. I just wished he could live freely. We all did.

“So... You gonna tell me why you look like you’re fixing to cry into that quilt?”

I’d been so lost in my thoughts, I hadn’t even noticed Dino standing in the doorway, leaning against its frame with his arms crossed.

Briefly closing my eyes, I swallowed away another round of tears, his expression in itself telling me not to bother trying to lie. He’d see through it.

“Will we ever be free?”

Dino waited a beat before he asked, “What?”

I opened my eyes and skimmed my fingers over Vincenzo’s baby quilt his grandmother made, the blue hues

soft against my fingertips. Her time, energy, and love that went into quilting this brought me to tears the day she showed it off.

“Free to live. Free from fear.” I touched the top corner of the chair.

“You can’t spend your entire life living in fear, Lil.”

Tucking my hands along my lower back, I walked away from the crib and headed for my rocking chair off in the corner. It was my idea to save a space above it for a framed collage that I wanted to fill with Vincenzo’s first photograph, his footprints, and either pictures of me and Dominic, or maybe also a pregnancy photograph.

“Bullshit. We’ll always look over our shoulders for the rest of our lives.” I placed my palm on my belly. “How is that fair? My son deserves a life where he can live and play in peace.” Choking up, I shook my head at my lousy attempt at shaking off this recurring guilt. Looking down at my belly, I drew in a shaky breath. “I know Vincenzo will never have a normal life, so why can’t I shake this?”

“Because mothers always fucking worry.”

My humorous smile broke through. Positive that I curtailed any and all urges to cry, I turned around and looked at Dino, both my hands again supporting my lower back.

“I’m scared that any one of you won’t come back when you leave on your trips.”

“This is about the Russians, ain’t it? Dom told me about the chokehold they’ve got on you.”

Refusing to let myself get lost in *that* sea of emotions, I looked away from Dino, focusing on my feet.

“As far as those fuckin’ contracts go, don’t stress; we got those. Second, yeah, Vin won’t have a *normal life* the way you see it, but he’ll still have as good a life as we can give him. You know Dom will do anything in the fucking world to make that happen, and so will we. So, stop torturing yourself with false scenarios and conjectures, will ya’?”

Smiling discreetly as I began lowering myself into the chair, I said, “Easier said than done.”

“Just try, alright?”

Chuckling slightly, I looked at Dino as I got comfortable. “Okay.”

“So... You ready for this?” Dino asked, eyes wandering the room.

No, I wasn’t. Not without them. I stared down at myself, grappling with letting him into all of that.

“Lil?”

I lovingly touched my belly. Dino entered Vincenzo’s room amid the loud silence. I stood tall in my fight not to cry as he held onto the arms of the chair and brought himself eye level with me. I wanted to reach out and hug him, but if I did that, that dam would break.

“I don’t know if Dom ever told you, but you can’t lie to save your fucking life.”

Staring up into Dino’s eyes, what he said was funny to me, but that humor wasn’t there. Only concern.

Sighing, I said, “I just miss my mom.” I looked down again, focusing this time on Dino’s hand, speaking softly. “I miss a lot of people.”

Dino put a hand behind my head and inched close enough to kiss near the crown of my head.

“All of us would play God if we could, Lil. Your folks might not be here, but we are. Yeah, we ain’t them, but we’ll try to be, or somethin’.”

To say I was thankful for my brothers was an understatement. I was blessed.

chapter THIRTY-FOUR

Monday, June 12, 2017

IT WAS a gloomy day in the Rosini household, and the sun seemed to mock us all by shining hotly and brightly. Grief hit Katrina hardest—harder than she probably even expected.

Today was Hector’s birthday.

Sitting on our couch in wait as Dominic wrapped up his shower, I sipped on my glass of milk, eyeing his half-eaten steak, prosciutto, and mozzarella sandwich. My stomach rumbled. My craving was too strong.

When Dominic opened the bathroom door, I froze, his sandwich halfway to my mouth.

“That was mine.”

I was caught red-handed. “Baby’s hungry,” I said on a whim and took my next bite.

Dominic laughed and tossed the towel on the bed, shaking his head.

After finishing my bite, I put the sandwich on the plate. “I promised Katrina I would help her bake Hector a cake, but I

have no idea what she wants for him or what flavor or anything.”

Dominic zipped his slacks. “Which is why I handled it. Everything you’ll need is on the counter.” He turned to look at me, fixing his belt. “At least I can rest easy knowing that you won’t burn down the kitchen.” He winked.

I rolled my eyes, biting down slowly on the sandwich, dramatically tearing off a piece.

Sliding his arms into the sleeves of his dark red, button-down dress shirt, he walked over to me and snatched the final piece of sandwich out of my hand, stuffing it in his mouth.

If looks could kill, he would’ve been six feet under.

“I’ll make you one.”

My mood swung like a pendulum, a smile spreading across my face as he licked and kissed away the film of dried tomato juice from my chin. That harmless act of kindness sparked heat within me, but that kind of fun had to wait.

I buttoned his final couple of buttons for him. “Thank you for celebrating with us today. It means a lot to Katrina.”

He pulled away and stood upright, straightening out his sleeves. “She’s the only reason I’m giving a fuck about that asshole today.” He helped me to my feet.

I cupped his face and kissed the corner of his mouth. “I know.” I placed my palms on his chest. “And I’m proud of you for setting your hatred aside. Just promise me you’ll come find me before it becomes too much.”

Dominic held my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing my knuckles. His eyes met mine. “*Prometto.*”

FLOUR DUSTED MY DENIM OVERALLS, the floor, and the countertop. Katrina laughed when I tapped my flour coated finger to the tip of her nose. Laughter had rang in the kitchen all afternoon, and I was grateful. I was also grateful for this chair because my feet were screaming.

“Is it done yet, Lulu?”

Both of us and Bianca stared at the oven’s window, Katrina most anxious to get her hands on the triple chocolate cake.

Angling toward Bianca, I said with a pained laugh, “Can you check?” I refused to stand up any time soon.

Grabbing the nearest oven mitt off the counter, Bianca warned Katrina away from the oven so she wouldn’t get hurt. She dragged one of the cake pans out just enough to see, using a pink toothpick Katrina fetched for her to check its center.

“It’s done,” she said, then placed both pans on the stove top, the oven mitt underneath it.

“Yay!” Katrina celebrated. “Do you wanna see, Lulu?”

I waved my hand in dismissal. “I trust your judgment. It smells good, though.”

In fact, it smelled so good that it took tremendous restraint to not grab a fork and dig right in.

“Can I have that water over there?” I asked Bianca, referring to the bottle further down the counter. After handing it to me, she took a butter knife and began working around the edge of one of the cake’s layers. I almost choked on my sip of water the moment Katrina cried out in panic.

“You ruined it!” Tears filled Katrina’s eyes, nearing ready to spill. Shoving away the pain, I stood up and dragged my feet over next to Bianca, who had already backed away from the stove, her own panicked look written on her face.

I quickly caught onto the problem; Bianca accidentally cracked the edge of the cake. Nothing major to anyone else. The end of the world for my niece.

I put my hand on Bianca’s back as a sort of comfort as I looked at Katrina. “This can be our bottom layer. Or we can just cover it with frosting,” I told her calmly.

Tears ran down her cheeks. “It’s ruined,” she repeated. She wiped her face with her fists.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” Bianca apologized, sounding like she just might cry herself.

“I wanted it to be perfect.” Katrina dropped her head, fresh tears falling. “Like Papa.” She sniffed.

Bianca apologized softly to me, heartbroken in her own way. I wasn’t mad at her, but I couldn’t help but feel somewhat frustrated. I wanted—no, *needed*—Dominic’s advice at this moment, so I found a way to separate Bianca and Katrina.

“Do me a favor. Please go get Dominic and tell him it’s urgent.”

Nodding, Bianca silently slipped out of the kitchen. Tears lined her eyes, and it weighed my heart more.

I sighed as quietly as I could to myself, wracking my brain of any words to help diffuse the situation. Turning around, Katrina stood in place, staring up at me, sniveling. This *was not* how I planned Hector’s birthday. Fuck.

I snatched the towel hanging on the oven door and had a seat in my chair, calling for Katrina to come closer. I wiped her face.

“Sweetheart, nobody’s perfect. Not me, Bianca... Or your grandfather. But that doesn’t make us any less special, just like that cake up there.”

“But it’s broken, Mommy.”

My heart split further at her tone. Her pain.

I drew her into a tight hug. “I promise we can fix it. And I know your grandpa would appreciate it no matter what because you helped make it with your own two hands.” I pulled her away, wiping stray tears off her cheeks and the linings of her eyes. “It was made with love by those of us who love him. And to be honest... He probably would’ve already eaten that cake before we could finish frosting it. He *loved* chocolate.”

A shaky smile ghosted her lips before she broke down again.

“Come here,” I murmured, hugging her. I kissed her head, rubbing my hand up and down her back. “He loves you. He wouldn’t care about that minor imperfection.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” she said, her words muffled against my shoulder.

“Don’t be. It’s a rough day for all of us. It’s okay to let a few tears out. I’ll show you a trick when we frost it so no one will notice, okay?”

She nodded against me. “We don’t have to bake another cake?”

“No.”

She pulled away, her nose red like Rudolph. She sniffed. “Can we make a cake for Uncle Thomas, too?”

I hid the pang of heartbreak that struck me in that moment, nodding. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up while we let the cake cool? Then, we can get started on your papa’s dinner.”

She nodded, smiling wider, and then, she hurried past me out of the kitchen. I sagged back against the chair, blowing out a tired breath.

A familiar pair of Oxfords click-clacked toward the kitchen’s threshold.

I let out the tears I held back.

“*Bellissima.*” He stood behind me, leaning over and kissing my head, his fingers in my hair. “She’s hurting, just like you, and I wish I could change that.”

“I just want this day to be over,” I confessed, my voice cracking. “Seeing her cry like that...”

“You and me both.” He kissed my head once more. “Why don’t you, too, go wash up. Rest until dinner.”

“I can’t.” I craned my neck to look up at him. “We have to frost the cake. She’ll be upset if I’m not here with her to do it.”

Dominic walked around past me and went over to the cake, inspecting it himself. “Then, at least change out of that outfit into something more comfortable. I’m not forcing anyone to dress up today anyway.”

“What about your mom? I want to go check on her. She seemed just as sad as Katrina was.”

Turning around, Dominic nodded. “She’s in the office.”

“Is she okay?”

“She will be.”

I had to talk to her, convince her Katrina wasn't mad at her. I knew if I were her right now, I'd be feeling like the biggest scum of the earth.

