



A
SINS
OF THE
FATHERS
NOVEL

By
Fate I

Conquer

USA Today Bestselling Author

Cora Reilly

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I
Conquer

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Amo

Do you believe in love at first sight? In a love so strong and bright, it ignites you even in your darkest hours? Do you believe that somewhere in this world there's someone who's destined to be your other half? Your soulmate?

I didn't.

Until I met her.

Greta Falcone.

Protected mafia princess from the madmen of Las Vegas, she's forbidden to me.

Greta

My love for my family and my animals was all I needed. I never thought I'd fall in love. Until I met him.

Amo Vitiello. Future Capo of the Famiglia. Cruel and cold. The smiles that he has only for me quiet the chaos in my head.

What if you find your soulmate at the wrong time?

I knew the cruelest men, and yet nothing could ever be crueler than fate itself.

TRIGGER WARNING

Don't keep reading if you don't want any spoilers....

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[Click here to see triggers.](#)

Chapter *One*



Twelve years old

I was only a young girl, dressed in my favorite tutu, when I came to the realization that the men in my family were like the monsters in the scary movies that Nevio loved to watch.

And a piece of my heart broke.



Screams and laughter rang out, filling our backyard, and the lingering smell of charcoal tickled my nose.

Mom caught my eye where she lounged on a sunchair next to our huge pool landscape where my twin Nevio, and cousins Alessio and Massimo had a water battle with Fabiano's son Davide and my uncle Savio. The women of the family lounged on the sunchairs around them, having drinks. Only Aurora who was three years younger than me stood at the edge of the pool watching

the fight as if she might want to join in. I sat on our patio, needing space, but even here the sounds became too much. It had been a long day filled with presents, cake, singing and hugs as Nevio and I celebrated our twelfth birthday.

If it was just my birthday, I wouldn't have celebrated at all, but it was also Nevio's day and so I braved the excitement.

I sent Mom an apologetic smile and rose from the chair. She nodded, a few blond strands falling out of her messy bun. She knew I had to leave and find peace in my room for the rest of the evening. I glanced around, looking for Dad to say good night as I always did. I found him, Nino and Fabiano in the common area of our mansion. It was a place that was busy most days. With three families living under this roof, everyone always used this area to gather—to celebrate and to argue alike. And Fabiano, who was like a brother to my dad and uncles, though he wasn't blood, was over often too.

They were talking in quiet voices. I could tell something was up. A nervous energy was in the air, one that made my skin prickle in a way that made me long for a dark corner to hide. Dad fell silent when he spotted me. For a moment his dark eyes—the same dark brown as mine—held a gleam I couldn't read before they became tender. I went over to him and briefly hugged his middle. "I'm off to bed."

"Do that." He kissed the top of my head before I pulled away and gave Nino and Fabiano a smile that felt a little tight from overuse today, then I headed into my family's wing and into my room.

Until a couple of years ago, Nevio and I had shared a room but when I got overwhelmed by events, I often sought absolute quiet and Nevio wasn't the quiet type. His room was a zone of war while mine was organized and spotlessly clean. Yet, our rooms were joined by a door so we could easily visit the other.

I got ready for bed despite it being only eight, but I felt tired and preferred to read in bed.

It was nearing eleven when I realized my mind and body wouldn't find peace any time soon. I was still too overwhelmed by the day. Outside it had gotten quieter.

I got out of bed and put on my favorite white leotard, tights, tutu and ballet shoes before I headed downstairs. Through the French doors I could see that Mom, Nino's wife Kiara, Savio's wife Gemma and Fabiano's wife Leona were still talking and drinking wine. Farther down, I could also make

out movement, probably the other kids.

I decided against my ballet room in the small garden house. I didn't like to dance there when so many people were in the garden.

Instead, I headed for the basement. Dad didn't want me to be down there. But since Nevio had figured out the code for the steel door, I often went there when I couldn't find solitude anywhere else.

I'd always loved the dark. I sought the nooks and crevices of our mansion to hide when the world around me became too much, when the sounds and smells crowded in my brain like an avalanche, threatening to bury me beneath. On countless nights I'd roamed the sprawling tunnels and rooms beneath our mansion and the two neighboring houses. One of them belonged to Fabiano and his family and the other was mostly vacant. Dad had bought it because he didn't want direct neighbors. My uncle Adamo and his family lived there whenever they visited Las Vegas.

Tonight, something felt different about the basement. It took my eyes a moment to get accustomed to the dark, and that's when I realized that light was coming from somewhere farther down the hall. I followed it until I reached the first corridor below the neighbor mansion. It was illuminated. My brows puckered when I heard low voices from behind one of the doors.

Shuffling, like shoes being dragged over stone, sounded further down the corridor and I slipped into the room beside the cell. It wasn't dark either and when I turned, I saw why. The room had a floor length window looking into the neighboring cell. Dad and Nevio were inside but they didn't seem to see me. This was like a one-way window. I moved closer, wondering what was happening. Nevio's hair was still wet and he was barefoot. The door to the cell opened, and Nino and Fabiano entered, dragging along a very tall but skinny man.

They shoved him to a stretcher in the center of the room, then proceeded to cuff him to it.

"Enjoy your birthday present," Fabiano said with a shake of his head, his smile a little wrong, and left.

Nevio glanced between Dad and Nino, licking his lips. "Present?"

I shivered at the eager note in his voice.

"He's yours to deal with," Dad said, motioning at the man who looked terrified as his wide eyes darted between my brother and father.

Nevio laughed darkly, bent down and pulled his knives. He always carried two in leather holsters at his calves. No shoes or socks, but weapons.

I took a step back, shaking my head. What was going on?

Nevio practically leaped at the man on the stretcher, like a cat pouncing on an injured mouse, and sliced the blades in a slashing motion across his cheek. A scream rang out and I whirled around, my heart pounding, my vision becoming blurry.

I didn't stop running until I reached a dark corridor. My breathing was labored. I tried to process what I'd seen, to understand the meaning of it all. Dad had gifted Nevio a man to deal with...

I knew Dad was feared in Las Vegas. He was Capo of the Camorra after all, but he'd always made sure I didn't know too much about his work. Since I didn't go to school or had contact to people outside of our world, I'd never heard the details of the rumors.

But even with my limited knowledge, I could only assume Dad had given Nevio that man so he could hurt him badly.

I counted to seventy-five before I crept back to the cell, driven by curiosity and fear alike. Dad always said we needed to face our fears or they'd control us. I slipped into the adjoining room. Goose bumps flashed across my skin when I approached the glass. Beyond it, Nevio still knelt beside the man on the stretcher but everything else had changed drastically. Blood covered Nevio's face, clothes and the floor around him—even his feet. The man was a gruesome mess, and at first glance I was sure he was dead but then his eyes peeled open in his bloody face with the flappy skin. He was whimpering. Nevio smiled cruelly and brought the knife down on the man's face again. An earsplitting scream rang out. I whirled around breathing raggedly. Cold sweat broke on my skin and my heart raced so fast I was sure I might have a cardiac arrest soon. I needed to check in one of the medical books in our library if it was even possible to have a cardiac arrest as a young person if you didn't have a heart defect.

"If you always give up control like that when you torture, then you won't get any useful information out of them," Dad said disapprovingly.

"And an onslaught of immense pain like this in such a short period of time isn't as torturous as dosed amounts of agony over a longer period," Nino drawled.

I shivered.

I needed to leave. I needed to stop this. I needed...I needed.

"What is going on here?" Mom's shrill voice pierced my ear.

"Oh fuck," Dad muttered.

I turned to find Mom in the other cell. She looked completely disgusted, furious and terrified. She stared at Nevio with horror-widened, blue eyes. Last time I'd seen her, she'd been happy and tipsy, nothing of that remained.

He only grinned. "Dad gave me the best birthday present ever."

Mom swallowed, disbelief reflecting on her face as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Dad stalked toward her, grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the cell despite her struggling. I quickly dashed under the desk that was pressed up against the wall and huddled in the shadow it provided, making myself as small as possible.

A moment later the door swung open and banged against the stone wall. Dad dragged Mom inside. He closed the door and pressed a button on the keypad beside the door. Suddenly the sounds from the neighboring cell ceased and I assumed Nino and Nevio wouldn't be able to hear us anymore either.

Mom ripped away from Dad's hold. "How could you do this?" she screamed, her skin red, and tears streaming down her face. "What is wrong with you?"

I'd never heard Mom raise her voice against Dad.

She began beating her fists against his chest. "What. Is. Wrong. With. You? How could you give a twelve-year-old boy a present like that?"

Dad grabbed Mom's wrists, his expression scary.

I didn't understand what was going on. I'd never seen my parents fighting. I'd never seen Mom freak out like this either. She was always so calm and understanding.

"Do you really want Nevio to become as messed up as you?"

Mom! My breath hitched and I had to force myself to stay motionless.

Dad jerked Mom against his chest, smiling in a way that made my heart beat very fast. "Maybe you are blind to the truth, Angel. But I am not. Maybe you cannot see or won't see that our son is a monster. I don't have to turn him into one. He's messed up and I'm trying to channel his monster before it goes rampant in a way none of us want. For fuck's sake, look at him."

Nevio was running the tip of his blade along the man's belly with a curious expression.

"Stop it. Stop it now!" Mom whispered harshly.

Dad looked down at her for a long time, before his mouth set in a tight line. "Go upstairs. I'll stop it. For today. You can't stop who Nevio is becoming, who he has been all his life. It's in his genes."

“Maybe we can get help.”

“We are his help. He doesn’t need anything else. Now go up,” Dad growled.

He’d never ordered Mom around like that, and I shivered.

Mom ripped away from his hold and stormed outside. Dad released a harsh breath then he stalked out of the room. I crawled out from under the desk and stumbled to my feet then toward the keypad, pressing the button that Dad had. He appeared in the neighboring cell a moment later.

“The show is over,” he ordered.

Nevio shook his head, still hurting the man with his knives. “I’m not done yet.”

He sounded so eager, so...wrong.

Dad grabbed Nevio by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet. “I said it’s over. And you better remember who makes the laws in this house and in the West.”

Nevio stared back at Dad for a moment before he dropped the knives and nodded.

Nino pushed away from the glass and patted Nevio’s shoulder. “You need to learn when to stop, when to control yourself.”

“Control is no fun,” Nevio said with a grin.

Dad exchanged a look with Nino I didn’t understand, shaking his head. “You have to learn control.”

“Why? You don’t ever have to control yourself as Capo.”

“I don’t have to, but I do.”

He pushed Nevio out of the room while Nino went over to the bleeding man. “I’ll be back. This isn’t over yet.” Then he followed Dad and Nevio out.

I didn’t do anything but breathe for a while, then I forced my body to move. I walked out of the room and stood in the corridor until I’d counted to fifty-five before I felt capable of moving again. I should go back up to the mansion. Instead, I walked into the cell. I’d never felt sadder and more desperate than I did in this moment.

The floor of the cell was covered in blood and the knives and pliers lay in a blood puddle on the floor next to the badly injured man on the stretcher. My brother had done this. Dad and Nino had shown him how to do it.

I couldn’t understand how the people who protected and loved me were capable of this.

I took a step closer to the man and his eyes opened but one of them

wasn't all right.

His chapped, bloody lips parted, and he said something but I couldn't understand his rasp. I walked closer, even as panic and nausea settled in the pit of my stomach. My ballet flats touched the blood and soaked it up as I stopped beside him.

"Help me," he croaked.

I climbed up on the stretcher and perched on my knees, terrified. What could I do for him? I couldn't help him escape. What if that hurt my family?

Tears pressed against my eyes.

The man looked pleading. "Help me please." He sucked in a rattling breath. "Kill me."

I froze, eyes widening.

His face tipped toward the knives that Nevio had dropped on the floor.

"Stab me," he pleaded.

My brows furrowed as I hopped down and reached for the knife closer to me with a trembling hand. I curled my fingers around the bloody handle. The blade was coated with the man's blood from the endless cuts Nevio had inflicted on him. I avoided looking too closely at the man's body. I could not bear the proof of my family's monstrosity. I stared at the sheer fabric of my tutu that was slowly turning red with the blood around me.

"Fast. Before they return," the man rasped.

I looked up at his begging face, or what was left of it.

Tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Show mercy, girl, and kill me."

How could killing someone be mercy?

I'd sworn to never hurt a living creature, didn't eat meat, dairy or eggs, and here this man was asking me to end his life.

My fingers around the knife handle tightened but I could not move. Despite my revulsion, I reached out with my other hand and touched the man's shoulder very gently. I never touched people I didn't know. But this man needed comfort and so I had to get over my anxiety. "I can't." The words were broken. I moved my hand back again.

The man tried to roll over, closer to me but the cuffs held him in place. He groaned and lay back on his back.

"Then give me the knife. Don't let me suffer."

"I can talk to my father. He'll spare you."

The man cackled, and blood spilled out of his mouth. "Your father and

his brothers do this every day. They torture people for business and for fun. They know no mercy.”

I’d feared it was like that after what I’d heard earlier. My heart beat faster and faster, and the pounding in my temples was close to unbearable by now. A distant whistling sound rang in my ears. I needed quiet. I needed dark. I needed sweet oblivion.

The man’s eye widened because of something at my back, and he began to shake, then cry.

“Greta,” Nino said in a careful voice.

I didn’t turn to him, only looked at the sheer terror in the man’s face, at his desperate crying. I’d never felt terror like his. Terror because of the men I loved with all my heart.

“Come down immediately,” Nino said. Then he appeared beside me. “You move an inch toward her and you’ll regret it,” he said in a very different tone, one he’d never used on me and wasn’t now. The man closed his eyes, his shoulders shaking with sobs. My own tears intensified seeing his anguish.

“Give me the knife, Greta.”

I tightened my hold, not taking my eyes off the man.

Nino reached for my hand with the knife but I shoved away from him, whirled around and backed up against the wall. I breathed harshly.

Nino’s brows furrowed. He raised his hands, palms facing my way. “I’m not going to hurt you. You know that. Give me the knife and come upstairs.” He took a step closer and I brought the blade up so it pressed against the spot beneath my ribs. I’d watched enough fight training to know this was where you aimed when you wanted to kill and I *always* listened when Nino explained anatomy.

Nino regarded the knife then nodded slowly. “All right.”

“What the fuck is it now?” Dad muttered, stepping in and freezing when he spotted me. The harshness slipped off his face, and his expression became one I couldn’t understand. Too many emotions flashed across his features.

More tears streamed down my face, shaking my body with their force.

Dad glanced at Nino, then at the knife in my fists, aiming at the soft spot beneath my ribs.

“What are you doing, mia cara?” His voice was gentle, like a caress. It was comfort and love. It was everything I loved.

He moved closer but I pressed the knife harder against my chest and he

stopped. “What have you seen?”

I searched his eyes, and swallowed. Everything. Too much. I couldn’t say anything but he must have seen it in my eyes. Dad was good at reading others.

He looked at Nino once more, then at the man on the ground. “He deserved it, you know?”

I sobbed, shaking my head. I didn’t want to hear another word. I just wanted out, away. I wanted darkness and quiet. But I couldn’t leave now, not before I’d done what needed to be done.

Even though every word felt like shrapnel in my throat, I croaked, “Don’t hurt him anymore.”

“Why don’t you come upstairs?” Dad said, holding out his hand. He exchanged another glance with Nino, who shifted his weight. Maybe they thought I didn’t notice, but I did. I noticed everything, every little detail no matter how inconsequential. That was the problem, and now my salvation.

I backed farther away and pressed the knife into my flesh. The tip pierced my skin and I whimpered, not used to pain but willing to brave it.

Nino lifted his hands once more.

“Mia cara, drop the knife.”

“Show mercy.”

Dad regarded the man briefly and his eyes made it clear he wouldn’t. Dad never lied to me, and he didn’t now. “I won’t. Not even for you. This is something you can’t understand yet.”

The man opened his eyes and looked at me. He wanted death. “Kill him then. Just don’t hurt him anymore.”

Dad stared at me, then at the man, and his expression hardened once more. Nino shook his head, as if annoyed by the whole situation, and stalked over to the man, grabbed his head and twisted hard. I heard his neck breaking and the light leave his eyes, but with it the terror and anguish left too.

I dropped the knife with a clatter. Both Dad and Nino looked at me as if I was about to break.

I stormed out, evading Dad and ran faster than ever before. I knew these corridors by heart, even in the dark that cloaked them now. I’d roamed them too often at night in the last few years.

Light chased me as Dad and Nino tried to catch me and turned on the lamps hanging from the low ceiling. But I turned one corner after the other, never slowing.

Their calls echoed in the basement, hunting me.

Tears burned my eyes, blinding me. But I didn't need them to see. I followed my memory until I reached the basement below Fabiano's mansion and hid in the storage room in a big carton that was filled only halfway with discarded clothes.

I curled into a small ball and closed the box over my head.

I stared into the darkness, fighting nausea and trying to quiet the whooshing in my ears. Soon the dark and quiet took effect and my pulse slowed, and then later the whooshing in my ears settled down as well. Sweet oblivion.

Chapter

Two



Voices carried through the room.

“This is a fucking mess,” Fabiano muttered.

“Can you imagine how scared she must be?” Leona said, sounding heartbroken.

Hearing her voice, my own heart ached. Then I realized who she was talking about—me.

She was heartbroken for me, worried I was scared. Was I scared? Should I be?

Of Dad? Of every man in my family? Of my own brother? I didn’t know what I was feeling. Mostly, I didn’t want to feel. I just wanted to be, in the dark and quiet, all alone.

“I doubt that’s all she is. Seeing something like that changes you,” Fabiano said. They didn’t think I was here because they didn’t know I had the code to their part of the basement.

Their voices disappeared, probably to help my family search for me.



Eight hours later—at some point I'd started counting the gentle thud-thud of the second hand of my wrist watch—I had to leave my hiding place. I needed to relieve myself and my legs and back hurt from being curled up for so long. When I was certain I was alone, I opened the lid and climbed out. The blood on my clothes had made the fabric stiff, but I didn't smell the coppery scent anymore. My nose was desensitized to it by now.

I shivered. It was cold in the basement even at this time in the year. I hadn't noticed before, but my fingers and toes were stiff from the cold. I looked around for a place to pee, but every corner felt as bad as the other. I felt bad about sullyng Fabiano's basement like that.

The memory of the blood puddle in the cell entered my head and I shuddered once more. Maybe I could hold on for a few more hours...but what then? I couldn't return to my home, not yet.

I hugged myself and shivered harder.

What was I going to do now?

I glanced to my right and went into the corner. I retched as I touched the bloody fabric of my leotard to push it aside so I could pee. Squatting in the corner, I hurriedly emptied my bladder, then got dressed as quickly as I'd undressed and rushed back to my hiding place. I needed quiet, needed dark, darker than the storage room, dark enough to black out my too accurate memory replaying every detail of the man's anguished face. I didn't even know his name. Would anyone remember him? I wanted to forget but was it wrong of me to wish for something like that? I curled up as small as I could on top of the clothes in the box then closed the lid.

I didn't sleep, though I was tired and hadn't slept in more than a day. I kept counting the seconds, trying to let the familiar sound calm me.

Eleven hours had passed since I'd run away when I heard voices again but this time it wasn't only Fabiano and Leona. Dad, Nino and Nevio were with them.

I made myself even smaller and breathed very slowly and low so they wouldn't hear me. They weren't in the storage room but in the corridor in front of it. I strained my ears to listen to their conversation.

“Are you sure she doesn’t know the fucking codes to leave the premises?” Dad snarled. “That’s hard to believe considering you slip out all the time.”

“Maybe she does. Greta is observant,” Nevio said. Despite what I’d seen him do, a part of me wanted to go to my brother. He’d always been the person who consoled and protected me. Now I hid from him and my family.

“She isn’t in our basement and she isn’t in the spare house basement. That leaves this basement,” Dad said.

“She hasn’t left the premises yet from our side. I checked the log of the last twelve hours,” Nino drawled. “The only code that was entered from our premises was the one to the door leading to your basement, Fabiano.”

I didn’t know they could see who put in a code.

“I don’t have a log of entered codes. Leona felt it was too stalkerish. There’s only an alarm if a wrong code is entered, and it wasn’t.”

“So she could have slipped out of your mansion,” Dad said in a tight voice.

“I doubt it.”

“You can’t base your doubt on facts,” Nino said.

“Fuck it,” Dad growled. “We have to find her. If something happens to her...”

“Maybe you should alert your soldiers in case she’s outside,” Fabiano suggested.

“No. I don’t want anyone to know. I don’t trust anyone with Greta. We’ll find her.”

“Let’s search your basement and mansion and the backyard, if we don’t find her there, we’ll consider further actions,” Nino said.

Their voices moved away. I swallowed. It was only a matter of time before they’d find me. Once I was sure they weren’t close by, I climbed out of the box once more and tiptoed toward the door. I wasn’t sure what I was waiting for. I just knew I couldn’t face them yet.

I glanced into the corridor which was empty but at the end light spilled out of two rooms, I looked to the other side where a steep staircase led up to the house. Taking a deep breath, I rushed toward it and climbed up. I slipped out of the basement. I could hear Fabiano and Nino somewhere on the first floor.

I sprinted out and upstairs toward the second floor. I’d been inside Fabiano’s house a few times and remembered the layout. I put my ear against

Aurora's door. It was quiet inside except for her soft humming. Without knocking, I slipped in.

Aurora sat on the floor surrounded by her Barbies and was playing, her back turned to me.

She turned and her eyes shot open in alarm. "Greta?"

"Shhh." I pressed my finger against my lips. "Can I hide in your room?"

She got to her feet slowly, eyeing me. "What's that on your clothes?"

"Blood," I said.

She paled and looked sick. "Really?"

I nodded. I heard voices coming closer. "Can I hide? I really need to hide."

"Did you do something bad?" Aurora asked, not coming closer.

I wasn't even sure at this point anymore. "I don't know. Will you help me?"

Aurora nodded hesitantly and pointed at her wall cupboard. I slipped inside and sank to the ground, hidden behind her dresses. I wasn't sure why she had so many. She never wore them. Aurora closed the shutters, her face questioning.

She returned to her Barbies and sank down a second before a knock sounded. Through the gaps in the shutters, I could see long legs enter the room. I recognized the white sneakers as Fabiano's, and a moment later his voice sounded.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she said, still bent over her Barbies, busying herself undressing one of them. "I'm in my room like you asked me to."

He didn't move. "That's good. Have you heard something? Or maybe seen Greta?"

"Greta?" Aurora asked, lifting her head briefly.

"She ran away. She might have misunderstood something and is a bit confused."

I bit my lip. I wasn't confused. He said it so Aurora would tell on me in case she knew something.

"Okay," Aurora said slowly. "What did she see?"

"Nothing to worry about. You'll tell me if you see her, okay?" He moved closer to her and squatted beside her. I tensed because now I could see his face. I doubted he could see mine through the shutters as I wasn't backlit like they were.

Aurora fumbled with her Barbie doll. If she kept acting like this, he might get suspicious.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” he asked quietly.

I held my breath.

“Greta and I aren’t close. I tried but she’s with the boys, not with me and Carlotta.”

Fabiano touched her shoulder. “Greta is different. It’s not about you, all right?”

Aurora nodded. Fabiano pressed a kiss to her forehead, then he rose to his feet. “Stay in your room until your mother or I get you for lunch.”

He left the room.

Greta is different.

I didn’t move. I knew I was different. I didn’t like being around people that weren’t my family. Too many people made me anxious. I never minded being different. But now I wondered if I’d hurt Aurora by being the way I was.

She got up and came over to the wardrobe, opening it. She peered down at me with a hesitant smile.

“Thank you.”

She nodded. “You can stay in my room for as long as you want. I can try to smuggle some of my lunch up later.”

I shook my head. “I’m not hungry, but I’d like to stay here.”

“Do you want to shower and put on some of my clothes?”

I glanced down at my bloody leotard, tutu, tights and ballet shoes. “No.”

For some reason, I didn’t want to get rid of the blood yet. It felt as if I’d be disregarding the man’s suffering by doing so.

“Oh, okay. But I’m sure some of my clothes would fit you, even if they aren’t your style.”

I frowned. Not my style? I didn’t have a style. I liked comfortable clothes and Aurora often wore overalls, which were the epitome of comfort. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know how to explain my reasoning to Aurora. I knew her clothes would have fit me. Even though she was three years younger, we were almost the same height and I was too thin, a constant worry of Mom.

“I just want to sit here,” I said eventually.

Aurora swallowed and nodded. “Oh, sure. I’ll close the door then and keep playing with my dolls.”



Hiding in Aurora's room had the advantage of having a bathroom if I needed to go to the toilet. It had been thirty-eight hours since I'd run off and Aurora respected my wish not to interact. Despite her offer to sleep in her bed with her, I preferred to stay in the wardrobe or lie under her bed and stare at the slat frame. I knew I must have been smelling awfully because of the dried blood by now but she never complained.

I hadn't slept or eaten in more than two days and was starting to feel the effects. My eyes burned as if I had sand in them and my stomach ached badly. Aurora had left for lunch 75 minutes ago. She'd probably bring me food again. Food I couldn't touch. Not because it wasn't vegan, but because the mere idea of eating after what I'd seen seemed impossible.

The door opened but I remained where I was in case it wasn't Aurora.

"I really don't have time to play dolls right now," Nevio muttered as he followed Aurora into the room.

I froze under the bed where I'd been lying for two hours.

"I'm sorry, but I had to get him. He was going mad from worry about you," Aurora said, sounding absolutely miserable.

"What?" Nevio said then fell silent. "Fuck."

He moved toward the bed and fell to his knees then peered under the bed. His face filled with relief and a flicker of guilt overcame me. Worrying my brother always made me feel bad. He reached for me but I tensed and backed away. His expression transformed with realization and pain, which felt like a stab in my heart. He lowered his arm and stretched out on his back on the floor, his face tilted toward me.

"Give us a moment, Rory, and make sure no one interrupts us."

Aurora left without hesitation, closing the door almost inaudibly.

Nevio put his outstretched arm, palm upward between us. An invitation, one I didn't accept.

I looked at Nevio, at the dark eyes that were mine too, only the look in them was different. Where my face was soft, Nevio's was harsh. Where I was thin and short, he was tall and already muscled from fight training and parkour.

Where I despised violence, Nevio needed it.

“We’ve been looking for you nonstop. Everyone’s worried, Greta. We thought something might have happened to you.”

Something had happened, something I couldn’t explain quite yet. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. The furry sensation on my tongue reminded me that I hadn’t brushed my teeth in too long. My pulse picked up thinking about what this would do to my teeth.

“Greta?”

I simply stared back at my brother. Meeting other people’s eyes cost effort, not with him.

“Are you scared of me now?” he asked in a strangled tone. Tears filled my eyes. Deep down I had always known what Nevio was. I had felt it. But I hadn’t quite understood the enormity of it, how pitch-black Nevio’s longing really was. What I’d seen him and Dad and Nino do, had opened my eyes to a brutal truth I had trouble handling.

“Greta,” Nevio said, shifting a bit closer. I glanced at his palm with the crisscrossing scars. Pain meant little to Nevio. He liked pain, feeling it, causing it.

“I don’t fear you,” I pressed out. Nevio visibly relaxed and a small joyless smile pulled at his lips.

“I fear what you’re capable of. I fear for the people who’ll cross your path in an unfortunate moment.”

“That’s how nature works, you know?” he murmured. “There’s dark and light, there must be. Maybe it’s the same with twins, but it wasn’t split evenly between us. I got all the darkness and you got all the light.”

“That’s too much of a weight to carry, so much darkness,” I whispered, my heart aching for him.

He smiled sardonically. “I like the dark, Greta. I belong there.”

I wished I could argue with him but after seeing his expression in the cell, I couldn’t.

“Very few people can bear what I am,” he said quietly.

“I can.”

Nevio searched my eyes. “You ran from it.”

“Not from your darkness. From...” I shuddered, remembering everything. Tears stung my eyes once more.

Nevio nodded as if he understood. How could he when even I didn’t?

“I won’t ever run from you, Nevio. I’ll always be at your side, no matter

what.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.” I extended my hand and touched my palm to his. His touch didn’t revolt me. Maybe it should. Why could I bear his touch after what I’d seen when I could hardly bear most people’s closeness? Maybe my light wasn’t as bright as Nevio thought.

“We should go home. Dad is about to send out the cavalry to search the city for you.”

A weight sunk into my stomach but I allowed Nevio to pull me out from under the bed. He scanned my bloody clothes but didn’t comment.

I felt shaky because I hadn’t eaten in too long. Nevio tightened his hold as he led me out. He towered over me, his fingers linked with mine. Aurora leaned against the wall in the corridor and she straightened when she saw us and gave me an apologetic look before she smiled at Nevio.

He nodded at her. “I owe you.”

He pulled me past her and down the corridor. When we’d almost reached the stairs, I looked over my shoulder, mouthing *Thank you* at Aurora who still stood where we’d left her. Then she disappeared from view as Nevio led me downstairs. Soon we were crossing the basement corridors and entered the mansion. Nevio didn’t stop until we arrived in the common room area where most of my family had gathered. Alessio and Massimo lounged on the sofa while Nino and Savio sat across from them on the other. Dad was pacing the room, and Kiara was consoling Mom who looked horrible.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Dad muttered, then his eyes settled on me as I stepped out from behind Nevio. Silence fell in the room.

Mom stepped out of Kiara’s embrace, her blue eyes scanning me from head to toe, horror mixing with relief. She rushed toward me and pressed me against her chest in a crushing hug. “Oh Greta.” She sobbed. “Greta.”

I accepted her embrace but my eyes were directed at the rest of the room. Nevio headed over to Dad, clapping Massimo’s and Alessio’s hand on the way. He said something to Dad, probably how he found me.

Dad’s eyes locked on mine, and I felt a deep sadness. I looked away and pulled out of Mom’s arms. I didn’t look at anyone in the room, unable to bear it. “We need to clean you up, okay?” Mom said in a careful voice.

“No,” I said firmly.

“Greta.” Mom cupped my face. “We really need to get you out of these clothes. You’ll feel better then.”

I backed away but my refusal to eat and drink caught up with me and my legs gave in. Mom gasped, reaching out to stop my fall. But my knees hit the floor before she could grab hold of my arms. Dad crossed the room in a blink and knelt beside me.

I tensed when he lifted me in his arms. “When have you last eaten?” he asked in a low voice.

I briefly glanced into his eyes then looked away and gave a small shrug.

“She’s dehydrated. I can tell from her skin,” Nino said as he stopped beside us. He reached for my wrist but I jerked it away. Dad’s grip on me tightened but he didn’t say anything.

“I want to feel your pulse, Greta,” Nino explained calmly.

“I don’t want you to touch me,” I said.

Nino glanced at Dad.

“I’ll take you up to your room now, Mia Cara, where you’re going to let your mother help you clean up and get dressed, and then Nino will take a look at you, and you’re going to eat and drink, understood?”

I blinked up at his dark, serious eyes, then glanced down at myself. I gave a nod.

“You stay here,” Dad said.

“Why?” Nevio groaned.

“Stay.”

Dad carried me upstairs, followed by Mom and Nino. He put me down on the marble floor of my bathroom but didn’t release my arms. “I can take over now,” Mom said in a pinched voice. A tense look passed between them but Dad finally released me and left the room.

Mom closed her eyes briefly then turned to me with a pretend smile.

She didn’t try to speak to me as she helped me undress. If she was bothered by all the blood on my clothes and skin, she didn’t show it. I supposed being married to Dad, she’d seen worse over the years. When we pulled down my tights, I winced at a sharp pain in my sole.

I had a cut under my foot that looked as if it was inflamed. “Nino will have to take a look at this,” she said neutrally. “Or would you prefer if I called a doctor?”

I immediately shook my head. Nino had always treated me when I was sick. I didn’t want someone I didn’t know taking care of me.

“Okay. That’s what I thought. I just thought I should ask considering everything that’s happened.”

I could tell that Mom was angry.

“Are you mad at me?”

She let out a sharp laugh and shook her head, her palm sliding over my hair as she began to rinse it with water. “No, why would I be?”

“But you’re mad.”

“I am.”

“At Dad.”

She held the shower head out to me and I took it and washed away the dirt and blood while Mom gathered a fluffy bathrobe.

“Why are they the way they are?”

“I don’t know.” Mom held the robe out to me. I wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth. Her blue eyes were soft as they settled on mine, but her mouth was set tight with worry. She wasn’t wearing any makeup and her blond hair was a mess. “I wish you hadn’t seen what you did. I wish I could take this burden from you.”

“Why would you think you can carry it better than I do?” I asked, honestly curious.

Mom smiled. “I don’t think I do, but I think I should. I’m your Mom. I want to protect you.”

“I don’t need protection from Nevio, Dad and Nino.”

Mom touched my cheek. “No, you don’t. I’m glad you realize that. And that’s not what I meant.”

I nodded because I understood what she meant. “I would have found out eventually.”

“Maybe. But this was a very brutal way to find out. It’s a lot to take in.”

I didn’t deny it. I hadn’t dared to fall asleep after all. When I was dried off, I put on my fluffy bunny pajamas, seeking their familiar comfort. Mom grabbed something from the shelf and held out my stuffed rabbit. I’d had it all my life but recently I hadn’t cuddled with it anymore. I took it from her.

“What can I do?” I whispered, clutching my stuffed rabbit to my chest. It was soft and white.

Mom sighed, looking exhausted. She probably hadn’t slept these last two days either. “Love them.”



When Mom and I emerged from the bathroom, Dad and Nino were waiting for us in my bedroom. Dad scanned my face with furrowed brows, his dark eyes cautious, as if he worried I'd bolt again.

Mom ignored both of them and helped me get into bed. She pressed a kiss to my forehead then she straightened.

"Go to bed and get some rest. I'll join you when I've talked to Greta," Dad said to Mom. She didn't look at him, only at me. "Do you want me to stay?"

Anger filled Dad's eyes.

"No, go sleep."

Mom hesitated but then she nodded and turned around. Dad held her by the wrist when she tried to pass him. Mom sent him a scathing look. He released her and she slipped out but left the door ajar.

Nino gave Dad a look I didn't understand. They often shared these moments. Dad approached me and sank down on the bed, then he motioned at the glass of water and plate with scrambled tofu and toast on the nightstand. I emptied half of the glass and nibbled at the toast. "Nino is going to check you now."

I nodded, because I knew Dad wouldn't accept a no in this case and it was the reasonable thing to do anyway. I didn't want my wounds to get infected. If my foot stopped me from dancing that would be unfathomable. I knew I'd have to spend many nights alone in my ballet studio to get over this.

Nino sank down on the other side of the bed. "I'm going to start with the cut under your ribs."

I lifted my pajama top enough for him to see the small slash I'd inflicted on myself. Nino was careful as he cleaned and taped it. "We had the man tested for possible diseases since the knife you used was contaminated with his blood but he was clean."

His voice was matter-of-fact, professional, something I usually appreciated. Whenever I needed a neutral opinion or wanted to truly understand something I asked Nino, but today I couldn't bear his emotionless tone. He moved on to the cut in my foot without missing a beat.

“How does it feel to hurt someone so badly that they pled for death when you could save them with your abilities instead?” I asked softly.

Nino’s fingers halted on my foot. He glanced up at me then at Dad.

Whatever passed between them, they obviously decided Dad should answer.

“He deserved death.”

“By whose standards?” I asked.

“Mine. They are the only standards that matter.”