I grabbed Dominic's hand and let him help me to my feet.

“Did we do good?” I asked, referring to the cake.

Dominic gave a chef's kiss. “It's *magnifico*.”

I narrowed the gap between us and kissed him on the cheek. He dipped his head as I brought my lips to his outer ear, speaking low enough for only him to hear.

“That's not the only thing that's *magnifico* around here.”

SOMEHOW, Dominic convinced Katrina to let him and her frost the cake and make one of Hector's favorite meals: spaghetti bolognese. The rest of her uncles and even Bianca helped with dinner. Katrina forgave her in the end, to all of our relief.

I squeezed in a nap. Well, as good a nap as I could've gotten these days.

Before my nap, I watched the kitchen camera, my heart warming at the sight of Katrina and Dominic specifically. She swiped a little of the chocolate icing Bianca made and pressed it onto the tip of his nose, laughing. He pretended to try taking a bite of the cake much to Katrina's distress, paying for it in the end when she smeared more frosting on his face as karma. Dino laughed the loudest and hardest, high-fiving her.

It all gave me greater hope and reassurance and a better talking piece to truly prove to Dominic that he and Lorenzo

were never and *could* never be the same.

Our new butler, Christian Satriano, walked around the dinner table collecting the dishes, eventually leaving the room. We were stuffed from such an amazing meal and exhausted from carb overload.

Or so I had thought.

“I want to talk to Papa,” Katrina said out of the blue, breaking our collective silence.

“You don’t need to ask permission,” Dominic told her. “You can talk to him anytime.”

“Can you go get him?” she asked her uncle. He looked at her in confusion.

“The urn, bro,” Dino explained.

Lifting his chin in understanding, Dominic directed Dino to go get Hector’s urn. Dino set it down near Katrina on the white, lace tablecloth. She reached for the urn, but Dominic held up his hand, stopping her.

“Hold on. I want to say something first.”

Katrina sat back in her chair.

You can do this, I thought to myself, noticing the subtle tells in his expression and body language—staring hard at the table lost in thought, messing with the buttons on his sleeves, clearing his throat as he adjusted his collar.

“I’ll make this brief,” Dominic began, staying seated. “Hector Salamone was a man of integrity. Honor. He defined the code this family lives by—family above all.” He cleared his throat again. “He would’ve been sixty-one today.”

A knot formed in my chest. Tears wanted to reach my eyes. Throughout all that went down between me and Hector, I never wanted him dead. This family wasn't quite the same without him, whether that was good *or* bad.

Dominic held up his glass of wine. So, we all did the same. Well, I held up my glass of water and Katrina her glass of juice.

“To Hector. May he look down on us all and be proud, and may he continue to rest in unconditional peace. *Salute.*”

“*Salute!*” we all repeated in unison, raising our glasses higher before sipping on our drinks.

“You did great,” I told Dominic, winking with a smile.

I slid the urn over to Katrina after she lifted off of her chair again to reach for it. Angelo left his seat per Dominic's request and held Katrina steady as she hugged Hector's urn.

“I love you, Papa.” She gave it a kiss.

I looked away, losing control of my fight to hold back tears.

“I miss you,” she added. “You would've liked your chocolate cake. Lulu and B and my uncles helped me bake it.”

Bianca's soft cry rose above mine.

“You would be proud of me, Papa. I've been good, and I'm happy here with everyone. Lulu's even having a baby, Papa!”

I broke down, making a fist in my lap as I battled my self-control. Dominic took my hand in his, caressing my knuckles. He gently squeezed my hand as I bit my lip, crying harder.

“I know,” he said quietly. “You still have the floor, Katrina. Please go on.”

“I wish you were still alive, Papa. Please come back.”

A long silence stretched, and when I lifted my head, everyone was watching Katrina. She stared intently at the urn, quivering with sadness. We each sat in wait for her next words or next move. She swallowed the lump in her throat as a tear slid down her cheek. Her face twisted, more tears falling.

“The man that hurt you is dead. You... You can come back now, Papa. Please.”

Bianca, cupping her face in her hands, leaned into Anthony for support. I glimpsed him dabbing the lining of his own eyes with his finger before I noticed Angelo keeping composure, along with Dino and Dominic.

I stared at Dominic longer, seeing beyond his mask. The corner of his eye twitched. His jaw clenched through the war waging inside of him, his other hand a tight fist in his lap. He refused to wave his white flag.

In life, we learned the ways of navigation. We learned strategies to jump over its hurdles, and we learned to cope with its trials and tribulations. We pushed ourselves through the horrors of life. Those painful moments.

Dominic Rosini fought so many horrors in his short twenty-six years. He learned to wear his masks as he deemed appropriate, but this mask wavered, his bleeding heart revealing itself enough for me to see.

His hatred for Hector was substantial, but he still found enough space in his hardened heart to care about how Hector’s loss impacted the rest of us.

chapter THIRTY-FIVE

Friday, June 16, 2017

ONE MINUTE, I was in dreamland, envisioning Dominic cuddling and holding and soothing me with sweet Italian nothings while I rode through the waves of labor. The next minute, I was back in my bedroom. Alone. Dominic's side of the bed was made. His phone, keys, and cigarettes weren't on his nightstand.

Exhaling, I began to stretch, arching my back before pain suddenly seared through my muscles, taking my breath away. "What the hell?" I asked no one, biting down on my bottom lip through the pain as I tried to move. Giving it one more go-ahead, I gritted my teeth and swung my legs off the side of the bed, my ass damp. *Did I wet the bed?* All I knew right then was that my back pain wasn't normal. I needed to call Julie. Dominic. Someone, but fuck, did I have the means to get to my phone, let alone get out of bed?

It was like knives stabbing me in the back. Warm, long knives.

Blowing out a breath, I told myself I could do this and whined as I fought through the pain to sit on the side of the

bed. I immediately leaned forward, gripping the edge of the mattress. This position helped some, but intense pressure pushed on my pelvis.

Oh, fuck.

My breaths came in shorter, faster bursts. My anxiety rose. Looking around at nothing in particular, I felt between my legs—wet there, too. It wasn't urine. I didn't wet the bed. My heart raced.

No... Not yet. It wasn't time yet. Dominic wasn't here. It. Wasn't. Time.

“Shit,” I whispered, on the verge of tears, shaking. I dared to push myself off the bed and onto my feet, grabbing hold of the nightstand in desperation when my legs almost gave out from the debilitating back pain. My eyes widened as fluid leaked down my legs. The wet spot I'd left behind was clear on the mattress.

A silent cry left me when a burst of pain possessed my lower back, sliding into my tailbone and teasing down into my ass and thighs. The knives. Stabbing and stabbing. Blowing out another big breath, I held onto the nightstand and wall for support on my way to the bathroom. Luckily, it was next to our bed. But when the pain wrapped around my sides and lower belly, I stopped in my tracks.

Rethinking a trip to the bathroom, I carefully turned around, grateful for a moment of relief when the pain eased. I hurried as fast as I could, hunched over, to our couch and put on the nightshirt I wore before I stripped of it for a nap. No sooner did I pull the shirt over my belly did the pain strike again, nearly bringing me to my knees. It was as if tiny hands viciously tugged and yanked on my ligaments, wanting to rip

them apart. An intense cramp spread throughout my belly, nothing like any of those Braxton Hicks contractions.

This couldn't be it, could it?

Mindlessly, I moved over more toward the side of the couch, held its armrest, and rocked and swayed in a weird dance. Softly moaning through it, the pain intensified, bringing me on the verge of tears again. "Oh, God, this is it," I whimpered. I thanked God when the pain waned, again taking advantage of it and hurrying to the door.

I reached the door, panicking more when I felt more liquid drip down between my legs. The moment I opened the door and my foot touched the threshold, I leaned against the doorframe, my hand on my mouth as I stifled a loud cry. Unable to tolerate the new sensation of burning and stabbing pain, I went weak in the knees and sank to the floor. Pressure spread around back into my rectum, like I had been constipated for days and my body decided to finally let it go. The pressure built as did what I admitted to myself was indeed another contraction. It felt as if a steel band wrapped around my belly and squeezed, bringing the stabbing sensation up toward my belly.

Crawling hurt. Moving hurt. My entire body screamed with each movement, each breath. A little bit of nausea bubbled within my gut. Waves of agony rolled through me alongside the grueling charley horses. For a moment I knew the suffering a piece of fruit endured when it was crushed under a juicer. "*Oh, my God,*" I quietly moaned, squeezing out tears.

Just when I thought the contraction seemed to relax, a new one hit on top of that. I did my damndest to breathe, but it was a challenge. The urge to scream was almost as bad as the

new urge to bear down. Someone might as well have been stepping on my insides with a steel boot. The baby threatened to pop out of me right here, right now. I couldn't scream. I couldn't talk. All I did was whimper and silently pray for an endpoint. A finish line. And as if God Himself stood in front of me with his arms out, commotion came from somewhere down the hall. It sounded like the voices of my family. Bianca's voice edged out above the rest.

My body temperature rose. Sweat beaded the lining of my forehead. I crawled toward the noise, but pain won again. The peak of the contraction glued my hands and knees to the floor. I tried to breathe like I read about, but it was useless. *Oh, my God... What's happening to me? Someone please help me... Please.*

Feet away from the end of the hall, I bit my bottom lip and barreled on through the agony. My back pain was at its worst with the height of each contraction, like it was crushing my vertebrae. Seconds away from being able to find the power to cry out for help, yet another contraction started to form before the previous one barely began to ease. More liquid gushed from between my legs. My body burned hotter, and I physically began to shake, almost losing my balance. Like an iron fist that had been simmering in a sea of flames, it punched through my insides amid waves of ever-increasing abdominal charley horses. A burning sensation whipped around from my lower back to my front in a sick-to-my-stomach sort of way. Its peak came on so intensely and so rapidly, it knocked the air from my lungs. The tense combination of crushing and burning won out, and I laid on the floor, curling into myself.

“Help me!”

Every muscle and fiber of my being tensed. I was scared my spine was actually ripping apart one vertebra at a time. The heat in my back flared and cascaded throughout my body. “Help me, please!”

“Lilith!?” Bianca’s voice was heaven sent through the rush of footsteps that came my way. I curled my knees toward me with every bit of my strength, and out of nowhere, I began rocking on the floor. Beads of sweat start to roll, even in places I never thought possible. My soft, almost silent cries turned into loud, teary moans.

“Oh, my God,” Bianca said, immediately kneeling next to me. She wanted to hold me, but I was too heavy and too tense for her to lift.