I stared into Dad’s unwavering eyes. I couldn’t detect a hint of guilt or doubt in them. I’d known he was Capo all my life. It had taken a long time to understand what it meant, and I still wasn’t sure I knew everything. I’d never understood people who chose obliviousness over information, who weren’t driven by strong curiosity to know everything. Maybe I was slowly getting there.

“Do you want me to explain why?”

“No,” I said firmly. “It won’t change the way I think.”

“You can’t know that,” Nino interjected.

“I have my convictions.”

Nino rose to his feet and began to put everything back into his medical kit. “That’s a luxury not everyone is allowed.”

Silence settled in the room. Nino closed the kit and looked at Dad for a moment whose expression was a mask of control. Their silent interactions often reminded me of Nevio and I, but Dad and Nino’s thought process was more similar than mine and Nevio’s.

I swallowed, remembering Mom’s words. “Thank you, Nino, for treating my wound. I appreciate it.”

He tilted his head. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m not scared of you, you know,” I said before he could slip out of the door. He regarded me curiously, then a tight smile pulled at his mouth. “You don’t have to fear any of us.”

He left and closed the door.

“You should try to sleep,” Dad said in a low voice, still perched on the edge of the bed, not touching me.

He was about to get up but I pushed up and pressed against him. I didn’t want him to think my feelings for him had changed. He was tense at first then his arms came around me in a tight embrace and he released a long breath. “I love you, Dad.”

Dad pressed a kiss to my temple. "I love you more than life itself, Mia Cara. Never forget that."

I nodded, because I wouldn't. I'd never doubted his love, not even in the basement.

"There's darkness all around you, pitch-black like hell itself, and no matter how hard I try to protect you from it, some of it will inevitably touch you because you are part of this family. But I swear I'll make sure no other darkness comes close to touching you."

I closed my eyes, listening to his steady heart.

I wondered how Mom and Kiara felt, knowing what Dad and Nino were. They'd chosen them despite what they were. I didn't think I could ever be with someone like that. I had always loved my family. I didn't choose them. But choosing someone who was capable of such horrors, of acts of utmost cruelty? I couldn't do it.

The men in my family were bad men. Nevio, my other half, was possibly the worst of them. But this love was inevitable.



It was only fitting that I should fall in love with a man who was just as bad, as brutal, as cruel as the men who'd raised me.

Chapter *Three*



Anno

Seventeen years old

I landed a hard punch in Maximus' stomach. He grunted and tried to land a hit in turn but I blocked his side jab. We'd been training together for years and knew each other well. Maximus was one of the few guys who were almost my height. Fighting him actually sometimes proved a challenge, which was nice.

"Training's over," Dad shouted as he stepped into the Famiglia gym. Maximus and I stopped and exchanged a confused look. Dad sounded majorly pissed.

Maximus' cocked one dark brow as he grabbed the towel draped over his corner. "What did you do?" He and I had sometimes been mistaken for brothers because we both had black hair, but while my eyes were gray like my father's, Maximus had inherited the amber eyes of his. I was a year older than him and we'd been best friends for a decade. In the past Primo, Maximus' younger brother, had joined us most of the time, but now he had his own group of friends.

I shrugged. The list of possible mess-ups was too long to pick one. His father Growl got up from the bench-press, gave my dad a nod in greeting, and motioned Maximus to come over to him. Maximus climbed out of the boxing ring and jogged over to his father while I moved toward mine.

“We need to talk,” Dad said, his expression pinched. What had I done now?

I followed him into the locker room. Uncle Matteo was already there, which meant this was a Famiglia matter and not a simple family mess up, and when he didn’t greet me with his usual wink and smirk, I knew I was doomed. Dad motioned for one of his soldiers to give us privacy. The man didn’t hesitate.

I grabbed a fresh towel from the shelf against the wall and rubbed my bare chest.

“Antonaci called me today.”

Cressida’s last name was Antonaci and my only connection to him. I kept my face neutral. I wasn’t going to admit to anything, in case this was another matter after all.

Dad crossed his arms as he leaned against the lockers. The scowl he was giving me would have sent many into a nervous breakdown. Matteo gave me a look that suggested I should write down my last wish before he went over to a small mirror to check whether his hairstyle was okay. I almost rolled my eyes. I was vain to a certain degree, but Matteo always looked like he’d fallen out of an issue of the Vogue.

“He told me about you and Cressida.”

Fuck.

“There’s no Cressida and me,” I said immediately. It was the truth. Cressida and I were nothing. What had happened was over. It had hardly been anything worth mentioning to begin with.

“No?” Dad asked in a deadly voice. His body language suggested he had trouble staying where he was. “So you didn’t sleep with the girl?”

I didn’t say anything. Some of my decisions of the past had been unfortunate, driven by barely restrained anger. I could still feel it simmer under my skin dangerously.

Dad raised his eyebrows, not happy with my reply.

“A real gentleman never tells.”

Dad rammed his fist against the locker, his expression burning with rage. I tensed. The rattling of the locker could probably be heard down the street.

“I swear I’ll beat every goddamn word out of you if you don’t open your mouth now.”

“We had sex, a few times. End of story.”

Dad stalked toward me as if he had every intention of breaking my neck. I didn’t back away. I’d encountered Dad’s wrath before, though never quite as potent as right now, and was too hardened to be overly bothered by it. He grabbed my shoulders in a bruising grip, bringing us nose to nose. His hot breath hit me. “And you call yourself a gentleman?”

“It’s not like you didn’t fuck other women before you married Mom. You and Matteo fucked every woman that crossed your path from what I hear.”

“Careful,” Dad snarled, his fingers tightening even more.

Matteo clucked his tongue. “Your dad and I had enough blood left in our horny brains to pick only outsiders to fuck.”

Dad shoved me away and punched another locker, leaving a dent, before he faced Matteo. “I can’t even look at him. I really want to kill him.”

“I had sex with her, consensual. I didn’t push her to have sex, so stop overreacting.”

Dad was on me before I knew what was going on. I blamed my lowered guards around my family. With anyone else I wouldn’t have been caught off guard. He thrust me against the locker. The back of my head smashed against the metal, making my ears ring.

My muscles tensed, wanting to retaliate like I was used to, but I forced down my body’s overwhelming need to act. This was my father and Capo.

Dad’s eyes looked unhinged. “If you’d raped her, we would have a very different conversation, son.”

I kept my mouth shut. My sister Marcella always accused me of being rash but I knew when to stay silent, at least sometimes.

“She’s an honorable Italian woman, the daughter of one of my Captains, and you fucking take her virginity.”

“*Fucking* indeed.” I countered. “Trust me, she didn’t act honorable at all. And the way she threw herself at me, I really wouldn’t call it taking. She practically begged me to relieve her of that burden.”

Dad glanced at Matteo, and motioned him to take his place. Matteo stepped forward and took Dad’s place who turned his back to me.

“Have you had too many hits to the head over the years, or are you playing dumb on purpose?” Matteo asked with a harsh smile.

Dad’s shoulder muscles flexed under his white T-shirt and his hands were

balled into fists.

“Her family isn’t amused in the slightest. The girl definitely made it sound as if you promised her the world and she practically couldn’t say no.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s bullshit. I didn’t promise her anything.” She’d simpered about how she’d love to see me again and how our families would be so great together. I’d ignored her words and showed her how to suck dick properly so she’d shut the fuck up.

“Why did you do it?” Dad asked in a very low voice, turning to me once more. Mom’s expression would have reflected disappointment in such a case but Dad was furious.

“It was to prove a point.”

“And what point would that be?”

“That she had no right to judge Marci. She called her a slut.”

“You acted like a fucking idiot. You should have thought about the consequences,” Matteo muttered.

“Give her father money and more soldiers, I’m sure he’ll take it gladly.”

Matteo chuckled. Dad didn’t look amused and his answering smile was predatory. “There’s only one thing he’ll accept as compensation. Marriage.”

It took a moment for me to understand what Dad meant. I laughed. “Right.”

Dad shook his head as if he didn’t know me. “This isn’t a joke. I told him I’d consider a marriage between you and Cressida.”

My face fell. “You can’t be serious. No way in hell am I going to marry that bitch.”

Dad hit the locker again. It was the third one he’d dented so badly, I doubted anyone would get their stuff out of it ever again. “The Antonacis are well connected among the Traditionalists. I abolished the goddamn bloody sheets which caused an uproar and almost a revolt. Do you realize what would happen if I allowed you to dishonor a Captain’s daughter without you putting a ring on her finger?”

“So what? We’ll make a bloody statement and force them to follow our command. We’re Vitiellos, we don’t bow to anyone’s whims.”

“You want me to kill loyal men, the core of our Famiglia, because you couldn’t keep it in your pants? I’ve been way too lenient with you. For once you’ll have to carry the burden of your actions.”

I had underestimated Cressida and her ambition. I’d wanted to make her eat her words. But she’d turned things around, and now I was stuck with her.

“There has to be a way around it,” I muttered.

Dad took a deep breath, running his hand through his dark hair. “The Traditionalists feel cheated as it is. Marcella’s bond with a biker, the bloody sheets, and our bond with the Camorra, they were a lot to stomach for them. This would be the tipping point. I won’t weaken the Famiglia with a bloody statement only because you can’t stand your future bride. Cressida will be your wife. You have years to get used to the idea, and you fucking will, or I swear you’ll feel my full wrath.”

I glowered at my father. “Yes, Capo.”



On our way home, we didn’t speak. I was trying to figure a way out of the mess. Like Dad had said, I still had years before I had to marry. Until then I’d have to find a fucking solution out of this. The idea of being with Cressida for the rest of my life was too harsh a punishment for a few lousy fucks.

When we entered our mansion in the Upper East Side, Mom was in the living room with Valerio, helping him with his homework. One look at her face told me she knew what was going on.

Dad motioned at Valerio to leave. He grumbled but obeyed. “You’re in big trouble,” he muttered as he passed me.

Thanks for the heads up... I tried to ruffle his unruly blond hair but he dodged the attempt. His reflexes were getting better.

Mom wrung her hands as Dad headed her way. He kissed her briefly and they exchanged a few quiet words. Mom nodded, but I could tell she wasn’t happy.

Mom barely reached Dad’s chest, but she was his rock nonetheless. She stood by his side and his decisions, even if she disapproved of them. At least in front of others, even us kids, it had always been like that.

She would never contradict Dad’s decision but her face when she looked at me spoke of her concern. She was worried for me. She’d always wanted me to marry for love.

Dad shook his head once more, then headed out, obviously still too pissed to be in a room with me for long. Mom followed him with her eyes before she looked at me once more. She let out a quiet sigh and headed toward me.

Stopping in front of me, she touched my cheek, peering up at me with worry-clouded eyes. “Will you be okay?”

“With marrying Cressida?”

“Yes.”

“Sure. I always knew I’d marry for tactical purposes, not love,” I lied. For some reason I couldn’t bring myself to use her as a way out of this. She was the only force on this planet that could change Dad’s mind if he was hellbent on something, but I admired their marriage too much to drive a wedge between them. “Love is for dreamers or weaklings. I’m neither.”

“Your father is many things but not a dreamer or weakling.”

“Dad’s the exception to the rule. Your story isn’t the norm, Mom. Many married couples barely tolerate each other’s presence. That’s what I can look forward to with Cressida. With a little luck, she’ll hate me enough a couple of years into our marriage to punish me with silence, then I won’t have to talk to her.”

Mom regarded me quietly. I could see that she was wondering where the boy had gone that she’d raised. She almost looked at me as if I might be an impostor, or as if the boy was still inside somewhere. Truth be told, I was pretty sure the easy-going boy had been the impostor in the first place. Given Dad’s genes anything else would have been a big ass surprise.

Mom still worried about my emotional well-being. If she could look inside of me, she’d know that nothing could hurt my feelings or break my heart. Marcella’s kidnapping and the aftermath had hardened me, had turned me into who I needed to be to become who I was destined to be. My grandfather had shaped Dad into the hardened man who ruled over the Famiglia with an iron fist. Dad hadn’t done the same to me out of love for Mom. What he had been too weak to do, the bikers who’d kidnapped my sister had accomplished.

I’d enjoyed the carnage. It ran in my blood. Maybe I’d only held it back in the past because of Mom. I patted Mom’s shoulder when she didn’t stop looking at me with worry-clouded eyes. “I’ll be fine, Mom. I don’t need love.”



I went up to my room but Marcella was already inside, browsing through a magazine, high-heeled feet crossed at the ankles. I had suspected that she'd be over to dinner today because Maddox was out on a run hunting his former biker buddies. Her dark hair was brushed back, revealing her maimed ear, which still made my blood boil even if my father and I had taken vicious revenge on many bikers.

Marcella looked up and shook her head. "I told you to stay away from Cressida."

I closed the door, crossed the room over to my desk and sank down on the chair. My phone beeped with another message. I put it down on the desk. I'd reply to Maximus' messages later. "I did it for you. To pay her back for talking shit about you."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "And I told you that you'd get yourself in trouble. You realize she's probably gloating like crazy right now because she'll be your wife, a future Capo's wife. Paying with her virginity for it was a small price for a lifetime of everyone worshipping the ground she walks on. If I think about it, thanks to you I'll now have to be nice to her, so you really did me disservice, not just yourself."

I gave her an annoyed look. I knew I'd fucked up. Marrying Cressida was at the top of things I loathed to do. I didn't want her at my side. She was already acting like royalty because her father was Captain. I could only imagine how much worse she'd treat everyone around her as soon as she had my ring on her finger.

"It's too late now. Dad made it very clear I have no say in the matter. I need to marry her to keep the Famiglia happy. My actions were too dishonorable apparently."

Marcella shrugged. "Dishonorable, I don't know. I assume Cressida more than happily jumped into bed with you."

"She did. No convincing necessary."

"Then it's her problem that she lost her V card before marriage. But your actions still were stupid. There's a reason why most Made Men sleep with Outsiders before marriage to avoid this mess."

The thought of being stuck with her was horrid. I supposed we'd just have a marriage on paper. "Marrying Cressida has its advantages. I don't give a fuck about her feelings so I can keep fucking whoever I want even when we're married."

Marcella sighed. "You're going to make an even worse mess, I can feel it

deep down.”

“Says the girl who brought a biker home with her.”

She got up and punched my shoulder. But she knew I was right. Nothing I could do could possibly cause a bigger scandal than the one she had caused.



A month later our families met for dinner to finalize the details of our bond. Marcella had found a feeble excuse not to be present. I wished I could have done the same. She was probably banging Maddox on his bike while I had to bear Cressida’s smug face.

After dinner, I got up with a forced smile. “I’d like to show Cressida around.”

Her mother pursed her lips with overdone worry. “You’re not even engaged yet.”

Her father didn’t seem quite as concerned about me being alone with Cressida. I’d already popped her cherry, which was why we were here in the first place. He nodded benevolently, almost making me punch him. Cressida got up with a played shy smile. She put her hand on my arm and giggled as I led her out. I didn’t speak until we reached the library, then I dropped my arm and the chivalrous act.

“Amo, what’s the matter?” she asked as if she didn’t know it.

“Cut the act. You know I can’t stand you. Do you really want to base a marriage on that?”

Cressida shrugged. “I don’t care. You’ll change your mind about me once you get to know me better.”

I seriously doubted it. She’d talked shit about my sister in one of the hardest times of my sister’s life. She treated everyone she deemed less like shit and she was conceited as fuck. “Find a guy who buys into your bullshit and who worships the ground you walk on because that’s not going to be me.”

Her expression pinched but then she smiled sweetly and came closer, touched my chest.

“I gave you a gift, my virginity, doesn’t that count for something?”

“I’d give it back if I could,” I growled. I didn’t care if saying it was

dishonorable too. I was a Made Man, not a British gentleman.

She flushed. "But you can't. You dishonored me. You're lucky nobody but my family knows yet. It would cast a bad light on you."

"And you," I said. But she had a point. While it wouldn't ruin me, it would stir up a lot of bad blood and would make many Traditionalists demand that I didn't become Capo.

She pressed up to me again, her lower lip jutting out. "Don't be like that, Amo. I know we'll have fun." I gritted my teeth. She sank down to her knees right in the library and pulled down my fly. I shook my head, unable to believe she was going to blow me with our families down the hall. I was all for interesting places but not when my mother could potentially walk in.

She pulled my cock out, which was hardening despite my dislike of her. She giggled again and licked her lips.

My annoyance won over my hormones and I grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet. Confusion flickered across her face. "You can't expect me to dishonor you again." My voice dripped with sarcasm.

She shrugged as I shoved my cock back into my pants and pulled up my fly.

"Your loss."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Cressida, I didn't say I'd become a monk. That I won't touch you until we're married because I don't see a fucking reason why, doesn't mean I won't fuck all the other women that throw themselves at me."

"I could do the same, you know? Let other guys have me."

I didn't say anything, only looked at her daringly. She'd make me the greatest fucking gift of all time if she let a guy fuck her before I officially put my ring on her. Then I'd be free of her.

Chapter *Four*



Anno

Six years later

I stifled a groan when I glanced down at my phone.

I can't do this alone. A good fiancé would have been here.

I was trying to get into the right mindset for the fucking meeting ahead and Cressida had nothing better to do than to grate on my nerves with rehearsal dinner number two. The only reason why I had humored Cressida and attended rehearsal dinner number one was because my father had insisted that I do to make up for my mistakes of the past. I couldn't care less if we served smoked marlin or smoked tuna. I had far more important things to do. Of course, Cressida didn't understand.

I'm not a good fiancé and I won't be a good husband. You can still call this off.

Cressida always brought out the worst in me, and now definitely wasn't the right time to rile me up. It would be difficult enough to keep it together.

Nothing you can do will make me call this wedding off.

That's what I feared. I'd ignored her existence these last few years, not once touched her because not a fiber in my body desired her. Still she clung to me and our future together. Not for emotional reasons of course. We both knew the only thing that made her heart beat faster was the prospect of becoming a future Capo's wife. Even Mom didn't like her, and Mom was the kindest person I knew and gave everyone a chance. Dad *utterly* despised her. I could see it in his eyes whenever she was close, and yet he insisted on this ridiculous bond.

Fuck. Part of me got it. The Famiglia was still divided between the Traditionalists and the more liberal soldiers. It had always been like that, but since Marcella married Maddox, a biker from a hostile MC we'd been battling for decades, and became part of the family business, the Tradionalists had become too loud to ignore. The tide was turning and Dad and I needed to make sure we weren't swept out onto the unforgiving ocean. Eventually we'd have to make a bloody statement, there was no way around it, even if Dad was reluctant to do so. Maybe because he could sense that it would very well be one of the bloodiest in the history of the Famiglia. I had a feeling he was biding his time until my brother Valerio was old enough to fight at our side. Considering he'd recently turned sixteen I really hoped that would miraculously happen before my wedding with Cressida.

But our wedding was only six weeks away and I had already endured a tight schedule of necessary tastings, rehearsals, meet-ups and brainstorming events that made it impossible to pretend I wasn't caught in Cressida's cunning clutches.

Where are you?

I ignored her question. She knew I was in Las Vegas for business and she didn't need to know more than that. I didn't trust her and that would never change.

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I raised my head in time to see us pull up in front of the huge steel gates to the Falcone mansion. An obnoxious F crowned the thing in addition to dozens of razor-sharp thorns.

"Judging by your pissed off look, that was Cressida. This meeting is important. We need to make sure we regain control of our drug routes. With the current mood in the Famiglia, we can't risk earning less money. Even the Tradionalists are less likely to speak up, if their pockets are full. Don't make a scene."

“She makes my blood boil and not in a good way.”

“I don’t care. Do not mess up.”

I gave him a lazy smile. “I’m not a hotheaded teen anymore. You don’t have to remind me. Today’s about business, nothing else.”

Dad regarded me briefly and gave a satisfied nod, though I caught the hint of doubt on his face. He and I had worked well together these last few years despite our occasional disagreements. Maybe it was a matter of age that made Dad more cautious and reluctant to dish out violence. When he’d been my age, he would probably have ripped Antonaci’s throat out for demanding anything. He should consider himself lucky my father had abolished the bloody sheets tradition or Cressida would leave a very bad impression the morning after our wedding night. He was the leader of the Traditionalists after all. None of them would have taken him seriously anymore if his own daughter had done the deed before her wedding night.

Dad hit the button that made his window slide down so he could ring the bell and alert the Falcones of our arrival. Of course, they’d known about us because of their numerous security cameras the moment we’d pulled up.

The gates swung inward without a word out of the speakers. We pulled up the long driveway. “I don’t like that we’re meeting at their place. It always puts us at a disadvantage.”

“We want something from Remo and he invited us to his home. Refusing him would have set the wrong tone.” Then Dad’s expression became harder, and dangerous. “We’re outnumbered, true, but the house is full of people Remo wants to protect. That puts him at a disadvantage not us.”

“Then why invite us into his home?”

“Power plays as always. I’m sure the women and children of the family are well hidden and protected.”

In recent years peace had become harder to maintain. To think that not too long ago, our bond had been strong enough that Remo had allowed his brother Adamo to spend a year with us in New York...

Dad parked the rental car and we got out. Remo, Nino and Nevio appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Fuck, tell me that crazy bastard isn’t going to join the meeting too,” I pressed out under my breath, pebbles crunching under our shoes as we approached the house.

“He’s the future Capo. You and him will have to figure out a way to tolerate each other.”

“We both know war will break out the moment Nevio and I become Capos. No need to pretend otherwise.”

Dad sent me a warning look as we ascended the few white steps. Dad shook Remo’s hand but no love was lost between them either. I shook Remo’s and Nino’s hands before I came face to face with Nevio Falcone, the little shit that gave new glory to the name Madmen of Las Vegas. He wasn’t the little shit I’d last seen a few years ago. Now at almost nineteen we were almost at eye level while I’d always towered over him a couple of inches in the past.

His smile pulled wide, baring white teeth, his dark eyes gleaming with a promise I gladly returned. *You’re a dead man.*

Some people believe in love at first sight. Bullshit.

Hate at first sight? Definitely a thing. The first time Nevio and I had seen each other we’d loathed each other with fiery passion. I didn’t know why, only that our hate had been instantaneous and that it would outlast every promise and contract made by our fathers. One day I’d cut off his grinning head and skewer it on top of the obnoxious Falcone fence for everyone to see, even if that meant I would have to make peace with the Golden boy of the Outfit.

We didn’t shake hands, didn’t do anything but stare into each other’s eyes. I wanted nothing more than to give the crazy bastard a taste of his own medicine.

“Nevio,” Remo said in a low voice and Dad touched my shoulder in a very obvious way, his fingers digging in warningly.

I smiled at Nevio. He looked at his father then turned his back on me and headed inside. Stabbing someone in the back was dishonorable and I’d never considered doing it, but right this moment, I spared it a thought. The world would be a better place without his batshit crazy ass.

I supposed being the child of Remo Falcone and grandchild of Benedetto Falcone made it impossible to cling to sanity. I hadn’t met Nevio’s siblings yet, but they couldn’t be any saner than him.

Dad and I followed the Falcones through a long corridor, past what looked like a big common area, until we finally arrived at a big office. The blinds were drawn. I glanced around briefly. The desk wasn’t a place that was used very often. It didn’t have any signs of use, but the sofas and boxing sack had. I swallowed a comment.

“You want to discuss your drug routes through our territory,” Nino said

as he perched on the edge of the desk. I preferred his cut-the-bullshit-style. It spared us all the fake pleasantries we all despised.

“Indeed. But Texas can hardly be counted as your territory at the current time,” Dad said.

Remo’s lips pulled into a hard smile. “It’s more mine than it is anyone else’s.”

“Tell that to the Mexican cartel and all the rogue MC gangs attacking drug transports left and right.”

“The rogue MCs are the result of unfortunate developments in the Famiglia, not the Camorra,” Nino said.

I gritted my teeth. He wasn’t entirely wrong, Marcella falling in love with the biker who’d kidnapped her had complicated things unnecessarily, but...

Nevio smirked as he leaned against the wall with crossed arms. “That’s what happens when women spread their legs for the wrong guy and the family doesn’t disembowel said asshole as should be done.”

I took a step forward, my hand twitching toward my knife at the same time as Dad snarled, “Careful.”

“Nevio,” Remo warned in a voice that even sent a shudder down my back.

Nino stepped between us and his brother and nephew. “We’re not here to discuss past decisions. This is about finding solutions for the future.”

“Speaking of future, how’s your lovely fiancée?” Nevio asked casually. His eyes held mockery. “I can’t wait to attend the wedding of the century to bear witness to the greatest love story of all time.”

I smiled cruelly. “When are you going to kidnap a poor woman as your wife of your own as is family tradition and the only way a woman will ever tolerate your crazy ass?”

Nevio lunged at me but I’d anticipated the move. It still didn’t stop me from losing my footing from the force of his attack. None of the Falcones liked to be reminded of the fact that Remo had kidnapped Serafina on her wedding day.

We slammed against the wall and blood filled my mouth as I pierced my tongue with my teeth. I jerked my knife out of my holster, seeing a familiar gleam in Nevio’s hand. An arm slung around my throat, pulling me back at the same time as Remo’s arm around his son’s throat brought him to his knees.

I was thrown against the wall once more and Dad pressed his forearm

against my throat, breathing harshly, his eyes burning with barely restrained fury.

Remo had wrestled Nevio to his knees and was holding him there, while he murmured something in his ears. Nevio lowered his gaze from mine and gave one jerky nod before he dropped his knife with a madman grin. If he wore the right make-up, he could be the Joker in every Batman movie.

“Amo,” Dad growled, and I dropped my knife as well. He caught my eyes with his, forcing me to focus only on him. “Back down, understood?”

I nodded reluctantly. Dad released my throat slowly, still eyeing me as if he thought I might lose it again. Truth be told, I wasn’t far from it. The only thing stopping me was that Nevio had turned his back to me. If I’d seen his face, I would have lost it.

Dad turned to Remo who looked no less murderous than his son. Nino was the only one who seemed unimpressed by the whole spectacle. But I didn’t let his cool demeanor fool me. He was a lethal opponent given the right incentive.

Dad cleared his throat. “What my son said about your wife was inappropriate.”

“Your son doesn’t look like he regrets his words. Insulting a Capo in his territory is a strange way to maintain peace.”

“I didn’t insult you, only your son, and he isn’t Capo yet.”

“If I were, you’d be dead,” Nevio said quietly, his dark eyes slanting to me once more.

Remo motioned at his son and he moved over to the sofa and sank down, propping his combat boot clad foot up on his knee before he began cleaning the profile with the tip of his knife.

Dad gave me a look that made it clear he wanted me out of here now.

“I need to take a leak,” I said as politely as I was capable of.

Remo’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t lose your way.”

I stalked out, pissed about this sweet-talking bullshit that was about to go down. There was no reason for us to keep up the truce with the Camorra anymore if they couldn’t guarantee our drug routes. They were a liability now that Nevio took over more tasks.

I took a deep breath. I needed to get a grip. Dad wanted peace, and as long as we were in Camorra territory, I needed to calm the fuck down. Since I didn’t really need to piss, I walked down the corridor then into the common area, looking around curiously. The whole place was deserted. Like Dad had

said, Remo had brought the vulnerable Falcones to safety.

I huffed, shaking my head. Trust and peace, what a load of crap. My eyes were drawn to the French doors overlooking the sprawling backyard. The sky was overhung with clouds and it was drizzling, which probably equaled a downpour by Nevada standards. I hated the barren landscape and desperate eagerness of the city. I walked out, sucking in a deep breath of fresh air. Maybe that would help me calm down.

A distant sound reached my ears. I couldn't place it and so I followed a path of smooth white marble stone slabs down a gentle slope toward a small house. It was like a pool house but I had a feeling that wasn't what it was for. The soft drizzle soaked my white dress shirt, making it cling to my chest and my leather shoes were soon speckled with dirt but I followed the sound until I reached a glass door, which was open a tiny gap, just enough to let classical music drift through it.

A figure moved behind the foggy glass. Driven by curiosity, I pushed my hands into the gap and slid open the door, and I froze.

A girl in a light-pink tutu was dancing to the music. She appeared weightless and in a world of her own. Her black hair was piled on top of her head but a few curls framed her face. She looked like a doll come to life. Heart-shaped lips, porcelain-smooth skin and fairylike features.

Something seemed familiar about the girl, but I couldn't pinpoint what exactly.

She was so lost in the music, she seemed oblivious to me. Her eyes were closed. I'd never thought I'd enjoy ballet but watching this girl, I couldn't imagine tearing myself away. My mind turned blank, my heartbeat slowed and every violent thought drained out of me as I slowly walked further into the room, drawn to her.

A yap sounded somewhere, tearing me from my reverie. The girl's eyes snapped open and her poise fell as she turned to me. Eyes as dark as bitter chocolate. Those eyes reminded me of the person who was at the top of my to-kill list if peace between the Famiglia and the Camorra ever ended. Nevio fucking Falcone.

And this was no other than his twin Greta Falcone.

Terror twisted her face. "No!"

I tensed, raising my arms. She didn't give me a chance to explain anything. Instead she rushed past me, just out of arms' length, only leaving a whiff of vanilla in her wake, as she fled the house. I whirled around,

watching her sprint up the slope leading toward the mansion at a speed I hadn't thought possible with her petite frame.

"Fuck!" Had I just terrified Greta Falcone enough that she was running away screaming?

Remo Falcone wouldn't give me a chance to explain. He'd just put a bullet in my head. If Dad didn't kill me first.

Chapter *Five*



Anno

I sprinted after Greta. With my much longer legs, I soon caught sight of her again as she dashed down a staircase into the basement.

Not even stopping to think, I chased after her. She was probably leading me into a dungeon where her evil twin could torture me to his heart's desire.

"Stop!" I shouted.

She didn't. Instead, she turned another corner and another, and then disappeared into a room. I rushed after her but she was already on her way out again. I couldn't stop anymore and she barreled into me, bouncing off my hard chest like a ball. My hands shot out, grabbing her arms to stop her fall. My fingers closed completely around her slim upper arms. Her body became tight as a bowstring, her eyes widened, mouth falling open, and she recoiled violently. I released her and she stumbled backward then fell to the floor.

An earsplitting alarm sounded and I whirled around. The toe of my shoe hit a wood wedge, but I was busy trying to figure out how to stop the howling.

"No!" Greta shouted, pointing at the heavy steel door, which fell shut with a loud clang. The keypad beside it glowed red once, then turned off, and

a few moments later the sirens stopped.

“What the fuck is this shit?” I snarled. Had this been Falcone’s plan all along? Trapping me in a cell in his basement? Had this been a trap?

Then I remembered something, or rather someone.

I turned away from the steel door and lowered my gaze to the girl cowering on the ground.

Huge dark-brown eyes peered up at me, set in the most beautiful face I’d ever seen, and framed by dark hair. The girl was petite but with an aura so overpowering that it magnified her physical presence.

Her brows snatched together as her eyes took me in and she scurried backward, bringing more distance between us, acute nervousness flashing across her face. She definitely knew me.

I couldn’t stop staring at her heart-shaped face.

If this had been Falcone’s plan, it had seriously backfired. I could only imagine how he’d react if he found out I was alone with his daughter.

“Can you unlock the door?” I asked. My voice was rough, from running, from adrenaline, from my previous fight, and Greta’s hands began shaking. Was she scared of me? It seemed ridiculous considering she’d been raised by the madmen of Las Vegas. Brutal men were her constant companions.

But unlike them, she didn’t know me except for my reputation, which was probably why her brother hated me so much. I stole his show in the brutality department on occasion.

“You don’t have to be scared of me,” I said quietly, softening my voice, something I never did for anyone, and I wasn’t sure why the hell I did it for her, but I simply didn’t want her to be scared of me.

She tilted her head, regarding me quietly. The tension didn’t leave her body. “I know who you are,” she said simply. She touched her ear, eyes flitting to the keypad then to me again.

“And I know who you are, Greta, so you’re safe by default. Not to mention that I’d never hurt a woman. You don’t have to be worried.”

“I’m not scared of you,” she said, which I seriously doubted considering her reaction to my proximity so far, but I allowed her the lie. “There’s blood on your face and shirt.”

I reached for my mouth and my fingers came away red. My tongue. Glancing down at my shirt, I saw a few droplets of blood on the white material, which had spread due to the fabric’s wet state.

No wonder she’d run away screaming. She’d probably thought I’d come

to murder her, or worse. I could only imagine what kind of horror stories Nevio told her about me.

“Fuck.” My eyes flitted up to find Greta still watching me. “I apologize. I shouldn’t curse in front of you.” Had I really just said that?

“I hear worse on a daily basis,” she said, her body relaxing ever so slightly.

“I bet.”

She pointed at my lips as she pushed to her feet. “Was that Nevio?”

“No.” I wasn’t sure why I said it but for some reason I didn’t want her to know how much he and I hated each other. Once she saw us together there would be no hiding it, not to mention that I didn’t know why I’d bother anyway.

The silk ribbon of one of her ballet shoes had come undone and wrapped around her other leg, causing her to lose her balance. I reached out to steady Greta who stumbled forward. Her eyes widened, looking at my fingers on her arm as if they might strangle her. I released her the moment she was steady. Dad would be pissed if I caused a war with the Camorra with a misunderstanding. I bet Remo and Nevio would love to misunderstand me touching Greta’s arm.

“I meant it, you don’t have to be scared.”

She smiled in embarrassment. “And I told you, I’m not scared of you. I’m nervous around people I don’t know well, especially in surroundings that give me anxiety in the first place.”

I remembered the rumors about her social phobia. I’d never given it much thought. I’d never given Greta Falcone much thought. I nodded. “There’s only one solution to our problem, you have to enter the code that keeps us locked in.”

She shook her head then bent forward to wrap the ribbon around her slender ankle and calf once more, completely throwing me off with the movement and the way her ass propped up in the air. “I can’t. Someone set off the alarm by entering a wrong code somewhere in the house and by doing so locked all the electronic doors in the house.” She seemed completely oblivious of the view she was giving me. I swallowed thickly and dragged my eyes back to the keypad and busied myself hitting the buttons of it but the keys remained dark.

“How long will we be trapped down here?”

She appeared in my peripheral vision but more than an arm’s length

away from me. "My family will check every locked room in the mansions and basements systematically." She fell silent, gnawing on her lower lip. "I can't tell you more."

I could make you. This was important safety information. I just nodded.

My eyes traveled the length of her once more, unable to stop. She barely reached my chest and the cold down here in the basement had a very obvious effect on her body, the least of all were the goosebumps on her skin. Her nipples had hardened to firm pebbles under her leotard.

Tearing my gaze away, I cleared my throat, which felt dry and rough. "Will you be okay in this enclosed space until someone gets us out?"

She gave me a grateful smile. "I doubt I have a choice, so yes, I'll be okay."

For some reason, my lips pulled into a smile in return which I cut off quickly. What the hell was wrong with me?

"I'm sure we'll be out in no time."

Greta eyed me with curiosity. I met her gaze and she didn't look away. She scanned me from head to toe. If it was any other girl, I'd say she was checking me out, but with her I honestly wasn't sure.

"You're very tall and muscled, unusually so."

My eyebrows shot up, and I almost laughed. I didn't laugh in public, definitely not around people who could become the enemy any day. "Thanks?" I said then narrowed my eyes. "Or did you insult me? I'm really not sure."

Greta tilted her head with a small, secretive smile. "It wasn't an insult."

"A compliment?"

"A fact."

"A fact," I echoed, and shook my head with a chuckle.

She nodded and moved toward a corner. "Maybe we should get comfortable. I have a feeling this will take a bit."

Greta sank down to the floor in a cross-legged seat, arranging her tutu carefully over her upper thighs, and gave me an expectant look. I motioned at the padded stretcher in the center, that looked far more comfortable than the cold stone floor but a haunted expression slithered across Greta's face and so I went over to her. I sank to the ground as well and stretched out my legs but made sure not to touch Greta.

"You know what this place is for, that's why you don't want to sit on the stretcher." Even if I hadn't been in similar rooms back in New York, I would

have recognized a place for torture by the bloody straps on the stretcher and the array of pliers, needles and knives on the small metal table at the other end of the room.

“Yes. I know what it is and what they are.”

A hint of protectiveness rang in her voice. I didn’t comment. My feelings for the majority of her family weren’t fit for her ears.

“Do you consider yourself so different from them?”

In some ways, yes, but in many others not at all. Greta meant the latter. “No, which is why I wonder why you aren’t scared of me, especially when you have trouble with people in general.”

“I’m not scared of people, they only make me anxious. And I’m not scared of you because...” She searched my face for longer than was appropriate but I didn’t mind her curiosity. “...because I just know deep down that I don’t have to fear you.”

I’d expected her to say because of her father. After all, he’d invited us here and this was his territory, and while this was probably part of the truth as well, her answer pleased me much more. She smiled again. She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her upper arms with her hands. I didn’t see anything I could have used to warm her, except for my body heat and that was out of the question for various reasons.

“You’re cold,” I murmured. She shivered and curled and uncurled her ballet flats to get warmth into her feet.

“I’m okay. Maybe you can distract me?” She tilted her head to the side, gazing up at me through impossibly long lashes. How could so much loveliness be related to Nevio fucking Falcone?

Fuck, I knew just the way to distract her from the cold.

I stared down at my arms that were loosely resting on my knees. Whatever was going on in my head had to stop.

This was Greta Falcone. Twin of the guy I’d one day kill. Daughter of the man I’d probably have to kill right after.

She was off limits. I tried to find more reasons to stop thinking about her like this, but her age wasn’t one. She was eighteen and I was only four and a half years older.

What about Cressida?

“Why are you here?” Greta ripped me out of my thoughts.

“My father’s meeting with your father,” I said. “Business.”

I wasn’t sure how much she knew about the details of our truce and

business in general so I didn't mention the problems with our drug routes.

"But you aren't at the meeting now."

I met her gaze, a caught laugh tumbling out. The low rumble surprised me. "The atmosphere got a bit tense so I decided to catch some fresh air."

"Nevio likes fighting."

I didn't say anything because it wouldn't have been fit for her ears.

"I didn't know you were a dancer," I said, watching how she straightened her toes and let her slender fingers slide over the tutu. Until today I had hardly known anything about Greta Falcone so my words made absolutely no sense.

Her expression became even softer, which made her loveliness shine all the brighter.

"Ballet," she said as if she were talking about a lover, full of devotion and adoration, and I caught myself wishing she'd use that tone when talking about me.

"And you? Do you like to dance?" she asked, wrapping her arms around her legs and resting her chin on her knees.

"Depends. I used to go to dance clubs a lot when I was younger, now not quite so much, but I suppose you wouldn't call that dancing." Mostly I was out with Maximus looking for easy pussy. That was definitely not something I'd mention to Greta.

She frowned, looking as if my words didn't quite make sense. "Why would I say that? Me dancing ballet doesn't mean I appreciate other dance styles less. If dancing in clubs is your passion, then that's as valid as my form of dancing."

My passion? Looking into those dark eyes, regarding me as if she was really trying to see me beyond the obvious, I knew one thing I could be really passionate about.

"I've never been to the ballet," I admitted.

Greta looked sad. "You should go. It's beautiful."

"I can imagine," I said roughly, imagining how Greta danced on stage. Yet, at the same time I loathed the idea of her dancing for anyone but me. What the hell was wrong with me? I was engaged. I had no business wanting Greta to dance for me. I couldn't have her. Cressida would probably turn a blind eye to me cheating on her. She was content becoming a future Capo's wife. But Greta wasn't a girl who deserved to be an affair. She was a woman who deserved to be someone's number one, their one and only queen.

She shivered again and a closer look revealed that her lips were turning bluish.

“You’re freezing, Greta. We need to do something about it.” I sat up straighter, weighing my options. “Would you feel comfortable putting your feet on my lap? I swear on my honor that I won’t touch you inappropriately in any way.”

The words left my mouth before I could process them. They just fell out, like that one biker’s glass eye when I’d slammed my ax into his head.

She wiggled her feet again, considering my lap. To think that Greta Falcone was currently staring at the spot where my dick was... “I think so,” she said slowly. She peered up, searching my eyes. I wasn’t sure what she was trying to see. Most of it was pure darkness and rage and violence, but I supposed if anyone could bear it then it was a Falcone. She shifted her body in my direction and propped those slender ankles up on my muscled thighs. Her heels loosely rested on my lap. For a moment I stared down at them. This moment felt so surreal, I briefly wondered if Nevio had actually managed to ram his knife into my body and I was caught in a strange limbo between life and death.

“Now what do we do about the rest of your body?” I mused. Suggesting she sat on my lap and let me embrace her was naturally the obvious choice but sanity hadn’t quite left me yet.

“You could give me your shirt,” she said as if it was nothing.

One of my brows edged up. “I’m not wearing anything beneath.”

“Oh,” she whispered, shaking her head. “That’ll definitely be too cold for you then.”

I wondered how she’d preserved this innocence living under a roof with the Madmen of Las Vegas.

I grabbed my shirt and tugged it out of my pants, then began to unbutton it. Greta followed my movements with utmost curiosity that slowly morphed to fascination when I parted my shirt, revealing my bare chest beneath. Her eyes roamed over my pecs and abs, leaving a hot trail on my skin with her gaze alone. Blood slowly filtered down to an area it had no business going while I was alone with this girl. I shrugged out of my shirt then leaned forward and draped it carefully over Greta’s shoulders. It was way too big for her, covering her thighs too. She pulled it tighter around herself and actually drew in a breath then peered up at me with a small, lovely smile. “Thank you. Your shirt smells good.”

“It smells like me,” I said as if my brain cells had left my skull.

She didn’t comment, only huddled happily in my shirt.

I couldn’t stop staring. The realization that Greta was covered by something I’d worn moments before and would soon smell like me...fuck, it made me feel so goddamn ecstatic.

She rested her cheek on her knees and let her eyes roam my body once more, lingering on the Famiglia tattoo over my heart.

“Is that your only tattoo?”

“It is and will always be.”

Her gaze dipped lower to the fine cuts across my ribs. I touched them, wondering why these exactly had caught her eye. I had more scars on my arms, belly, and back.

“They look pretty.”

That was the oddest thing anyone had ever said about my scars and a low chuckle burst out of me. “That’s Maximus’ special talent, creating pretty scars.”

She narrowed her eyes a fraction, as if she was trying to figure something out. “He was your friend.”

“He is my friend,” I corrected.

“He’s still your friend?”

“He is, he has similar scars from me, not as pretty of course,” I joked.

She laughed, and something stirred deep in the pit of my stomach and despite the cold in the cell, I felt fucking hot. “Why did you hurt each other?”

“We tortured each other to make us stronger. He’s going to be Enforcer under his father.”

“Oh. He’s my cousin.”

I always forgot that Maximus was related to the Falcones, that his father was Remo’s half-brother. Even now I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Dad had made sure I didn’t mention Growl or Maximus with a single word. Greta, however, didn’t sound as if she minded.

“Did it make you stronger?” she asked, sounding honestly curious.

“It did. But since we did this, he and I have battled against many enemies and braved far more pain than a friend’s knife.”

Her eyes drifted to the door, and she bit her lip. She wiggled her toes, but I doubted she realized it. I cupped them in my hands, feeling how icy they still felt. Her head swiveled around to me, her expression questioning.

I raised my hands. I shouldn’t have touched her without permission.

“No, it felt good.”

My chest swelled as I cupped her small feet again, hoping to warm them with my palms. “You handle my closeness better than I thought after you ran off screaming when you saw me.”

She tilted her head. Her expression was strained as if she was trying to solve a difficult equation, then she put down her chin on her knee again and drew in another deep breath of my shirt.

Fuck me.

“I don’t know what it’s about you, but...” She gave a small shrug and didn’t finish the sentence. Then her expression lit up in amusement. “And I didn’t run away from you. When you opened the door to my ballet studio, you let Momo escape. I tried to catch him. That’s why I ran so fast.”

I gave her a blank stare. What the hell was a Momo? She must have seen the question on my face because she continued.

“My dog. He’s terrified of everything and you are a very terrifying sight for a small dog.” She paused, “For most humans probably too.”

I shook my head, close to start laughing again.

“I hope he’s all right.”

“I’m sure he’s run to someone from your family.”

“He’s terrified of almost all of them.”

Clever dog.

“Maybe he went to Kiara but she’s in the library in her wing, so I doubt he could reach her.”

“He can’t escape the premises, can he?”

“No, but he could hurt himself trying to escape.” She sighed. “You’re lucky Bear wasn’t there with me in the studio. He would have attacked you. He’s a Cane Corso.”

I assumed that was a dog breed, but I had never heard of it despite my friendship with Maximus. His family had a dog shelter for abused animals. Rottweiler, Pitbulls, Bulldogs...

“If he is the size of a Rottweiler, I could have handled him.”

“By killing him?” The sad note in her voice made me shake my head.

“Only as a last resort. I have experience wrangling beasts like that. I’d have tried to throw him to the ground and hold him there. If he’s 120pounds top. I have a hundred pounds on him.”

“He’s all muscle.”

“Me too.”

She dragged her gaze over my muscles and a delicate blush tinged her cheeks. “Yeah.”

“Are you promised?” The word shot out of me faster than any bullet out of my semi-automatic.

Greta’s brows dipped like she couldn’t quite understand the question. Neither could I. “No,” she said it as if the answer was obvious. And maybe it was. Considering her crazy twin and the rest of the crazy Falcone bunch, you needed balls the size of Nevada to ask for Greta’s hand.

“I’ve never met someone who interested me like that.” She looked thoughtful for a moment before she peered up at my face again. “What about you? Are you promised?”

“No,” I said without thinking about it. Why was I lying? News about my engagement had certainly made the rounds in Vegas as well, and if I wasn’t mistaken the whole Falcone clan was invited to the wedding. On the other hand, she seemed like a girl who lived in a world of her own. She’d never been to one of the festivities in recent years. I wasn’t even sure if I had seen her before today.

Maybe she really didn’t know about me and Cressida. I wished I could keep it that way for reasons I didn’t have the patience to explore.

I had absolutely no clue how long we’d been locked in this cell. It felt like a blink and eternity at the same time, and I knew I never wanted it to end. Talking to Greta just felt right.

Her eyes settled on my face. “I never thought about kissing someone. But I think with you I could imagine having my first kiss one day.”

My body became taut, my heart thundering in my chest. I stared at her. She wasn’t flirting, her body language not inviting me to kiss her now, but her words had set off an avalanche in my body I had trouble holding back.

What the hell?

A click sounded and the keypad glowed red then green. The door swung open and Nino followed by a tall boy with honey-blond hair and piercing blue eyes, wearing a black muscle shirt that revealed the fucking Camorra tattoo and several other tattoos, came in. As if they’d practiced a choreography one of their eyebrows climbed their foreheads and the look in their eyes was like being plunged into ice water.

Here we go...

Chapter

Six



Alessio and Nino entered the cell. My face broadened with a grateful smile. I'd really enjoyed my time with Amo but my worry for Momo had gotten worse with every passing moment. Last time he'd run off, it had taken me more than a day to find him curled up behind a shelf in the basement.

Alessio pulled his Damascus steel tri dagger from the leather holster at his waist. Amo put down my feet and rose to his full height. My eyes were drawn to him without thinking, following his long, muscled legs, to the fine dusting of dark hair to his belly button, his chiseled abs and then higher to his strong chin, and pronounced face. He was beautiful in a way I'd never noticed in a man before.

"I assume you have a reasonable explanation for this," Nino drawled. I turned to him, though I knew he wasn't talking to me. He would never use that tone on me.

Seeing his expression, I could tell that Amo was in trouble. Never taking his eyes off Amo, Alessio strode toward me and held out his free hand, the other with his knife still pointing at Amo. I let him pull me to my feet and for once he didn't immediately release me, instead he tugged me away from

Amo. The shirt slipped off my shoulders, fluttering to the floor, and I mourned its warmth and comforting scent.

Alessio's blue eyes pierced into mine. "Did he do something?"

My brows pinched. "He gave me his shirt."

"You're not injured?" Nino inquired, his eyes still on Amo, though neither of them had pulled a knife or gun yet.

I tugged at Alessio's hand and he finally let go. "I'm cold."

Alessio scanned my arms and throat, then my clothes. I wasn't sure what he was looking for. "No marks or rips."

Amo let out a sigh and crossed his arms in front of his broad chest, which made his biceps flex in a very pleasing way. "I didn't do anything. I'm a Vitiello, I don't hurt women. I ran across Greta in the garden when I was getting some fresh air and she asked me to help her catch Momo. The dog had run into the basement and so that's where we went. Then the alarm went off and locked us in, and I tried to keep Greta warm with my shirt. End of story."

I slanted a look at Amo. His face was hard and absolutely convincing, though he hadn't told the entire truth. I guess with lying it was crucial that you hid the lie behind a part truth. He did it well.

I didn't lie to my family. Ever.

Nino came toward me, blocking my view of Amo, forcing me to bring my gaze up to his. Alessio too was watching me as if this was the Spanish Inquisition, a fascinating part of history I didn't have the stomach to read after what I'd seen. Nino wrapped his fingers around my wrist. "Was that what happened?"

"Yes," I said, not even missing a beat. Guilt bloomed in my chest but I never wavered, only stared up into Nino's face. I couldn't explain why I lied, only that I wanted to protect Amo and I knew the reason why he lied was that he considered himself in danger. I tried to console myself with the fact that I'd probably protected Nino and Alessio too. Because if they'd attacked Amo, they would have suffered injuries as well, even if they were very capable fighters. Amo looked like he was very capable himself.

Nino gave a satisfied nod after he'd regarded me for a few more heartbeats and released my wrist.

"I advise you to put on your shirt," he told Amo. The latter shook his head with a muttered curse, then bent forward and took his shirt from the ground before he slipped it on.

Alessio took a step toward Amo, all the while turning the dagger in his hand. “You’re damn lucky that it wasn’t Nevio who found you like this. He wouldn’t have waited for an explanation.”

Amo buttoned his shirt with steady fingers, his cold gray eyes resting in an almost bored fashion on my cousin. Alessio was several inches shorter than Amo, though he was already 6’1 tall at seventeen. Amo was probably 6’5 and towering over him. He didn’t say anything.

“Let’s go upstairs and inform everyone that we found you,” Nino said. He motioned at Amo. “Go ahead.”

Amo walked past us, his eyes briefly hitting me, and I held my breath, not even sure why. When I burst out of my reverie, I caught Nino’s eyes on me. I gave him a quick smile. He lightly touched my shoulder before he followed Amo.

“Come on, Greta,” Alessio said and I stepped up to him and we walked at a slower pace.

“Did he say anything inappropriate?”

“Like what?” I asked as we ascended the staircase. I really couldn’t imagine what Alessio had in mind.

Alessio stopped on the step below mine, which brought us almost to eye level. “Something sexual.”

I pursed my lips. “You, Nevio and Massimo talk about sex around me all the time.”

“Not to you,” Alessio said as if it should be obvious and I was stupid not to see it.

“Of course, *we’re related* but Amo and I aren’t.”

Alessio shook his head, bringing his face closer and spoke in a low, warning voice, “Do not say anything like this to Nevio, you hear me?”

I blinked at him. “What if he asks the same question you did?”

“Then you come up with a better answer. Say you didn’t talk at all, or you talked about cotton candy. I don’t care, but do not say what you said to me.”

“You want me to lie to Nevio?”

“Greta,” Alessio said in an imploring voice, grabbing my shoulders, which was why I knew it was serious. “Nevio’s waiting for a reason to kill Amo. Trust me when I say he’ll kill him if you give him that answer, or better yet tell him Amo sat beside you half naked, massaging your feet while you hugged his shirt.”

“You’re stating the facts wrong.”

“Nevio won’t care for the correct facts. He’ll take the facts that suit him and go with it. He won’t be able to control himself, he won’t want to.”

I sighed and nodded. Our conversation was cut short when Uncle Savio appeared above us. “Your presence is required, dollface, so stop the chitchat.”

Alessio let me pass and I walked toward Savio. He was the second youngest of my uncles, in his mid-thirties and always called me dollface. I never understood why he did it considering dolls looked lifeless at best, and creepy most of the time. When I’d asked him why he compared me to a dead thing, he’d laughed so hard, I’d thought he’d pass out. He still called me dollface but because he meant it in a nice way, I didn’t mind.

Savio wrapped an arm around me as he led me in the direction of the common area. “You okay?”

“Of course,” I said.

He shook his head. “Convince your crazy father.”

I didn’t get a chance to ask what he meant because raised voices came from the common room and made my anxiety flare up. The atmosphere when we stepped inside was so tense, I felt a little sick. Dad and a man who looked remarkably like Amo were face to face, looking as if they were about to throw fists any moment. Amo’s expression told me he was willing to join in. Only Nino seemed to keep a cool head. I didn’t see anyone else, which was fortunate. Nevio and Massimo probably wouldn’t have improved the situation.

The moment Dad spotted me, he stepped back from the other man. “Nino told me what you said.”

I didn’t say anything, not sure what he wanted to hear. I hadn’t heard what Nino had said but knowing him he’d probably repeated my words accurately.

“Talk to Kiara,” Dad said after he’d regarded me for a long time. What was everyone trying to see?

I gave him a puzzled look. “Why?” I enjoyed talking to Kiara. Her kind insights were very close to how I saw the world, which was very nice, but I could tell Dad had a reason for his request.

“Remo,” Nino said firmly. “She doesn’t display any signs. Calm down.”

Amo’s expression twisted with fury and so did his father’s. They obviously knew what was going on even when I didn’t. At least I wasn’t the only one who seemed clueless as to what was happening judging from

Alessio's analyzing expression.

"We're leaving now before this ends in a very unpleasant way," the man, who must be Luca Vitiello, said. His arm was stretched out in front of Amo's chest as if he feared he would have to hold him back. It was all very confusing.

Nino held Dad by the shoulder, and murmured something in his ear. Dad motioned me forward and I went over to him immediately. Dad cupped my chin, his eyes so intense I had trouble returning his gaze.

"I'm fine, Dad, only cold," I said with a reassuring smile.

He gave a nod. Then he looked over my head. "You can leave."

"I wasn't asking for your permission," Luca Vitiello said.

Dad's expression sent a shiver down my back. I touched his chest and his gaze found me.

Nino stepped forward. "We should continue our meeting tomorrow, once we've all calmed down."

Amo laughed, but it was a very different laugh from the ones I'd heard in the basement. It was harsh and derisive. "And you think that'll be the case tomorrow?"

"You need peace more than we do," Dad growled.

I lowered my gaze, trying not to let my anxiety get the better of me. It was too loud in here and all the people, their movements, scents and voices sent my mind whirling. I longed to be back in the basement.

I focused on the marble beneath my ballet flats, its firmness, solidity, cold. I breathed in very slowly and let my breath out at an even slower pace.

2. 5. 7. 15. 25. 55. 75.

Once I'd repeated my favorite numbers in my head, I felt calmer.

"Mia cara?" Dad's quiet voice filtered through the whooshing in my head. I peered up, realizing that we were alone. He touched my cheek. "You're cold. Take a hot bath."

"Momo's missing."

Dad's mouth tightened with disapproval. He didn't like Momo very much. Though that had less to do with Momo and more with the fact that Dad disliked many things, humans and animals alike.

"If we haven't found him by the time you're done taking your bath, you can join in the search, but now I want you to warm up."

If Dad demanded something, I knew he wouldn't budge. I nodded. "Where are Nevio and Massimo?"

Usually, my brother stuck to my side, especially in situations like this. That he wasn't here meant Dad had ordered him to stay away. Probably because of Amo, if Alessio was right.

"Helping your Mom wrangle Giulio into submission until I have time to talk to him."

"Did he trigger the alarm?"

"Who else?" Savio muttered as he returned to the common room, followed by Alessio and Nino. I assumed they'd let out Amo and his father. I felt a pang when I realized I hadn't even said goodbye to Amo. Would he return tomorrow?

I felt myself wishing for it.

Savio smirked. "Now that Nevio goes bump in the night, Giulio took over his spot as the residual trouble maker."

"He's only six. He's not always going to cause trouble," I said, feeling protective of my little brother.

"Take a bath now. We'll look for the dog," Dad said.

"Which one?" Savio asked. "If I have to look for that ugly beast, I'm not wearing my new Balenciaga sneakers."

"He'll go for your throat not your sneakers," Alessio said, one corner of his mouth edging up.

"It's not Bear, it's Momo."

"You should have never allowed her to bring the beasts into the house," Savio said.

"I didn't," Dad said with a reproachful look at me.

"Momo was in the studio with me, and Bear's locked in my room."

"That he is. Nice surprise when I tried to check on you," Nevio drawled as he stalked into the room. His left forearm was covered in blood but because he wore leather wrist cuffs, I couldn't see the extent of his injuries. In three long strides, he was in front of me. Our eyes locked.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" I whispered, my voice trembling.

"That dog tried to rip him to shreds and you worry about a rabid beast," Alessio muttered.

I ignored the remark. Nevio knew that I'd die if something happened to him, but Nevio was Nevio, and even Bear couldn't stand a chance against him.

"I only hurt it enough to get it off me," he said quietly. I knew what Nevio was, knew he didn't need much incentive to kill. That he didn't kill

Bear though he'd attacked him was only because of me. Sometimes it felt as if I was holding Nevio's darkness by the leash and if I ever let go...I didn't want to think about it.

He took my hand. "Come." He pulled me along.

"Momo," I said over my shoulder.

"We'll find it," Dad said.

Nevio didn't slow, pulling me upstairs and into my room. My eyes fell on Bear who lay beside the bed. Nevio had bound his leash to the bed post. His tail began wagging when he spotted me. I went over to him and rubbed his maw like he loved.

"If that thing ever as much as growls at you, I'll kill it, no matter what you say," Nevio said, coming to a stop beside me. Bear stopped wagging and peered up at my brother but didn't react otherwise. Whatever Nevio had done, had intimidated Bear for the time being.

"He would never do that," I said fiercely.

Nevio looked into my eyes. "You put too much trust in dangerous creatures."

I raised my eyebrows, but his expression became wary and darker. "Alessio told me you were locked in a cell with Vitiello."

I rose to my feet and moved toward the bathroom. For some reason, I was reluctant to have this conversation with Nevio. Maybe because Alessio's words replayed in my head.

I didn't want to lie to my brother, but I knew I had to.

"Let me draw a bath and get in, then we can talk."

Nevio stayed in my bedroom while I turned the water on and got undressed. I put a generous amount of bubble bath into the water until a thick layer of foam covered the water surface, then I slipped in, hissing as my skin began to prickle from the heat.

"Greta?"

"I'm fine. You can come in."

Nevio slipped in and closed the door then he perched on the closed toilet lid, his body angled my way. He leaned his forearms on his thighs, his mouth briefly twitching in what looked like discomfort. I glanced at his bloody arm.

"You should have that treated."

"Tell me everything he said, everything he did. Don't leave anything out."

"He didn't do anything, Nevio."

“Let me be the judge,” he said with a hard undertone. “No offense, but you wouldn’t know if he did something.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m not a stupid child.”

“No, you aren’t, but your kindness and innocence make you entirely unequipped to deal with someone like Amo Vitiello.”

My brother rarely made me angry. Despite his harsh disposition and crude language, I never got mad at him. But now I could feel myself growing annoyed.

“And what exactly is he?”

Nevio locked eyes with mine. “A hunter in more than one regard.”

I tried to figure out what he meant but that was apparently enough to convince Nevio of the truth of his words. “See, you don’t even know what I mean.”

It finally clicked. “You mean he pursues women?”

Nevio laughed darkly.

I couldn’t see what it mattered. “You do too.”

“I’m not bound to marry.”

My stomach clenched. “Marry?”

“This summer.”

I hoped my face didn’t give away how confused I was. Why had Amo lied? He’d said he wasn’t promised, but if he married so soon, he must be engaged. I wasn’t sure why the idea made me upset. Amo’s relationship status shouldn’t be my concern.

When I realized Nevio was watching me, I said matter-of-factly, “Then you have even less reason to be worried. If he’s in love, he’ll hardly make any advances on me.”

“Love,” Nevio scoffed. He shook his head and stared down at his injured arm as if he considered cutting it off. He began loosening the leather cuff with more force than was required. “He doesn’t love her. It’s an arranged marriage.”

I was still mulling over Amo’s lie, which was probably why I forgot to lie at Nevio’s next question.

“So he kept his distance?”

“He gave me his shirt so I wouldn’t freeze.”

Nevio shoved to his feet and ripped the leather cuff off where it had been stuck to the bite wound. A piece of skin came off as well but Nevio didn’t seem to care. Fresh blood dropped from the wound and onto my floor. “Oh,

did he now?" Nevio asked, baring his teeth. He stared at me as if he wanted to shake some sense into me then he turned on his heel and stalked toward the door, leaving a trail of blood on his way.

"I don't care what Dad says, I'll kill him. We don't need peace."

"Nevio." He grabbed the door handle but stopped at my voice. I leaned over the edge of the bathtub, holding onto it. "Nevio!"

He turned to me, frenzy in his eyes.

"Don't, okay? He helped me. I was really cold. I asked him for his shirt. He didn't suggest it."

Nevio breathed harshly but eventually he came back over to me and sank down on the lid. "Greta, you need to stop being so naïve. You can't ask someone who isn't a Camorrista for something like that. Our soldiers fear us but Amo..." His lips thinned again, the fury returning to his eyes.

"I'm fine, okay? I'm well protected, you know that." I reached out and tapped the skin of his left hand. "Now please let Nino take a look at this before it gets infected."

His eyes followed me down to his forearm as if he had forgotten about the bite wound. It looked nasty so I didn't know how he could. He took a deep breath. "Okay. But this discussion isn't over."

I gave him a patient smile. "I need to get dressed and find Momo."

Nevio rose to his feet. "I'll look for that thing."

He left. I didn't tell him that Momo would never let Nevio catch him. Most animals avoided Nevio. There was something too erratic, too frenzied about him. With a sigh, I got up, my body nicely warmed up. My mind drifted back to Amo and the warmth in my body intensified. I stared at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I had never wondered what other people thought of my body, but I did now, wondering what Amo had seen when he'd looked at me.

Why? Why did I care? I liked my body. Amo's thoughts about it shouldn't matter. But then I remembered the flushed sensation that had overcome me when Amo had removed his shirt, which came unexpectedly. It wasn't as if I'd never seen a naked chest. The men in my family ran around shirtless all the time when they worked out, headed to fight training or went into the pool. They too were fit to an extent that required a daily workout regime.

But Amo...

I shook my head. I didn't understand any of this. I'd never been attracted

to someone before. I didn't have much contact with people outside of my family but I'd also never had a crush on a celebrity or anyone else I'd met in passing. I was attracted to Amo. My body's reaction pointed toward this conclusion.

And thinking about his strong chest and gray eyes, I felt the novel desire to touch myself. My breasts and lower. Again something I'd never done because I simply hadn't felt the desire to do it. I regarded my small breasts, half covered with foam then dipped lower to the apex of my thighs where I felt the warmest. I reached for my sex, my fingertips brushing my pubic hair.

A knock sounded, making me draw back.

"Can I come in?"

It was Kiara.

"One sec," I called and quickly got out of the bathtub and put a fluffy bathrobe on. I opened the door to find Kiara standing right in front of it, glancing worriedly at Bear. "Is he all right?"

That's what I liked about her. "I think so. I think Nevio smacked him over the head. I'll keep an eye on him."

She nodded then her kind brown eyes settled on me. Massimo had the same eye color and yet few people would probably notice, because the look in his was rarely kind and thus made them appear different. "Your father asked me to talk to you," she said carefully.

I went over to the bed and sank down then began to pet Bear with my toes because he'd rolled on his back, exposing his belly. "I don't know why."

Kiara sat down beside me. She regarded me for a while. "Amo is an imposing man, and your father is a man who knows what kind of horrible acts some humans are capable of."

I tilted my head toward her. "I know what humans are capable of."

I'd seen the men in my family commit said acts almost seven years ago and still often dreamed about it.

"I know. I mean something else."

"Kiara, I'm not good at this."

She laughed gently. "Nino's neither, that's probably another reason why I'm here."

"And what's the first?"

Kiara's face sobered and a haunted look entered her eyes that I'd never seen before. "This is something that you can't tell Massimo or Alessio."

"Okay," I said slowly.

“When I was a young girl a man from my family sexually abused me, and I hid it from everyone out of fear and shame.”

Without hesitation, I hugged her. She exhaled and briefly hugged me back before she let me pull back again. She patted my cheek. “Thank you.”

I nodded, and slowly it dawned on me what this was about. “Like I told Dad and everyone else, I’m fine. Amo didn’t hurt me in any way. I would tell you and Dad if he had. I know I don’t have to be afraid when I’m in Vegas and I know I don’t have to be ashamed.”

“You wouldn’t keep it a secret to protect him from harm, right? I know you.”

“He wouldn’t be deserving of my protection if he’d done what happened to you.”

Kiara smiled proudly. “That’s good. Your dad will be proud.”

“He’d be prouder if I could defend myself like he always wanted.”

“You aren’t someone who resorts to violence, he’s come to terms with it, and you wouldn’t have had a chance against a man like Amo anyway.”

I nodded. “Have they found Momo yet?”

“No, they’re still looking.”

“I’ll get dressed and join them. And tell Dad, I’m fine. I don’t want war to happen because of me.”

“It won’t,” Kiara said.



Ten minutes later I was dressed and went down to the common room where I found Nino stitching up Nevio. He was talking to Alessio and Massimo while Nino pushed the needle into his flesh. Seeing them, I remembered Kiara asking me not to tell them. I wondered why she didn’t want them to know. They could handle a lot considering what they did at night.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Nevio asked with an arched brow as I headed toward the backyard. Maybe Momo huddled under one of the bushes. He was too careful to go near one of the two pools.

“I’m going to look for Momo.”

“Wait for me. I don’t want you to go alone.”

I sent my brother a disbelieving look. He has always been protective but this was taking it to a new level. “I’ll never find her if you’re by my side, you know that.”

“I’ll come with you,” Dad said as he stepped into the common room. He’d probably been upstairs to give Giulio a lecture. He pointed a warning finger at Nevio. “You’re getting stitched up. If you lose your arm because of an infection, you’ll be in major trouble.”

He strode over to me. Momo didn’t tolerate Dad much better than Nevio but I actually liked the idea of Dad joining me.

With his hand on my shoulder, we stepped out into the backyard. The evening air was brisk and so I wrapped my cardigan tighter around myself, remembering how Amo’s shirt had felt, how it had smelled.

“Where to?” Dad asked.

“He sometimes hides in the bushes at the fence.”

Dad and I walked in silence for a while. “Please don’t let war break out because I managed to get locked in a cell with Amo, okay?”

Dad’s fingers on my shoulders tightened briefly. “I can’t imagine war is avoidable in the long run.”

“So many would die, for nothing.”

Dad gave me a strange smile. “Not for nothing.”

I sighed. I didn’t want a war, for various reasons. “Would it make you happy if I tried to learn to fight?” Dad had tried to coerce me into taking fight lessons for as long as I could remember, but the thought of choosing violence had never sat right with me. For my family it was always the first choice, but for me it was the last resort.

Dad turned me so I was facing him. “For many years this was what I wanted but I can tell that you’ll never be a fighter, Greta, not in the physical sense. I don’t want you to fight to make me happy.”

The bushes to our right rustled and Dad stepped in front of me, his hand on his knife. I squinted into the half-light. There were lamps at the top of the fence but their light didn’t penetrate the ground. Still I could see a small white muzzle peeking out under the bush.

“Momo!” I rushed toward him and picked him up before he could dash away again. I removed a few twigs from his shaggy fur. He was a Maltese and when I’d found him, he’d been completely matted and emaciated, his ears infected. I cuddled him to my chest, something he’d only started allowing recently.

I felt Dad's eyes on me and headed to his side. He didn't try to pat Momo, only regarded me. "Considering what kind of man I am and the sins I've committed, I don't know why I deserve a daughter like you."

"I'm not perfect Dad. I'm as flawed as everyone else."

Dad gave me a look that made it clear he disagreed. His phone rang and when he saw the caller ID he picked up after a muttered curse. "Luca." He listened to something the other man then nodded. "Getting it over with sounds like a plan." He hung up.

"What's going on?"

"Luca and his son are coming for another meeting tomorrow."

My heart beat faster, my belly bustling with excitement. I lowered my gaze and pressed my face against Momo's fur to hide my reaction from Dad.

Dad thought I was perfect.

He didn't know how my heart picked up when I thought about Amo.

Chapter *Seven*



Amo

“No fights today, Amo. No matter how much Nevio provokes you.”

“I’m in control, don’t worry.”

It was true. I didn’t care about the meeting in the slightest. All I had been able to think about since Dad and I left the mansion yesterday was how I’d manage to see Greta again. Her last words to me had floated around my brain all night. I’d imagined kissing her, dreamed about it. That’s why I’d convinced Dad to ask for another meeting so soon.

Nevio wasn’t in the meeting room this time. In his stead, Alessio leaned against the wall beside his father Nino.

Remo perched on the edge of the desk with his arms crossed, regarding us with a challenging smile. His eyes settled on me, and his smile became harder.

If he knew how my brain kept revolving around Greta, the little spark of hate would become a roaring fire.

Dad and I settled on one of the sofas and we began our discussion about new transport routes. I tried my best to be involved and professional, even when my thoughts drifted to the doe-eyed girl.

“I have to take a piss,” I said after about fifteen minutes, and rose.

Remo bared his teeth. “That didn’t end well yesterday.”

“Would you prefer if I relieve myself in a corner of this room?”

Dad’s mouth twitched but then he sent me a warning look. He just wanted to get this shitshow over with.

Nino motioned at Alessio. “Accompany him to the bathroom.”

I stifled a very rude comment. Frustration welled up in me. I didn’t even need to piss. I just wanted to go looking for Greta. With Alessio hot on my heels, that obviously wasn’t going to happen.

Maybe it was better this way.

Alessio’s expression was on the verge of boredom as he walked by my side. He had the same cold demeanor as his father even if he didn’t look like him. Especially his more pronounced, slightly crooked nose didn’t bear any resemblance to the Falcone nose. Maybe someone had broken it in a fight.

His eyes slanted up to me, calculating. “Don’t try anything.”

I sent him a hard smile.

“Who have we here?” Nevio’s voice echoed through the hallway and I grabbed my knife.

Nevio and Massimo headed our way. I couldn’t assess the latter. Our interactions had been too sparse but the look in his eyes was like a snake waiting to strike. Nevio definitely looked like he had every intention of turning this bloody. I was ready. Fresh stitches covered his left forearm. I’d aim there first, an easy target.

Alessio shook his head and stepped in their way. “What the fuck? You know what our fathers said. Let this drop, Nevio.”

“Since when are you so eager for peace?” Massimo asked. All three of them were dressed in black as if they were part of some creepy, gothic boyband. Seeing them together I realized that Alessio was the shortest. Even Massimo who was a year younger had an inch on him. Nevio was almost my height so he towered over them.