Whimpers, little grunts, and erratic breaths were all I could manage. Tears fell in a never-ending stream. When I thought one contraction was ready to end, another one piled on top of it. It just kept circling in a monstrous, unrelenting cycle. Somewhere in its midst, I wondered if this was some kind of punishment from God. Every nerve ending, every fiber, and every tissue felt as if it were being struck with a taser of the highest voltage known to man. The pain spread so harshly and so quickly it was hard to breathe. Invisible elephants stepped on my lower back and stomach.

“Oh, fuck,” Dino said. “Get Katrina outta here.” More voices shouted and hollered for the man I needed most. Katrina’s frantic, worried voice reached my ears as someone urged her away from the scene. “Dom!” Dino shouted at the top of his lungs.

Pressure in my pelvis and rectum built to an all-time high. The urge to pee and push increased. A hot flash rode through me with the contractions.

“Is it time?” Bianca asked, her mouth to my ear. Her touch and soothing shushes made things a little easier, but all I wanted was one person. The only person who could help me survive this misery.

“I want Dominic,” I sobbed. My voice quivered like the rest of me.

“He’s coming,” she reassured in a soft tone. She maintained her warm embrace as I shook and fought to control my breathing. My urges to push.

It was getting harder to breathe. I wondered if Vincenzo was literally tearing me apart. He kicked, and in turn, ramped up the pain. With each tightening and squeezing of my uterus, it also wrapped a tight, hot band around my back and encompassed me in a sensation of my bones and muscles being crushed under the sudden implosions.

“Lilith!?” Dominic hollered, his voice gruff and riddled with worry like everyone else’s. His pounding footsteps drew closer. Momentarily lost in happiness to hear his voice, knowing he was coming to my rescue, a big gush of lukewarm liquid gushed out from between my legs. Bianca let me go and scooted back enough to see whatever aftermath that left. The urge to push grew tenfold. The way the contractions had no end point, just piled one on top of the other, was almost rhythmic. With their peaks, I think I felt my cervix literally open and pull back.

Dominic took his mother’s place beside me and lifted me up into his arms. I cried out and groaned, taken hostage by the crippling pain. Every movement or breath was a task in itself. I couldn’t get myself to breathe during the contractions—just cry, moan, and wail. Breathing alone shot even more unimaginable, excruciating pain to my uterus. Sometimes, it

got to a level where I hoped I would pass out to give me a break from it all. Finding his tie, I grabbed it and yanked so hard, it jerked his body close. We were face to face. His blue eyes were inscrutable, though I thought I saw a hint of his own kind of agony in them.

“He’s c-coming,” I gasped between breaths. “Vincenzo’s coming.”

Dominic’s eyes widened with panic. Pain gripped and shot down my legs, and it felt warmer the stronger the contractions got. Vincenzo descended further down my pelvis.

When I thought the pain couldn’t get any worse, the contractions seemed to be double on top of another. I wanted to die. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to just give up. I shook and sobbed violently in Dominic’s arms. After reading so much and doing research, it became aware to me what phase and stage I was now in and that I needed to let my body go and surrender to what was happening, but I was afraid if I did, I’d let go too much and cross over to the other side.

“Someone call in some nurses now!” Dominic ordered. His voice carried off somewhere else.

A loud, croaky groan escaped me when Dominic adjusted me in his arms.

“Santiago!” Dominic’s voice was tremulous and taut. His eyes and his face were stolid and steel-like, probably in an attempt to keep his composure for my sake.

“He’s calling,” Bianca informed him, also maintaining a sense of calm for me. Us.

“Let’s go, Dominic,” Anthony said out of the blue, and they wasted no time rushing me to the basement.

In a way, the rocking and swaying from Dominic rushing me downstairs brought its own relief, but it also made the pressure that much greater. I didn't know pressure like this existed.

A female's voice echoed from somewhere, but I couldn't register who it was, let alone what she said. The sound of footsteps echoed in the wake of her voice.

"*Pleeeaaassee*," I whined, begging not for Dominic to get me on a bed but for our son to be in my arms already. I sucked in a sharp, messy breath.. The desire to push was extreme and seemingly impossible to fight. I blew small, shallow breaths in and out, trying to shove aside the constant stinging and pressure gradually building between my legs. My hands were balled into tight fists in the air. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize how all this pain and pressure worked Vincenzo down further into the birth canal.

"Mr. Rosini," the female voice said. Julie.

"Prisco, go upstairs and make sure the rest of those fucking doctors get the fuck down here right away, and unless the house is on fire, *nobody* else is to be down here. Got it?"

"Yes," Anthony stated and dashed back through the basement.

"*Dominic!*" I wailed. I wasn't quite sure where I was at this point as a severe contraction ripped through me. It was like this baby was ripping my insides apart. "*SHIT!*"

"Hang on, Lilith," Dominic said, kicking the door shut. He laid me on the bed in the first room he came across in the medical facility. I frantically and feverishly grabbed onto the rails of the bed. I swayed and rocked roughly from side to side like two people were trying to pull me closer in each direction.

I was sweaty, tired, and trying to make it through this. I knew I needed to push, but I was too afraid to. Sensations lingered up around my waist and in my lower back, but as my body worked to birth my son, I tensed my muscles and tried to hold him in. The more my son descended, the warmer and sicker I felt.

“It’s going to be alright, Lilith,” Julie assured me. Her latex gloves snapped as she pulled them on. “It’ll be alright.” A nurse already here on shift with her assisted her.

Something’s wrong.... Everything in the book was a lie. Childbirth wasn’t supposed to be this bad... I’m sorry, Dominic... I’m sorry I’m not strong. I’m sorry you have to see me like this. I’m sorry I’m caving to the pain. I’m sorry... I’m sorry.

The sound of running water found my ears, and I looked to find Dominic washing his hands in the sink. “*Dominic...*” I whimpered, flat on my back and fighting to endure this pain. “Dominic, I *neeedd yooouuuu.*” My voice wavered and struggled through the chaos. Within seconds, Dominic rushed up beside me. He brushed his palm up and across my sweat-ridden forehead.

Julie began to release the stirrups built into the foot of the bed.

Tugging on my shirt, I begged for anyone to take it off, still rocking from side to side. “Please take this off.”

With scary ease, Dominic ripped my nightshirt in two right down the middle, slipping my arms out of the sleeves but leaving it underneath me. I didn’t care. I just wanted to push and push hard. “I... I can’t be like this,” I rambled. “I-I-I need it higher—AHHH!!” In that moment, the pain hit so hard and

was so bad, I literally arched my back like someone being possessed by a demon.

My focus vanished as fast as I gathered it.

I panted.

I groaned.

Weird noises climbed up my throat, but I didn't care how funny or embarrassing I sounded.

I wanted to physically run away from this pain.

Dominic and I turned our attention to the door as more nurses rushed into the room. I looked at the ceiling, squeezing my eyes shut shortly thereafter, blowing out rapid breaths.

Someone adjusted the bed, so I was sitting at a better angle. I laid back and grabbed onto the rails.

"I'm sorry," I thought out loud as I drowned in the pain. "Help me... Dominic, please help me," I sobbed, shaking. "I can't take this anymore." Not realizing he grabbed me a towel in this haze of pain, Dominic patted my forehead with it, taking my hand into his, squeezing. I sensed him staring, but all I could focus on was the ceiling. The burning and stretching in my vagina intensified, and it was only then did I grasp what was now happening. Vincenzo was coming out whether I pushed or not.

"Try to breathe, *Bellissima*."

"I can't." I sucked in a bunch of rapid, erratic breaths, bawling. I started to open my legs, but I rushed to close them under a new, more severe contraction, arching my back again. Even with Dominic by my side, I went from wanting this baby out to wishing he would stay inside forever. I couldn't find any courage.

I finally looked at him. He wiped my tears. His eyes were vacant, and it hurt to see him so helpless.

“You can do this, love,” he softly spoke. “You just need to focus.” He leaned over me and kissed my forehead.

I panted harder and faster.

I moaned and groaned as I lifted my legs and rested my feet in the stirrups one at a time. With my left hand, I grabbed the railing at my head, my other hand still secure in Dominic’s. I had to find courage. I had reached the point of no return.

“He’s coming,” I whimpered. I was growing too tired to try to run away from the pain anymore. I was so tired, but I needed to push.

I stared up at the ceiling again. I trembled, and the urge to vomit increased by the second. The burn between my legs flared. I squeezed Dominic’s hand tight in reaction. “Don’t move,” I begged. “Don’t let me go.”

“I’m here, love,” Dominic soothed, dabbing away more sweat off of my face. “I’m right here.” Dominic kissed my forehead. His voice, like his nature right now, was gentle and what I needed.

My lips parted in a silent scream as another contraction sliced through my body. It felt like Vincenzo pushed into my spine with a brute force and twisted it as hard as he could at the same time. I wanted to run again. And I did, sort of. I wriggled upward against the mattress to try to search for the exit that didn’t exist. Dominic reached for me and gently guided me back down.

“I can’t do this. I’m not strong enough.”

Dominic wiped away the damp strands of my hair sticking to my face. “Yes, you are.”

“Do this for me,” I pleaded.

“If I could, I would, *Bellissima*, but *you* need to do this, and you *can* do this. I love you.”

His words in my ear helped me gain the courage to try to bring our baby boy into the world.

I drew in a big breath and bore down hard. Surprisingly, pushing brought a little bit of relief. It also brought a ton of additional pressure and burning. When I caught my breath, I worried his head was actually about to come out of my butt. The pressure there was overwhelming and so painful.

“You’re doing great, *Bellissima*.”

I pulled another big breath deep into my lungs and pushed again. My body quaked. A bone-on-bone feeling ground down on me as Vincenzo’s head continued to rotate and squeeze through my birth canal. I kept pushing until I couldn’t anymore.

I let my head fall back against the pillow and arched when a contraction began to build along with the increased burning and stinging. Weird groans and sounds escaped me. I blew a few quick breaths and pushed again, wriggling my butt further down the bed at the same time. Sweat beaded and dripped all over. Like I was a butcher stuck in a hot meat locker on a scorching, summer day.

The more Vincenzo squeezed down through, the hotter I became.

“I can see his head,” Julie announced with encouragement.

“Dominic,” I cried, tears streaming, “help me please.”

“Please keep pushing, love. I’m so proud of you.”

When I gathered myself and bore down, a strange sensation stirred inside of me. My heart was racing at a dangerous level. It felt like Vincenzo was trying to climb back up inside.

With my next push, I began to feel off. It was nerve-racking. I momentarily dry-heaved. And when I caught my breath and pushed yet again, a vigorous, brutal contraction hurled through me like a freight train.

“Something’s wrong,” I thought out loud.

“Talk to me, Lilith,” Dominic demanded, concern and worry thick in his tone.

The next contraction came with a riptide of fire that seared through my uterus. The pain was sudden and intense. It was a pain unheard of as of this moment. It was worse than when my contractions double-peaked.

I screamed bloody murder.

“HE’S RIPPING ME APART!!”

Something tore down deep. A gush of warm to almost hot, thick liquid gushed out after an outward-pushing type pressure struck my uterus.

“What’s happening!?” Dominic hollered.

Breathing became increasingly difficult as the contraction began dwindling. A new pressure sat inside my chest. I dry heaved until I actually vomited. Dominic suddenly turned my head to the side as the vomit and bile spilled down the side of my mouth, down my neck, and onto the bed beneath me. Pity crossed through his unblinking eyes.

I gagged once more before I rolled my head and lifted it, finding Julie’s hands on my thighs. Blood stained her hands.

Panic flashed in her eyes, but she just as quickly got herself in check.

“What’s happening?” I breathed as best I could under the tremendous pain and tenderness.

“You really need to push, Lilith.”

Julie’s voice was unsteady, confirming my suspicion that something was seriously wrong.

Dominic towered above me, kissing my forehead repeatedly. A part of me felt for him. If the roles were reversed, I would’ve been absolutely beside myself, helplessly watching my loved one suffer.

I grunted and squirmed, pushing little by little. “Oh, Jesus,” I groaned with a bigger push.

“You’re doing it, love. Keep going.”

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” Julie ordered.

“I can’t,” I whimpered.

“I need you to try,” she urged.

“Ripping. So much ripping and tearing and *pain*. So much pain!”

“We need to get this baby out,” Julie said with a newfound urgency. “Now.”

It then hit me. I was about to undergo the absolute worst pain I could ever imagine, and all I wanted was for it to stop or for me to die.

“When I tell you to push,” Julie went on, “I need you to listen to me and push hard. Understand?”

“Tell me what’s happening now!” Dominic demanded.

“I don’t know for sure, Mr. Rosini, but we can’t waste any more time. Your son needs to come out and needs to come out *now*. So, Lilith, on three—look at me.”

I looked at Nurse Barton as Dominic held my hand tightly in both of his.

“On three, I want you to push as hard as you can.”

“It hurts to push,” I whined.

“You can do this, Lilith,” Julie coached.

“One,” she began, now in a blue paper gown and shining a brighter light on me.

“Two.”

I inhaled a deep breath, squeezing Dominic’s hand tighter.

“Three.”

With all my might, I bore down, screaming shortly afterward.

Pain seared from my chest to my knees. The harder I tried to push, the more I struggled.

“Amy, get me the vacuum please,” Julie instructed our OBGYN. I looked around in a panic.

“Grab her other leg,” Julie instructed Amy. Julie inserted the vacuum inside of me. “When I pull, you push, okay?”

Sobbing, I nodded.

“Go ahead and push, Lilith.”

Once I found the strength, it was like I was being ripped in half. Unbearable, unimaginable pain, pressure, and burning overtook me as Julie pulled, continuing to instruct me to push.

I feverishly clawed at anyone and anything. “Make it stop!”

“Keep pushing,” Julie coached.

Knowing my only means of escape was to birth my son, I pushed hard and for as long as I could. She pulled. I pushed. When I watched Julie pull, it looked as if she was putting her all into it, and I certainly felt it. My vaginal walls stretched and opened so far, I worried I might rip open.

The saying was true; to push out a baby was like pushing a watermelon out of something with the opening the size of a lemon.

So many weird cries, screams, and guttural, animalistic noises escaped me through it all. I pushed. I grunted. I blew and panted and yanked down on Dominic’s tie. His blue eyes were doleful. His face fell. A hint of tears lined his eyes. It actually enraged me. It made me feel as if he were checking out on me.

“I wish I could take it all away,” he professed in a hushed tone, like each word killed a piece of him as he said them. “I’m sorry, my love.”

“Don’t you *fucking* check out on me now,” I grunted, gritting my teeth and practically smashing his face into mine. As I tugged and clung to him mid-push, I reached for Amy in a panic. “OH, MY GOD!” I violently arched my back as a ripping sensation spread down my vagina with an explosion akin to fire.

I shook, sweaty. I wanted to vomit again. The pain was indescribable. I started to lose control.

“Push again, Lilith,” Julie told me.

I was too worn down. In fact, something happened as I began to push again. Grabbing Dominic and the nurse on my left, I rolled my head straight back against the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. I honestly felt like my spirit was leaving my body. Time had no meaning anymore. I just wanted to escape. Part of me seemed to float above as I worked hard to birth my son. My thoughts seemed to float away right along with my spirit. My control left until a searing, burning sensation struck me down below. My tissues stretched further to accommodate Vincenzo's head.

It was as if this nightmare would never end. Like I was falling into hell and coming back into reality over and over again.

Giving birth to our son was supposed to be sweet and memorable. It wasn't supposed to go this way.

"What's happening!?" I screamed as Julie tirelessly pulled. To push at this point was like having a hot boulder fall on me and melt right through my flesh. If Vincenzo wasn't born soon, I might pass out.

"I have to cut," Julie announced. "His head is too large. Just hang in there for us. You're almost done, I promise." Her pity was unmistakable.

I just cried in absolute defeat. Sweat dripped down every crevice, every crack, every fold. It soaked my hair and made it stick to the back of my neck.

I can't do this, I thought as I squirmed and fought. I'm too weak. Oh, Vincenzo, you're lucky I love you so much. Oh, dear Lord, help me. Please, God... Give me the strength to get through this. Give me the strength to push.

I turned to Dominic for guidance and words and support, but he stood there in a daze. He watched Nurse Barton, lost with tears in his eyes. He was bleak, dejected, and crestfallen. Guilt consumed him.

I grabbed his sleeve and yanked with all my might, almost knocking him off his feet. I pulled him in close. “Don’t you fucking wimp out on me now!” His eyes went wide. “*You* did this to me; *you’re* gonna help me!” I threw myself backward, screaming as Julie cut me again, still hanging onto Dominic.

More warmth gushed between my legs. It was thinner, runnier.

“Give me another push, Lilith,” Julie instructed.

I once again found myself leaving my own body as I bore down. Voices all sounded off at once as I mindlessly let go of my support systems and tried to crawl up the bed. I didn’t want to be in this body anymore. I climbed further, looking for a way out due to the sheer intensity, but I couldn’t. I experienced what I read to be the ring-of-fire. With a powerful contraction and a push, I moaned loud and felt my eyes bug out of my head. A wicked sensation of fire and pressure shot through my vagina, some much needed relief right behind it. I didn’t know if I was losing my mind, but I just watched in a haze as Dominic and the nurses helped me scoot me back down into position.

Only then did it dawn on me that I just pushed out Vincenzo’s head.

“Catch your breath,” Amy advised me, brushing her fingers along the side of my face and doing her best to calm me. Julie suctioned out Vincenzo’s nose and mouth quickly, passing something that I couldn’t make out to another nurse.

I winced when Julie moved the baby somehow, almost like she turned him.

“Alright, Lilith,” Julie said. “You need to push and push hard. We need to get him out.”

“Will you just tell us what the fuck is going on!?” Dominic snapped, and everyone went still and quiet.

“I suspect her uterus has ruptured, which is dangerous for both Lilith and your son. If we don’t get him out now, there’s a chance one or both of them won’t survive.”

“Then cut her open!” Dominic shouted, riddled with worry and fear.

Julie remained calm. “It’s too late. By the time I cut into Lilith, her uterus could rupture entirely and, well... We’re going to have to rely on a little faith for this but mostly Lilith.”

Dominic quickly leaned in close, his eyes and face deadpan.

“Look at me,” he said in a more serious instead of hopeless undertone. “You’re almost there, but you need to find your fire and deliver our son.”

“Fuck you!” I spat, angry at the world.

“I know you’re in pain, and I know this is tough—”

“You don’t know shit!”

“I know this is tough,” Dominic tried again, “but you need to dig down deep, *Bellissima*. You need to push. We’re all counting on you. Vincenzo needs you.”

I gasped for air like it was sucked clean out of my lungs. As a gigantic contraction hit, so did a new ripping sensation in my uterus. “Help me!” I arched back, feverishly grasping for

and tugging anywhere I could on Dominic. “It’s happening again; he’s tearing me apart!”

“Push, Lilith!” Julie hollered, fear in her voice.

I began to sob uncontrollably, realizing there was no other way out of this nightmare. I started to climb away again, but I was held down this time, preventing me from going anywhere. I jerked from side to side. “It hurts so much!” I screamed as one of our other nurses in attendance leaned over to push on my belly. Right then, I finally found my fire. I ditched everyone and everything and grabbed firmly onto the bed rails, lifting myself once again and bearing down as hard as physically possible.

“Good job, Lilith,” Julie cheered.

Intense pressure pushed and grinded against my pubic bone. Julie mumbled something to Amy, and her and another nurse began to spread my legs further apart and bring my knees even closer to my chest. The pressure from the motion was borderline unbearable. “Stop it!” I cried out, frantically trying to shove everyone’s hands out of the way.

“Hold her legs,” Julie instructed.

“Please just tell me what’s happening,” I begged, breathing labored and erratic.

“Shoulder Dystocia,” was all Julie said. I looked to the nurse next to me for answers.

“He’s stuck,” Julie answered for her. “His shoulders are broad, and we’re having a hard time getting him out. Just focus. Don’t quit now. You’re so close.”

Rolling my head away from Julie, I looked at Dominic, grabbed his tie, and yanked him toward me as I pushed with what strength I had left.

I screamed as I felt Julie reach up inside of me.

Time stood still, losing all meaning as the cycle went on: push, breathe, push, breathe. I didn't know how much longer I could continue on like this.

This should have been exciting. This should have been like I saw in the movies and on TV where the husband or partner cooed and cheered on his mate as she gently guided their unborn child into the world. But that wasn't *my* reality. And it hurt worse than any physical pain.

As I pushed, the pain and pressure somehow finally started to ease. *Maybe this was it? Maybe I was about to meet our son?*

I was too tired to scream anymore.

Vincenzo's shoulder rubbed against my pubic bone, and I gasped when I felt it slip out.

"It hurts," I grunted, exhausted.

"He's almost out," Julie informed us. "Just one or two more big pushes, and he'll be here."

Please come out, baby boy, I thought as I stood right before the finishing line. *I've held you and carried you and pushed you out long enough. It's time. It's time to come out and see all of us.*

Another intense contraction steamrolled through me, and all I did was groan. I let go of Dominic's tie and instead grabbed a piece of his shirt, crying and trembling.