Alessio turned to his brother. “You should know better.”

“I do,” Massimo said as if he couldn’t care less. “But I’m not going to stop Nevio.”

“Then I’ll do it,” a familiar voice said. I turned to find Greta coming down the stairs, a huge black dog at her side. She held him by the leash but I couldn’t imagine her being strong enough to hold him back if he attacked. I had to admit the thing looked more impressive than a Rottweiler. In her arm

she cradled what looked like a white Flokati with a black nose.

She was dressed in an oversized white knit sweater with short sleeves and cut-off jeans that revealed her slim, tanned legs.

"This isn't how we treat guests," she said firmly as she came to a stop between me and the unholy trinity. She didn't look at me.

"He's not a guest," Nevio said.

"Nevio," she said in an imploring voice. She dropped the leash and the dog actually sat down as if that was his command, then she approached her crazy twin. He slanted me a warning look before he looked down at Greta.

I forced myself not to look at her legs, but when she stepped on her tiptoes and her slim muscles flexed, I couldn't help but stare. She whispered something in Nevio's ear. He didn't look happy in the slightest, but he nodded then jerked up his chin at Massimo.

"Keep an eye on him. No roaming around," Nevio ordered Alessio before he and Massimo finally disappeared. I didn't trust Nevio to have given up.

Greta sighed and picked up the leash. I might as well have been air for her. "Come, Bear."

"Where are you going?" Alessio asked her.

"Taking Bear and Momo outside so they can relieve themselves. Bear will protect me, so don't worry." Before she headed out, her eyes slanted to me for a moment and my heart almost jumped out of my chest. I definitely wasn't air.

"Take a piss," Alessio said motioning toward the bathroom.

"I don't take orders from you."

He shrugged. "Then piss your pants."

Maybe I could just knock him out. Dad would probably hang me by the balls if I did that. I headed into the bathroom, trying to figure out a way to get Greta alone again with all the Falcones following me around.

I leaned against the door.

"Alessio, you have to help me. Momo ran off again. I think he headed for the basement. Can you go looking for him? Dad will be angry if I go down there again," Greta said.

"Fuck, Greta. I need to watch Vitiello."

"Please, Alessio."

A hard knock sounded. "If you're done with your piss, you head straight back to the office!"

Steps rang out and then a soft voice sounded right in front of the door.

“I’m outside at the pool at the back.”

I closed my eyes briefly. What was I doing? I unlocked the door but Greta was already gone. Checking my surroundings, I headed outside as I kept my hand loosely on the holster with my gun.

I knew it was a horrible idea to seek Greta out. Her family, especially her crazy brother would throw a major fit, and I was about to marry Cressida. A thousand reasons spoke against talking to her, but I couldn’t stay away. I needed to see her again, to hear her voice. I wasn’t sure what the hell was wrong with me. I’d never felt so incapable of controlling myself.

I walked around the house where a big pool landscape illuminated the night.

Greta sat cross-legged on a sunchair that someone had pulled into the shadows, away from the pool’s glow, and she was peering up at the night sky. For a few moments, I simply watched her, how the moonlight made her skin glow, how content she looked cloaked in the dark and all by herself. My heart sped up and heat flushed my body. Fuck. What. Was. I. doing?

This question kept repeating itself in my head.

I approached her slowly, making my steps heard so she didn’t startle. She peered over her shoulder and I waited for her to tense. She didn’t. Instead, she patted the place beside her. “You can sit down if you want.”

I folded myself down on the sun chair. It was too low for my long legs but I wanted to be close to Greta.

“Why are you out here alone in the dark?”

I had a feeling she would have been out here even if it weren’t for me.

“I wanted some quiet,” she said before she motioned at the stretched-out beast at her feet that was eyeing me with eerie amber eyes. “And I’m not alone.” She stretched out one leg and began to run her toes along the dog’s side. I was mesmerized by her elegant petite feet, by the way she held them as if she was about to dance some difficult ballet move, by her toe nails, which weren’t painted. I’d never met a girl who didn’t paint her nails and still Greta pulled it off. With a satisfied huff, the dog turned on its back, presenting his vulnerable belly and throat so she could pet those too. A smile pulled at Greta’s mouth as she ran her toes along the bare insides of the dog’s upper thighs. It was a male dog, no wonder he was eager to be petted by Greta.

“We don’t have long,” I murmured. Reminding her. Reminding myself because being around her it was easy to forget that we weren’t alone in this

world.

“It’s better if nobody catches us.”

I couldn’t read her. She sounded almost forlorn.

“Why did you say you wanted to kiss me?” I asked the question that had been haunting me since yesterday.

Greta tilted her head to the side, watching me quietly for several seconds. “Because I like your face.”

I almost choked on laughter. “Only my face?”

Her dark eyes took in every inch of my body, slowly, meticulously, as if she really wanted to make up her mind. This girl was out of this world. “I like your body as well.”

I allowed my eyes to wander over her body like I’d never dared before. According to my reputation I was cocky and boisterous, but so far I hadn’t been suicidal enough to undress Greta Falcone with my eyes in Camorra territory. “I like your face and body as well.”

Greta’s mouth turned into a small smile but pursed in confusion when I checked our surroundings.

“Just checking if there’s a risk of getting a knife in my back.”

Greta shook her head. “Nevio wouldn’t stab you in the back. He prefers the direct approach, so does Alessio. Massimo might do it, though.”

Something shifted on the ground and the white fluffy dog let out a huff where it lay hidden at the Cane Corso’s side. “You lied to Alessio. Why?”

“I lied,” she admitted softly, guilt tinging her words. “I like how you make me feel.”

My eyes were drawn to her lips. Maybe this was our only chance. I could claim Greta’s first kiss.

She didn’t deserve this. But I wasn’t a good man.

Her eyes met mine. “Why did you lie?”

I paused, not sure what she meant.

“About your fiancée.”

It felt as I was being doused with ice water. She knew.

Strangely enough, I felt relieved. Lying to Greta had felt...wrong.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly because I didn’t. I’d lied without thinking because every second since I’d met Greta I’d wished I wasn’t engaged, so much stronger than I’d ever felt it before.

Greta searched my eyes then nodded as if she believed me. “Us sitting here together, is it wrong?”

Was she asking me for moral guidance? I was the wrong person to ask for many reasons. “We’re not doing anything.”

Greta tilted her head so she was peering down at her dog once more. “It doesn’t feel like that.”

“I know,” I admitted. My eyes rested on Greta’s face, on the thoughtful tilt of her lips.

Something cold touched my neck. I tensed, my hand flying to the gun in my holster.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, asshole, or I’ll ram a hole in your skull,” said Alessio.

“You better lower that fucking knife,” I growled, half tempted to pull my gun and see if his reflexes were quicker than my own.

Greta rose to her feet and her dog growled in a low and threatening way. “Stop it, Alessio. Amo caught Momo for me.”

“What a lucky coincidence that he’s around every time Momo runs off. What a hero,” Alessio muttered but he lowered the knife. I stood and turned around to him, wanting to have him in view.

Greta reached for Alessio’s arm. “Don’t tell Nevio.”

He frowned at her hand then narrowed his eyes at her. “Tell him what exactly, Greta? Because I really don’t know what it is I’m seeing here.”

She bit her lip and her eyes were drawn up to mine.

Alessio leaned toward her. “We’ll have to talk later.” He straightened and turned to me. His expression was cold and calculating. From all the Falcone men he had been the best option to catch us. Most of the rest would have punctuated my skull with their blade. “Let’s go back before someone comes looking for us.”

I hesitated, wondering when and if I’d see Greta again. Tomorrow Dad and I were flying back to New York. We wouldn’t be returning to Las Vegas any time soon and the next time the Falcone clan was supposed to visit was for my wedding. I sure as fuck didn’t want Greta to be at my wedding with Cressida.

“Vitiello, I swear I’ll call Nevio and deal with the shitshow later.”

I nodded at Greta and turned. I needed to stop this, whatever it was. I could never see Greta again.

Alessio and I walked in silence back to the house but shortly before we reached the office, he turned to me. “Listen, maybe you think being Amo fucking Vitiello gives you a carte blanche for being an asshole, but Greta is

the kindest girl you'll ever meet. If you're looking for another fling before you get married, then look somewhere else."

A silent or else swung in his voice. I smiled harshly but didn't say anything.

"Greta isn't like other girls, or most other people."

"She has a very direct manner."

Alessio narrowed his eyes in contemplation. "Greta's always been this way. She's like my father in that regard."

"Minus the murderous sociopath bit."

"Minus that, yes. Greta hates violence in any shape and form. She's not your type, Vitiello, so forget you ever saw her."

I didn't react to his words and stepped into the office. I didn't owe Alessio an explanation, but his words had the intended effect.

Dad, Remo and Nino looked up when we entered.

"What took you so long?" Remo snarled.

"I needed a smoke and Amo joined me in the backyard."

Nino shook his head with obvious disapproval.

I sank down beside Dad who sent me a questioning look. I gave him a nod to indicate everything was good, though that couldn't have been further from the truth.

I was bound to marry Cressida, and quite possibly falling for Greta Falcone.



It was past midnight when a knock sounded at my door. I hadn't turned off the lights yet as I'd expected Alessio to show up. He slipped in, dressed completely in black and with an equally black balaclava in his hand. He was

obviously on his way out with Nevio and Massimo. The steel covered tip of his combat boot gleamed freshly polished.

Bear lifted his head and growled but I shushed him. Alessio came over to my bed and perched on the edge. He regarded me, his honey-blond brows dipping in a V. "Explain to me what I saw today. Don't give me any of this Amo saved Momo bullshit again. I know the fucker and he probably kills puppies in his dreams."

I pursed my lips at Alessio's assessment. He always tried to be unemotional and logical but sometimes his temper burst through.

I put my book away. "Amo and I were sitting on the sunchair."

"I really don't know how it could have happened but you seem quite adept at lying and sneaking away so I have to ask. Did you have sex with him?"

Shock washed over me. "I have never even kissed a boy," I said.

I didn't miss the flicker of relief on Alessio's face, though I couldn't see why the state of my hymen or kissing state was cause for an emotional reaction. "You were getting cozy with Amo today."

"I didn't get cozy with him. We talked, that's it."

"Amo doesn't just talk to girls, and you, Greta, aren't anyone. Amo's probably getting cold feet because of his wedding and looking for an easy lay."

My cheeks grew hot. "And you think I'd be one, an easy lay?" Maybe it was true, because I could imagine sleeping with Amo.

Alessio sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Fuck, if I knew. Yesterday I would have said no. You usually can't even stand when strangers are too close. I don't know what's going on, that's why I'm here."

"You don't have to worry about me."

Alessio didn't look convinced. "I know you never get the chance to meet someone because of Nevio and the rest of us. You're Greta Falcone. You can't just pick a guy. But Amo really is the last guy you should give a second glance."

I didn't say anything but Alessio kept staring at me. I'd given Amo more than just a second glance but he didn't need to know that.

"Alessio, I won't see him again."

As the realization settled in the pit of my stomach that this could very well be the truth, a sense of loss overcame me, which was strange, because how could I miss something that I had never had?

Chapter *Eight*



Anno

“Okay, this is the third time you’re zoning out on me today. What is wrong with you?”

I focused on my best friend who stood in front of the biker hanging from chains in the ceiling of our holding cell. He was one of the few surviving supporters of the man who’d kidnapped my sister years ago. Maddox had caught him with Primo’s help yesterday and killed another. Blood was dripping down the guy’s face and chest. He’d passed out.

“Nothing.” I sheathed my knife and went over to the sink in the corner where a bucket with cold water waited for instances like this.

Maximus stepped back as I flung the water at the guy. He jerked, his eyes flying open but then they rolled back again and he sagged forward once more. As future Capo, torturing wasn’t the top of my priorities but with bikers I gladly made an exemption.

“Should I get adrenaline?”

I nodded absentmindedly but my mind was far away. Thousands of miles to the west. I could barely focus on anything else than the girl I’d left without a goodbye two weeks ago.

“Do you want me to continue without you?”

“No,” I snapped and took pliers from the table in the corner. Maximus injected the adrenaline into the man’s veins and soon he stirred.

My phone rang with a reminder. I took it out of my back pocket and glanced at the screen, then froze. It had struck midnight and my phone reminded me that it was May 15th, Greta’s birthday.

“Who’s G?” Maximus asked with a curious glint in his eyes as he stepped up beside me.

I had completely forgotten that I’d put the reminder into my phone shortly after I’d left Vegas’ two weeks ago. I wasn’t sure why the fuck I’d done it. But back then I’d just wanted to remember Greta’s birthday.

Maximus wiped his hands and leaned against the wall beside me. “That is a look I’ve never seen on your face.”

I turned to him. “What kind of look?”

Maximus grimaced, shook his head as if it was something dirty he had to say. “Never mind.”

“Spill, Maximus.”

“It’s the look my father has when he looks at my mother.”

I stared, then scoffed. But my heart sped up completely uncharacteristically. I clicked the reminder away but it stayed locked inside my brain.

Maximus continued staring as if he could x-ray information out of me.

“She’s no one.” The words rang wrong.

Maximus’ gaze didn’t waver. “So G’s a she.”

I raised my finger in warning. “Drop it, all right?”

“It can’t be Cressida. You don’t have a cutesy name for her that starts with G and it’s not her birthday. The closest thing to an endearment you’ve used for her was bitch.”

Why couldn’t he drop it? I usually shared almost everything with him, but I hadn’t mentioned my encounters with Greta with a single word. To no one.

“Have you found an affair so you can bear being married to Cressida?”

“She’s not an affair.”

The protective note in my voice was unmistakable and really piqued Maximus’ interest. “You’re in trouble.”

I was.

“It’s Greta’s birthday today.”

“Greta?” Maximus’ eyes flitted with a hint of recognition but then

disbelief wiped away that look. Of course, he wouldn't believe it.

"Greta Falcone."

Maximus stared, waiting for the joke.

Cackling filled the cell. Both Maximus and I turned toward our captive. He gave me a toothy grin. "How sweet. The Vitiello giant got a taste of Camorra whore pussy."

Static filled my ears as rage boiled up.

"Amo!"

I moved across the room before Maximus could react. I pulled my knife, grabbed the man's long, greasy hair so he met my gaze and rammed the blade with such force into his abdomen that I wondered if my fist was inside his bowels. I smirked down at his agony-ridden face, wide eyes and blood-sputtering mouth. I jerked the blade upward, opening him up.

He sagged forward again but this time adrenaline wouldn't bring him back. Stepping back, I slid the knife out. With a splash, part of his bowels dropped to the floor.

When I turned, Maximus was staring at me as if he'd never seen me before. "We were supposed to question him."

"We did. We'll catch another one."

I went over to the sink and washed my hands and knife, then changed my shirt. My pants were black. Nobody would notice blood on them. "Stop staring," I growled when Maximus still hadn't moved. "Call someone to clean up this mess."

"The mess you caused because you went berserk on behalf of a Falcone's honor?"

I left him standing in the cell and headed out, toward my car, a black Mercedes G-Class. When I turned on the engine, Maximus slipped in, plopping down on the passenger seat. "Cleaning crew is on the way."

I nodded and pulled away from the warehouse.

"Amo."

I sent him a warning look. Unfortunately, we'd been friends for too long for it to have the effect it had on everyone else.

"You don't have to tell me," he muttered with a shrug. "I'm just going to assume the worst. That you fucked one of the most off-limit girls in the goddamn country and war will be upon us very soon."

I rammed my fist down on the steering wheel, hitting the honk by accident and making the car in front of me swerve. "Do not talk of her like

that.”

Maximus raised one dark brow. I glanced back to the street and shook my head. My chest was burning with emotions that I didn’t want and had never felt.

“Wouldn’t that be perfect for your family? You could be Capo of the Camorra.” Maximus’ father Growl was Remo’s half-brother, older than the Camorra Capo, but illegitimate and thus never considered as Capo.

Maximus’ expression twisted. “My father never wanted that position and neither do I. I’m happy with my place.”

“I didn’t sleep with her. I haven’t even kissed her,” I murmured.

“But you want to.”

“I’ve never wanted anything more in my life,” I admitted, needing to get it out, no matter how ridiculous it sounded. And it wasn’t even the whole truth. What I wanted from Greta was far more than physical. I wanted her in every regard. I was a condemned fucker. How could a single moment in time shift everything so drastically? One fleeting glance at the girl in the tutu... what if I’d just walked by instead to stop? My life would be so much easier right now, but I couldn’t regret spotting her.

Maximus leaned his head against the seat, staring up at the ceiling, blowing out a long breath. “I don’t have to tell you that there’s no way in hell you can have her.”

“Is that so?” I asked in a low voice.

Maximus turned his head, looking honestly concerned. “You can have almost any girl, why pick the one you can’t?”

I hadn’t picked her. I had lain eyes on her and had been a goner. Fuck, if I knew how that was possible.

“Your father won’t cancel the wedding to Cressida four weeks before it’s supposed to happen. He’s the most respected and feared Capo there’s ever been and you are on your way to become just as feared and respected, but trust me when I say that it would cause too much uproar in the Famiglia if your family did this. The Traditionalists won’t turn the other cheek this time. The thing with Marcella, the bloody sheets, the biker, her induction that was already a very hard slap.”

Maximus as a soldier heard the voices of discord that stayed silent when I or Dad were close. I trusted his judgment.

I nodded. I knew he was right. But I didn’t care. I didn’t want to listen to reason.

“Not to mention that there’s absolutely zero chance that Remo Falcone will give his daughter to you.”

Nevio would neither. He’d kill me before he’d let me have her.

“I could kidnap her like Remo did with his wife.”

I didn’t sound as joking as I thought I would, and I realized part of me would consider doing it. I parked the car in front of the Sphere. Maximus and I often came here after torture sessions to dance away the remaining adrenaline and pick up a girl or two.

When I turned off the engine, I noticed Maximus watching me. I arched a brow.

“The Falcones will burn down New York and every city on the way.”

I chuckled darkly. It would serve Remo right. Fear of his reaction was not why I would never kidnap Greta. She, she was the reason.

“I need to get rid of Cressida somehow.”

I hopped out of the car and Maximus followed me. “And then what?”

I shrugged. Once Cressida wasn’t a problem anymore, I’d figure out what to do about the Falcones. We walked past the long line waiting to be allowed in, and with a wave at the two bouncers stepped into the club. The crowd parted as they always did when I and Maximus appeared somewhere. The admiring and lusting looks of the girls I’d always basked in perked right off me.

We settled in a VIP booth and ordered a bottle of Clase Azul Tequila. Maximus and I clinked glasses before we downed our first shot.

Then I lounged back against the leather cushions.

“How are you going to do it?”

“Not kill her, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Maximus looked indifferent. “She won’t vanish into thin air.”

“Maybe we can discredit her. If she slept with someone before we married, I could dump her.”

Maximus narrowed his eyes as he propped his tattooed forearms up on his thighs. “I hope you’re not thinking about me.”

“She knows you’re my best friend and would know it’s a trap.”

“Good,” he said and filled our glasses again. “I don’t think she’ll be stupid enough to let any guy fuck her, not so close to her ultimate goal.”

He was probably right. I’d ignored Cressida in the last few years, hoping she’d grow tired and find someone else. But even as I fucked one girl, or more than one at once, after the other and never bothered to be discreet about

it, she just accepted it, because it wasn't me as a person that she wanted. She wanted a Capo.

"Are you sure it's about Greta? And not you having cold feet because you have to marry Cressida?"

I smiled bitterly. I'd made my fucking peace with marrying Cressida before I'd met Greta. My life wouldn't have changed because of marriage. I'd still have fucked around, worked all day and done whatever the fuck I wanted. The only thing that would have changed was that I would have started fucking Cressida again as well.

Maximus' eyes were drawn to something behind us. I turned to see three girls heading our way. One of them was carrying a bowl with lime wedges, the other a salt shaker. With flirty grins, they presented them to us and set them down on the table.

Maximus stifled a smile at the look on my face.

"We saw you were missing something," the blond girl said.

"Something to ruin a \$500 bottle of Tequila with?" I asked, leaning back with narrowed eyes.

The girls exchanged uncertain looks. Maximus waved a waiter over and ordered a bottle of standard Tequila. He draped his arm over the backrest, spreading his legs. Two girls perched on his thighs as if on cue. The third hovered beside me. What if Maximus was right?

I patted my leg and she sank down with a bright smile. Then she grabbed a wedge and salt. I knew what was coming because Maximus was already busy licking salt and lime off the nipples of the two other girls. My life was good. Fucking great, even with Cressida in the picture, so why the fuck was I complicating things with someone like Greta?

The blond girl tugged down the top of her dress and dripped lime juice on her tit. Her nipple hardened and she grinned cheekily when she scattered salt on it.

In the crowd, I saw one of the photographers who always caught me in the worst moments. "Get up," I ordered the girl on my lap. She blinked but obeyed immediately.

I reached for the expensive Tequila then hooked my fingers in the top of the girl's dress and tugged hard, ripping it all the way until it tumbled to the floor. The girl let out a little cry. Before she could react, I spilled Tequila down the girl's front. Her eyes grew wide as the liquid spilled down her tits, belly and drenched her thong.

The Sphere was famous for its scandals. Not all of them were caused by me.

Grabbing her ass, I pulled her toward me and licked the liquid off her thigh, belly and tits. Everyone's attention was on us. She gripped my head, obviously soaking it up like a sponge. "More."

I ripped away her thong and let the tequila run between her legs. I sucked some salt of her nipple, licked over a lime and then sucked the Tequila off her pussy. I prayed that Greta wouldn't see any of this, but she hadn't even been aware of my upcoming marriage so chances were she never paid attention to New York gossip.

This would make headline. If Cressida had an ounce of self-respect, she'd call things off.



I took two Advil. I'd had too much Tequila last night and when my alarm had rung this morning, after only four hours of sleep, I'd regretted last night thoroughly. Dragging myself out of my bedroom, I sank down at the kitchen island and blankly stared at the Manhattan skyline. I took out my phone and regarded it for a long time. What I was going to do was risky and stupid...



Three hours later, I was still at the kitchen island, drinking my third cup of coffee. The elevator beeped and the doors slid open. Only very few people had the code to my apartment. Matteo and Gianna who lived in the penthouse above me, my parents and sister. I'd moved into the place two years ago. Before that it had been vacant since Maximus and his family had moved out to live in a house outside of the city center.

Heavy steps sounded and a newspaper landed on the table in front of me.

"That's what your mother saw when she read the newspaper during breakfast this morning."

I grimaced when I saw a photo of me sitting in front of a naked girl, my face buried in her pussy. Of course, her tits and pussy had been blurred for it to be published, but it was still very obvious what I was doing.

I was glad that I didn't live at home anymore and didn't have to see Mom's face when she saw this. When I'd messaged her this morning, she hadn't mentioned anything.

Dad sank down across from me. I dragged my eyes up to look into his pissed face. "Men in our world are given plenty of leeway, you as a Vitiello even more, but this is too much. Your wedding to Cressida is only a few weeks away and even if you don't respect her, you'll at least have to pretend in public."

"Maybe she'll get tired of me being an asshole and cancels the wedding."

"That's not going to happen. She wants you for your power, not your pleasant personality." Dad shook his head. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"How bad would it be if we canceled the wedding now?"

Dad's expression gave a very unmistakable answer.

"Amo, you took Cressida's virginity in revenge. Do you even realize what kind of backlash we'd face if you don't marry her, not to mention that it would be absolutely dishonorable to drop her like a hot potato only weeks before the wedding, when everything is already booked and planned."

I nodded, because I knew it was true. Our men forgave many things but fucking their daughters without marrying them wasn't one of them. Still, the idea of marrying Cressida when every fiber of my body longed for Greta seemed like the worst torture. Dad and I had discussed this before but I'd never felt this deep certainty that I'd hate every moment of being with Cressida, that it would be the worst torture I could imagine, because it meant I wouldn't be able to be with Greta.

"You despise Cressida, don't pretend otherwise," I gritted out.

Dad chuckled. "I won't. She's a gold digger. You weren't careful and she used your weakness against you."

She had. And she would keep looking for other openings to get me to do what she wanted. Marriage with her would always be a power play, always mean I'd have to watch my back and live with a shield around myself in my own home.

Dad sighed. "Keep this apartment, live here most of the time. While Antonaci can expect you to marry her, he doesn't care if you share a roof

with her all the time as long as she's protected and you get her pregnant at some point. You can keep living your life. Nobody expects you to be faithful."

"You're faithful to Mom."

"You can't compare your mother to Cressida, and I want to be faithful."

If Greta were mine, I'd want to be faithful too.

Chapter *Nine*



I couldn't fall asleep. Restlessness had settled in my bones like a deep ache. For two weeks, I'd hardly slept more than two hours at a time. All my thoughts revolved around Amo. He'd marry in four weeks. I'd never paid attention to the arranged marriages in our world. Social events were something I avoided if possible but the countdown to Amo's wedding day rang loudly in my head.

I slid out of bed and grabbed my favorite leotard, the material threadbare thin from wearing it so often. A small sigh fell from my lips, my body welcoming the familiar piece of clothing like an old friend. I had many leotards in my wardrobe, one for almost every day of the year, gifts from my family, or people who wanted to get into Dad's good graces.

I rarely wore any of them, always circling back to my two favorite pieces.

Bear regarded me through bleary eyes from where he'd curled up at the foot of my bed. When I opened the door, he hopped off the bed, but Momo stayed curled up, which was probably for the best considering his tendency to run away. Once Bear was out in the hallway with me, I closed the door.

The mansion was quiet at this time in the night. I didn't bother turning on

the lights. My senses were tuned into every corner of my home. Even with my eyes closed I would have found my way downstairs. On the top of the stairs, I touched a small bump in the rail like I always did, rubbing my thumb over it in slow circles before I descended the staircase. My parents, siblings and I lived in the east wing of the mansion, while my uncles and their families occupied the other parts of the house. Only Adamo, his wife and their son lived in their own place.

I stepped out into the vast backyard, my gaze sliding toward the small house which was nestled to the right of the building and that harbored my ballet studio. Dad had built it for me shortly after I'd started dancing as a small child.

Through the windows small lights flickered up and out. I wasn't alone tonight. After a brief moment of disappointment over not getting the chance to dance by myself, I walked toward my ballet studio. It was early for them to be back. They often lingered in my ballet studio when they came back from their nightly activities to calm down before they went to bed.

Through the glass door, I saw Alessio, Nevio and Massimo sitting on the floor of my ballet room in the dark. I opened the door and reached for the light switch but then lowered my fingers without turning it on. On nights like this it was better to leave the lights out. I knew what they were but it was easier not seeing it.

The glow of the cigarettes threw shadows on their faces, turning their beautiful features into frightening grimaces, a reflection of their true nature. I often lay awake worrying about them when they went off into the night—more than that, I worried about the people who'd encounter them.

Nevio's head swiveled toward me and for the briefest moment, his eyes held a look he only directed at others. The moonlight was cruel tonight, revealing the truth I'd rather not see. Bear let out a low growl behind me. Goosebumps slithered along my skin.

A smile broke on Nevio's face. It wasn't quite the smile he wore during the day but it came close enough to make me relax. "Late night ballet again?"

I nodded and tiptoed toward them. Bear was close behind me, his claws clicking on the hardwood floor.

Massimo lay stretched out on the floor, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and his eyes following my dog. "Haven't you gotten rid of that psychotic beast yet?"

I sank down between Nevio's legs and he wrapped an arm around me.

Bear's fangs flashed.

"One of these days that dog is going to take your face off," Massimo muttered.

Nevio leaned forward and stared straight into Bear's eyes. At first, Bear's growls grew in volume but then he stopped, tugged his tail between his hind legs and trotted into a corner of the room.

Alessio laughed darkly and took a deep drag from his cigarette. Beneath the scent of smoke lingered the subtle note of blood. The windows were open so I knew it had to be bad.

Nevio grinned. "Good choice, dog. I've taken off more faces than you."

"That's not funny," I said softly.

"He wasn't joking," Alessio said.

Nevio rested his chin on top of my head. "Why do you save these deranged creatures?"

"For the same reason she bothers with us," Massimo said as he held out his cigarette to me but I shook my head.

"One of these days we'll lure you to the dark side," he said with a shrug.

Alessio put his head down on my shins. "You overestimate our powers."

Nevio shook his head with a chuckle. "Don't listen to these assholes. Stay where you are. You belong in the light."

My fingers slid over my tutu. "I belong with the people I love. I don't fear the dark."

Many people thought I couldn't handle much because I was petite and quiet. It was true I got easily overwhelmed in certain situations, especially if I was surrounded by people I didn't know, but my family's darkness wasn't one of the things that triggered my anxiety. Neither had Amo's.

I banished any memory of him from my mind, worried Nevio might pick up on my treacherous thoughts.

"Happy birthday, by the way," Nevio murmured.

"Happy birthday to you too," I said with a small smile. "Your present is up in my room. I didn't think I'd see you tonight. It's early for you to be back."

Alessio nudged my shin. "Things got out of hand for birthday boy. Happy birthday, Greta."

"Happy birthday," Massimo said.

Nevio motioned at a simple cardboard box in the corner that I hadn't noticed before. "There's your birthday present from all of us."

I searched their expressions to a hint of what was in there. Bear had gone over to the box and was sniffing at it curiously, which increased my wariness. I pushed to my feet and cautiously approached the box. I slanted them a look. “There’s nothing cut off in there, right?”

They chuckled, but they had played that kind of prank on Mom and Kiara before. It hadn’t gone over well. Usually they acted more considerate around me, but I still thought caution wasn’t unwarranted.

Nevio shoved to his feet as well and came over to me. “No body parts, promise.”

I squatted down and opened the box, my eyes growing wide at what was inside. Two bunnies. One of them was a lop-eared breed, the other had longer hair, which was mostly matted. They cowered in the box, pressed up to each other, their noses moving quickly and moist, because of their stress level.

“Where did you get them?”

“It was coincidence,” Alessio said, as he sat up. “The guy we paid a visit to tonight had them. They were obviously meant as snake food. The one with the hanging ears sat in the snake terrarium. The other was in a tiny cage that didn’t even allow it to lie down.”

My heart clenched as I peered down at the neglected animals. Bear sniffed at them.

“Back,” I ordered. I didn’t want to add to their stress level, which was why I didn’t try to pet them. They wouldn’t have appreciated it.

“Nevio saved the brown bunny from the snake pit.”

I smiled up at my brother. He shrugged. “You don’t want any bought gifts, so this is the best we could do.”

“It’s perfect,” I said and hugged him briefly.

Then I closed the lid again and picked up the box. “I’ll take them up to my room for now, until the vet has given the okay to keep them outside.”

“Don’t let Dad see them in your room,” Nevio said with a grin.

“It’s only until they’re ready to move out.” I waved at them and left them to their nightly cool down phase before I returned to my room, grabbing a bag of hay mixed with dried wild herbs from the basement. One room down there was devoted solely to the animals I saved and had food for almost every pet that might cross my path.

Bear was hot on my heels, sniffing excitedly. I had a big vacant enclosure at the backwall of my ballet studio where I’d kept two rescue rabbits until early this year when they’d died. The new bunnies could move in there next.

I took the bunnies into the bathroom and closed the door so neither Bear nor Momo could follow and terrify the poor creatures even more. After I'd laid out towels on the entire floor, I opened the lid of the box again. I put down a generous amount of hay for them to eat and a small bowl with water before I put the rest of hay and another bowl of water on a towel. The bunnies looked too terrified to come out yet. I dimmed the lights and went back to my bedroom to change into my pajamas then grabbed a blanket and slipped back into the bathroom. I huddled on the floor against the door, keeping an eye on the box in the dim light. If something happened with the bunnies, I'd be there to help or call Nino. Though it wasn't his specialty, he'd learned to treat pets over the years until a real vet could come over.



Eventually I must have dozed off and I dreamed of Amo like I had almost every night in the last two weeks, but that wasn't what woke me. It took me a few heartbeats to realize my phone was ringing. I sat up, seeing a bunny head peeking out over the box briefly before it ducked again. I fumbled under the blanket for my phone and frowned when I saw it was Aurora. She never called me. We messaged on occasion, but even that was rare. I didn't particularly enjoy texting, especially Emojis completely freaked me out. People used them for a subtle conversation I didn't understand.

"Hello?" I asked, hearing how awkward even that one word sounded from my mouth.

Aurora cleared her throat. "Hey, sorry, I hope I didn't wake you?"

"You did, actually."

"Oh. I'm sorry. It's just...Can I come over? I can't explain over the phone. I know it's early and your birthday. Oh happy birthday by the way. So...uhhh."

I blinked blearily down at my wrist watch. It was 7:48. Not really early. "You can come over. I'm in my bathroom." I hung up.

The bunny with the lop ears peeked out again and this time it put its paws on the edge of the box. It tried to jump out but failed and the box fell over, both rabbits tumbling out. They both dashed under the sink after a moment of

terror. Their muscles weren't well developed. A bunny should be able to jump out of a box of that height without trouble.

I texted the vet I'd worked with for almost five years and asked him to come over as soon as possible.

A knock sounded at my bedroom door, and I quickly got up. I'd forgotten about Bear and Momo. They liked Aurora but I still preferred to be present when she entered my room. When I peered out Aurora was already inside, patting Bear. Momo hadn't bothered getting up from the bed but Aurora went over to him for a quick cuddle as well.

"Hey, Greta."

"Can you come into the bathroom? I want to keep an eye on the new bunnies."

Aurora followed me back into the bathroom and raised her eyebrows at my set up.

"Nevio gave me two rescue bunnies as a present."

"Oh that's so sweet of him," Aurora said, her cheeks flushing.

I shrugged. "He knows I don't want a bought present."

I sank back down, my back against the wall and Aurora did the same.

I wondered why she was here.

She gave me an awkward smile. "This might sound strange, but I'm not here because of me. I'm here because someone asked me to."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Amo?" she said as if she wasn't sure if I knew the name.

I didn't say anything but my heart began racing.

"Amo Vitiello, you know him?"

I smiled. "I know him, yes."

"He got my number from Aunt Aria and called me fifteen minutes ago. It was all very strange. Well, he asked me to go to you and call him again. Is that okay?"

I nodded.

Aurora picked up her phone then waited for Amo to pick up. "Yes, she's beside me. You're welcome."

She handed me her phone and my pulse sped up even more. My mouth became terribly dry. "Hey?"

Aurora regarded me closely.

"Happy birthday, Greta."

Amo's voice was deep, low and growly with sleep, and my belly heated

unexpectedly.

I swallowed, not sure what to say.

"I know this might seem stalkerish but I simply had to wish you a happy birthday."

"You remembered?"

"I can't forget," he murmured, and I was sure I'd combust with heat any moment.

"Wasn't your mother confused that you wanted to call me?"

"I lied. I told her I needed Aurora's number because of the wedding." The last word was quieter than the rest. The wedding. His wedding.

"Oh, that makes sense."

Amo sighed, and I imagined he ran his strong fingers through his dark hair. "I know I shouldn't say this, but I want to see you again."

I stared down at my thighs, frowning. I should say no. I wasn't sure where this was heading, only that it was a tunnel without a light at the end. "I have a dance rehearsal in New York in a week that I wanted to cancel but I could go."

"Come."

"Okay."

"There's more I want to say, but I can't do it over the phone. One week."

"One week."

"Don't take Nevio with you."

I pursed my lips. My brother wouldn't agree to stay in Vegas when I flew to New York no matter what I said. "I'll try."

"Can Aurora keep a secret?"