"I need you, Dominic," I whimpered, pleading with him through my gaze to understand what I needed.

He understood the assignment.

Tears escaping his eyes, Dominic wrapped his arm around behind my back, still holding my hand. He leaned in and kissed my face.

“I’m here.” He moved hair away from my face. “You can do this, *Bellissima*. Please push. For me and for our son.” Dominic lifted and adjusted me better against the bed.

I held onto the rail.

I pushed.

And pushed.

“Last one,” Dominic whispered in my ear. “I promise.”

Soaked in my own sweat, I tipped my head back, holding onto the bed rails for dear life as I gave it one more go-ahead. A high-pitched, penetrating cross between a scream and a whine crawled up out of my throat. More fluid and blood gushed out, Vincenzo’s body sliding out of me right along with it.

I flopped hard against the bed.

“*Bellissima*,” Dominic whispered with excitement. He lifted me high enough so I could see our son. My hazy, watery eyes found him, and everything around me dissolved into this amazing moment.

Everyone stilled and quieted as Vincenzo emitted a powerful cry. With red hair and wrinkly skin, our baby was so beautiful.

Dominic shed a few tears as he kissed my forehead. “You did it, *Bellissima*.”

Amy whisked the baby off to be cleaned, and it dawned on me.

“No,” I whined softly, prompting a confused look from Dominic.

“Lilith, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“You were supposed to do that,” I whimpered, feeling out of myself again.

“Do what?”

I suddenly felt faint. More hot, thick liquid spilled out from between my legs. I knew it was blood. I grew more tired by the second, lazily grasping and fighting to grab onto Dominic.

Please let Vincenzo be healthy. Please let me live. I don’t want to die. I want to see and hold and kiss my son.

“What’s going on? What’s happening to her!?” Dominic hollered. His eyes glowed a rich red, and through my haze, I thought I saw his fangs, too. Sights set on the staff, Dominic’s beast threatened to break loose.

Barely able to turn my head, I managed to move it, searching for any kind of strength as I reached out.

“Janice, get the anesthesia ready and raise that railing over there,” Julie calmly ordered another nurse. “We need to operate immediately.”

“Julie!” Dominic shouted.

A nurse placed something over my nose and mouth.

“Count backward from one hundred,” she warmly instructed. My body suddenly became unnaturally heavy, like I was being pulled and sucked down through the bed.

Blurry. It was all a blur. Noises were far away.

Dominic was the last beautiful thing I saw.

Everything went black.

chapter THIRTY-SIX

FLUTTERS AND FLICKERS of light became splotches and then a white ceiling—a familiar one.

“Welcome back,” said a calm, tender voice.

I took deep, careful breaths, assessing my situation the best I could under the thin haze. I slowly turned my head, discovering hospital equipment and cords. An IV line traced back to my hand, tape keeping the line in place. A clip was attached to my hand, and cords stretched across my body, connecting to the sticky pads on my chest. Scanning my surroundings, I noticed my right hand was clear of any cords and clips.

I recognized this room—its door, sink, and counter. I fell asleep here.

I almost died here.

My son!

Panic rose. The beeping sped up. My heart leapt into my throat. Before I could move, someone rested their hands on my shoulder, keeping me in place.

“It’s alright,” said that sweet voice again. Looking up, I spotted Julie hovering over me. She pointed to something, and

that was when I caught sight of Dominic sleeping on the long, cushioned chair for guests at the left side of the room. He, too, had a blanket draped over him.

“My son?” I asked, my voice raspy on account of my parched throat. I began to lift my right hand to rub my throat. It felt as if I swallowed tacks or something.

I blinked and tried to look away at the sudden burst of light in my eyes. Julie put her small flashlight in her coat pocket and fetched me a cup of water from the sink, walking back to the bed with it. She put her hand behind my head and helped me take a sip, the cold water refreshing.

“Vincenzo is sound asleep, just like his daddy.”

As she checked the sticky pads on my chest and checked over me as a whole, I looked again at an area across the room Julie previously pointed out to me, my eyes fixated on the bundle wrapped in a blanket wearing a blue hat.

My baby boy.

I breathed a sigh of sheer relief, keeping my focus on Vincenzo. “What happened to me?”

“You don’t remember?” Julie questioned while lifted my gown.

When I shifted my attention to Julie, I noticed my belly was still somewhat bloated. I winced slightly when she adjusted my blanket.

“It’s not surprising you don’t remember much. You had quite the ordeal.”

“It hurts,” I said mindlessly, briefly closing my eyes.

I sensed Julie step around the bed toward me, and then, I heard a click.

“I gave you some analgesia for your pain.” I felt her slide something under my left hand. Loosely clutching it, I opened my eyes, slowly looking down at what she’d given me. “Just press that button at the top whenever you feel you need some relief.”

I studied the small, gray object in my hand. With the fogginess of the waning anesthesia, my ability to focus was hindered. My body was sluggish, and my eyes were tired. It was easier to stare at the clicker in my hand than at anything or anyone else.

“You had to have emergency surgery to save yours and your son’s life.”

“A c-section?”

“No. While I did have to cut you open, you delivered your son vaginally. Thankfully, the rupture was incomplete. That’s what saved both your lives.”

Was I going to be okay? Was my son one-hundred percent okay? Rupture?

“A rupture?”

“Your uterus ruptured. We ended up having to give you a blood transfusion. It was scary for a few minutes, but like Dominic has stated before, you’re quite the fighter, Lilith.”

I suddenly stared at my fiancé, overcome with emotion. A tidal wave of sadness rushed through me, and before I knew it, I was crying. It was coming back to me: the look on his face as I delivered our son. The fear. Worry. Wondering if I’d make it through. I couldn’t remember if I said anything nasty. I hoped I didn’t, and if I did, he hopefully understood that pain made a person say crazy things.

Julie put her hand on my shoulder again.

“Oh, Lilith,” she said, her tone sympathetic. “Sometimes things happen that we have no control over, but just know you and your son are healthy and thriving. We’re all so proud of you.”

I sniffed. “Thank you.”

Just then, Dominic opened his eyes. He lazily lifted his head, clearly coming out of a heavy sleep. The second we locked eyes, it was as if any and all energy had rushed back into him. He sprang upright, flung his blanket off him, and nearly tripped over his feet running to my bedside. Julie quickly moved out of his way, standing at the foot of the bed.

Dominic scooped up my hand and smothered it with kisses, then began to do the same to my face. The sheer relief that I made it out alive was unmistakable in his eyes and features.

“Now, don’t expect her to be one hundred percent yet,” Julie innocently reminded Dominic. “She’s still fighting off the anesthesia.”

Dominic never strayed his eyes from mine. “Thank you for everything, Julie. You went above and beyond and will be rewarded substantially.”

Julie put her hand over her heart, graciously taken aback, smiling. “Thank you both for letting me be here, and I always go above and beyond for my patients.”

I squeezed Dominic’s hand the best I could, looking at him with fresh tears in my eyes.

“I want to hold my son. Please.”

After everything, all I wanted to do for a while was hold and cuddle Vincenzo.

While Dominic gently and carefully helped me readjust against the bed so I was properly sitting up, I closely watched Julie with anticipation as she lifted Vincenzo into her arms. One of his chubby little arms peeked out from the blanket he was swaddled in. He hardly made any noise as she carried him over to me.

“Look at him,” I whispered, awestruck. My chest tightened. “Oh, my gosh.” I let go of the clicker and weakly lifted my arm, reaching for him. Dominic held our baby steady the moment Julie placed him on my chest.

Sitting here, taking in such a precious sight, it was all worth it. The pain. The blood, sweat, and tears.

I remembered how it all started at zero: small twists and tightening. And then, with the snap of a finger, it skyrocketed to one hundred. It was like flashes of red, orange, and white were closing in on me inside of a tunnel that seemed to shrink, threatening to crush me. The beginning of a tsunami that pulled a person under and threw them around like a ragdoll without the chance to breach the surface and capture that one lifesaving breath. And then, the tunnel exploded into a gorgeous merger of yellow, orange, and violet flames.

Vincenzo squirmed and fussed some as he woke, curling and uncurling his chubby fingers.

Softly shushing him, I kissed his forehead. “I love you so much.” Beautiful, blue eyes stared back at me as his eyelids fluttered open. As I continued to stare, riveted by him, I noticed his left eye was a brighter, more intense blue like his daddy’s eyes, while the other eye seemed about two shades lighter. “Look,” I told Dominic and Julie.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Dominic said, examining our son’s peculiar feature. “I’ve never seen that before.”

“Is he okay?” I asked him and the nurse, wanting to make sure this wasn’t dangerous for our son.

“He’s a tough little guy—passed every one of his tests,” Julie said. “It’s called heterochromia. I’ve never seen it in a person either, but it’s one of those random bits of information I remember from the medical books.”

“He’s beautiful,” Dominic said, brushing his fingers against Vincenzo’s cheek.

We both stared in amazement at this new life we created. The one I almost died for.

“How does it feel?” I asked Dominic, looking at him to find tears glossing over his eyes. His lips parted like he was about to say something before he drew in a shaky ghost of a breath.

“Incredible,” he declared. A teardrop snuck out, trickling the speed of a snail down his cheek.

I brushed the pad of my thumb against his cheek. “What’s wrong?” Remembering Julie was still in the room, I politely asked her if she could spare us a few minutes alone. After quickly making sure Vincenzo and I were all set, she left the room.

As soon as the door latch settled into place, Dominic sucked in a sharper, more unstable breath. He blinked away tears.

“*Bellissima*... What you did... I’ll forever admire your strength and your courage.” He swallowed the frog in his throat. I cupped his cheek. “I almost lost you.” He looked at his son. “Both of you.”

I didn’t know what to say. The pressure of tears burned behind my eyes.

“I love you so much,” he said, leaning in close and kissing me. He stared into my eyes, sweeping his hand across my cheek. “You’re so beautiful and incredible. You’re my hero.”

“I love you, too, Dominic.” I nuzzled into his touch, staring down at our son.

“I don’t ever want to lose you,” he softly spoke. “Without you...” He let his thoughts trail.

“You won’t lose me,” I stated as I looked back at him.

Closing his eyes, he kissed my cheek, his eyes opening again as he pulled away.

“*Potrei guardarti tutto il giorno*; I could look at you all day.” His velvety, illustrious Italian tongue danced with my heart. “Your strength is something I wish I carried. It takes a special kind of woman to have your fire. To have your courage and love. *Amor di madre, amore senza limiti*; a mother’s love has no limits.”

Vincenzo began to make fussy little noises, and when I gazed down at him, his face was scrunched up, his little fist jerking around in the air.

I took off his light blue cap, skimming my fingertips over his red hair. He had a full head of it. That explained the heartburn.

“He has a little of each of us,” I observed.

My hair. His daddy’s nose.

As Dominic brought his fingers to his son’s hand, Vincenzo wrapped his fingers around Dominic’s index finger.

The love and admiration in Dominic’s eyes for his baby boy was an image I’d never forget.

I kissed Vincenzo's hair. He yawned, his sweet noises following.

“We love you so much.”

Vincenzo Matteo Rosini

Born: 06/16/2017

Time: 11:30 A.M.

Weight: 10.5 lbs

Length: 22 in.

chapter THIRTY-SEVEN

Wednesday, September 20, 2017

THE MOON'S lighting coupled with the glow of the lamp created a picturesque atmosphere. Moments such as this reminded me of how far I had come. How much I had overcome.

Motherhood was the greatest feeling in the world. Sometimes, I worried if I was doing things the correct way, but I had to remember children didn't come born with an instruction book. Dominic also told me how proud of me he was and that I was raising him just fine. I did the same for him.

"Is that good?" I asked my son, who lay snug in my arm, watching me as he drank his formula. He liked to take his sweet time when he ate. Books called it the gourmet style. I just saw it as another way he was like his father and how he played with his food. Tasting a little bit of formula at a time, smacking his lips, and eventually eating. It still tended to make me laugh.

I smiled at my son, standing at his bedroom window. I gave him a soft kiss on his forehead, telling him I loved him.

He had his fingers wrapped around mine.

The day I birthed Vincenzo, it awoke a new sense of self in me. Greater confidence. Life was now being viewed through a clearer, new set of eyes. I was developing the courage and strength to face and process anything and everything head on. I refused to stress and fear over things in life that I couldn't control.

Maybe it stemmed from being forced to face the chaos and trauma that ended up being my son's birth. Maybe I finally realized in the thick of that agony that I was running out of excuses to hold onto to keep myself in a place of fear and weakness. Watching Julie hold up Vincenzo for us to see flipped some kind of switch.

Nothing made sense for so long. Up was down. Down was up. I didn't want to be trapped in my own head anymore—my thoughts, my self-loathing, and woe-is-me. It was exhausting and held me further and further back. Before I forced myself to face who I truly was and what I truly could conquer, I kept my head down, navigating the world at ground level. Years of insults, degradation, and not being given a fair shot fucked with me. It kept me docile. Ignorant to life. I kept the peace and kept it together good enough to survive. A sheep among thousands allowing themselves to be herded wherever. I believed everyone's lies and misconceptions.

Dominic gave me the most strength and that greatest sense of safety. He *still* did. So did my brothers, Hector, and even Nadia, but to a degree and earlier on in my journey of rediscovery. If it weren't for Dominic believing I had strength, worth, and potential, no one else would've. *I* wouldn't have. It wasn't easy though. I imagined there were times he wanted to rip his hair out over me flat out refusing to open my heart to

myself. But for the life of me, I was blind to what had forever stared back at me in a mirror—a beautiful young woman with a heart of gold and a spirit as hot as fire. A woman who held the power to dream big and crush any obstacle that threatened those dreams. Like Dominic, I had that fire inside me. I had an inner monster, who was thrashing to come out of its cage and prove to the world I wasn't one to fuck with, and she wasn't done. I just had to be reminded of it all during the scariest moment of my life.

Truths were lies, and the curtain lifted, swiping the rug out from under my feet at the same time. I had to relearn every aspect of my life; that was what it felt like. Like I planted my feet next to a victory flag on the country's tallest mountain, only for a gust of wind to knock me off balance and send me tumbling back to the bottom. And like that point in my life, with the help of Dominic, I won over the mountain that was my own mind.

“I see you're going to fight again tonight,” I predicted, noticing Vincenzo's eyelids growing heavy, but he kept springing them back open right before he could fully drift off. I smiled when he showed off a smile of his own.

Watching Vincenzo grow so much in these three short months had been fascinating. Giving him Dianidine within the first twenty-four hours of his life, Dominic and I wondered whether any and all traces of vampirism were still in our son's system. Julie was always in awe at his checkups, reminding us he was in the top 85th to 97th percentile.

At twenty pounds and twenty-seven inches long, we were proud parents.

His bottle now sneaking below half-full, I tilted it up for him for an easier end of his feeding. Luckily, he took to bottles

rather well and quickly.

Guilt wracked me when deciding to quit breastfeeding. Incredibly guilty. With our schedules and unpredictable lifestyle, I knew it was a smart choice. Well, that and it was becoming too painful for me. A chore, even.

The bedroom door opened, and Dominic stepped inside.

“Perfect timing. He’s just about done.”

Vincenzo looked as best as he could toward his daddy, cooing and grunting and smiling.

We watched Dominic through the window as he shut the door.

Fatherhood suited him. He loved to sing to his son, doing it every night before bedtime. Vincenzo smiled whenever he heard his daddy’s voice and when he came home from any sort of trip. He snuggled with his daddy and fell asleep constantly on his chest, ear over his heart.

Their bond was unbreakable.

Dominic joined us, planting a kiss on his son’s head.

“Is Anthony liking his new toy?” I inquired, amused at the thought.

Mr. Prisco turned thirty-one today, and to celebrate, Dominic, Dino, Angelo, and I pitched in and bought him a 2017 red Dodge Viper. He didn’t believe us at first until we handed him the title. Then, he jumped and celebrated with glee.

“I’m fairly sure he’s burned rubber all over town.”

“Should we expect complaints?”

“If he doesn’t rein it in, I’ll expect a bill for his bail.” Dominic then took Vincenzo’s empty bottle from me, allowing me to hold him in a position to burp him.

I rubbed circles on Vincenzo’s back, patting it every so often. “We can’t let a Karen ruin his fun.”

“Which is exactly why I’ve already made calls to the local police and county sheriff’s offices.”

Vincenzo let out a grown man-like burp, catching us off guard. We laughed.

“Feeling better?” I asked my son, laughing again when he smiled lazily. Looking out of the window, I gently bounced him, soaking up the moment. “I still can’t believe it.”

Dominic stepped up behind me, enclosing me in his arms. We both delicately swayed, killing two birds with one stone as the motion soothed our son.

Ever since Vincenzo was born, Dominic’s love and respect for me had exploded and manifested tenfold. He continued to remind me how proud he was of me, how much he loved me, and how my strength inspired him. We constantly talked about how we wanted our wedding, but we weren’t in a rush. Dominic said a special woman like me deserved nothing short of an equally special day with whatever I wanted.

He wasn’t turned off by my post-baby body, despite me gaining over thirty pounds while I was pregnant. Thankfully, he understood my apprehension to go beyond fondling and tender displays.

I was scared my body wasn’t ready yet for sex, but my biggest wall was my surgical scar. I hated it, although I would’ve gone through it again and again as long as it meant

my son lived. Dominic saw my scar as a battle scar and something to be proud of, not disgusted by it.

It was a work in progress.

Vincenzo fussed, relentless in his fight against sleep.

Until his daddy started singing.

Music worked the best at soothing him to sleep, whether it was listening to his daddy's lullabies, Dominic playing the piano, or us playing classical music. His favorite piece was the same as Dominic's—Moonlight Sonata. I played it for him repeatedly when he was in the womb.

He stared at his father, soaking him in while he sang “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.”

During moments like this, sometimes it didn't feel real. I didn't want the rug to be swept from under us.

Our son yawned, making Dominic and me smile. He gave his son a kiss, switching over to singing the rest of the lullaby in Italian. Vincenzo closed his eyes, losing the battle.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “Please keep singing.”

“Whatever you say, *Bellissima*.”

chapter THIRTY-EIGHT

Thursday, June 6, 2019

Bahamas

NO MATTER how many times I pinched myself, I didn't wake up. Because this wasn't a dream. Staring out at the resort's manicured landscape, this was a reality I never thought possible. I figured winning millions in the lottery would've come true first.

In less than an hour, Bianca was going to escort me down the aisle to marry my best friend.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

Smiling, I turned around to face Vincenzo, who was running toward me as fast as his little legs could go. When he roughly collided with my legs, he reached up, making grabbing motions for me to pick him up.

Bianca appeared in the doorway of where me and my bridal party were getting ready, an amused look on her face coupled with an expression that said she tried to catch her grandson but wasn't fast enough to foil his mission.

I bent over and picked up my son, securing him to my hip for a more comfortable hold. He snuggled into my arm, gripping the fabric of my robe.

“I turned my back for one second,” Bianca said.

Laughing, I told her it was fine. I was going to be holding Vincenzo as I walked down the aisle anyhow, but I did need her or Katrina to at least keep him occupied for a little longer so I could get into my dress.

“Mommy?”

“Hmm?”

“I want to see the fish.”

The hotel lobby had an aquarium, and Vincenzo was mesmerized by the different breeds of fish in the tank.

“Mimi will take you to see them later, I promise, but for right now, you need to stay with her until we’re ready to go outside. Okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I motioned for Bianca to take him, and luckily, he didn’t put up a fuss. Normally, he was my shadow back at home.

I walked back over to the wide, tall span of bay windows overlooking the garden and some of the beach surrounding the hotel, shaking some with anxiety. The more the clock ticked, the worse my nerves wrung in knots.

The hustle and bustle of the staff weren’t doing any favors.

My right hand shook as I brought it to my front. I released a steadied, drawn-out breath. I was grateful to have my mother-in-law accompany me down the aisle, but I would’ve rather had my father do it. Or my mother or Nadia. I

swallowed the tears that began threatening me, shaking my head of those depressing thoughts.

Today was supposed to be the best day of my life, and I intended to let nothing and no one spoil it. Besides... I had yet to reveal my surprise.

Katrina entered the room and begged to take Vincenzo from who she also called Mimi now instead of just B. They went off into the hallway, leaving me and Bianca alone.

“Are you okay?” she pondered.

I nodded. “Just praying I don’t trip over my feet or send us both to the ground.”

She placed her hands on my shoulder, seeing right through what I said.

“What else, honey? You can tell me.”

I shook my head, worried if I let her into my head, I would end up ruining my makeup.

“Can I take a guess?” She touched my loose curls, tucking some of my hair behind my ear.

Knowing I would’ve felt better letting out my feelings instead of locking them in a box, I said, “I wish...” I swallowed the tears lodged in my throat. “I wish my parents could be here.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I lied, looking at her. “At least I have you.”