"Shouldn't you have worried about that before you called her?" I asked with a hint of amusement.

"I did, but my desire to call you was stronger than caution."

I closed my eyes. "She can."

At least from almost everyone, except for Nevio. For some reason she seemed unable to lie to him.

"Good. See you in a week."

"Okay." I hung up and took a deep breath, wondering what had just happened. What was this?

When I opened my eyes, Aurora was watching me with an open mouth. "What's going on?" Her voice was hushed, shocked.

"I don't know."

She shook her head as if she couldn't believe it. "Amo's going to marry in a few weeks."

"Don't tell anyone about this, okay?"

She blinked at me. "Okay." I could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"Not even Carlotta or your parents, and definitely not Nevio. Swear it."

"Greta—" A growl sounded, followed by a sharp *shhhh*.

The bathroom door swung open and Nevio stepped in, messy bed-hair and only in low hanging boxers. He paused with a coffee cup against his lips, eyes narrowing when he saw Aurora beside me. "Girl talk?"

He handed me another cup of coffee and as he bent over me, I caught Aurora checking him out with a look in her eyes I finally understood. It had never quite made sense to me, but since I'd met Amo I could feel it deep in my belly. Our eyes met briefly and she jerked to her feet and almost knocked Nevio's cup out of his hand. Some of the hot liquid spilled on his naked chest and boxers, causing him to hiss. "I'm not into fire play," he snarled. I didn't understand, neither did Aurora from the look of it. She grabbed a towel from the floor and awkwardly patted Nevio's chest then seemed to think better of it and thrust it at him, her head turning a deep red. He caught it with cocked eyebrows.

Aurora looked like she was about to have a nervous breakdown. Anxiety was something I was intimately familiar with so I recognized it immediately.

"Can you give us privacy?" I asked my brother.

He seemed taken aback. I never did girls talks. He shrugged. "Sure. Come over later." With another skeptical look at Aurora, he turned to the door.

"Happy birthday!" Aurora practically screamed at him.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a dubious smile. "Thanks, Rory." He reached out and ruffled her blond hair, then he left.

Aurora stared at the closed door, her lower lip trembling.

"You okay?" I asked carefully. I could see that she wasn't.

"No," she said miserably and sank back down beside me. She covered her face and I worried she'd start crying. I wouldn't know what to do then. Maybe call Kiara. Instead of crying, she let out a muffled scream against her palms then peeked at me through the gaps between her fingers. Her blue eyes were moist but she wasn't crying. "Why do I act so stupid around him?"

I didn't have an answer to her question. She had definitely acted very curiously.

"Maybe because you are in love with him?" I suggested.

The color drained from Aurora's face. "Shhhh. I don't want him to know!"

I wouldn't have been surprised if he did know. Nevio was better at reading people than me. Even if he didn't care about their emotions, he filed them away in case he needed them. He probably just chose to ignore Aurora's crush because he wasn't interested in her for various reasons and out of respect for Fabiano.

I had never talked about Aurora to him.

"Don't tell him, okay? I swear I won't tell anyone about Amo, but please don't say anything to anyone about Nevio."

"Okay." I wouldn't have told anyone anyway. Aurora's emotional state was her personal affair, not anyone's business. Her feelings for Nevio didn't hurt anyone.

My feelings for Amo? They had the potential to leave behind wreckage. And yet, I'd go to New York in a week to see him.

Chapter *Ten*



My heart beat frantically, the noises around me pulsating in my head, whooshing in my ears, chasing my pulse. Then the first cords filled the theater and I briefly closed my eyes. I lost myself to the music, to the feel of the stage beneath my feet. I breathed in the warm air, let it fill me with purpose. The rattling of the Metro and the honking of the taxis soon faded to the background. I forgot about the many judgmental looks that wanted to take apart every move until all that made this so beautiful was washed away.

I'd danced Giselle Act 1 Variation countless times. It was one of my absolute favorite ballets but I'd never felt it as deeply as I did today. The deep infatuation of Giselle, her happiness when she was with Albrecht. Then later when the harsh truth burst through the heroine's bubble of innocence, her franticness in every twirl and jump as she realized the hopelessness of her love.

On the last accord of the piece I stopped, my breathing fast but at the same time I felt beautifully calm.

I opened my eyes, taking in my surroundings, and noticed someone in one of the back rows. No one ever sat there during rehearsals. The trainers

and my fellow dancers either watched from the front row or from backstage.

Heat filled my cheeks and my belly. In my mind I'd danced for him without even knowing he was there.

Amo sat in the second to last row, shrouded in shadows so I couldn't see his expression. My heart jolted, filling with a longing I could hardly explain. The teacher clapped her hands once, ripping me from the moment.

I turned to her. She motioned a boy called Mika forward. He was a couple of years younger than me. Tension filled my body. Dancing with others was and had always been the hurdle I had trouble jumping over. It was what was holding me back, why I preferred to dance alone at night, even if my old teacher had once said I was wasting a precious talent.

But if I wanted any chance at becoming part of this ballet program, I'd have to dance with a partner. It was why I'd originally intended to cancel this rehearsal and when I'd flown to New York, I'd still been convinced I wouldn't dance at all, only try to meet with Amo. I hadn't known he'd come here. He hadn't contacted me since our phone call but I'd known he'd find a way to see me. I'd had absolute faith.

But now as I stood on stage, I wanted to give it my all, even if it required a major mental effort. I knew why Nevio and Dad had allowed me to come here. Because they knew I'd never make the program. Nevio knew me better than I knew myself, every fear and every longing.

I knew his darkness and he knew mine.

Mika held out his hand, palm upward, his expression focused, barely taking me in. I hesitated. After almost a minute, his expression became confused. I forced my arm to move until my hand rested on his. His skin was too warm and clammy. The floor pressed too hard against my soles and the AC whistled in my ears. The smell of sweat and dust and old rubber clogged my nose. My heart and pulse pounded too loudly.

I swallowed and even that sound rang too loud in my ears.

"Ready?" Mika asked, and I flinched as the sound echoed in my head.

Too much. But I nodded anyway. I had come here and I would do my best. Dancing was my passion. It helped me whenever everything felt too much. It calmed the chaos in my head when nothing else could. I wouldn't give up without giving it my all.



Watching Greta dance took my fucking breath away every time.

How could one girl be so beautiful and graceful?

I ignored the occasional glance from ballet dancers and their families. Fear mingled with curiosity on their faces. Maybe they thought I was Greta's bodyguard. Fabiano managed to look less suspicious than me. If they even knew who she was. Greta was someone who didn't seek the spotlight even if she belonged there.

When the ballet instructor asked Greta to dance with a male partner, I sat up straighter. Not because I was jealous of the guy because he definitely was fishing in a different pond than me. No. Even from afar I could see how uncomfortable Greta felt. My protectiveness roared its ugly head. I didn't have any right to be protective. At least not like this, not in this deep sense. Greta had her own protection waiting outside for her and also in the front. Seeing Greta's obvious discomfort at having to touch her dance partner I got why Nevio wasn't here in the theater. Considering his lack of control and penchant for violent outbursts, the male dancer would already have been history.

Greta's expression became tighter and tighter as the dance began and the guy touched her hip. Fuck, it took all my self-control to stop me from rushing to the front and putting a stop to this bullshit.

Fabiano didn't react, and if I did and acted like a protective bulldozer, he'd undoubtedly get suspicious. Neither Greta nor I could really risk that. So far he didn't even know I was here. I'd come in after he'd settled on his seat in the front.

To be honest, I still couldn't believe Greta was really here. When she'd told me a week ago that she'd be in New York for a dance rehearsal at Juillard, I'd thought it was to get me off her back. But now she was here and

the way she'd danced would haunt me until the day I died. It was otherworldly, passionate and so unbelievably graceful.

The guy put his hands on her waist to lift her off the ground but Greta jerked away and shook her head. "I can't."

"You have to do a couple dance to apply for the program."

"I know," Greta pressed out with a tight smile, backing away from the guy. "It's okay. Thank you for the chance."

She turned around, gave Fabiano a quick glance that made him sit back down and she headed backstage. I wasn't really surprised that she didn't want him to console her. That guy was as cold as a dead fish. Mom always told me he used to be very different, but I only knew this version of my uncle.

I got up and went back the way I'd come in but took a detour that led me behind the stage. As usual I'd studied the layout of the building before I'd set foot inside of it. It was a habit that would probably one day save my life. Today it guaranteed that I'd find Greta without Fabiano being the wiser. I knew our time was limited. Fabiano had probably already alerted Nevio and it was only a matter of time before the latter would come in to get his sister.

If he found me anywhere near her...

I knocked at the female dressing room and after a moment a redhead opened the door, her gaze slowly rising from my chest up to my face. Her eyes grew wide and her face flushed.

"I need to talk to the girl who just left stage, black hair, about this height." I motioned at my chest.

"She's not here. She just rushed through."

I turned, not waiting for more. I glanced around the dimly lit hallways leading to several storage rooms. I began to search the area and found Greta in a dark corner at the back of the hallway, her back pressed against the wall, her head bent down. She almost looked as if she were in a trance.

She tensed when I moved closer.

"It's me, Amo."

She didn't look up or acknowledge my presence in any way.

"Are you all right? Do you want me to get Fabiano or your brother?" I really wasn't fond of the idea, and it would end in a mess but if Greta needed them, I'd do it.

"I came here for quiet to calm down."

I nodded. "You want me to leave?"

I couldn't imagine leaving her like this. Every fiber of my body screamed

to go closer, to comfort her with my touch. Fuck. That was the last thing she needed. The last thing I should do.

Her head rose and she fixed me with her dark eyes. "No."

I moved closer until I stood right in front of her. She was really here. She tilted her head back to keep up eye contact. "Do you want me to have a word with the dance instructor? I'm sure there's a way around the partner dance."

Greta smiled slightly. "Partner dances are a crucial part of ballet."

"But it's your dream to dance. You just give up even though I could help you get a spot in Juillard if that's what you really wanted."

Dad would kick my ass. The Falcons probably too. Not to mention that it would look hella suspicious if I helped Greta. But she'd be in New York.

Fuck.

And then what?

I was still supposed to marry Cressida. She had completely ignored my dishonorable stunt in the Sphere. She'd probably even accept me fucking someone in front of her. She wanted to become my wife, no matter the price.

Greta's smile brightened. And fuck, seeing it, I would have promised her the world. What was this girl doing to me?

"I love to dance. But on stage today I realized something very important. Doing this program won't make me love ballet more. My love for ballet isn't linked to being on stage, possibly quite the contrary. Dancing is my happy place, it gives me comfort and quiets the static in my head. Doing this program would have made me anxious about dancing, would have eventually made me loathe and fear something that means so much. That's not really worth it, do you think?"

I shook my head, once again amazed by her way of thinking. I loved how she described her feelings about ballet. "So you're okay?"

"I will be," she said softly. "I'm sad now."

I took another step closer, forgetting myself, forgetting everything else too.

"I didn't expect you to be here today."

"I told you I had to see you. I couldn't wait for a better moment," I said, throwing caution to the wind. I wasn't even sure what was going on anymore. We were close now, closer than Mika had been, but we weren't touching.

She didn't look scared, which didn't make sense. If a gay, skinny dancer had made her tense on a stage surrounded by people, then being alone with me in this dark corridor should have sent her body into overdrive.

“Am I too close?” I asked gruffly.

Greta simply stared at me. I wished I knew what was going on in her mind, if she felt as unhinged when I was close as I did whenever I saw her. She looked absolutely irresistible in her leotard and tutu. It was something I’d never given a second glance, but this girl in front of me made me weak in the knee looking like she did.

Her words about kissing me crossed my mind and this was the worst possible moment for them to pop up. I was alone with Greta and she wasn’t telling me to back off.

Maybe I was reading her wrong, but I didn’t think I was. Then again I’d never been with a girl like Greta.

“I’m going to do something I shouldn’t do, Greta. Something I swore I wouldn’t do. If you don’t stop me,” I growled.

Greta swallowed, but she didn’t move, didn’t say anything.

I cupped her cheeks in both of my hands, cradling her soft skin, locking eyes with hers. She held my gaze, her breath fanning sweetly over my face. I ran my thumbs over her cheekbones, searching her eyes. Those soulful dark kind eyes that always gripped me by the heart and didn’t let go.

“If you don’t say something...” I trailed off and lowered my lips to hers. I wanted to claim her as mine. I wanted her with every furious pump of my heart. The moment our lips touched my body flushed with heat and my pulse raced in my veins, and everything fell into place. Her lips were the softest I’d ever felt. I wanted this kiss, this moment, to last forever.

Every kiss, every touch, everything faded into meaninglessness.

Greta’s eyes fluttered shut and she covered my hands with her much smaller ones, keeping me in place. It was all the encouragement I needed. I nudged her lips with my tongue. She parted for me and her tongue met mine hesitantly. A low rumble echoed in my chest as I tasted her, a hint of mint and chocolate, unbelievably addicting. It was a slow, sensual kiss. No urgency even if our time was limited. I wanted to savor every second of this. One of my hands moved from her cheek to the back of her head.

Slowly I pulled away, even as my body screamed for more, for another taste, another touch, simply more. Greta’s dark eyes locked on mine, her lips parted, chest heaving. “You kissed me,” she said in wonder.

“Yeah.” The world around us slowly began to come back into focus. I’d kissed Greta Falcone in a dark corridor, with Fabiano and her brother nearby.

My palm still rested on her cheek and her palm on top of it. “You swore

you'd never do this. Why? Because of Cressida?"

I chuckled bitterly. A good man would have felt qualms about this because of his fiancée but I didn't. Cressida meant nothing to me, neither did I to her. We both knew why we were going to marry. Feelings, especially love had nothing to do with it.

"No," I murmured. "She's inconsequential. I swore to never do this because you're a woman who doesn't deserve to have her first kiss stolen in a dark corridor as a dirty secret."

"Am I your dirty secret?"

The timbre in her soft voice sent a shiver down my back. What was she? Fuck me if I knew. She was everything I wanted. I couldn't stop thinking about her. I could hardly breathe when she was gone and I could hardly breathe when she was close. Her dark eyes sucked me into their abyss. With one look out of those doe-eyes she held me captive. I'd never felt this way. Did she even realize what she'd done? She'd pried my ribs open and held onto my heart with her elegant fingers.

A simple kiss had enforced my longing, had made it a thousand times worse. I shouldn't have done it, but seeing her again, watching her dance, I lost it. Kissing her had been like a fucking rebirth. She'd been sweet and lovely like I'd known she'd be.

Greta wasn't a girl that should be kissed in the shadows, like a dark secret. She deserved to be center stage. Guilt had no place in my life, but kissing Greta in the dark as if she were nothing but an affair made me feel like dirt. This woman before me deserved so much better than what I could give her.

"What now?" I rasped.

Greta smiled sadly. "I don't know."

"You could stay here with me."

"I belong in Las Vegas."

You belong with me.

"When will you return to Las Vegas?"

"In two days. Since this is my first trip to New York, I wanted some time to discover the city."

In two days already. Too fucking soon.

"Fabiano's invited to dinner at your parents' house tomorrow night. Fabiano said I could come as well. I think he's worried Nevio will get me in trouble. But Nevio would have to stay away."

Mom must have spent days convincing Dad of that dinner. He and Fabiano still couldn't stand each other. And it really wasn't a surprise that Dad didn't want Nevio under his roof.

"Will you be there?" Greta asked.

"If you come, I'll be there as well."

"Then I'll ask Fabiano to take me with him." The thought that Nevio would be roaming the streets, my fucking streets without anyone to control him didn't sit well with me, but if this gave me the chance to see Greta again...

But a family dinner didn't give us much time to be alone. Everyone would be watching, especially Fabiano. "Is there any way you can sneak out to meet me tonight?"

Greta worried her lower lip. "We have the presidential suite but with separate rooms."

"I know. You have the entire floor in the Mandarin Oriental."

"Fabiano made sure the hotel staff locks the stairwell to our floor and to get off the elevator on our floor you need a keycard. Nobody's allowed to go up or down without notifying Fabiano."

I smirked. "I'm sure Fabiano gave the staff those orders. But New York is my city, not his, and my word trumps his by far. If you can get out of your room and make sure neither Fabiano nor your brother notice, then I can get you down to the lobby and out of the hotel."

Greta thought about it for a while and I was sure she'd say no. Finally, a small determined smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I'll find a way."

"Good," I murmured, leaning down for another kiss. "Meet me at midnight in the stairwell, okay?"

"What are we going to do? We can't go out and I didn't pack anything fancy."

"I'll think off something, don't worry." Then a thought crossed my mind. "Can you wear your ballet clothes? I'd love if you could give me a private dance."

Greta's smile broadened and she nodded.

Heavy steps rang out. I leaned down quickly and pressed another kiss to Greta's lovely lips before I pulled away and disappeared in the shadows, slipping away before we got caught together.

Chapter *Eleven*



I had trouble being close to other people but the first time Amo looked into my eyes, the chaos in my head quieted. And his touch? It didn't feel as overwhelming and confusing as every other touch felt. The kiss we'd shared today? It had awakened something in me that terrified and excited me. And suddenly I realized that only Amo could fill the void in me that I'd never known I had.

I wanted more. But deep down I knew our shared kisses had to stop. Eventually.

Not today though. When the clock struck five minutes before midnight, I crept out of bed and left my room through the door that led to the corridor, not the connecting door that would have forced me to cross the living room of our suite. If Fabiano or Nevio caught me, I'd simply tell them I was looking for a place to dance. They knew of my obsession to dance at night, especially after a stressful day like today.

The emergency exit wasn't locked, just like Amo had promised, so I could enter the stairwell. I headed down one floor then left the stairwell to board the elevator that took me down all the way to the second floor where I

switched back to the stairwell once again. Down on the first floor of the stairwell, Amo leaned against the wall, waiting for me. Relief flashed across his face when he spotted me. Maybe he'd thought I wouldn't come.

"Security cams," he said as a way of greeting and motioned for me to follow him. He led me through a few empty corridors then out a delivery entrance at the back of the hotel. A black SUV stood right beside the door.

Amo opened the door for me and I climbed in. He closed the door then got in behind the steering wheel. Without a word, he leaned over and grabbed my face then kissed me firmly.

I tensed, surprised by the move and still not used to being kissed. Amo pulled back, his eyes searching my face. "Too much?"

"Just startled," I whispered. "I'm not used to this kind of intimacy."

"Would you prefer if I don't kiss you?"

"No. Just maybe warn me until I get used to this?" How could I ever get used to it when our time was so limited?

"Okay. I can do that." A slow smile spread on his face then he turned back to the street and started the engine and pulled the car out of the alley. After a moment, he held out his hand, palm up. It took me a few heartbeats to realize what he wanted. I slipped my hand into his and he closed his fingers.

"Where are we going?"

"There aren't many options. That's why I decided to take you to a secluded place where nobody will catch us. Do you trust me?" He slanted a look at me, as if he worried I'd change my mind about this. But I didn't feel a flicker of discomfort in Amo's presence. Nevio would probably accuse me of being naïve or too trusting, but it wasn't that.

Eventually we headed toward an industrial part of the city. Amo pulled up in front of a red brick building with tall smokestacks that towered over the Hudson river. I pushed open the door and scanned the cracked concrete with weeds and even smaller trees breaking free from its man-made confines. "Is this the abandoned Yonkers power plant?"

I'd read all about it in the handwritten chronicles in our library.

Surprise flitted across Amo's face as he touched the small of my back to lead me toward the steel doors. "It is."

"That's where the last bloodbath in the history of the Famiglia took place, right?"

Amo grimaced and stopped in his tracks. "I'm not used to being romantic. I guess it shows," he said with a deep laugh that made my belly flip. "Would

you prefer if I took you somewhere else?”

I could tell that I'd caught him off guard, which was almost endearing.

“I like it. I've always been fascinated by abandoned places, their history and the wistfulness that clings to them.”

He stared up at the sky, shaking his head. “Wistfulness was definitely what I was going for with our first real date.”

I tilted my head, trying to determine if he was joking. He peered down at me with a dry laugh. “I'm kidding. Are you uncomfortable going in there with me?”

“Why would I be? I suppose there's hardly anyone I'd be safer with in this place than with you.”

“There's no one you'd be safer with.”

The pressure of his hand against my back increased and I allowed him to lead me the rest of the way toward the steel gate. He shoved it open with a harsh creak that let goosebumps ripple across my skin even though it was still warm.

I stepped into the high-ceilinged hall with its rusty pipes and columns. The scent of abandonment, mold and dust, hung in the air. My eyes caught on a table and two chairs on a small platform. Several small gas lamps illuminated the path toward and the place itself.

I could feel Amo's gaze on me and so I dragged my eyes up to him. His expression was tight.

“Can we go there?” I motioned at the setup.

Amo nodded and took my hand in his bigger one, leading me toward the platform. “I'm going to lift you up, okay?”

I nodded. He grabbed my waist and hoisted me up on the platform. My hands flew to his shoulders as I was suspended in the air for a moment. I'd always loved the idea of lifting figures, but never managed to enjoy them. But in Amo's hold I could imagine how it might feel with someone you felt comfortable with. Amo didn't release my waist even when my feet touched the ground of the platform. Instead we stayed like that, me peering down at him, his hands on my waist and mine on his shoulders. I smiled and without thinking, I bent down and kissed him. I pulled back a bit. “Was that okay?”

Amo chuckled. “You can kiss me whenever you want.”

I shook my head. “I mean my technique.”

Amo slid his lips across mine, a soft friction that warmed my belly in the most perfect way. “It's not about technique, but passion.”

Passion. I nodded. Passion was something you couldn't grasp or learn, definitely not read up about. Then I took a step back so Amo could jump on the platform and I could take a look at the table. It was set for two. But I didn't see food anywhere and I doubted there was a kitchen. "Sit down."

Amo pulled back one of the chairs for me and I sank down. He squatted before a Styrofoam box which delivery services used to keep food warm and lifted the lid. Inside were several bags. He began to unload about two dozen boxes. "I wasn't sure what you like to eat so I got Sushi, Chinese, Indian, Arabic and Italian food."

My eyes grew wide when he opened the different cartons. Amo sank down across from me and held up a bottle of wine. I nodded, stunned by his consideration. After we clinked glasses, I piled my plate with hummus and pita, cucumber and avocado maki, and olives. All safe choices for me as a vegan.

We ate a few bites in silence. "You don't eat meat?" Amo asked, motioning at the lamb shawarma on his plate.

"How do you know?"

"You scanned everything closely and you didn't pick a single meaty starter."

"I'm vegan."

He narrowed his eyes in consideration then nodded. I allowed my eyes to roam the hall, trying to imagine past events. "This is where your father ripped out a man's tongue for insulting your mother, right?"

Amo swallowed a piece of lamb and regarded me for a while as if he was trying to consider his reply. "Yes. I should have known you've heard about the gruesome stories of the Famiglia. Next time I'll pick a different place."

"Is there going to be a next time?" I asked as I ripped a piece off the pita bread and dunked it in the hummus.

Amo leaned back in his chair, ignoring his food. The way he looked at me made me feel impossibly hot. "I want there to be many more times."

I wanted the same thing but he was supposed to marry in three weeks, and my family would never allow me to see Amo. I couldn't see how we could make this happen, make us happen. As if Amo could sense the direction of my thoughts, he shook his head. "Only the moment counts."

I smiled slightly.

"Are you going to dance for me?" Amo let his eyes glide over me. "You put on your ballet clothes after all."

“If you want me to dance, I’ll do it. Do you have a special wish?”

Amo smiled wryly. “I don’t know that much about ballet, but maybe something from the Nutcracker? That’s one of the most famous ballets, right?”

“One of many, yes,” I said. I took my phone from my purse and picked the music then turned up the volume. My belly tightened with nerves when I put down the phone and walked a few steps away from the table and chairs to have room for my dance. Dancing in front of others always gave me a great deal of anxiety but the look on Amo’s face calmed my nerves. I closed my eyes when the first familiar notes rang out. This felt like one of the most special dances in my life and I wanted to pour all my passion and feelings into it.



The moment Greta had mentioned this place’s blood-thirsty past, I’d regretted my choice of having our date here, even if our choices were very limited. Now, with Greta standing amid the decrepit hall in her light pink tutu the contrast hit me like a sledgehammer. Her beauty and kindness in a building known for its ugly brutality. She lifted her arms as if pulled by strings, her body almost adrift as it moved to the notes from her mobile. The quality wasn’t the best and the vast hall didn’t carry the music very well, but I still sat in awe and watched Greta become one with the music. She twirled and jumped, raised her leg high above her head.

I could have watched her all night. When she held out her hand to me, I got up and let her pull me away from the chair. With her hand in mine, she circled me and I turned with her, as if I was pulled by invisible strings. She smiled brightly when I followed her lead and when she leaped toward me, I

caught her by the waist automatically and lifted her. She seemed to fly over my head, her legs and arms extended elegantly. And then she let out a delighted laugh, light and carefree, and peered down at me with pure joy in her eyes. Slowly I lowered her back to the ground in front of me. She held my gaze and every creak of the old building, the distant sound of engines and sirens, everything faded to the background. "I'm going to kiss you." I cupped her face, and kissed her. I snaked one arm around her waist and pulled her against me, needing her closer. Every time I met her, the pull got stronger. I'd never understood why people were willing to risk everything for someone who wasn't close family, someone they barely knew but I finally began to understand.

Chapter *Twelve*



Fabiano had been surprised when I'd asked him to take me to dinner with him but then he'd actually seemed relieved. Nevio had been furious at first but then an excited gleam had entered his eyes and I'd known he'd use his night off to do what he always did at night. Maybe I should have stayed with him to prevent the worst, but today I was being irrevocably selfish.

"You are tense," I told Fabiano when we arrived in front of the townhouse where the Vitiellos lived.

Fabiano gave me a tight smile.

"Nothing for you to worry about. You are perfectly safe."

"I know."

He nodded once then we got out and walked up the stairs to the front door. Fabiano looked up to a camera above our heads and his expression was even tenser than before. I wondered why he'd agreed to have dinner with the Vitiellos if this bothered him so much.

I didn't get the chance to ask him because the door swung open and Aria Vitiello stood before us with a bright smile. "Fabiano, Greta, welcome."

I gave her a tiny smile. Behind her Luca Vitiello came into view. His

expression was hostile when it settled on Fabiano and only slightly softened when he gazed down on me.

I swallowed but my anxiety turned to a nervous flutter in my belly when I stepped into the entrance hall where Amo was waiting beside his sister Marcella and his younger brother Valerio, who shared his mother's blond hair and reminded me remarkably of Fabiano. Even if I hadn't known Fabiano and Aria were siblings, I would have suspected it by their similar appearances.

I hovered a few steps from them, making sure I smiled at them all, and didn't only stare at Amo. My body longed to be closer to him but I held back. Valerio gave me a brief grin. He was already much taller than me though he was three years younger than me. Marcella gave me a restrained smile. My gaze caught on the diamond ear clip that hid her missing earlobe. I usually wasn't interested in gossip but the story of her kidnapping and her marriage to a biker had stirred up waves high enough to crash even through my bubble of obliviousness.

Amo's eyes caught mine as we headed into the dining room, and my belly did another flip. I wanted to be alone with him.

I dragged my eyes away before someone noticed. Fabiano was busy glaring at Luca, and Aria was busy looking concerned so we were safe for now but I didn't want to be too daring.

Soon the cook came in with trays loaded with food. Lamb. Roasted potatoes with pancetta. Creamy spinach with parmesan.

She took my plate to serve me first as the only female guest but I quickly shook my head. "Nothing for me. Thank you."

Everyone stared at me and my pulse sped up, a soft whooshing filling my ears.

"Sorry, I didn't expect you to come along. I forgot to tell them," Fabiano said with a grimace.

"Tell us what?" Aria asked, worry flitting across her face.

"I'm vegan so I don't eat animal products."

"Her brother and father slaughter people as a favorite pastime, and she doesn't like to hurt animals," Valerio exclaimed, starting to laugh as if it was the greatest joke of all time.

"That's not how we treat guests," Amo snarled, sending his brother a scowl.

Marcella's attentive gaze moved lazily between Amo and me, reminding

me of a cat about to pounce on her prey.

His mother blinked then cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Greta. I'm sure our cook can whip up something for you really quick."

The cook looked a little panicky. Many people found the idea of cooking without animal products daunting and it showed in their creations. Only Kiara had mastered the art of cooking for me. "No cheese? Cream? Eggs? Butter?"

I shook my head, feeling pity for the poor woman. She wasn't dealing well with being put on the spot like that.

"How about I show you to the kitchen so you can check our cupboards and fridge for something you can eat?" Amo suggested.

"That would be very nice of you," I said, trying not to sound too eager at the prospect of being alone with Amo.

Amo rose and so did I.

"Not going to happen," Fabiano said, rising to his feet as well.

"Our son has been brought up to respect women and is capable of controlling himself, unlike the Falcone trio," Luca said. Aria cleared her throat, her eyes widening in warning.

"Last week's newspaper showed him respecting women all over the front page," Fabiano said with a very unsettling smile. I could tell things were quickly going downhill but I wasn't sure how to stop it. I wasn't sure what Fabiano was referring to either.

"I didn't know you kept up with our current affairs."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right?"

Marcella huffed and shoved back her chair, rising to her feet. With her high heels, she towered over me. "I'll go with Greta."

Fabiano looked between her and Aria then at me. I gave him a firm smile and he slowly sank back down but he wasn't happy about it.

"Come on," Marcella said.

Amo sent Fabiano a very nasty look. "I'll go into the backyard for a bit. I need to cool down."

I stifled a smile as Marcella led me out of the dining room, down a corridor toward the back and into a big luxury kitchen.

"So what about olives, ciabatta and truffle oil to dip it in?" she asked, then her lips thinned. "I thought you wanted to cool off."

I glanced over my shoulder at Amo who came in through a backdoor. He motioned at a maid rolling out dough and she wiped her hands on an apron

and dashed out into the backyard. I swallowed as my eyes took him in. I hadn't dared doing so before.

He wore dark blue cargo pants and a simple gray T-shirt that matched his eyes and hugged his muscles in a very appealing way.

"I guess you're hungry for something else than olives," Marcella said, and my gaze darted to her, my skin flushing with heat.

Amo went over to her. "Can you give us a moment and make sure nobody bothers us?"

Marcella gave Amo an exasperated look. "Amo, you want me to keep watch while you're alone with Greta Falcone?"

People often accentuated my name in that way, as if the other person didn't know who I was.

"Marci," he said in a low voice and a look passed between them that I wasn't privy on.

"This is going to end badly. Very badly."

"Tell Maddox hi from me when you return to your apartment tonight."

Marci shook her head and turned to me with a searching look. "I assume you don't mind if I leave?"

"I don't," I whispered.

She shook her head again and walked out, her high heels clicking too loud on the stone.

I didn't move, suddenly overwhelmed.

Amo crossed the distance between us and cupped my cheeks, his lips coming down on mine without warning again. I tensed, surprised by his vehemence, heat and touch. Amo pulled back slightly, his eyes searching mine. His thumb brushed over my cheekbone. "I would never hurt you."

"I know."

He chuckled and released a deep breath.

"You can kiss me now," I said.

Amo's eyes locked on my lips and then he lowered his head again, letting his mouth slide very gently over mine. Electricity seemed to zag through my lips, down my chest into my belly and straight to my sex. My eyes fluttered shut against the too bright light in the kitchen. I wanted my sole focus on Amo, his mouth, his taste and smell. On how perfect his strong big hands felt against my cheeks.

Slowly Amo pulled away again but he stayed close, our breaths mingling. I searched his face for a sign that what we were doing here wasn't wrong.

“What we’re doing here is wrong, isn’t it?” All my life I’d tried to be kind to others, but I knew my moral compass wasn’t as tuned in as it should be.

Amo smiled darkly. “Do not ask a man like me about right or wrong, Greta. The only thing I can tell you is that nothing has ever felt as right as kissing you.”

I nodded, my breath hitching, because I felt the same way. How could something that felt so right be wrong?

“I swear, Amo, if you deflower another mafia girl, I’m going to throw you off the next bridge.”

We both jumped at Marcella’s angry voice. She had spoken through the door.

Amo grimaced.

“Is that why you have to marry Cressida?”

I tried to imagine Amo being this close with someone else. I wasn’t the jealous type but felt a little nauseous thinking of having to share him.

“Do not go there,” Amo murmured.

I tilted my head curiously. “I know you’re not mine. You’re Cressida’s.”

“I’m not hers, won’t ever be. In the few moments we’ve shared I’ve already been more yours than I’ve ever been anyone else’s.”

“But you’ve been with girls on a physical level that we haven’t shared.”

Amo laughed. It was raw and bitter. “And none of it mattered.”

“What did Fabiano mean with his newspaper comment?”

I could tell that Amo didn’t want to talk about it, which piqued my curiosity even more. “I publicly touched a woman in one of our clubs, and the newspaper published it.” He continued when he looked at my face. “I did it because I thought it would make Cressida mad enough to cancel the wedding.”

It must have been a very sexual touch considering it made front page. My belly tightened uncomfortably.

“Don’t try to find the photo. I don’t want you to feel bad because of me.”

“But you want Cressida to feel bad?”

“I’m a very bad man, Greta. Do not mistake me for anything else.”

“I know what you are. I’ve grown up among bad men.”

“And yet you turned out like this.”

My brows snapped together. So many people in my life thought I was good but there was dark inside of me too. “Some might not see me in such a

positive light considering I'm turning you into a cheater."

"You're not turning me into anything. First of all, I can't cheat on someone I'm not in a relationship with. Cressida and I are nothing. And I've been with other women before you, so if anything, one of them first turned me into a cheater."

"So I'm one of many."

Amo looked as if I'd said something outrageous when I'd really just based my words on the facts that he'd given me. His fingers against my cheeks tightened. "Don't you ever dare thinking this. You are everything."

"How can I be everything if you still need other women?"

"I don't."

I searched his eyes. "I can't ask you to stop being with other women. It's not my place. Because I can't give you what you'd give up."

"You can ask anything of me, Greta, and I'd give it to you."

Ask him not to marry Cressida.

To what avail?

I could not take her place. I belonged in Las Vegas. I didn't want to be a Capo's wife. I wanted to live in the shadows not as the main attraction of the mafia world.

The door swung open and Amo dropped his hand and took a step back. It was Marcella and her eyes narrowed. "We need to return." Her voice was hard.

I nodded, because she was right. It was a good thing that she'd burst in when she had because I had been on the verge of asking something of Amo I shouldn't.

She walked past me and grabbed a jar with olives, a ciabatta and the oil. Together we returned to the dining room.

When I sank down beside Fabiano, he leaned over. "Everything okay?"

"Yes."

I didn't dare look at Amo again all evening. I was at a complete loss at what to do.



I couldn't think straight after the kisses Greta and I had shared. She'd left without looking at me again. It was the worst torture, but I knew why she did it. Greta was too fucking good. She didn't want me to do something stupid.

After dinner, Dad stalked into his office, pissed. I went after him but fingers clamped down on my arm. I stopped and glared down at my sister.

"Sleep over it."

"Sleep over what?"

"Do you want war? Is it worth it?"

I leaned down, bringing our faces closer together. "Was Maddox worth it?"

Marcella's expression became pained. "Amo, this is different."

I shook her grip off. "Will you have my back?"

She shoved my arm. "You know that. Of course. I'm just worried, you idiot."

I turned and headed toward Dad's office. I knocked.

"Yes," Dad growled.

I went inside. Dad was hunched over a drink in his leather armchair. He was in a bad mood, but I knew there would never be a good moment to tell him what I had to say. Better not to ruin one of his few good moods.

Dad frowned over the glass at me. "What now?"

"I need to discuss the wedding with you again."

The look Dad sent me was unmistakable. He had absolutely no intention to talk about this again. I didn't give a fuck. He needed to hear this. He thought I was just getting cold feet but this was more.

"I have found a girl I want to marry," I said.

Slowly his eyes dragged up from his drink again. If possible, his expression was even more pissed than before. "Why do I get the feeling I

won't like what you're going to say?"

"It's a good choice," I said. "She's from an important family." The understatement of the fucking year.

Dad narrowed his eyes. "Cressida is a good choice, the choice we all decided on."

"Fuck, Dad, would you listen for one fucking second? Cressida was a mistake, is still a mistake and will be the worst mistake in my life if I marry her."

Dad didn't say anything but his expression didn't soften in the slightest. I got why he wasn't impressed with me. I'd done a lot of shitty things over the last five to eight years.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to figure out how to get through to his thick skull.

"Humor me, who is it?"

"Greta."

Dad stared, his mouth setting in a thin line. "As in Greta Falcone?"

"Yes. I want her."

Dad shook his head, chuckling. Then he sobered when I didn't fall in. "You're being serious."

"I'm deadly serious. I want Greta."

Dad shoved to his feet and carefully put the glass down on the small side table as if he worried that he could throw it at me if he kept it in his hand.

He came closer, his eyes incredulous but also angrier than I'd seen them in a long time. "Amo, have you lost your fucking mind?"

I stared back at him, unblinking, as serious as I'd ever been about anything in my life.

"Let's disregard the fact that you're going to marry Cressida in a few weeks, shall we? You could have any woman in the Famiglia. Every family would gladly give their daughter to you as a wife, but Remo Falcone's daughter that's not something I can make happen. Nobody can unless they're ripping her from his cold, dead hands, and even then you'd still have to kill the remaining Falcone bunch."

I knew all that. I knew Remo Falcone would ram his blade into my heart before I'd finished asking for her hand. Not to mention Greta's crazy twin. "I'm willing to risk it. I want Greta. It's her or no one."

Dad looked at me as if I'd lost my fucking mind, then his expression hardened and he grabbed my arm. "Don't tell me you touched her? Or heaven

forbid took her virginity? I swear, Amo, I'm going to beat the shit out of you for the first time in your fucking life if that's the case. Cressida, that was something we got under control, but Greta? Hell would look pretty cozy in comparison to our life if you fucked up like this."

I shook him off, fury bursting in my chest. "I wouldn't dishonor Greta like that," I growled. "She's honorable."

Dad searched my face and grimaced. "Fuck it. You're serious about her."

"I am, Dad. I want Greta."

He shook his head again. "Remo Falcone won't ever allow it. He'd rather chop himself into pieces and send us the bloody mess than give us his daughter. I don't have leverage against him to force him and to be honest I doubt he'd let anyone force him into giving away his daughter. He'd go on a fucking rampage as he should."

"What if Greta wanted to marry me?"

Doubt flashed across Dad's face. "She does?"

I wasn't a 100% sure. Greta and I hadn't really discussed our feelings, nor had we talked about a future together because Cressida had always been in the way. "I haven't asked her. But she and I..." I shook my head. It was difficult to put into words what went on between us. I didn't even understand it myself.

"You hardly know the girl. How can you be sure about anything?"

"How can you ever really be sure about something? But Dad, what would you have done if you had met Mom after being engaged to someone else? Would you have given her up or would you have done everything in your power to make her yours?"

Dad shook his head. "This is lunacy, Amo, and nothing you say will make me think otherwise. Even if you and Greta had some kind of connection, then there's still the major problem of Cressida. A Capo needs to honor his men's families and the traditions. If we cancel the wedding now, this would cause ripples none of us could control. The only way this could happen was if you waive your position as future Capo."

My stomach tightened. I'd once before offered up my position, to Marcella, but deep down I'd known she wouldn't accept. This was different. I'd always wanted to become Capo. It was in my blood, and had until recently been my only desire. Things had changed since I'd first met Greta. But would I really give up my future for her?

Part of me shouted yes, without hesitation, another part wanted to have

both and simply beat down anyone who disagreed.

Dad grabbed my shoulder. “This is not something I can do for you, Amo. And you shouldn’t consider giving up being Capo for a girl you hardly know and can’t have unless you start a war with the Camorra. My wedding with your mother was supposed to guarantee peace but a possible wedding to Greta would cause a bloody war.”

I had considered what Dad said. Still the thought of giving up Greta without fighting felt like a coward move. Dad was weighing the options as Capo, as a bystander of what Greta and I had.

“Love doesn’t happen in a blink, Amo. What you experience with Greta is lust, cold feet and the thrill of the forbidden. Don’t ruin your future because you mistake it for something else.”

Dad knew the love Mom and he shared. He didn’t know much about romantic love apart from that. Did I love Greta? I didn’t know. It was something I’d never felt before. I knew it was more than I’d ever had. It was something new entirely. It was so impossibly strong I could hardly believe it could become more. Was it love? Possibly. Was I falling in love? Definitely.

I knew love at first sight was a hoax. And yet, my feelings for Greta defied logic.

Dad jabbed his forefinger against my chest where my Famiglia tattoo was. His eyes bored into mine. “Since you seem incapable of making good choices at the moment, I’ll make it easy for you. If you want to become Capo, you’ll marry Cressida. As your Capo, I’m telling you to stay away from Greta Falcone. If you touch her, kiss her, fuck her or God forbid ask Remo Falcone for her hand, you’re going against my direct order, and you’re going to waive your position as Capo and face punishment, possibly exile.”

I stared at my father incredulously.

“This is for your own good. I’m trying to save you, Amo. One day you’ll see it.”



I needed to talk to Cressida again. If she had the slightest interest in me beyond becoming a Capo’s wife, she had to see that this bond wasn’t going to make either of us happy. I found her in the gym that Gianna had opened up

for women and girls in the Famiglia. Gianna wasn't at the reception today. Instead, Maximus' mother Cara, dressed in sport tights and a tank top, greeted me from behind the counter. When she wasn't busy with their animal shelter, she could usually be found working here. She gave me a surprised smile. "Amo, if you're looking for Gianna, she won't be here until later today for her yoga course." Cara nodded toward something behind the counter. "Isa is here though."

I propped my elbows up on the sleek white surface and peered down. My cousin Isa sat on the ground. She wore headphones, a green cord overall dress and worn-out white Converse. In her hands she held a fat tome, probably some high-fantasy nonsense with dragons and incest. Her glasses sat on the tip of her freckled nose, dangerously close to falling off. Her chin was propped up on her palm and she didn't notice me, too pre-occupied with her reading.

I moved back, leaving her to it. I didn't have much time anyway. "I'm here for Cressida."

Cara's smile thinned. "She's doing Zumba in room two."

I nodded and headed to the training room. Through the glass door I could see Cressida and her friend Agostina trying to follow the dance moves the trainer showed the class. She lacked Greta's grace, not just when it came to dancing. I knocked against the door, causing everyone to turn around. Cressida's eyes widened then she exchanged a triumphant look with Agostina and stalked out of the room with her nose up.

I motioned her to follow me behind the counter and into the staff room. Cara didn't stop me and Isa only briefly looked up, pushed her glasses back up only to wrinkle her nose when she spotted Cressida.

I closed the door behind Cressida and me.

"She won't ever find a husband if she keeps dressing like a nerd. Why doesn't she use contacts? Men don't want girls with glasses."

She looked at me expectantly.

"I don't know and I don't care. Ask her if you want to know. But I doubt Isa's existence revolves around finding a suitable husband so she probably doesn't give a fuck if glasses are sexy or not."

Cressida tossed her long brown hair over her shoulder. I wondered how she could do sports with it not in a ponytail. But I supposed her appearance was more important than practicability.

"I'm all sweaty, Amo."

I ignored her inconsequential comment. “I came here to talk to you about our wedding.”

“There’s still so much to discuss, I know. They still didn’t serve the right quality of tuna. Apparently the Japanese are buying the prime pieces before they ever enter the international market.”

I heard every word she was saying but she might as well have spoken Japanese.

“I think we should cancel the wedding.”

“I won’t postpone the date. I’m already twenty-three, Amo. Twenty-three. Agostina has been married for three years and look at me!”

Maybe she was misunderstanding me on purpose. “I meant cancel the wedding, not postpone. I don’t love you, Cressida, and I never will.”

Fuck, I’d even entertained thoughts of disposing of Cressida and making it look like an accident. She didn’t deserve this. I didn’t love her, didn’t even particularly like her but she wasn’t an overly horrible person. She was egotistic and power-hungry, but many people were, and I wasn’t in a position to judge anyone for their sins anyway.

She shrugged as if it were inconsequential. “Love’s not necessary for what we have.”

“There’s someone else,” I tried again.

Her eyes sharpened but then she shrugged again. “Keep it quiet. I don’t want a scandal on our hands.”

“Do you really want to live like this? Knowing there’s someone else I’m with? Knowing we’re only married for appearance’s sake?”

“We’re going to get married, Amo. This is it. I won’t ever agree to cancel this wedding, never. And neither would our families, or the Famiglia. We are bound by our traditions, even you. Fuck that girl, I don’t care as long as it’s me they call Mrs. Vitiello.”

I shook my head, unable to believe that I was really supposed to marry her. Right this moment, I couldn’t imagine a worse fate.

Chapter *Thirteen*



Nevio was hung over on our flight back home to Las Vegas. Whatever he'd done at night had knocked him out. I doubted he'd done hard drugs. He wasn't the type. What had gotten him so high was probably a potent mix of too much alcohol and violence.

Fabiano had pretty much dragged him into the private jet and was glaring daggers at him all through the flight.

Despite my worry for Nevio, I was glad his senses were clouded. My conversation with Amo yesterday and the kiss we'd shared had thrown me off completely.

I didn't understand what I was feeling, only that it was so strong it made me feel claustrophobic in the sense that my heart seemed too big for my ribcage whenever I thought about Amo. I'd overheard Carlotta and Aurora talk about falling in love. It had never piqued my interest, had seemed something that wouldn't happen to me, and definitely something I didn't need. My life had been full. Filled with love and purpose.

Now Amo had somehow found the tiny hole in my existence I hadn't even known existed, and I knew he'd leave a void once he left. A void that

I'd never be able to overlook the same way I had before. I could try to fill it with new purpose of course but I had a feeling it wouldn't fill the void.

I was already thinking about the moment he'd leave. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when. Though maybe me leaving New York was the goodbye we hadn't dared to voice.

My stomach dropped, my chest feeling hollow, empty.

When we arrived back home, Nevio disappeared in bed and I recounted my failed dance recital to my family.

"I'm sorry," Mom said gently and kissed my cheek. "You look really sad. I didn't know you wanted this so badly."

Dad exchanged a look with Nino and Savio I understood too well. He was glad it hadn't worked out so he was spared forbidding me from going there, because that's what he would have done. I knew Dad. He considered his power in Las Vegas as endless and thus thought he needed to keep us all here to guarantee optimal protection.

I shrugged, not wanting to lie to Mom but glad that she thought my sadness was because of ballet. Her voice made me realize that I was sad and wistful, almost as if I were already mourning what Amo and I had had.

Eventually I excused myself from my family and roamed the premises. The bunnies had moved into their enclosure a few days ago and were taking well to it. I dropped off a bit of carrot greens and herbs before I went to my ballet studio to greet Bear and Momo. When I was gone, which usually never happened, Dad wanted them to stay there the entire time. Nino had taken them on walks and fed them, since his calm seemed to work well with them. I would have preferred Kiara, but Nino didn't want her near Bear. Still I was glad when they both rushed my way with their tails wagging.

Ballet filled my head with calm but my animals filled it with purpose.

I rubbed their soft heads and sank down on the floor with a sigh. For the first time, I felt a little lost in my studio surrounded by my furbabies.

My thoughts were a whirlwind that kindled the embers of my always present anxiety.

I needed to talk to someone. I couldn't carry this secret alone anymore. Usually, I always confided in Nevio. My secrets had always been his to carry, like his had been mine. But this was a secret I couldn't confide to him. I had so many people around myself that I trusted with my life, so many people who loved me and who'd do anything for me, and yet it felt like this secret was only mine to carry. I couldn't confide in my family because my secret

felt like betrayal. But I'd never betray them, not for anything or anyone in the world, and could love ever be betrayal? I wasn't going against them. But part of me wanted to follow my heart and that was leading me in a direction I'd never considered possible, away from them. For once I was truly alone.

I was glad for the dark but it didn't help with my rising anxiety.

My breathing got labored. Despite the lack of sound and bright light around me, this felt like one of my sensory overload attacks. Bear began growling and shifted. He always got particularly protective when I was like this.

"Shhh, down," Nino said.

Bear let out another growl but then he became quiet. I reached out, feeling for his back and stroking his fur.

"Greta?" Nino asked into the dark.

I peered toward the doorway where his voice had come from.

My throat felt too tight for words.

"I'll turn the lights on. Close your eyes. I'll tell you when they're dimmed down."

I closed my eyes.

"It's okay."

I opened my eyes. A dim glow filled the studio. Bear was curled up beside me with Momo snuggled up against his butt. His eyes were fixed on Nino but he didn't get up or growl again.

"Do you need help?"

I peered up at Nino, trying to consider my reply, but my pounding heart and rushing pulse were making any sane thought impossible.

"I'll get your parents."

"No," I croaked.

Nino regarded me with quiet scrutiny. "Nevio?"

I shook my head, panicking.

Nino nodded, as if he understood my reasoning when he couldn't possibly grasp the whole dimension of my dilemma. He walked over to me slowly and regarded me for a while before he sank down on my other side.

I breathed low and deep until I began to feel more in control, then I began talking in a bare whisper, "When is love wrong?"

Nino's brows snapped together and his scrutiny intensified. "You're referring to romantic love?"

I nodded.

Nino waited almost a minute before he finally spoke. I was glad he took his time to weigh his answer. Maybe he could tell how important it was for me. “Wrong and right are concepts designed by humankind over the centuries to allow peaceful co-existence. It’s not something that’s inherent in nature or in our DNA. If you refer to the moral compass that guides most societies, there are certain forms of love that are regarded as wrong. Though again love in itself isn’t wrong but how you act upon it.”

I frowned. That wasn’t helping.

Nino must have seen my confusion because he continued, “Unrequited love can be detrimental to a person’s mental and even physical health, so I’d say it’s a logically wrong love. Too much love can be a problem, like most extremes.”

“Love and logic don’t go together, do they?”

“Logic told me it was useful to love my wife so I did eventually.”

I laughed because I doubted that was how it happened. Kiara told a different story. Maybe Nino just preferred his more restrained take on things.

“Do you really think there can be too much of love?”

“If it makes you forget everything else that matters, then yes.”

That made sense. I could imagine losing myself in my feelings for Amo, at least for a little while, but I didn’t want to forget everything else that mattered to me.

“What if the person you love is already promised to someone else?”

“Infidelity is considered wrong by many. I think it’s often a sign that the original bond is damaged. And some people have open relationships, then it can’t really be called infidelity.”

“What if the person who’s promised doesn’t love the person they’re promised to but the other person.”

Nino narrowed his eyes in thought. My words didn’t even make sense to me. “It seems unwise to marry a person you don’t want instead of the person you want, but economic, political or familial reasons might be the driving force, especially in our world.”

I didn’t even know if Amo loved me. I didn’t even know if I loved him. “How do I know if I’m in love?”

Nino’s body became tauter. “I’m not the best person to ask.”

“I think you’re the best person I could ask.”

Nino gave a nod. “It’s not easy to put into words, even for me. I’m not an expert in this field.”

“You love Kiara, despite your emotional struggles.”

“I do.”

“How did you know?”

“Before Kiara there was calm and then suddenly there was chaos. It was frustrating at first but then I learned to enjoy it.”

I bit my lip. Amo quieted the chaos in my head. Maybe this, too, was a sign.

“Greta,” Nino said quietly, waiting until my gaze returned to his face. “I assume you’re talking about yourself?”

I didn’t say anything. Maybe I had already said too much.

Nino’s expression was analytical, not judgmental in any way. “Knowing your past interactions with men outside of our family, there are only very few options. It could be someone you met at your dance recital, which is unlikely given Fabiano’s presence and the limited time frame. Or it could be the only other male you spent time with. Amo Vitiello.”

I tried not to react to hearing his name. I was terrified of admitting to it.

“I think I fell in love,” I whispered.

Nino shook his head. “Greta—”

I touched my heart. “No,” I said firmly. “I can feel that it’s true. I fell in love, and it felt wondrous.”

“That’s why you’re crying?”

I froze and reached up, feeling wetness on my cheeks. “I’m crying because my heart’s already broken before it ever really got the chance to experience love.”

Nino regarded me quietly. “You said nothing happened between you and Amo.”

“It didn’t. We talked. But I felt a connection I’ve never felt before...”

Nino’s expression was impossible to read.

“You won’t tell anyone, right?”

If he told Dad or Nevio, everything would fall apart.

“I don’t see how telling anyone would serve any other purpose than bring down war on us. I don’t think now’s the right time to pursue a conflict with the Famiglia.”

“How can my feelings for someone be the reason for war?”

“I’m sure you can see how that would be the result.”

I lowered my gaze. If I allowed my feelings for Amo to take center stage, this might lead to a cancellation of his wedding and that would cause a major

uproar in the Famiglia. It would weaken them. Dad and Nevio would assume the worst. They wouldn't believe me if I said Amo hadn't manipulated my feelings. I couldn't see them accepting a bond with Amo. They would start a war. So many would die.

"Even thinking about him feels like betrayal."

Nino released a long breath. "Your brother would definitely see it as betrayal if you left Las Vegas for Amo. And I don't have to tell you that your father won't ever allow it, for nothing in the world."

I nodded, because I knew it.

"Can you imagine leaving Las Vegas to live with Amo in New York, as a Capo's wife?"

I tried to see myself in New York, away from my family, as the woman everyone in the Famiglia would look up to. Anxiety tightened my belly. "No," I croaked.



That night I went over to Nevio's bedroom. He gave me a distracted smile as he put on his leather wristbands, combat boots and leather biker pants, getting ready for his night out with Massimo and Alessio.

He put two curved knives into his holster at his back, then two daggers into the holsters at his calves.

I watched him quietly as I sat cross-legged on his bed. In the beginning when I'd realized why the three of them went out at night, I'd asked him to stop but eventually I'd realized he needed this like I needed ballet, as a way to deal with his demons.

"Would you ever leave our family?"

Nevio stopped and gave me an incredulous look. "For nothing in this world."

"Not even if you fell in love?"

Nevio came toward me, his eyes burning with intensity. "If I ever thought there was someone who'd make me consider leaving our family and the Camorra, I'd kill her before she turned me into a traitor of everything that matters."

“Don’t say something like that. You don’t mean it.”

He got down on his knees before me and his expression terrified me. “I’m fucking serious, Greta. Our family is everything. Nothing deserves to take its prime spot.”

I sighed. “You always think in extremes.”

“Maybe, but some things are just black and white. No reason to sugarcoat it.”

Nevio’s expression turned playful. “You need to stop reading all this shit about emotions. Sometimes it’s better not to have and understand them.”

I rolled my eyes and got up. “Be careful tonight.”

I always said these parting words even if they were unnecessary. My heart felt heavy as I returned to my bedroom. Nevio’s words had only confirmed what Nino had said, what I’d known all along.



I turned on my phone when the airplane landed in Las Vegas. Several messages popped up on my screen. I ignored the ones from Cressida and Dad asking where I was.

I had several missed calls and two messages from Marcella.

You stupid idiot, they’ll kill you. Turn on your brain for once.

Amo, please don’t be stupid.

Then there was a message from Maximus.

I should have come with you. You need back up. Fuck, they’re going to kill you.

If I’d brought Maximus with me that would have sent the wrong message.

It was better this way, me going alone. Maybe it was stupidity. Maybe it was suicidal, but I'd made up my mind and nothing would stop me now. Definitely not Dad, because he had no clue what I was doing.

The last week since my conversation with Dad my resolve had only grown, but I'd hidden it from him. The only people who knew of my plan were Maximus and Marcella. Both had tried to talk me out of it until I'd boarded the airplane.

When I left the airport, I stepped foot on Las Vegas ground not as future Capo of the Famiglia. I was here privately. I'd tried to come up with a plan to make this go as smoothly as possible. There really was no handbook on how to approach a family of murderous sociopaths.

I called Fabiano. He picked up after the third ring.

"I'm at the airport in Las Vegas. Can you pick me up?"

Silence.

"I wasn't informed that you and Luca would be coming over for a meeting."

"I'm here unannounced and I'm alone."

"This is the only time I'll speak as your uncle and not as part of the Camorra, and you better listen well. Turn around and fly back to New York."

"You don't know why I'm here. I could be asking to join the Camorra."

Fabiano chuckled dryly. "Ask for a bullet, that's more likely to happen."

"Are you going to pick me up or do I have to hail a fucking taxi to take me to Falcone mansion?"

"I'll be there in thirty minutes. You better be gone by then."



A black Mercedes S-class pulled up at the curb where I waited. The windows were tinted so I couldn't see who was inside. I opened the back door and slipped in.

Fabiano turned briefly and let out a harsh laugh, shaking his head. "You inherited your father's lack of control in certain matters."

I ignored his comment and regarded the man in the passenger seat who didn't turn around but watched me with cold eyes through the back mirror. Nino Falcone.

“Nino.”

His lips barely moved and his expression was emotionless. The locks clicked into place. “Amo.”

I leaned back. “Are you not going to ask me why I’m here?”

Nino motioned at Fabiano who pulled the car away from the airport.

I nodded. “Am I going to get a special Camorra treatment for breaching your territory without permission?”

He didn’t say anything.

“The mansion? Or where does Remo want him?” Fabiano asked.

“Take him to the Sugar Trap.”

Fabiano’s expression told me he hadn’t expected that. We drove in silence for the rest of the way. I was surprisingly calm. If this was what it took to get Greta, then I’d gladly brave torture, even if Nino’s talents were feared even among mobsters.

We arrived in the street before the notorious Camorra establishment. Strip club upstairs, torture chamber downstairs.

“You won’t give us trouble, I assume?” Nino asked.

“I’ll behave.”

Nino nodded once and got out then he opened the door for me.

“My brother’s dream has always been to break your father. I’ve never shared his aspirations.”

“I can assure you whatever your plans are for me, it won’t break my father. Marcella’s kidnapping didn’t break us either.”

Nino didn’t say anything. He motioned at the door of the Sugar Trap. Fabiano was close behind us. The inside of the strip club was deserted. I followed Nino’s lead and settled on a barstool. This was a curious meeting, and I wasn’t yet sure where it was going.

“I talked to Greta. I assume she is the reason why you’re here.”

Fabiano’s expression flickered with concern, then he narrowed his eyes at me. Again he shook his head as if he couldn’t believe how stupid I was. Hadn’t he entered a death fight with Remo once because of his feelings for a woman?

“She is,” I admitted. I hadn’t come here to beat around the bush. I wanted Greta and was willing to shout it from the rooftops. I looked around. “I assume you haven’t told your brother yet.”

Fabiano took a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label from the shelf behind the bar and poured three drinks. Without a word, he set them down in

front of us then downed his own. “This is probably the last peaceful drink I’ll get to enjoy in a while.”

Nino took his glass. “I’m of the impression that war might still be prevented.”

“War is unnecessary.”

Nino narrowed his eyes. “You’re looking for a Capo’s wife, for someone to present to your soldiers, someone who’ll represent your family as your mother and sister do. You’re looking for someone who seeks the public. Greta isn’t like that. Greta can’t. Greta prefers to stay in the background, away from attention. You’re looking for someone who blooms in the light but Greta seeks the shadows. Even if my brother would ever let her go, which he won’t, are you certain the Famiglia would accept a Capo’s wife that wouldn’t represent the Famiglia?”

I didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to know that by coming here I’d most likely forfeited my position as future Capo of the Famiglia. My mind was reeling with different scenarios of how I could run away with Greta or even kidnap her from her family. That I had chosen to talk to them was only for Greta’s sake.

“Your father’s protection gets you out of here because we value our cooperation with the Famiglia. Don’t do something that’ll bring war down on us.”

I shook my head. “I’m here because of Greta. I’m not leaving without having talked to her.”

“You stupid fucker, are you so tired of your life that you don’t know when to draw the line?” Fabiano muttered, slamming the glass down.

I only half-listened because someone had just risen from a booth in the corner and my attention was solely on her.

Chapter *Fourteen*



“Give me a moment with Amo.”

Nino looked at Amo and even I could see that his expression held warning. “I’ll be around the corner and you have five minutes.”

He and Fabiano got up from the barstools and sat down in a VIP nook so the surrounding wall gave us a semblance of privacy. That Nino had taken me here once Fabiano had called him showed me how much he trusted me and my judgment. I didn’t want to fail him.

Amo smiled, and my chest seemed to expand and my belly became a snake pit. I held out my hand and he took it, following me as I led him a bit further away from Nino and Fabiano.

“The odds are against us,” I said as I stopped behind a curtain that separated the storage area from the bar.

“I don’t care about the odds. I came here to ask for your hand.”

My stomach hollowed, my breathing catching in my throat. This wasn’t what I’d expected. I hadn’t even dared considering it. I tried to keep my emotions at bay, to think this through logically. This was too important to lose sight of all but my emotional turmoil. “Without your dad’s approval.”

Amo shrugged as if it didn't matter but I knew how much he cared about his family. Our families were our everything. Hearing Nevio's words had cut. That he thought being with someone meant betrayal. He was certain I'd never leave our family, never leave him because he couldn't imagine leaving himself.

"Does Cressida know you're here?"

Amo took a step closer, peering down at me with such intensity, I wondered how deep into my soul he could look. Nobody knew the darkness of my soul, but with him I wondered if maybe he saw and didn't care.

"No, I don't talk to her unless she doesn't leave me a choice. But she knows my heart doesn't belong to her."

"And she doesn't care?"

Amo chuckled darkly. "She cares about becoming a Capo's wife, not my feelings."

A Capo's wife. All my life my family had kept me from social events, had allowed me to remain in my safe space. If I became Amo's wife, that would have to end. The Famiglia was different than the Camorra. More traditional.

"What Nino said is true you know? I won't ever be someone who'll stand by your side in the flashlight, who'll give interviews to the press, who'll smile pleasantly at a camera."

Amo slowly lifted his hand and touched my cheek. "I know you can do it. Everyone will love you. You'll grow with the task."

I could tell he really believed it. Maybe he wanted to believe it. My heart broke. I shook my head. "I won't."

Amo shrugged. "Once we have children, nobody will expect you to be in public all the time. Then it won't matter anymore."

I swallowed. Of course. Amo needed an heir. Amo needed a representative wife. He needed someone who'd grab the hearts of his soldiers. "I don't even know if I want children."

Amo frowned. "Why?"

"Because this world is such a harsh place, and so much is uncertain, that it seems unfair to bring a child into it."

Amo nodded as if he understood but I could tell that he thought I'd eventually change my mind. Maybe I would, but it didn't matter.

"I'm who I am, and that won't change, and I can tell it's not what you need. I'm not the person you need by your side."

“But you’re the one I want.”

“Sometimes we can’t have what we want,” I whispered.

“Not me,” Amo murmured, bringing our faces closer. I looked deeply into his eyes. I loved how quiet my mind got when I did, how peaceful I felt, how in control of everything, especially myself.

“I don’t care about any of this, Greta. I probably won’t even become Capo anymore. My father made it very clear that I’d have to waive my position if I didn’t marry Cressida.”

He’d give up becoming Capo for me?

The realization that I’d lose this, that I’d lose Amo, ached in the worst way possible.

But I couldn’t be selfish. I had to think of my family, who’d probably start a war if I followed Amo, of Nevio who’d become completely unhinged without me by his side, of Amo and his family who needed someone else. Amo couldn’t see it because he idealized me, because his feelings for me made him blind to the truth, to my limitations. I had to be the one making the hard decision, the one that would save so many, even Amo. Maybe even myself because Amo would come to despise me if he gave up becoming Capo for me.

“I won’t leave my family, Amo. I owe them everything and I love them more than anything else. If I have to choose between them and you, it’ll always be them. And if you really think about it, you’ll choose your family too.”

I could see the hurt in Amo’s eyes, the lack of understanding. “You know what’s between us. Don’t pretend you don’t feel it. I see how you look at me, Greta.”

What was between Amo and me was fateful in so many ways, it was a one in a lifetime love, a miracle. I would never love anyone as I loved him. I’d known it from the moment I’d looked into his eyes even when I hadn’t dared admitting it to myself, and it had been confirmed in every second that I’d spent with him after that. But our love would be our ruin. I was too logical not to see the consequences of our love. Cressida would play the victim, and most of the Famiglia would side with her. The Traditionalists would condemn Amo for his actions, not just for breaking an engagement, but worse, for being intimate with someone before marriage and then not marrying her. It would hurt the Vitiellos, possibly weaken them, and for them to reestablish power they’d have to react with sheer brutality as they always

did.

Amo and his father would torture and kill many to bring what they considered peace over the Famiglia. I'd be the reason for it, for many deaths, for even more heartbreak and sadness.

And my family. Nevio would never accept me leaving Las Vegas, leaving him. I was the anchor he held onto in his eternal dark. Without me, Nevio would give in to darkness, he'd embrace it wholly, would let it swallow him, and his actions in the night would become all that there was to him.

Dad knew it. That he'd lose not only me but Nevio if I ever left our family. He knew what that would mean for Mom. Dad would burn down New York before he'd allow me to marry Amo. Dad wanted to protect us all at any cost, and the Famiglia was a small price in his mind if it meant saving what meant the most to him.

"Greta," Amo rasped and I peered up into his eyes, scared that they'd break through my resolve, that they'd make me disregard logic.

"I can't."

Amo lowered his head to kiss me, as if that could change my mind, and it might very well have succeeded, but I shook my head even if my body ached for his lips, for a last kiss.

Movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention but I was too late to call out a warning, and Amo was too focused on me.

My lips parted, a scream ripping out but everything happened so fast.

Nevio slammed his knife into Amo's side. Everything seemed to stand still for a moment before Amo pushed me back and impaled his knife into Nevio's belly in turn.

My heart slowed as I watched Amo and Nevio with knives in their bodies. I registered the positions of the stab wounds and knew if either of them pulled their knife, the other would bleed to death before help could arrive. My heart jolted and seemed to race at impossible speed. I heard steps thundering toward us, saw Nino and Fabiano bolting our way, but knew they might be too late. I knew the look in Nevio's eyes too well.

I stumbled toward Amo and Nevio. They stared at each other, still holding onto their respective knife. They were too experienced fighters not to know what would happen if they pulled their knives. "Don't. Do not move," I said thickly. I locked eyes with Nevio and his lips twisted into a grin.

"Nevio," I warned. "You'll both die."

"If it means he won't ever get to touch you again, I'll gladly bleed to

death.” I should have never asked Nevio if he’d ever leave our family, never mentioned falling in love. My brother was too intelligent to not make the connections and act upon them.

Amo brought his face close to Nevio’s with a harsh smile. “I guess it must be hard for a crazy fucker like yourself to know that your sister loves me, that I kissed her.”

I wanted to cry. How could love be this destructive? I grabbed Nevio’s hand before he could pull the knife out. “Nevio, don’t,” I begged.

Amo smiled darkly.

Nino appeared by our side, something in his hand and he rammed a syringe into Nevio’s neck. Nevio’s eyes widened a fraction, his body becoming tense and he passed out, letting go of the knife. Fabiano helped Nino to hold Nevio up.

“If you pull that knife, I’ll slit your throat,” Nino said to Amo.

“I won’t, don’t worry,” Amo said and looked at me as he released the knife slowly and lowered himself to the floor. One of his hands cradled the knife buried in his side, his mouth twisting with pain. Then a sardonic smile stretched his lips. “This doesn’t hurt as badly as you not choosing me.”

I had not not chosen him. I’d chosen peace. I’d chosen my family. I’d chosen saving many lives. I’d chosen Amo becoming Capo...

I sank down between him and Nevio, both of them bleeding profoundly. Nino was taking care of Nevio and Fabiano finally came over to Amo.

I was in trance, unable to catch a clear thought.

Soon Alessio, Massimo, Dad and Savio filtered into the room followed by two doctors and several nurses. Dad’s gaze swiped over the scene then he stalked toward me and pulled me to my feet. “Greta?”

“I’m not injured,” I said tonelessly.

Dad handed me over to Savio who touched my shoulder and I met his gaze. His was brimming with questions, but I couldn’t answer them. Dad knelt beside Nevio, while one of the doctors began to treat Amo.

Within an hour, we were in the Camorra hospital and both Amo and Nevio were in surgery to save their lives.

I sat on a chair between the two rooms, feeling like I was torn apart. Blood covered my hands and my dress. I wasn’t sure whose it was. Nevio’s? Amo’s?

I could feel everyone’s gazes on me. Nobody had asked any questions yet.

I had a feeling Dad was almost scared to ask what had happened. Maybe he worried what I'd say about my feelings for Amo. Nino and Fabiano had certainly filled him in on the details. Dad had reacted with a rageful outburst.

"Luca and Romero are on their way," Nino said in a low voice.

"With a declaration of war," Dad said with a dark laugh.

"We have his son, it would be stupid to threaten us now," Alessio said.

"It might be prudent to kill Amo while he's in surgery and get us an advantage in this war," Massimo said.

I looked up. Nino shook his head. "War would be unwise at this point."

"Killing his son will be an advantage."

"You don't know Luca like Remo and I do, Massimo. Killing his son won't slow Luca down. He's easier to handle as long as the people he cares about are alive. Luca is the most dangerous when he doesn't have anything to lose, and we don't want that."

Mom came in and glanced worriedly at me. I gave her a very weak smile so she rushed to Dad. "How is he?"

"He'll pull through. No major arteries were involved," Dad said, hugging Mom as she sagged against him.

"Savio said Nevio attacked Amo to protect Greta."

"I didn't need protection from Amo," I said firmly.

Dad's expression darkened in a way that resembled the look in Nevio's eyes when he'd attacked Amo. "Nevio obviously disagreed."

"Nevio didn't attack because he thought I was in danger."

"Maybe it's a danger you can't see," Massimo said with a hint of condescension.

I rose to my feet. Dad approached me slowly. "What exactly has been going on between Vitiello and you?"

"Nothing," I said. I hated lying, and I was bad at it, so Dad's eyes narrowed. He touched my cheek. "Mia cara, you know you can tell us anything. There's nothing we can't protect you from. Even if Amo makes you believe, he might have something over you, believe me there's nothing he can do."

Dad, like probably the rest of them, thought Amo had set his eyes on me and was trying to manipulate me into becoming his wife. They couldn't imagine that I had fallen for him.

I glanced at Amo's door. I wasn't sure if the truth would improve Amo's situation.

“He’s engaged,” Alessio said. “He’s probably just trying to have some fun before marriage.”

Dad’s eyes flashed. “Did he touch you?”

“Remo,” Mom said softly, seeing my expression. She took my hand and pulled me aside. “Greta, you know you can tell me anything.”

“Nothing happened between us. We only talked. We enjoyed each other’s company, that’s all.”

I couldn’t share our kiss with anyone.

Dad looked at Amo’s door. I stepped in front of it out of reflex.