She wrapped me in her arms, resting her face on my shoulder. We both looked out the window.

“You and Vincenzo are the best thing that happened to my son, you know that?”

I smiled, silently agreeing.

“You’ve helped each other see so much of this world and yourselves. Whenever you talk about each other, the sparks are still there. I don’t think he ever would’ve found peace within himself if it weren’t for you.”

I laughed nervously. “You’re gonna make me cry.” She was dead on though.

Every word she spoke was how I felt about Dominic. If it weren’t for him, I had no idea where I’d be. What my life would’ve been like. We’ve helped each other grow and learn and open our hearts, breaking through our stone walls. Fighting our demons. I still got butterflies around him. His kisses or just his touch still electrified me down to my toes. We were each other’s rock and protector. He reminded me I wasn’t alone in this world and that I was deserving of love, just as he was. I showed him not everyone hated him, that beneath the surface of what was ingrained and taught was a man that still had a heart of gold. He just needed help rediscovering himself past the darkness.

“I’m glad he has you, Lilith.”

“And he’s glad he has *you*, too.”

“I hope so,” she said, a subtle pang of sadness in her voice.

Steering away from the road of somber memories we were headed on, I said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been so nervous.”

“Not even with Vincenzo?”

“Well... Okay, yeah, maybe.” We laughed. “But at least I know what to expect this time around.”

I waited patiently for Bianca to catch on, stifling my laugh at the wide-eyed look she gave me, cracking a smile when she

gasped.

“Ten weeks,” I revealed before she could ask. “And no, Dominic doesn’t know.”

Cupping her hands over her mouth, Bianca squealed, resisting the urge to jump up and down.

“Congratulations!” She placed her hand on my belly. “Oh, Lilith, honey. Oh, my goodness.”

I laughed.

“How are you feeling?” Her expression changed to one of immediate concern. “You’re not nauseous, are you? Dizzy? Do you need anything?”

I turned us so we were facing each other, and I grasped her hands, controlling my laughter.

“All I need today is you and everyone else that’s here with us. And no, this baby isn’t kicking my butt like Vincenzo did.”

We let go of each other’s hands and hugged.

She rubbed her hand up and down my back. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you.”

A voice sounded from the doorway—my flower girl.

“Mom, when can we eat that cake?”

Bianca and I burst out laughing, pulling away from each other in the process.

I looked around the room, reality really beginning to set in now. Today, I was officially becoming Mrs. Rosini. The wife of a mafia boss. Co-owner of an empire. Oh. My. God.

“I can’t believe I’m about to do this,” I breathed, shaking my hands like something was on them.

Once again putting her hand on my shoulder, Bianca asked Katrina to shut the door and had her and Vincenzo enter further into the room. Bianca held her grandson as she gathered us in a circle.

“I just want to say a short prayer, if that’s alright.”

I nodded. I wasn’t much into organized religion, but I did believe in God and respected anyone else’s beliefs.

We all closed our eyes and bowed our heads.

“Lord, we ask that you bless Lilith and Dominic on this day, and please help ward off anything that could disrupt this ceremony. Shower us with your love, protection, peace, and happiness. We thank you. Lord, for today. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

“Amen,” Katrina and I said in unison.

We opened our eyes.

“Lilith, I’m so proud to call you my daughter. Thank you for sticking by him.” Bianca and I hugged again. After we separated, she remembered something, like a lightbulb went off. “We need to find you something old and something new and something borrowed and something blue!” She scanned the room, going over and picking up the scarlet chiffon shawl she planned to wear with her dress. With Katrina’s assistance, they draped it around my shoulders.

“That’s so pretty,” Katrina admired.

“This is yours,” I reminded Bianca.

She shook her head. “You wear it. Please.”

Smiling, I nodded.

“Take my silver bracelet, too, honey. That can be the old.”

“What about blue and new?” Katrina asked.

Bianca and I shared a knowing look.

“I already have the new,” I cryptically said. Katrina brought her eyebrows together. I brushed my hand across her cheek. “I’ll explain after the ceremony.” I swept some of her hair over her shoulder, tucking it behind her ear. “Maybe they have a blue flower here somewhere.”

“I’ll go check!” she said, but Bianca stopped her before she could leave.

“Let’s finish getting ready. We still need to get Lilith into her dress.”

Show time.

“JUST TAKE it one step at a time,” Bianca advised. With my arm hooked around hers, I squeezed her arm tight, like if I let go, it would all fall apart.

“I’m really regretting that bottle of water.”

My gut twisted in unforgiving knots as the processional boomed through the speakers. I stared down at my open-toed flats, my mouth becoming dry at the idea of being the center of attention. Cold feet. I knew it was ridiculous. I loved this man. I would’ve taken a million bullets for him. Jumped in front of a moving train. So, why was the thought of repeating vows of love and honor the scariest thing in the world right now?

I heard his professions of love for me. Read his letter, which I kept secured in my journal. I saw how much he came out of his shell and knocked down his walls, how entering his life made him search deep within himself to see the man that was there all along just beneath the surface of the monster he swore to be. That he swore I should've run from. Joke was on him... I never saw a monster. I was never afraid—well, once it was established *why* he snatched me out of New York. He could've skipped the sedative, but that was neither here nor there.

I saw a man in pain from the beatings of life and the absence of endearment. He had a hard time seeing the truths outside of that morally corrupt bubble, and when he had to face how I felt about him and how I saw him, he also had to face the bullshit fed to him by those with agendas against his best interests.

That saving grace was also mine.

Sunlight that any photographer would've killed to score on such a special occasion brought out the beauty of Versailles Gardens on Paradise Island. We agreed on marrying in the Bahamas, though not without worry of just having an outdoor wedding. I didn't want to exchange vows in a church. That would've felt more insincere than me wearing a white dress... But I couldn't ignore the strapless ivory, satin, Maggie Sottero gown when I saw it. With a crisscross bodice, it was to die for. The thigh-length slit on the left side was the perfect touch of naughtiness for my taste. I chose what was described as a garden-inspired, chapel-length veil to go with my dress, the floral lace fitting. I threw in a pair of satin, fingerless, ivory gloves for extra flare.

A staff member signaled that it was my turn to walk the aisle, and my heart could've exploded from my chest then and there. My pulse raced. My temperature rose. I started to quake like I was cold.

“Please don't let me fall.”

Bianca gently squeezed my hand. We looked at each other, her reassuring eyes a comfort.

“I've got you. Just hold on to me, and you'll be okay. There's nothing to be afraid of.” We took our first steps forward, sights ahead, when she added, “Not today.”

We passed many tiers of eye-popping gardens and more manicured landscape. The lush grass and gardens stretched out through the piece of property where the ceremony was being held. The tropical trees and flowers gave it a nice, pleasing twist.

Just ahead stood a decorated, flower-drenched, giant, stone archway. Ancient stone statues were scattered about, adding to the glorious backdrop. Various lily ponds gave the grounds an added oomph.

When we rounded the corner, all the guests, ranging from our entire staff and their families to the other two families of New Jersey, stood up from their chairs.

But the only beautiful sight I could focus on—that stole my breath—was Dominic. Wearing a black suit with thin, red pinstripes, a rose in his lapel, he stood watching me with his hands clasped together at his waist. His hair was gelled back, and the closer I got to the platform, the more it looked like he was about to cry.

His brothers, starting with Dino as his best man, stood in formation behind him. They looked strapping in their tuxedos,

all of them inevitably *strapped* as well. Bianca stood on the bride's side as my maid of honor, alongside Katrina, who accepted the role of both my bridesmaid and flower girl. To some, the inadequacy of how many were in my party versus Dominic's was off-putting, but I didn't want to just throw anyone into those sacred roles. If I had an uneven number, then so be it.

The guests smiled and awed over me and my mother-in-law as we trekked further down the red-carpeted aisle. Pink, white, and red rose petals decorated the aisle runner and the stone archway I would soon be standing beneath.

My son behaved in my hold, his arms around my neck, looking out at the crowd.

My hold on Bianca tightened as we reached the stone steps. We unlinked arms so she could help me lift my dress, and as I took my first step, it was as if Dominic secretly read my mind. He stepped forward and extended his hand. I happily slipped my clammy one inside of his. Bianca moved out of the way after we reached the top, helping another staff member tend to my veil and train.

"Who will be giving you away today?" our officiate, Janet, kindly asked me. Bianca lifted my veil, then clasped my hand back in hers.

"I will," she lovingly declared, and then, we kissed each other's cheeks. She lowered my veil and then took a thankfully calm Vincenzo out of my arm as Dominic and I took our positions in front of Janet, holding hands, face to face.

"*Bellissima*," he greeted.

That feeling of safety and security enshrouded itself around me the longer I stood in front of my husband. Our

officiate addressed the audience, but all I focused on was the father of our children. My hero and best friend. His tender, inviting smile. His cool hands.

There was nothing in the world we wanted more than right here, right now.

“Who will be handing over the rings?” Janet asked. Her question pulled me out of the tunnel vision I had trapped myself into.

Dominic and I let go of each other’s hands as I watched Dino take both rings from inside his breast pocket. He handed them to Janet, stepping back into place behind his brother. He gave a thumbs up, showing off a playful smile.

All of us shared a collective laugh.

Janet handed Dominic my ring.

“Dominic, do you take Lilith to be your wedded wife, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to her, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” Dominic declared with pride.

“Please go ahead and slip Lilith’s ring on her finger.”

He lifted my hand like it was a fragile piece of glass, sliding my ring onto my finger with ease. Like my engagement ring, it had a silver band, but instead of just having one diamond, it was set with four smaller diamonds.

Dominic kissed my knuckles, releasing me as Janet handed me his ring.

“Lilith, do you take Dominic to be your wedded husband, to live together in marriage? Do you promise to love him,

comfort him, honor, and keep him for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful only to him, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” I declared, smiling.

As I slid the simple, gold band around his finger with an engraving of “To my King” on its underside, I gained enough courage to add a little something extra, keeping a firm hold of his hand.

“With this ring, I give you my heart. You’ll never walk alone.”

“I love you,” he simply whispered, reclaiming both my hands in his.

“I understand you both have written your own vows to add?” Janet asked. We both nodded, gazing into each other’s eyes. “Who would like to go first?”

“I will,” Dominic volunteered.

“Thank you,” I mouthed.

He cleared his throat.

“My love, having to put into words how much I love you, how much I’m dedicated to you... It’s impossible... But I’ll try. These past years have been a whirlwind. But the ride was easier to take with you at my side. We’ve seen and done things which one cannot fathom. We’ve been tested more times than I care to count. But I feel it has made us stronger than ever before. You’ve dealt with me at my best and certainly at my worst. You’ve proven time and time again how incredible you are. How dedicated and true you are. Just look at our son.”