“So that’s the side you’re picking?” Alessio asked, his eyebrows rising in challenge.

“I’m not picking a side, because I don’t have to. I’ve always been and will always be a Falcone. Las Vegas is my home. There’s nothing between Amo and me and there won’t ever be. I’m just making sure we won’t declare war to the Famiglia.”

Dad cupped my face, searching my eyes. “You swear that Amo didn’t do anything?”

“He didn’t do anything except ask me to become his wife. He wants to strengthen the Famiglia I suppose and he doesn’t like Cressida very much.”

Dad looked at me a bit longer but seemed unable to detect the lie, maybe because for once, I’d wrapped it up in truths.

“Nevio attacked a future Capo in our territory,” Nino said. “Luca won’t be impressed. If we don’t want war, we need to consider our options.”

“If Amo dies under surgery, there’ll be war no matter what we do,” Dad said.

My heart squeezed tightly. I couldn’t even imagine Amo’s death without feeling like following him into the dark as well.

“Amo won’t die,” I said simply. “Nor will Nevio. They’ll both live.”

Mom took my hand, running her thumb over my knuckles in a way that had always calmed me, but even that wasn’t working in my current state.

Dad glanced at Nino. I could see that they thought war was inevitable. Tension had been rising for years. Mainly because Nevio and Amo couldn’t stand each other. Everyone expected war to break out once they both came to power.

“I’m scared, Mom,” I whispered when Dad, Nino, Massimo and Alessio had walked away to discuss strategies.

“Nevio is strong. He won’t die.”

“I know,” I said. “Neither of them will die. I’m scared of my heart, of the havoc it can wreak.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Nevio attacked before anything could happen, but Amo was going to kiss me and I would have let him.”

Mom couldn’t hide her surprise. “Okay. You and him?”

Was there Amo and me? It felt like we were over before we could ever happen. “We can’t be.”

“Because he’s engaged.”

“Because I’m Greta Falcone and he’s Amo Vitiello.”

Mom smiled sadly. “Your brother wanted to kill him because he doesn’t want you and Amo to be together.”

If Nevio had really intended on killing Amo, Amo would be dead. He would have aimed for his heart or throat. The attack was a last warning. And Nevio wasn’t dead because Amo had held back for me. Next time neither would be so lucky. “Nevio thinks I belong in Las Vegas. He thinks I won’t be safe anywhere else.”

“And what do you think?”

“Las Vegas is my home. This family is my safe haven. I don’t belong in New York. I wasn’t born to be at a Capo’s side.” And Amo was meant to be Capo. I didn’t want him to give this up for me.

Mom considered that. “You can be whatever you want to be.”

I gave her a grateful smile even if she was biased as my mother. “I know my limitations. And I can’t leave Nevio.”

“Nevio will be fine.” At the doubtful look on my face, she added, “Eventually. Nevio battles his very own demons even you are not equipped to fight. If you really love Amo, you shouldn’t let him go too quickly.”

What I felt for Amo was magnificent and new, but that was also the problem. I hadn’t had time to process everything. Too much was on the line for a spur of the moment decision. For the decision ahead of us absolute certainty was necessary. I couldn’t ask Amo to give up everything as long as I wasn’t absolutely sure about my feelings. What if I decided in six months that the novelty had worn off and that while I’d briefly fallen in love, I didn’t love him. He couldn’t undo what had happened by then. He’d lose too much. I didn’t want that burden on my shoulders. I couldn’t carry it. I had no experience with love, so how could I make an informed decision with minimal risks, especially if the consequences could be dire?

“Some things can’t be measured or quantified, Greta. And with love there’s always a flicker of uncertainty. You have to allow yourself to fall.”

I smiled because Mom knew me better than I thought. And I understood her reasoning. My letting myself fall when I risked plunging many others into the abyss for me wasn’t an option. “Have you never regretted leaving your family?”

Mom swallowed. “I knew it was the right choice for you and Nevio.”

“Would you have left as well if you hadn’t had us?”

Mom’s gaze slanted to Dad who was still in a discussion with Nino and now Fabiano.

“Maybe it would have taken me longer to come to terms with my love for your father but I’m sure eventually I would have gone to him.”

Mom’s family hadn’t tried to get her back. I couldn’t imagine mine reacting the same way. While Dad might accept love as a reason, Nevio wouldn’t.

For him love was difficult to grasp. For him devotion and love only existed in connection with our family, not outside of it. Everyone outside of our family was inconsequential to him. He was a bit like a livestock guardian dog. The puppies were introduced early to their herd or family they were supposed to protect. Everything they grew up with fell under their protection, everything that they encountered later in life was a potential threat.

“I know you and Amo don’t know each other. But what does your gut tell you? Do you think you love him?”

It defied logic, falling in love at first glance. I would have argued with anyone who would have told me it had happened to them, but I had fallen for Amo, and every time I saw him I only fell deeper. I was scared of what would happen if the fall ever ended. But falling in love wasn’t the same as loving someone. Or was it? The more I tried to dissect love, define it, box it up in a neat category, the more it confused me.

The door behind me on my left opened and the doctor stepped out. He was still covered in blood from surgery. Mom grimaced, tightening her hold on my hand. I got up. It was where Nevio had been undergoing surgery.

“He’ll recover. But he needs to hold back his nightly activities for a while.”

“Can I see him?” I asked immediately.

“He’s not awake yet. We’re monitoring him closely.”

“I’ll sit by his side.” I paused, glancing at Amo’s door. How much longer

would his surgery take? Again I felt like my heart was split in two. I couldn't be at both of their sides.

"You'll let us know when the Vitiello boy wakes, Remo?"

Dad looked at Mom for a few heartbeats before he gave a nod. Then he slanted another look at me. His expression was dark and foreboding, full of worry and anger.

I wasn't sure which of these emotions were directed at me. Mom and I walked into Nevio's room. I was angry at him, furious even. But seeing him drugged and attached to all kinds of machines, I rushed over to him and took his hand. My heart ached so terribly. I pressed my forehead to his hand, shuddering. "Nevio. I know you need me but why did you have to do this?"

Mom touched my shoulder. "You love your brother, we all do, but you can't hold back your life for him. Not forever."

"He's my life too. You all are. I don't want to leave. I can't be what the Famiglia expects, what Amo needs. Eventually he'll realize it and then it'll be too late."

Mom squeezed my shoulder and walked around the bed to the other side of the bed, putting her hand on Nevio's.

Mom looked at him then at me, her expression softening further. "Leaving my family, it was an impossible choice until it wasn't, until only one choice remained."

Amo needed another woman at his side, someone other than me. Our families needed peace. Nevio needed me. There was only one choice to make for me. I put my cheek down on the bed, my fingers interlinked with Nevio's. My gaze found the clock. Amo's surgery had been going on for three hours. Oh Nevio.



I must have fallen asleep but was woken by commotion in front of the door.

"Where is he?" A deep male voice boomed. It took me a moment to recognize it as Luca's.

My head shot up.

"Stay here," Mom urged but I shook my head and slipped out before she

could stop me.

Dad and Luca were facing off, guns drawn, and Dad's face didn't bode well. I didn't know Amo's father very well but his face didn't give me much hope either.

"In surgery," Nino said. "Our best surgeons are saving his life."

"And who got him a state that he required life-saving?" Luca roared. I flinched. I was used to brutality, to harsh words and even harder truths, but I wasn't used to other people's wrath.

"Your son entered our territory without permission."

Luca stepped even closer to Dad so their noses were almost touching. "And I thought our truce would guarantee my son's safety on Camorra land. I suppose I was mistaken."

I walked closer but Massimo grabbed my wrist and shoved me behind him. "Some monsters won't stop from hurting you."

"I know all about monsters, Massimo." I shook his grip off. I grew up among them. I loved them. Maybe I was one myself.

"Who attacked my son, the future Capo of the Famiglia?" Luca growled.

He let his eyes glide over us and then his smile became harsher. "Falcone Junior himself."

Luca gripped my father's shoulder and tried to shove him to the side to head for the operation room.

The second man, Romero, pulled his gun and pointed it at Nino. Fabiano had his gun drawn too but wasn't pointing it at anyone yet. Dad grabbed Luca's wrist, trying to twist it. I began running. If I didn't stop this now, there would be war and it would be my fault. "Stop!"

Dad's gaze briefly caught on me, his expression twisting with protectiveness. Luca used the moment to shove Dad back but he didn't fall. I used the commotion to position myself right in front of Luca who had raised his gun to point it at Dad. Instead it now pointed straight at my head.

"Luca," Dad said in a low voice. I had a feeling he was aiming his gun at Luca's head. Massimo and Alessio had their guns drawn too. Of course, I knew if Luca wanted me dead, I'd be dead before they killed him.

Luca met my gaze and lowered the gun. His lips curled as he looked over my shoulder at Dad. "I don't hurt women, Falcone. I'm a man of honor. I'm going to take my son home with me now and the moment we leave your territory consider our truce over."

"No," I said firmly.

“Aren’t you curious why your son was here?” Dad asked, then I felt his presence behind me. He grabbed my arm and tried to pull me behind him but I resisted. He ignored my struggle and shoved me behind him.

“Dad,” I said furiously.

Luca looked at me and something shifted in his expression. He didn’t say anything.

Dad’s smile became scary. “Your engaged son asked my daughter for her hand. He should remember his boundaries. Some things are even beyond his reach.”

Luca’s lips thinned. “That probably won’t be a problem in the future. He’ll be married soon and busy with war.”

“War is unnecessary,” Nino said firmly.

“Let me see my son now.”

Nino nodded and led Luca past Dad and me. He opened the door and I peered in. The doctor came our way, looking confused, but then he saw Luca. “He’s fine. You can go see him.”

Luca walked past him as if he hadn’t listened to him. Goosebumps rippled along my skin when I spotted Amo on the bed while around him nurses cleaned the floor. I took a step toward the room but Dad’s fingers clamped around my wrist.

“Luca wants to be alone with his son.”

I froze, swallowing hard. Romero closed the door and positioned himself in front of it. Then he took out his phone and began typing.

Was this the end of truce?

Chapter *Fifteen*



Anno

I woke with a foul taste in my mouth, a bad case of the shivers and a hand holding mine too tightly. I knew at once that it wasn't Greta. The hand was too big, too strong.

I stirred and the hand let go.

With a groan, I forced my eyes open to find Dad watching me with dark shadows under his eyes and an expression in them that was a mix of fury and concern. A hint of stubble showed on his chin. He rarely went out of the house without a shave.

"Where am I?"

Dad's lips curled. "Las Vegas. Camorra hospital unit."

Damn, the memory of Nevio's attack came back and with it the pain in my side. The bastard had rammed his knife into me.

"Is the crazy fucker alive?"

"Which one?" Dad said in a failed attempt at humor. His voice was too strained for it. Then he added. "He'll live. For now."

I nodded. It was better this way. I wanted him dead but the consequences would be too dire—for Greta. "You didn't tell Mom, right?"

Dad looked ready to choke me to death. “Of course not. She thinks we’re having another meeting with the Falcones. She suffered enough when Marci was kidnapped. I won’t let her suffer because of your stupidity.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said with a grimace as a fierce burning pain spread in my side.

“More morphine?” Dad asked with a nod at the drip.

I shook my head. I wouldn’t make myself more vulnerable than I already was, and had been these last few hours. I lifted the covers. I was naked but everything was still where it belonged. I wouldn’t have been surprised if the Falcones had castrated me for wanting Greta.

I lowered the covers.

Dad shook his head as he regarded me for a few heartbeats and I could tell he was fighting to control himself. “Damn it, Amo. Have you lost your fucking mind? Asking the Falcone girl for her hand in marriage on Camorra territory? Why didn’t you just burn down the fucking city and get the war declaration over with?”

“I thought she’d agree to marry me.”

“Let’s disregard the fucking fact that the Falcones would rather burn down New York than allow the girl to live there, what about what I told you? I wasn’t joking when I said I you would have to waive your position as future Capo if you dropped Cressida.”

“I didn’t care.”

Dad swallowed, obviously fighting for restraint. “Don’t tell me you fucked the Falcone girl too? I can’t believe what you told me is all you did with her. You’re leaving parts out and I’m sick of standing in the dark.”

“Don’t,” I snarled even as my side roared with agony. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

Dad closed his eyes briefly, then he grabbed my shoulder and got very close. “Get her out of your head now. The only way you could ever have her would be to kidnap her and I don’t have to tell you what would happen after?”

“She’d never forgive me if something happened to her family.”

“You stabbed her twin brother.”

“I did. But he stabbed me first. She’ll understand.” At least, I thought she would. She wasn’t here so I couldn’t ask her.

I knew Greta and I couldn’t be. Like Dad had said, she wouldn’t leave her family. After Nevio’s crazy ass actions probably less than before.

“Let’s get you home before the Falcones change their minds. If we go into war, we’ll do it on equal footing and not trapped in their territory.”

“You declared war?” I asked quietly. I had lived in peace all my life, had longed for war for half of it, but now a loss of truce meant more than losing our drug routes and many soldiers.

Dad’s eyes clouded with disbelief. “Nevio Falcone stabbed you.”

“And I stabbed him. We’re even.”

Dad shoved to his feet and turned his back on me. “If you weren’t my son...”

“Dad. We can’t have war now. How do you explain it to our soldiers?”

“Not too long ago, you wanted war with the Camorra. Now you ask me to keep truce even though you almost died at the hands of a Falcone?” He turned to me, his expression tight with suppressed rage. “I’ve killed many for far less.”

“This is the worst possible time for war. We have two big drug deliveries due in the next few weeks. We can’t redirect them.”

“Don’t you think I don’t know that?” Dad snarled. He shook his head. “This is your fault.”

It was. There was no arguing about it. I’d done it because of my feelings for Greta, feelings she obviously didn’t share in the same intensity.

“We should go now.”

I groaned when I tried to push my legs out of bed. Dad picked up my clothes from the chair, or what was left of them. My shirt had been cut in half and my pants and boxers were covered in blood.

Dad wrapped an arm around my back, supporting my weight as he helped me stand. For a moment my vision became black. “Come on, Amo. We need to get you dressed.”

I gave a terse nod. Dad was right. The situation was too volatile to stay on Camorra land. I put on my boxers and pants slowly while Dad got out of his jacket so I could put it on instead of my ruined shirt. Most of my torso was wrapped in bandages anyway so I was only half naked. He led me out of the room. Romero was waiting for us in front of the door and scanned my body briefly, his jaw twitching. I wasn’t surprised Dad had chosen him and not Matteo. Romero was a calm, controlled man. “Our doctors are waiting for you in the private jet.”

I gave him a tight smile. Remo, Nino and Fabiano kept their distance as they watched us. Any word we shared now would probably only make the

situation worse. Fabiano shook his head, obviously annoyed by my actions. Maybe he had forgotten that Nevio had pulled his knife? When Dad and I reached the middle of the room, my eyes were drawn to movement. A door opened and Greta stood there, her doe eyes wide and forlorn. My stomach dropped, my body flooding with such intense longing my knees almost buckled.

Behind her I could see Nevio in a hospital bed and his mother beside him. His expression showed not a hint of guilt. He would stab me again if he got the chance.

Then I caught Greta's gaze again and she took a step toward me, her face filling with regret. "I'm sorry you got hurt. I hope you'll heal quickly."

Remo went over to her, touching her shoulder. "Don't overstay your welcome."

Dad's hand on my shoulder tightened. If it was because of what Remo had said or because he wanted to turn my attention away from Greta, I wasn't sure.

Greta turned around, taking the decision from me, and went back to her brother's bed where she sank down and held his hand. Her eyes said goodbye. It cost me everything to keep my face straight. She made her choice and I had to accept it. Maybe it was better this way. Our family had taken a big hit when Marcella had picked Maddox. If I brought war over the Famiglia because of Greta and dropped Cressida, the Traditionalists would revolt.

My life belonged to the Famiglia. Now and for always.



My chest felt dark and hollow when I watched Amo and his father leave. This felt like a definite goodbye.

“You’re better off without someone like him. The fucking audacity of him to think you’d ever consider being with him,” Nevio muttered, his lips thinning in pain.

“Nevio,” Mom said in warning. “You need to rest, and this is Greta’s personal business.”

Nevio scoffed. “Personal business. Vitiello overstepped his boundaries. Greta isn’t interested in him but because of his huge ego he can’t see it.”

Mom glanced at me and I looked away.

“Right?” Nevio said. He leaned forward with a grunt and touched my arm. “Tell Mom.”

I raised my eyes, and he let out a derisive laugh. “Come on, Greta.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” I said simply, rising to my feet. “What you did was wrong. And I’m mad at you.”

Nevio regarded me in utter confusion. “I protected you.”

“From what?”

“He had his paws all over you and he was going to kiss you against your will.”

“It wasn’t against my will and it wouldn’t have been our first kiss. We kissed before.”

Nevio stared at me as if he couldn’t comprehend a single word out of my mouth. Maybe it was really impossible for him to grasp the concept of me having feelings for someone outside of our family.

Nevio swung his legs out of bed even as the color drained from his skin and pushed to his feet. “You chose him?”

“I obviously didn’t choose him. I’m here.”

Nevio glanced at something behind me and I followed his gaze toward Dad and Nino in the doorway. Dad’s expression was a mask of rage.

“Dad, we must stop this ridiculous truce with the Famiglia. It’s time for war. The Vitiellos are becoming too sure of themselves. It’s time to show them their place.”

“You only want a chance to kill Amo!” I whispered.

“Of course. You’re obviously not capable of seeing what kind of guy he is, but I know his sort, and I won’t allow him to ruin your life.”

“It’s none of your business!” I growled, causing Nevio’s eyes to widen in shock. I’d never raised my voice against him. “And you won’t kill him, or I’ll never speak a single word with you.”

Nevio’s face became a mask of nothingness. “You would never do that.”

“Don’t test my limits, Nevio,” I said quietly. “Please.”

He exchanged a look with Dad then he shook his head with a sigh. He cast his eyes up, looking tortured. “I won’t kill him if that’s what you want.”

I nodded but didn’t thank him. Not for *that*. “You need to rest.” I turned on my heel.

“Won’t you stay?”

“Mom’s here. I need a bit of peace and quiet. I’ll visit you tomorrow.”

I didn’t look at him because I knew his hurt expression would have made me rethink my decision.

Nino stepped back so I could walk past them. I didn’t dare look at Dad. I felt on the verge of anxiety anyway, and I knew his disappointed expression would have sent me over the edge. “Nino, can you take Greta home? I’ll have to talk to Nevio first.”

“Of course.”

Nino appeared at my side, a calm presence I appreciated. He led me toward Dad’s car and I got in without a word. I felt completely out of it, almost in shock. So much had happened in the last few hours. My brain hadn’t had time to process it. I wasn’t even sure if that was possible.

We pulled up the driveway to our mansion when I found the strength to speak, “Will there be war now?”

Nino turned off the engine and took a deep breath. “Maybe war has already started.”

“You have to stop Dad from going to war with the Famiglia. Please. So many people would die. Kiara wouldn’t be able to see her friend Giulia anymore, Fabiano could never see his sisters again, and Aurora her aunts. This war is unnecessary. I don’t want it, not because of me. Talk to Dad. He listens to you.”

“He appreciates my logic, but I’m not sure he’s in a state of mind for it at the current time. And then there’s still the matter of Luca. He made it clear he wants war. If he declares war, we won’t ask for peace. We’ll retribute with full brutality.”

I closed my eyes. My God. Who would have thought love was so destructive?

“I’m sorry for all of this.”

Nino didn’t say anything so I got out of the car and went inside. When I crossed the common room Giulio jumped up where he’d sat beside Savio and a heavily pregnant Gemma on the couch and watched something on the iPad.

Kiara, too, rose where she had been curled up in the armchair.

Giulio raced toward me, boisterous excitement all over his face. His eyes were a lighter brown than mine but his hair was just as dark. “Nevio stabbed Vitiello?”

Savio pushed off the sofa, his eyes on me as he approached us. He touched my brother’s shoulders, pulling him back. “Greta needs rest.”

Kiara came my way and lightly touched my arm. “Do you want me to come up with you?” Gemma struggled to get off the couch. She was already three days overdue. She gave me an apologetic smile as she gave up and dropped back on the couch.

“I’m okay. Nevio got stabbed, not me.”

Kiara nodded but I could tell she still worried.

Without another word, I turned and headed upstairs to my room where Momo and Bear were waiting for me. I put Bear on his leash and picked up Momo before I headed downstairs and went outside through the French doors in our wing of the mansion. I allowed Bear and Momo to relieve themselves and sniff around a bit before I returned to my room. Bear and Momo stayed close to me, obviously aware of my distress.

After turning off the lights, I curled up on my bed, shivering. I was cold, inside and out, despite Bear’s body pressing to my back and Momo cuddled to my front. A knock sounded. My eyes peeled open. With the black-out curtains drawn shut, my view was still utter blackness.

“Yes?”

The door opened and Dad’s tall form stood illuminated in the light coming in from the hallway. He turned the light switch. As usual it was dimmed to a low glow, enough to make out his exhausted eyes and tense expression. Bear let out a low growl which shook the mattress. Dad ignored it and stepped in. I sat up and sent Bear into his corner. He curled up there, his eyes on Dad, who sank down beside me.

Dad watched me, his dark eyes full of concern, but also something else, maybe wariness. “You lied to me.”

I swallowed, then gave a small nod. “I lied about kissing Amo, yes. Because I knew how you and Nevio would react if you found out.”

Dad’s jaw tightened. “We saw how Nevio reacted.”

I doubted Dad’s reaction would have been much better. In the long run he’d have spilled blood as well. “It’s over now. It never really started.”

Dad’s eyes seemed to sink into mine, willing me to tell him everything.

But there was so much I didn't understand. "He's bound to marry in a few weeks."

"I know," I said quietly, lest Dad thought I was oblivious. I wasn't as good and innocent as he thought. I'd kissed a promised man, and I wanted to do it again. I was wretched.

"He should have never approached you."

"Am I better than him? If I know he's promised and I still kiss him, doesn't that make me a sinner as well?"

"I don't give a fuck about sins. What I care about is your wellbeing."

Dad cursing like this in front of me told me his emotional state wasn't the best either.

"I'll be fine." I'd known Amo only for a short period of time. If time healed all wounds, then the heartache I suffered should be over in the same time it had taken me to fall for Amo, right?

Dad touched my cheek. "I should have protected you better."

I smiled sadly. "Would it have changed things for you if Amo hadn't been promised?" I knew the answer but I thought it required stating out loud.

Dad let out a dark laugh. "About him wanting you? Not in a million years, mia cara. Maybe he can have whatever he wants in New York, but this is Las Vegas, and he can't have you. Not now, not ever."

"You told me you'd do anything for me."

Dad cupped my face with both hands, his eyes blazing with fierceness. "Not that."

I shook my head in his hold. "I belong here. I'm talking about war. Please, don't let there be war because of me. Please do this for me. We need peace."

"Still too kind for this world. I thought you'd changed but I see you haven't." He kissed my forehead, sounding relieved but at same time resigned.

I peered up at him through my lashes. But I had changed, hadn't I? I could feel it deep in my belly. How could one person change who you were? Amo had changed everything, my every desire, my perception of what made my life full. But I was a Falcone. I'd go on despite the pain.

"What about peace?"

Dad kissed my forehead again then he stood, his expression hard. "That depends on Luca. We're ready for war if he wants it."

Chapter *Sixteen*



Anno

With every step Cressida took closer to me, I knew she wasn't the woman I wanted to marry. With every intake of breath, I knew I loved the woman sitting somewhere in this church. And with every furious beat of my condemned heart, I knew I could never be with the woman I loved.

I didn't search the guests for Greta. We hadn't spoken since I'd left Las Vegas with new scars. One of many on my body and the first one on my cold heart.

Who would have thought a woman would break my unbreakable heart?

Cressida arrived at my side, smiling as if she'd won the lottery, and I supposed she had. She was ambitious and as my wife she'd be at the top of the food chain.

I caught Marcella's gaze in the first row. She gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. I sent her a wry smile, remembering when I'd told her many years ago that I wouldn't marry for love, that I'd have an arranged marriage and marry for the good of the Famiglia. Today those words became reality.

Today would mark a turning point in many ways.

But back then I'd thought love was a loser's game and I'd be immune to it. That a Falcone would change it was almost comical.

That the Falcones were present today to celebrate the biggest wedding of the Famiglia was a fucking miracle in itself. It had taken considerable effort to make it happen. But if one thing was Remo's greatest weakness then it was his hubris. He thought himself invincible. His arrogance trumped even my own.

That I married Cressida would guarantee that the Traditionalists would get their fill. They had our backs, ready to follow us on whatever crusade we planned. Maybe if Marcella had married in a traditional fashion, I would have had more freedom to be with Greta. But even then...The Falcones would have never let her go and even if I'd ripped her away, Greta would have always belonged to them. She had chosen her family and I had chosen mine. Love wasn't written in my stars. Our world hardly left room for this kind of weakness. And that's what it was.

I would never again show weakness.

Cressida cleared her throat, giving me an expectant look. I realized we'd arrived at the part of the ceremony where we were supposed to exchange vows and rings.

My heart had been half dead before I'd met Greta. With all the shit I'd lived through since Marcella had been kidnapped and all the horrors I'd witnessed and committed that was the natural course of things.

With her it had felt like the black piece of stone in my chest could actually be revived but today whatever good had remained inside of me shriveled and died. "I do." The word tasted false and for the briefest moment I allowed myself to search for Greta in the crowd. But I didn't have to search. My gaze was drawn to her as if a magnetic pull connected us, and one look in her kind doe eyes and my heartbeat stilled only to speed up.

I tore my eyes away, hoping nobody had noticed my moment of weakness. Today wasn't time for it.

When I pushed the ring on Cressida's finger, I felt nothing. I didn't smile, only met her gaze. She was beaming up at me like the happy bride everyone expected her to be, but her eyes didn't reflect true happiness. If anything, they held triumph. Today marked her victory over me. I'd tried to bring her down for insulting Marcella, and Cressida had turned the tables.

"Kiss me," she hissed barely moving her lips, still maintaining the fake smile.

I bent down and pressed my lips against hers, not bothering to soften my mouth or to prolong this public display of affection. Applause rang out and I straightened, ignoring the furious glint in Cressida's eyes. I'd told her what she'd get if we married. Love wasn't part of the deal. If she thought, she could hold the reins in this marriage, she'd get a very nasty surprise.



What if you met your soulmate at the wrong time?

The words "I do" cut me like an acid-covered blade.

For a moment, the constant murmurs, intakes of breaths, rustling of clothes and sniffing in the church faded into the background, and I was focused only on one thing.

Amo Vitiello.

His gaze found mine for the fraction of a second, gray like the sky during a summer storm, before he turned back to the front.

I interlinked my fingers to stop them from shaking.

This day would change me. I loved my family, my life. I'd never longed for more, never wanted to leave my comfortable routine or familiar hometown. I'd never wanted for more than I had.

Until our paths crossed and Amo sunk his claws into my heart and soul.

I didn't understand everything that went on between the sky and the earth. I didn't believe in divine providence or fate.

Soulmates?

A sweet dream I'd never dreamed until he crashed through my bubble of contentment. Now a dream I never wanted became the nightmare I couldn't shake, and a longing I'd never felt became a crushing need.

One that would never be sated.

“I do,” Cressida said.

The little flame of hope inside of me died and my hands became slack.
Like a tsunami the sounds of the crowd around me crashed back down on me.

I’d grown up among cruel men.

But fate was so much crueler than any of them.

Amo Vitiello was my soulmate...

...and now married to another woman.

Chapter *Seventeen*



Anno

I dreaded the congratulations for one reason only. When Fabiano and his family stepped forward to congratulate me, I knew it was almost time. Fabiano shook my hand with a barely there smile. Our relationship had never been overly close. Now it was poisoned.

I supposed Nevio and me almost killing each other had soured the situation further. Even Aurora who was usually the nicest and most bubbly of the lot looked as if her smile cost her, especially when she shook Cressida's hand. I wasn't sure how close Aurora and Greta were, they were three years apart but Fabiano pretty much lived under one roof with the Falcone clan.

I swallowed when Remo and his wife stepped forward. Remo gripped my hand tightly, his eyes glinting with warning. He leaned forward. "You made the right choice today, one that's going to save many."

My answering smile was far from pleasant. "For now."

Serafina dug her nails into his arm and pulled him aside but they stayed close. Remo's eyes didn't hide his hatred for me. We'd never liked each other, but since Greta, simple animosity had turned to pure loathing. Slamming my knife into his son's stomach was one of the best moments of

my life, only every moment I'd spent with Greta beat it, which was ironic.

Then every ounce of hatred bundled inside of my evaporated as Greta stepped out behind her father. I hadn't expected her to be here, had wished she wouldn't show up, but in true Falcone fashion she faced complications square on.

Her dark hair was put up in a loose updo with a few strands framing her lovely, elfin face. She wore a simple long silk dress in a subdued mint which was held up by the thinnest straps I'd ever seen. She wasn't wearing a bra, couldn't possibly, but still it wasn't indecent. Whatever she wore beneath covered her nipples. She looked like the frailest beauty, like a flower too beautiful and delicate to be touched by human hands. Of course, she wasn't wearing heels even if she barely reached her father's chest, nor mine. I couldn't imagine Greta ever wearing them. She wore simple golden sandals and for once nail polish, the same color as her dress.

Greta met my gaze, her lips pulling into a smile that ached worse than Nevio's knife in my side. "Congratulations, Amo." She turned to Cressida. "Congratulations, Cressida."

Cressida scanned Greta from head to toe. And just the brief flicker of disapproval in her expression made me want to snarl at her.

"Thank you. When you turn of age in a few years, I'm sure you're going to have a nice wedding too," Cressida said.

Greta only smiled at the jab. Cressida knew fucking well that Greta was of age. She'd had to learn the names and ages of the most important players in our world before marriage, and Greta was one of the most important even if she didn't act like she was.

"Greta doesn't need to marry to be a queen. Only by existing, she's shining brighter than most ever will," Remo said in a harsh voice.

Cressida dug her nails into my palm, obviously wanting me to say something, but Remo had only voiced what I'd thought.

"It's a pity not all of you could make it," I drawled, not bothering to hide my insincerity. Savio and his wife, Massimo, Nevio and Alessio, and the younger kids had stayed in Las Vegas. I'd desperately hoped Greta would have stayed there too, even if seeing her now was the highlight of this dark day.

With a last harsh smile, Remo turned and led his wife and daughter away. I focused on Adamo and his wife Dinara. I didn't see Nino and Kiara anywhere, though they had been in church. Maybe Nino thought he needed to

stop his brother from doing something stupid.



The Falcones disappeared early from the party. The atmosphere had been too strenuous to bear it much longer. Dad hadn't declared war, not with two important drug deliveries on the way, and Remo hadn't either—Greta's influence no doubt.

Cressida and I excused ourselves not long after midnight. Cressida didn't stop talking when I steered my car toward our new townhouse. I couldn't believe that place would be the place Cressida and I would share. Maybe I'd come to tolerate her one day.

I led her into the house and motioned at the staircase. "Why don't you go ahead? I need another drink."

Cressida's lips pinched but she stalked up the stairs covered in the fluffy white carpet that she'd picked. She'd picked the furniture for the entire place, which made it feel even less like home. I'd probably spend more time in my apartment than under a roof with Cressida. I glanced at my Rolex. I had another hour.

I poured myself a small glass of Bourbon before I made my way upstairs. When I stepped into the bedroom, Cressida was still in the bathroom. I went into our walk-in closet and got out of my wedding suit, throwing it over an armchair there before I grabbed a black shirt and black cargo pants.

"You have a new scar!" Cressida exclaimed as she sauntered in, wearing a sexy white negligee. Her hair was down and she was wearing heels.

I followed her gaze toward the stab wound that was still tender but no longer bandaged. Not saying anything, I pulled up my cargo pants. I hadn't seen reason to reveal the events of Las Vegas with Cressida. Showing any kind of weakness in front of my wife seemed like a bad idea.

"What are you doing?" Cressida asked, confused.

"Getting dressed. I have business to attend to."

Her eyes widened with incredulity. "It's our wedding night!"

I put on the shirt and raised an eyebrow. "I never wanted this marriage. I told you what to expect if you married me. This is a marriage on paper. Don't expect any emotional attachment."

“We have to consummate our wedding. It’s tradition!” Her voice became increasingly shrill. I walked out into the hallway but she rushed after me.

“We consummated it in advance. That should do,” I said. I had absolutely no desire to touch her right now.

Down in the armory, I grabbed two gun holsters, and my favorite knives and guns. Cressida caught up with me. Her heels had obviously slowed her down. She scanned my attire. “Where are you going?”

“Business.”

“A husband should fuck his wife!”

“Maybe I’ll do it when I return in the morning.”

I grabbed my car keys and headed into the lobby. Cressida let out an enraged cry and one of her heels hit the mirror beside my head, making it splinter.

“You’re lucky I don’t have time for your bullshit right now,” I growled and left.

No virgin blood would be spilled today, only Falcone blood.



I put on pajamas but I couldn’t fall asleep. My thoughts revolved around Amo. He would be sharing his wedding night with Cressida now.

I had spent a week begging Dad to let me attend this wedding, arguing I needed to see Amo get married to close this chapter of my life. You needed to face your fears, that was what Dad always said, and it was something I had internalized too. Now I wasn’t so sure it had improved my emotional state. It definitely didn’t feel as if a chapter had been closed.

But maybe my presence had showed our goodwill to maintain peace, which felt so terribly fragile.

Nevio had been absolutely furious but Dad had insisted he stay in Vegas. It would have only crushed what was left of our truce if he'd come. His anger had been potent, and I was still worried he'd do something stupid. While Nevio respected Dad, his boisterous nature often made him forget reason and Dad's orders.

I brushed the finger where a ring would have been if I'd accepted Amo's proposal.

It had been my choice, the only reasonable choice at the time, to let go of Amo, but right now it felt as if something had been ripped from me that I didn't want to lose.

Voices sounded in the living area of our suite. I finally got up and went there. Fabiano, Nino and Dad were talking in hushed voices. Adamo sat on the sofa, his arms stretched out on the backrest. He was the only one who didn't look completely tense. He'd enjoyed his time in New York and was friendly with many Famiglia soldiers. If more of us made the effort he had made, things would be far less tense between the families.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Dad slanted me a look. "Nothing."

I pursed my lips. I could tell that wasn't true. He always said women were treated like the weaker sex because they acted like it, but his protectiveness sometimes made it difficult to act out of my comfort zone.

"Nino has a sort of premonition," Adamo said with a chuckle. His curly hair was all over the place.

"What kind of premonition?" I asked.

"There's nothing clairvoyant about my observations."

"I won't flee New York in the middle of the night like a fucking coward because you're overly cautious."

"And you're being arrogant and prideful."

"I know Luca. He always prides himself for his goddamn honor. He would never use a wedding night to attack. That would be *deeply dishonorable*."

Dad obviously thought there was nothing wrong with using a wedding for nefarious purposes.

"Aria was her usual nice, excited self. No alarm bells there. But Luca doesn't tell her everything. Maybe he wants to give you a taste of your own medicine," Fabiano said with a shrug. Dad sent him a warning look I didn't understand. "Luca can adept if he thinks it's necessary. Recent events might

have made him reevaluate his values.”

Dad’s lips curled. “Let him attack if he thinks himself so clever.”

“You’re letting your rage overshadow reason,” Nino muttered. “But there’s more on the line than our lives.”