I briefly flitted my eyes to his chest, smiling, and then found his eyes again.

“You’re a hell of a mother and more than I could ever ask for in a partner. As I look back, I feel everything that has transpired in my life has led me directly to you. My choices, my heartbreaks, my many regrets. Everything. And whenever you’re around me, my past seems worth it. Because if I chose to do one thing differently, I never would’ve met you. And I never would’ve understood the meaning of the word happy.”

Tears reached my eyes.

“Lilith, I can’t promise that dark clouds will never hover over our lives. I can’t promise you that tomorrow will be perfect and that this life will be easy. But what I can promise you is to forever love and cherish you. I promise my everlasting devotion and loyalty for a lifetime. I promise that I will always be here for you, to listen and to hold your hand, and to always do my best to make you happy. I’ll see and guide you through any crisis, pray with you, dream with you, build with you, and always cheer you on and encourage you. I promise that I’ll willingly be your protector, your advisor, counselor, your friend, your family. Your everything. I promise and solemnly vow to protect my family however necessary and to make sure all of you never want for anything. I’ll stand by you through the bad, the good, the sick... Whatever it is you need me to stand at your side for. God damn it, Lilith, I love you, and I promise you.”

“Wow.” I stumbled with my words, wiping away my tears. “How do I top that?” Everyone laughed. “Forgive me... I’m not great at public speaking.”

I lowered my head, fighting to find more courage. Dominic slipped his fingers beneath my chin and tilted my head back so I had to look at him.

“Don’t be nervous. Just focus on me.” He then lowered his arm.

Blowing out a breath, I did the best I could.

“Dominic, I’ve never heard such sweeter words in my life other than when you tell me you love me. You make me smile every second of every day. When I first saw you... I was just a *wee* bit freaked out, but when I got to know you... The real you... I saw the side I know most rarely get to see, if at all. And that’s a man of integrity, honor, and quite the romantic, if I do say so myself.”

Our guests got a kick out of that last line.

“Your love knows no bounds. You bend over backward for those you love, and even though you run a successful business, you always have time for me, Vincenzo,” I placed my other hand on my belly, revealing my surprise, “and for our soon-to-be bundle of joy.”

As the crowd gasped and erupted into cheers and clapping, Dino freaking out like a kid on Christmas morning. Dominic’s mouth fell open in shock, his eyes lit with joy.

Once the crowd quieted, I finished up.

“You are my soulmate. You and our children are my reason for waking up in the morning. My reason for putting my best foot forward every day. My reason for living. I didn’t fall in love with you; I *walked* into love with you. Well, okay, maybe we didn’t see eye to eye at *first*,”—we chuckled at my inside joke—“but I believe in fate and destiny, and what I believe the most is that we’re fated to do the things we choose, no matter what. And I’d choose you in a hundred lifetimes, in a hundred worlds, and in any version of reality. I constantly choose you again and again when I wake up and when I fall asleep. I

happily choose you to succeed with and to fight and make up with and to love and grow old with.

“I promise to love and cherish you, to stand by you through thick and thin, and every bleepin’ thing in between. I promise to be your one and only, your lover and your friend, to endure until the end. I promise to listen to you and nurture you, to share and never ever give up on you, to fulfill your every need the best I can, and walk beside you hand in hand. I promise to help you continue to succeed, to give you your room to grow, and to tend to you when you’re sick. I’ll build you up when you’re low.” I took a breath and gathered my final thoughts. “Dominic Matteo Rosini, you are my rock. You are my lover. You are my best friend. You are an amazing father. You are truly heaven sent. I love you so much and always will. And I promise to always give you the last burnt pieces of bacon whenever I make it.”

Laughter filled the air.

As Janet reined in her own fit of laughter, she said a few more words and then announced the most beautiful words of all.

“Family, friends, and everyone here today, I now pronounce Dominic and Lilith husband and wife. Mr. Rossini, you may kiss your bride.”

Cheers broke out along with a standing ovation as Dominic placed his palm on the small of my back and dipped me, passionately kissing me, cradling my belly with his other hand.

“I love you, Dominic Matteo,” I said, playfully taking his lip between my teeth.

“And I love you, Mrs. Rosini.”

Our tongues danced a slow version of the tango. “You’re absolutely stunning, by the way,” he added, devouring me with his eyes. He cockily lifted his brow, hinting at a night I may never forget.

“Mommy!”

Vincenzo raced over to us, running into my legs and grabbing on. His daddy picked him up and kissed his cheek.

“Awe,” I gushed when our son snuggled up to Dominic like he did with me earlier, resting his face against Dominic’s shoulder.

As we strolled in wedded bliss past the various gardens, I couldn’t help but experience butterflies. I watched my husband smile with a newfound pride as he stared straight ahead, his boy in his arm.

He was the man I loved.

The man I still dreamed about to this day.

The man I now got to officially call my husband.

My heart skipped a beat, knowing I would truly get to spend the rest of my life with Dominic. That I would get to watch the grass grow out on the patio as we grew old together.

Dominic looked at me with adoration. “*Io e te per sempre?*” he crooned, smiling that sweet, sexy smile that still, to this day, made me weak in the knees.

“You and me forever, baby.”

Fate was a beautiful thing.

chapter THIRTY-NINE

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

“EXCUSE ME,” Dominic said to me, taking his freshly-lit Marlboro and glass of Johnnie Walker with him outside to answer a phone call.

While Vincenzo happily played with his new driving toy near the Christmas tree, Isabella fought sleep in my arms. Every time I tried removing the nipple of her bottle from her mouth, she latched back onto it, suckling. It was adorable, and I gave her an A for effort for drinking from what was now an empty bottle.

With the injury to my uterus during Vincenzo’s birth, it was unanimously decided that Isabella’s birth would be a scheduled cesarean section. I wanted to go as long as I safely and comfortably could, and she entered our lives at thirty-eight weeks. That was last week, and everything went off without a hitch.

We gave her the middle name Lucia because, just like her brother, she was also, indeed, the light of our lives.

Pregnancy with Isabella had gone smoother than it had with her brother. I was grateful. Life in the Rosini household

had also been less chaotic. A well-oiled train running on a consistent track.

That didn't go without saying we still had our snags.

A mole still lived among us. Contracts lingered on our heads, and it was unknown if the Aleskeis would ever make any moves or just taunt us forever with that what-if. Honestly, that was a nightmare in its own right. Maybe that was Vladislav's plan all along—the constant looking over our shoulders. Wanting us to feel trapped and afraid and to go insane with it all. But that wasn't us. He wasn't going to dictate how we lived, and he definitely wasn't going to frighten us into any sort of submission. Yes, a tactic the mafia sometimes played was a wait-and-see approach. Who would crack first. But we weren't about to live under his boot and wave any sort of flag of surrender.

The Rosinis weren't anyone's bitch.

Vincenzo was having a blast pretending to drive around the living room. He loved watching his daddy drive and pretended he had his own steering wheel in the back seat. Dominic made it a game with him on road trips, as well as created opportunities to teach him the rules of the road and about the parts inside the vehicle. Vincenzo had his daddy's intelligence, grasping things rather quickly. One of their favorite activities was playing the piano, and it was clear he, too, developed the same passion to learn and play. He also wanted to grow up and be a dinosaur. We had to break *that* bad news to him eventually.

The incandescence of the cackling fire and the lights around the Christmas tree settled beautifully in the living room. I wished we would've gotten lucky this year with a

white Christmas but maybe next year. It wasn't quite cold enough.

All of us celebrated tonight with a home-cooked meal of spaghetti and made-from-scratch meatballs, dressed with Dominic's homemade sauce and sides of antipasti salad, sweet sausage, and bruschetta. Katrina and Vincenzo helped make the cookies we had for dessert.

Dominic took meal preparation as a time to teach his son the ways of cooking his spaghetti sauce, allowing him to help cut up the vegetables and stir in the seasonings. He even helped roll a couple of meatballs. Cooking was becoming another one of our son's favorite activities.

My arms grew heavier, and I looked to see Isabella asleep. I smiled, able to successfully move the bottle away from her this time. I set it on the couch cushion next to me at the same time Dominic came back inside.

Something was off as he closed the door—his vibes, body language. Whatever the call was about, it wasn't good.

I tilted my head, lowering my brows, wondering what was wrong.

"Nothing." He walked to the fireplace, tossing the butt of his cigarette into it.

"Dominic?" I tried sounding as discreet as I could so I wouldn't alarm Vincenzo. Not that he wasn't distracted enough with his toy as it was.

Hands in his pockets, Dominic stared at the fire pointedly. Something was definitely on his mind in a big way. *Did he receive a tip on our mole? Was it about the Aleskeis? Anything locally?*

During my pregnancy with Isabella, Dominic kept details of work under wraps as much as he could unless I needed to know anything pertinent.

I didn't want him to hide whatever this was from me, however.

"It's not nothing. Who called?"

"Mommy, can I open another one?"

"Not until morning," Dominic answered for me without turning away from the crackling flames. "Why don't you go put that toy in your room?"

"Wait for you?" Vincenzo asked him.

Part of Vincenzo's nightly routine was waiting for us in his bed with a story he picked out—if he wanted one read to him that night—when it was time to tuck him in.

Dominic looked at his son, nodding. "Yes." He looked back at the fire as Vincenzo excitedly ran out of the living room with his toy in hand. Dominic's ghost of a smile didn't reach his eyes.

I gave him the benefit of the doubt by waiting for any chance he'd talk, my patience paying off.

He told me it was Andre who called.

"Oh, yeah?"

After a few tense seconds, my stomach twisted into a billion knots.

"Katrina's father, Louis, was found in his cell this morning. Someone beat him to a pulp and put a bullet in his head. Police found Maria on her kitchen floor later that afternoon. Her head was next to her."

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I thank each and every one of you for sticking with this series so far and your continued love and support. It means more than you may realize.

And to my husband... thank you for putting up with me throughout this process and my many, many questions. I'd rather pick your brain than run to Google.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennifer Porter is an author of mafia romance. She resides in the state of Maine.

While in elementary school, she was told she had the potential to write her own book, and as she grew older, that's exactly what she did as she discovered her passion. Before penning her novel, she wrote opinion pieces for her local newspaper. Coffee and her supportive husband and sister keep her going.

If she's not getting lost in her favorite television shows, new reads, or her creative worlds, she spends her spare time with her husband and family.

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Visit my website <http://www.jenniferporterbooks.com> for announcements regarding my Wardman Chronicles series and any & all future stories!

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