Dad glanced at me, obviously still unwilling to listen to reason. “I have to admit Luca would get my respect if he really lured us here under the false pretense of peace, only to attack. That would mark a new low for him, one I’ll gladly return.”

I trusted Nino’s judgment on principal but what he suggested was so horrible I couldn’t, *I didn’t want* to believe it to be true.

A soft beep drew my attention back into my room. I moved to my nightstand where I’d left my cell, my eyes growing in surprise when I saw a message from an unknown number.

I clicked on it.

Leave the hotel now, Greta.

My heart sank and I whirled around, rushing back into the living area. Without Nino’s words, I might have thought this was Amo trying to meet me in secret, but I knew this was a very different message. It was from Amo, but he was trying to warn me. My instinct left no other conclusion.

Dad took a look at my face and strode over to me. I handed him the phone. “Get every gun! Wake everyone!”

Dad stormed into his and Mom’s bedroom, rousing her. Seconds later, he dragged her out only in her nightgown. A minute later, we were rushing down the staircase to the underground garage. Dad refused to take the elevator.

When we reached the garage, the lights went out.

“Damn it!” Dad snarled, his grip on my arm tightening. In the dark, we stumbled toward our cars. Mom, I and Kiara huddled in the backseat with Dad and Nino in the front. Fabiano and Adamo were in the other car with Aurora, Leona and Dinara. The car’s engine roared to life and we jerked forward. Dad held toward the rolling gate with full speed. “Down!” Nino ordered, and we ducked our heads. Mom wrapped her arms around my body, shielding me. An ear-splitting bang sounded as we crashed through the gate. I whimpered, my heartbeat fluttering in my chest.

Soon gunshots rang out and Mom’s arms around me tightened even more. Kiara shielded me from the other side, not letting me get up. I didn’t want

them to risk their lives for me. Several bumps and turns threw us around on the backseat until I lost every sense of up and down.

Suddenly we began spinning and the car jolted to the side, then crashed against something that made a metallic sound. My head collided with Kiara's and everything turned black.



Gunshots woke me. I opened my eyes, despite the sharp pain in my head. I was still on the backseat. But Mom was no longer beside me. Only Kiara was cradling her head, blood covering her face. My own skin was slick with blood as well.

“Damn it!” Mom whispered, hitting the steering wheel.

“It’s too damaged,” Kiara said in a quiet voice.

Mom looked over her back, at me, then at something behind us. Fear filled her face. She turned the keys again and the car let out a stutter. “We have to run to the other car. It’s not too far.”

I straightened and looked through the rear window, and found Dad, Nino, Adamo and Fabiano in a shooting match with Amo, his father and several other Famiglia men.

My heart slammed against my ribcage as I climbed out of the car.

“Greta!” Kiara shouted, but I didn’t listen.

I stepped out behind the car.

Amo spotted me first and froze. He and the other Famiglia men were shielded by two cars, while my family hid behind an overturned van.

All this because of us? Because we shared a bond that could not be?

The expressions on the face on both sides didn’t give me hope. Only death for the other side was the goal. Maybe torture first.

We were in an industrial harbor area, with the black water of the Hudson to our right. In the distance I could see more cars approaching, black limousines. Probably reinforcement.

“Get back in the car,” Dad shouted.

I only looked at Amo.

“Amo!” His father snarled. Amo’s expression was hard.

Nobody shot at me. Mom grabbed my arm and tugged me away behind a container that our car had rammed.

Soon the Famiglia would outnumber us. Good God. What could I do? Amo would protect me but he'd kill my family. Maybe if I begged him he'd spare them? I felt sick and cold sweat broke on my skin. My head pounded with a fierce headache and my pulse raced too fast, making me dizzy.

A Van barreled toward us and stopped with squealing tires. The sliding doors jerked open and Nevio got out, a woman in his hold and a knife at her throat.

"Stop!" Matteo roared. The Famiglia stopped firing and so did my family. Dad's expression told me he hadn't known Nevio was here.

"Surprise, motherfuckers," Nevio shouted with a wide grin, dragging the woman along as he walked toward Dad, Nino, Fabiano and Adamo. After him, Massimo jumped out, and then Alessio, a teenage girl in his hold. I recognized them as Matteo's wife and daughter from the wedding today.

"If you touched a single hair on their heads, I'm going to make you regret the day you were born," Matteo growled.

Nevio flashed his teeth at him and provocatively pressed his palm to the woman's red hair. She tried to escape his grip but he pushed the knife against her throat as a warning once more. "I don't regret anything yet."

"Isabella, Gianna, are you okay?" Amo called.

Gianna was in Nevio's hold and she had a bruise on her cheek.

Matteo stormed forward but Luca caught him by the arm and jerked him back. "The fucker hit you!"

"I'm afraid that's not true," Nevio said as he stopped beside Dad, who glanced between Gianna and Nevio with a hint of excitement. Nevio shrugged, grinning at Dad. "Sorry, Dad. I disobeyed, but I simply couldn't resist ruining a wedding. If I'd known it would come to this..." He chuckled and exchanged a look with Massimo and Alessio, looking like this was the greatest night of his life.

Alessio had his arm wrapped around the girl and his dagger was pointed at her belly. Her glasses were askew and her eyes wide and fearful.

"You're going too far," Matteo said quietly.

"Too far?" Dad snarled. "You attack me and my family while we're guests in your territory. Never talk about honor to me again. I'm the master at playing dirty, Vitiello. You just opened the fucking Pandora's box."

Nevio peered down at Gianna and sucked in a deep breath. "I smell war."

He laughed.

“Your wifey looks like a cougar, Matteo. Good catch.”

Amo took a step forward, raising his gun a bit more. Matteo struggled against Luca’s hold again.

I stared up at Mom in horror. Her eyes were wide and teary. Kiara huddled on the ground, still cradling her wound.

“Leave my territory. We’re even. And let Gianna and Isabella go right now,” Luca said.

Amo’s eyes slanted to me, and I thought I caught regret in his gaze but maybe I was just hoping for it.

“Even?” Dad asked in a low voice. “Plenty of Famiglia blood will be spilled before I’ll consider us even, Luca.”

Nino leaned toward Dad and said something but Dad didn’t react. Adamo and Fabiano exchanged looks. Today would end badly. Very badly.

“I think Alessio took a shining to your daughter,” Nevio kept provoking.

He wanted the Vitiellos to lose control, to attack. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill a woman. For him it didn’t matter, human was human. He enjoyed killing everyone equally.

Nevio said something to Dad and they all looked toward a tattooed man in his forties and a younger version of him. Growl and one of his sons, Maximus.

“How about you give us my half-brother and his son?” Dad asked with a cruel smile.

Amo looked toward his friend who had already taken a step forward.

“In exchange for my wife and daughter?” Matteo asked.

“In exchange for not letting them bleed out right here before your fucking eyes,” Nevio snarled. “We’ll keep them for now.”

“I should have slashed your throat,” Amo said.

“It’s not too late, Vitiello. Come here and give it a try.”

I turned my back on the scene and began running, catching Mom by surprise. I wasn’t sure if what I’d seen in Amo’s eyes would be enough to save us all, but I had to give it a try. And if nothing else, this would stop Nevio.

I stormed toward the edge of the harbor platform. The Hudson was black and unwelcoming below me. Before my anxiety could stop me, I closed my eyes and then I jumped, my arms pressed flat to the sides of my straightened body. My fall was short and the impact hard and cold. Terror gripped me.

The same terror that had overwhelmed me every time I'd been surrounded by water for as long as I could remember. That's why I had never learned to swim.

"Greta!" Several screams rang out before all sound was cut off.

1 year later...

Chapter *Eighteen*



Anno

I woke in a cold sweat, my heart almost beating through my chest, my breathing ragged. It was dark in my room, but so had been the night in my dream. The night that haunted me often and woke me sweat-drenched every time.

I sat up and swung my legs out of bed. Only dressed in my boxers, I walked out into my living room and stared out over the New York skyline.

I only spent one or two nights over at Cressida's and my townhouse per week, and never in the same bedroom. My sleep was already fitful, with her by my side it would be non-existent. We barely tolerated each other and she still hadn't forgiven me for our wedding night. That wasn't why the night haunted my dreams.

I pressed my forehead against the glass, remembering the day when years of peace between the Camorra and the Famiglia had ended.



Greta jumped off the edge.

Nevio shoved Gianna away, his face twisting with fear.

I stared at the spot where Greta had been moments before. I didn't think. I began running. Nothing else mattered.

"Amo, don't!" Dad roared.

I reached the edge and I stared down at the Hudson. My eyes frantically searched the inky surface for a sign of Greta. She was nowhere to be seen. The current in the Hudson could be strong. Nevio catapulted himself into the floods without thinking but I knew it was impossible to find someone in a large body of water without a hint of where they might be. Ignoring the commotion around me, my heart beat faster and faster, until I spotted a flash of white floating below the surface off to the right down the river. Nevio was nowhere near that spot. After I dropped my gun, I jumped before I lost sight of it again. The impact knocked the air out of me and it took several confusing heartbeats before I could tell what was up and down, and swam up to the surface. The current was dragging Greta away. I began swimming, using the force of the water to get where I needed to be.

For a long time, I was sure I'd never reach her but then my hand closed around hers.

It hadn't rained in almost three weeks, so the water level was low and the river lazier than usual. It cost me all my strength to drag us to a stone platform. We had been dragged a good distance away from our families. A steep ladder attached to the pillar led up to the platform. I wrapped my arm around Greta's middle and pulled myself up with one arm until my feet reached the first step. I was out of breath when I reached the top, Greta still dangling in my hold. Putting her down on the ground, I stared at Greta's unmoving form beneath me, my chest heaving. Fuck. I'd barely any breath left for me but I pressed my mouth to hers, and began to resuscitate her. I'd tried to make my peace with the fact that I'd never see her again, but the idea that she wouldn't still be safe somewhere, living her life, it was unacceptable.

When she sucked in her first breath, it felt as if I could breathe freely again too. Her eyes slammed open, locking on mine.

Fuck.

I cradled her face. "Have you lost your mind? Why did you jump? Why didn't you try to stay at the surface?" More whys flooded my head but I kept them to myself.

"To be alone with you." I didn't crack a smile at her failed attempt at

humor. She shivered, her breath catching. She swallowed. "I wanted to stop your family and mine from killing each other. I can't swim."

I shook my head. "They're probably still killing each other."

But I knew that wouldn't be the case. Dad would send everyone out to save me, and Remo would try to save Greta.

"You could be dead."

"I knew you'd jump in after me and save me."

She said it without a flicker of a doubt. Love is a fucking weakness.

"I'm married now."

"I know," she said simply.

I looked away from her lovely face because I would have kissed her otherwise. It would have only made me look like even more of a fool.

"Don't allow them to kill each other, Amo, please. Don't let what's between us cause a war. It's too precious to be the reason for something this horrendous."

"What is between us?" I rasped, glaring down at her, my palms still pressed to her cheeks, my body caging her in.

She licked her lips and I lost it. I bent down and kissed her, claiming those lush lips. When I pulled back again, I growled. "There's nothing between us anymore, Greta. You didn't allow it to be." I got up with a hard smile. "Don't trust me to save you again."

I rubbed my face to bring me back to the present. It was the only kiss I'd had in my wedding night. I let out a harsh laugh. I had, however, fucked my wife when I'd returned home in wet, blood-covered clothes. Anger fueled fucking on both sides. Cressida had sunk her nails into the still tender scar of my knife wound, drawing blood, her eyes bursting with loathing, which had only intensified when I'd pulled out before orgasm and come on my own stomach. I wouldn't get Cressida pregnant.

It was only four in the morning but I wouldn't fall back asleep, so I got dressed and drove to my parents' house. Dad would be awake too. Since we'd declared war on the Camorra, his nights were as sleepless as mine. Like the Camorra, we now had too many enemies and no true allies. Even if Greta's actions hadn't stopped the war, they had postponed it. Nobody had died that night, especially not Isabella, or Gianna—or Greta.

I let myself into the townhouse with my spare key. Dad had taken it from me the day after the bridge incident, and had barely spoken to me for almost six months, but Mom's insistent mediation had eventually brought us back

together. As expected, dim light came from under the door to Dad's office. I headed there. He would already have seen me approach the front door through the security cameras. I didn't knock before I stepped in. Dad sat behind his desk, bent over several maps, a dark look on his face. Our last drug transport had been stopped by the Camorra in Texas.

"As long as the Corsican Union sells us drugs, we'll be fine with a stopped transport here and there," I said as I sank down across from Dad.

"We're paying double for the same shit."

It was true. The Corsican Union bought drugs from the Russians, transported it to their territory in the French part of Canada through Alaska and sold it to us for double the price. Our customers were desperate so they still bought the overpriced drugs, but the Russians had been trying to sell cheaper ware in our territory.

"Eventually the Camorra won't be as focused on our transport routes anymore."

A muscle in Dad's cheek flexed. "If we'd killed Remo and the rest that night, we would be better off."

"Nevio would have killed Gianna and Isa. He wouldn't have batted an eyelash. I can't see how that would have improved our situation."

"It would have made my sleep more satisfactory knowing I'd killed Remo Falcone," Dad said.

I didn't say anything. The look in Greta's eyes when I'd turned my back on her after I'd pulled her from the river popped up uninvited. I hadn't talked to her since that night and I tried not to think of her—which was close to impossible.

A soft knock sounded and Mom peered in, her face clouding with worry when she saw me and Dad. But worry had become her constant companion these last twelve months, mainly for Gianna and Isa. Gianna was her usual snappy self, which was probably an act, but Isa had definitely changed, become quieter, even more obsessed with her fictional worlds and chess.

"You should sleep," Dad murmured.

"So should you."

He leaned back in the chair.

She sighed. "How much longer do you want to keep up the war?"

"Some things are inevitable."

The sadness on her face intensified but she nodded. I knew she missed Fabiano and especially Aurora. She left with a shuddering breath. I hated

knowing that she would be crying over the situation.

Dad got up. "I'll talk to her." At the door he paused. "Maybe you should go back home."

"Where is that?" I asked with a bitter smile.



"I want to go home, Nevio," I whispered, shivering, rubbing my arms.

I usually loved Vegas by night, but this part of town had a starved, greedy feel to it that made my pulse speed up.

Nevio sank down in front of me, dark brows pulling together.

"Now?"

"Now," I whimpered. I should have never asked them to take me with them, even if Nevio had promised that they were only looking for a caravan to buy tonight. I hadn't dared ask him why they needed the caravan. I'd learned to keep my questions limited when it came to my brother's nightly activities. Some things were better left unsaid, like what happened the night he kidnapped two women and Amo saved me from the floods. My stomach clenched. Nevio had carried me back to the car that night, cradling me against his chest like a child. He hadn't spared a single look at Amo as he did.

Massimo gave Nevio a sign from his position on top of the fence surrounding the scrapyards.

"Just one more stop, all right? They don't have what I'm looking for here." Nevio searched my eyes. "You'll get over him."

"I know."

Nevio stood and held out his hand, which I took and let him pull me to my feet. "Come on. All that matters is our family, Greta, and we'll always be by your side."

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to talk about Amo with Nevio. I hadn't talked about him to anyone. It hurt enough that I saw his face in my dreams every night.

Nevio pulled me away from the scrapyard as Massimo jumped down from the fence and Alessio got back behind the steering wheel.

Nevio wrapped his arm around my shoulders as we settled on the backseat.

"Where are we going?" Alessio asked from the front seat.

"Let's go to Ivanov's. When I drove past there last time, I saw a Campervan I liked."

One corner of Nevio's mouth pulled up in a way that meant trouble. Usually I would have tried to be the voice of reason but today I felt like chaos myself. I wanted to be consumed by Nevio's frenzy until it blasted away everything that ached inside of me. "If your Dad finds out Greta is here with us, he'll skin us alive."

"He knows we can protect Greta."

Massimo shook his head but neither he nor Alessio tried to talk Nevio out of it.

We eventually arrived in an even shadier part of the city, on the outskirts, at a car dealership which looked as if it mainly dealt with other things.

Alessio parked in front of the rundown building.

The men who sat on chairs in front of the illuminated garage spoke in a Slavic language I didn't know. It wasn't Russian because I had decent knowledge of it. Maybe Bulgarian or Albanian.

They all got up when we approached them, exchanging looks and condescending smiles.

"They don't know who we are?" Alessio said with a hint of excitement.

"Seems they don't have a clue," Nevio said with a grin.

"You got lost," one of the men said with a heavy accent.

"We want that caravan," Massimo said, pointing at an old caravan over to the side.

"Not for sale."

The biggest man came closer, checking me out. He sneered at Nevio. "She yours?"

"She's ours," Massimo said, giving Nevio a wary look.

The men snickered. "Then she won't mind filling her holes with a few more dicks."

“Can you go over to the Caravan and see if it’s what you want,” Nevio said to me, but he was only looking at the man.

“We don’t want trouble,” I said, giving Nevio a pleading look. The look in his eyes reminded me of the night of our twelfth birthday.

Nevio gently pushed me away. I took a few steps back.

The Slavic men still didn’t understand the severity of their situation. “Just sell the caravan to us,” I said.

“Let me fuck your ass, then we can talk money.”

The man opened his arms invitingly.

Nevio grabbed one of his wrists and tossed the man down so he braced himself on his hands then he smashed his foot down on the man’s elbow. I backed away as screams filled the night. Blades flashed, laughter sounded, bones broke, and then silence fell over us.

Nevio sheathed his knife and stalked toward me, turning me away from the bloody scene and steering me toward the caravan. I glanced back and caught Massimo throwing money on the ground beside the bodies. Then he and Alessio jogged after us.

The caravan smelled of weed and cold smoke and the chassis squeaked every time we moved.

“We should burn the bodies,” Alessio said, taking out his favorite lighter.

“Let them rot in the sun tomorrow. I heard there are a few shady characters in this area that have been doing unregistered business. This’ll send them a nice message.”

“You know what our fathers think of us doing this without telling them.”

Nevio snatched the lighter out of Alessio’s hand, with a cluck. Alessio tried to get the lighter back from Nevio and they began to shove each other, but I could tell they were high on adrenaline and not out for a real fight. Massimo let out a shrill whistle from the bedroom of the caravan to get their attention. “They have quite a stash of weed here. No wonder they didn’t want to sell the caravan.”

Nevio and Alessio went over to him, completely forgetting about the lighter they’d dropped during their grappling match.

I put it in my pocket and sank down on the steps of the caravan and looked off into the distance, trying to ignore the bodies sprawled on the ground in my peripheral vision.

When a pained yowl caught my ears, followed by another and then an ear-piercing scream that sounded almost human though I knew it was a dog, I

began running, not even thinking about it. I'd never run this fast in my life but I knew I didn't have much time. I turned a corner into an abandoned alley and my pulse jerked higher, adrenaline spiking higher than I'd ever experienced. Two men stood over a dark dog which was crying like a baby and twisting on the ground, obviously unable to get up. One of them poured liquid over the dog from a canister. Gasoline. They were going to burn the dog alive. The other kicked the suffering creature into the side. Shrieking, I stormed toward them and barreled into the man with the canister. He stumbled backward and fell over his own feet, landing on his back, spilling the rest of the gasoline over himself.

"What the fuck, you fucking cunt!"

His friend laughed. "Tiny girl wants trouble." He made a move as if he wanted to kick the dog again. I lunged at him, the rushing in my ears quietening down until there was nothing. Until I felt nothing, until I heard and saw nothing but the poor creature on the ground and the two monsters torturing it. He laughed again, widening his eyes comically.

"Fuck, help me. I'm covered in gasoline!" the other man screamed.

I collided with the guy but he braced himself for the impact. He gripped me by the hair and held me away from him, then he slapped my face hard.

"Motherfucker!" Nevio roared somewhere behind us in the alley. Then three sets of steps stormed toward us.

I didn't feel the pain in my scalp or anywhere else. I stared up at the guy and then I sunk my teeth into his arm as hard as I could. He roared and released me but I didn't let go until a piece of his flesh ripped off then I dropped to the ground and spit it out.

The dog lifted its head a couple of inches, meeting my gaze. His hind legs looked broken and his tail was burnt. I shoved my hand into my pocket and took out Alessio's lighter. I met the gaze of the man on the ground who was trying to get out of his gasoline-soaked jacket. With a flick of my thumb, I opened the lighter, bringing the flame to life. I watched it snatching at the air hungrily, ready to destroy and consume.

The man's eyes latched on to mine, growing wide with panic. "No, plea —"

I hurled the lighter at him. With a whoosh he burst into flame.

I watched as he jumped to his feet, screaming at the top of his lungs, hitting at the flames that were ripping at his flesh. He staggered toward us.

"Damn it!" Nevio snarled. He picked up a steel rod from the ground and

struck out like a baseball player, hitting the burning man's head. As if a plug had been pulled, the burning body dropped to the ground. I watched as the flames consumed the body.

"Your turn," Nevio told the other guy, taking out his knife.

"Make it quick but painful," I heard myself say as I crawled over to the dog and touched its neck. It trembled. "We need to get the dog medical help."

"Quick isn't my thing," Nevio muttered but his eyes were on me with an intense worry I'd never seen on his face before.

Massimo stepped forward, pulled out his raptor claw and dragged it along the man's abdomen. His bowels spilled to the ground. "Done."

"Where's the next vet?" Alessio asked.

"Call our doc," I said. Our Camorra doctor was always the quickest to respond to emergencies. Even if this wasn't a human patient, he'd come if we called.

They exchanged a look but Massimo picked up his mobile and agreed upon a meeting spot with the doctor close by. It was one of the fully equipped hospital rooms that the Camorra had all over the city.

"We have to carry the dog to the car," Alessio said.

"It'll be too painful for him."

"Let me grab my kit from the car," Massimo said and jogged away. Alessio grabbed his lighter from the ground and lit a cigarette before he walked around the burned body, shaking his head.

Nevio still only watched me.

The stench of burnt flesh registered on me for the first time. My chin was sticky. I wiped at it with the back of my hand and even in the dim street light I could tell it came away stained with blood.

I dropped my hand, felt the terrifying urge to get rid of this limb, somehow. My eyes darted to Nevio's knife that he was still holding in his hand. He clucked his tongue, bringing my focus back up to his face. He pocketed the knife then came over to me, got down on his knees and ripped a piece off of his shirt, then rubbed first my hand then my chin clean with it.

He motioned at the bodies. "These are mine."

I didn't understand.

"Forget what happened. They are on me."

"No," I said, still patting the dog's neck.

"Don't argue. My darkness spilled over. It wasn't you."

Was it Nevio's darkness? Or was it mine?

Massimo jogged over to us, pulled a syringe from his medical kit and injected the dog. Then he prepared an infusion which he attached to the dog's front leg. I watched but didn't ask. I knew what they were doing by night, and these tools usually weren't for saving a life.

I got up, feeling hollow. My always overactive mind was quiet. My legs were steady. My body didn't react as it should with revulsion, with heart pounding and sickness, with cold sweat and goose bumps. In that moment I felt nothing. I was empty, as if everything that had made me me had been erased by what I'd done.

Massimo picked up the dog and I carried the infusion. Nevio never left my side, watching me as if he worried I'd break down. I wouldn't. Not today.

I rode in the truck bed beside the dog and touched her neck to assure myself that she was still alive while I held the infusion up. The dog was breathing slowly but steadily, relieved of its pain. She was black with a few random white spots like a cow. "I'll call you, Dotty, okay? You're going to live with me and my family, and no one's ever going to dare hurting you again."

We arrived at the designated meeting space a few minutes later. Our Camorra doctor and a nurse were already waiting for us there. But so were Dad and Savio.

I could see the concern on Savio's face. Maybe one of the boys had sent them a text or called them, and told them what had happened. The nurse and doctor rushed forward with a stretcher, not questioning why they had to take care of a dog. I handed the nurse the infusion and hopped off the truck bed. Massimo had already walked over to Savio and Dad, and was talking to them.

"You have blood on your face, let me take a look at you to make sure you're not hurt," the doctor said, reaching out for me without permission.

"No," I growled, backing away. "I'm fine, it's not my blood." I swallowed and smiled weakly at him, motioning at the dog. "Please take care of her."

When I looked up from Dotty, Dad's gaze hit me and I lowered my eyes to my feet. I swallowed thickly.

I focused on Dotty and followed the doctor and nurse inside the former warehouse now hospital unit. I sank down on a hard plastic chair and watched as the doctor got to work. X-Rays, ultrasound, examination of the burns and broken bones.

Raised voices drew my attention to the front of the warehouse where Dad

was obviously arguing with Nevio. It wasn't Nevio's fault. Savio headed for me with a reassuring smile. He squatted before me as if I was a small kid. In their minds I'd probably never lost the status of one, because they thought I was frail and breakable. Innocent. Kind.

I hoped Dad would take a close look at what I'd done, so he'd stop putting me on a pedestal.

"Hey, dollface, how ya doing?"

Dollface. That was still his nickname for me, and sometimes the rest of my family used it too. Because I was pretty and tiny. Because I was sweet. Because I seemed breakable at first glance.

"I killed a man today by burning him alive," I said because it was the only answer I could give Savio at the time. I didn't feel much of anything at the moment.

Savio nodded, still smiling. He touched my hand which rested on my leg. "Yeah, so we heard." He tilted his head. His brown eyes remained kind. He didn't look disgusted, only worried.

"Dad shouldn't blame Nevio. It's not his fault."

Savio chuckled, glancing to the front where Nevio and Dad were still at it.

"Your brother hasn't been the best example. His track record is really messed up."

"That might be true, but it has nothing to do with what happened today."

"You can tell your Dad that."

Dad was moving toward me, his expression troubled, but also lingering with anger. I knew the latter wasn't directed at me. Savio got up and gave Dad and me space. Dad pulled me to my feet and hugged me tightly. Then he pushed me back a bit and searched my face. I allowed him to look at me, so he could search for whatever he was hoping to find.

"Don't fight with Nevio because of me. It wasn't his fault."

Dad's expression tightened. "That's hard to believe given his usual activities."

"I did it. Not him."

"It definitely wasn't just Nevio. I certainly can be blamed too."

"If it's genetic, then you couldn't have done anything different."

Dad shook his head with a sharp laugh. "You've been spending too much time with Nino."

I glanced past Dad, toward the doctor who was coming our way. "I have

to amputate half of the tail, so maybe you should go outside while I do.”

He meant me. Dad would hardly be bothered by the sight.

“I want to stay,” I said.

The doctor looked at Dad for confirmation, and Dad nodded.

“Why did you kill him?”

I pursed my lips, trying to determine the reason for my actions. In that moment when I’d tossed the lighter at the man, I hadn’t really thought much. I’d acted out of rage and despair.

“I don’t know if I wanted to kill him. I wanted to inflict the same pain on him that he’d inflicted on the dog.”

Dad nodded. “But by setting someone on fire, you take killing them into account.”

“Yes.” I’d known he’d die. It was the consequence of my actions but not their purpose. “I’m not sad that he’s dead.”

Dad remained silent. “But you regret using violence?”

I nodded. “I still don’t like violence. I still don’t want to hurt others... I...”

“That’s what makes the difference, mia cara. You acted out of kindness even if your actions were anything but.”

“I burnt someone because I wanted them to experience the pain they’d caused another creature.”

“Next time you want to punish someone who hurt an animal or person, tell me, your brother or one of your uncles and we’ll handle them.” He kissed my forehead.

I nodded, because I knew it was what Dad wanted. He thought he needed to protect me and stop me from doing something I didn’t want to do. But in that moment, I’d wanted to hurt the man in the worst way possible. Now? I hoped I’d never feel the urge again but I knew I wouldn’t ask Dad or my uncles to step in instead either. I didn’t want them to have more blood on their hands because of me.

My eyes settled on my hand. It was still slightly pink. Nevio’s shirt hadn’t rubbed away all traces of blood. “My face?” I asked.

Dad turned to Savio. “Give me a wet towel.”

Savio went over to a sink and came back with a soaked towel. Dad cleaned my face gently then his hand froze. He touched my cheek. “What happened there?”

“The man I killed hit me.”

“You showed him mercy by what you did. I would have made his end much more excruciating than what he experienced.”

I knew it was true. I also knew it didn't diminish my guilt.

“Does Mom know?” I asked. Mom always worried about Nevio. If she found out I'd burned someone, she'd be heartbroken. I didn't want her to suffer because of me.

“Not yet,” Dad said. “And I'm not sure I'll tell her.”

I hugged my middle. “You shouldn't lie to Mom. She'll be furious if she ever finds out.”

“I prefer her fury to her worry.”

“She'll worry if she finds out. But if she finds out later, she'll worry too.”

“Do you want me to tell her?”

I swallowed. “I don't want it, but I know you should tell her.”

“I won't.” He nodded toward Dotty. “You probably want to adopt that dog as well?”

“Yes. I have to keep her as a reminder of what humans are capable of, myself included.”

Dad touched my cheek. “It won't happen again. I know you've been suffering in silence for a while and not talked to anyone. Today was the result of that.”

I'd hoped Dad and the others hadn't noticed that something was wrong with me, but apparently my anguish had been too strong to keep it hidden. My feelings for Amo hadn't vanished in weeks or months, my heartbreak was still as potent as it had been in the beginning. It didn't make sense.

“He needs to stay under surveillance for another day before he can go home with you,” the doctor told me, once he'd bandaged the tail and the dog's two broken hind legs.

“Will she walk again?”

“Yes, but it's likely that she'll have a bad limp.”

Dogs were resilient. I'd do anything in my power to help her heal, not just physically. “I'll stay with her.”

“Take them home,” Dad told Savio, pointing at Nevio, Massimo and Alessio.

Nevio stalked toward us, shaking his head. “I'm staying.” He stopped right in front of Dad, challenge in his eyes. Dad smiled dangerously.

“I need him,” I whispered.

Dad sighed. Nevio sank down beside me and wrapped his arm around me.

I put my head down on his shoulder, but I didn't find the comfort I needed.

Chapter *Nineteen*



Back in my room the next morning, I curled up on my bed, feeling hollow in a way I'd never experienced before. The ceiling seemed too low and was coming closer with every intake of breath. My bed was too soft, my body sinking deeper and deeper into the mattress, the blankets wrapping around me.

Momo yapped. He and Bear were curled up on the bed right beside me. Bear panted, my nervous energy obviously rubbing off on him. I swallowed. "It's okay," I consoled them, but Momo whined.

I couldn't make them believe something that wasn't true. They could tell I wasn't okay.

Eventually I could hardly breathe. I wasn't sure why this was happening. I didn't regret the man's death. But somehow knowing that I was capable of violence like this... I couldn't understand how this was possible.

I despised violence more than anything else. I'd always refused to take fight lessons for that very reason, and last night, with one flick of my hand, I'd set a human being on fire without a second thought. Maybe I'd lost more than my heart when I'd given up Amo, maybe a part of me had been woken

by the anguish of his loss that should stay hidden.

I squeezed my eyes shut as hard as I could but my despair and a longing so excruciating it stole my breath took hold of me. I knew what I needed, whom I needed.

What was one more sin today?

For the first time in my life, I wanted to be consoled by someone outside of my family.

I picked up my phone without pausing to think and called the one person I'd sworn to stay away from.

Amo.



The click-click of Cressida typing a message on her phone filled the silence, driving me raging mad. She insisted we have dinner together even if we'd nothing to talk about. To piss me off, she spent all dinner chatting with her friends, making sure to keep the tone on so I heard her typing. I didn't care that she wasn't talking to me, but the background noise after a fucking stressful day made me want to throw the phone out of the window—followed by Cressida.

"What the fuck are we doing here? Why do you insist on this?" I asked when my patience ran thin.

She looked up briefly from her phone, as if she'd forgotten I was here. "We're married, Amo. Married people have dinner together. They do things together. And husbands fuck their wives."

My mouth curled and I had to hold back a very nasty reply not fit for someone who was my wife on paper at least. My father treated Mom like a queen, and I had trouble mustering up every ounce of decency I possessed

around my wife.

“I have fucked you if I recall correctly.”

“Maybe a dozen times in a year!” she hissed. “And it was angry fucking every single time!”

“If you’re hoping for love making, then you picked the wrong husband.”

Cressida’s hand around the wineglass tightened. I could tell she wanted to throw it at me, but since she’d seen the fucking abyss in my eyes after I came to her in our wedding night, she knew better than to provoke me even though I’d never hurt her. She enjoyed the rage fucking so that didn’t count.

“You only fuck me when you need an outlet after a messed-up night of torture and killing.”

I didn’t deny it. It was the only time I could stand being with her, on nights when I was completely numb from an abundance of violence. “You can have angry fucking or no fucking. It’s up to you.”

“I’ll go looking for a lover then.”

I waited for jealousy to flare up, for a spike in my pulse, for something, but I felt absolutely nothing at the thought of Cressida being with another guy. “Be sure to find someone discreet.”

Her lips parted, her face twisted with fury. “You would let another man fuck me?”

“Why not? Because I won’t.”

She threw the glass on the floor, shoved to her feet and staggered toward me on her high heels. I raised an eyebrow, and she slapped me. The spike in adrenaline that had been vacant before came sudden and I grabbed her wrist, snarling into her face as I shot to my feet, “Never, never raise your hand against me again, do you hear me? If you weren’t a woman, you wouldn’t live to see tomorrow.”

I released her and she whirled around, stalking away. I released a slow breath. Almost every of our encounters ended in an argument. Maybe it would be for the best if she found some asshole to fuck some happiness into her. I knew she’d go on a major shopping spree with her friends tomorrow, to get over her annoyance with me.

My phone rang with a number I couldn’t forget. The only number except for my own that I could remember. A number I shouldn’t consider answering.

I stared at the phone for several heartbeats before I picked up.

“Yes?” I said. My voice was detached, business-like, definitely not a mirror of what I was feeling. Because inside of me?

An inferno of emotions was raging.

Anger. Longing. Frustration. Sadness. Too many goddamn emotions.

“Amo?” Greta’s voice was soft, small.

Fuck, that voice awakened something in me I couldn’t rein in. My dead heart seemed to jolt awake, my frustration and bitterness washing away with that one soft word.

But I steeled myself. This was Greta *Falcone*. “Why are you calling?”

She was silent. “I shouldn’t have called. I’m sorry. I’m not quite myself right now. I—”

“What’s wrong?”

She swallowed audibly. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Tell me why you called,” I ordered firmly.

Silence reigned on the other end. “I thought hearing your voice would help quiet the chaos in my head. It did in the past.”

She sounded broken, terrified. Not my fucking business. In the last year, her family had caught several of our soldiers and butchered them, only to send the pieces back to us.

“I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Last time we saw each other, I told you I wouldn’t save you again.”

“I’m not sure I need saving. I’m not sure I can be saved.”

My chest constricted. “Can you leave your home without anyone noticing?”

I couldn’t believe what I’d said.

“Yes,” Greta said quietly.

“I’m free tomorrow. I’ll catch the earliest flight. I’ll call you when I’ve landed and then I’ll pick a place for us to meet.”

“Okay.”

I stared at the spot where Cressida had sat not long ago then I touched the scar on my side that Nevio had left. One year of war and I was heading to Las Vegas to meet with the enemy.



I hadn’t told a soul where I was going. How could I explain this lunacy to my family or Maximus? They’d probably lock me in a basement until I could

think straight again. Fuck, it's what I would have done with anyone I cared about if they'd suggested this trip. I had the weekend off unless something major went down but the last few months had been calm, a cold war more than anything else.

Still, this could be a trap and the next step in our war, but I couldn't believe Greta would be in on this, nor that Remo would use her like that.

Meeting someone in enemy territory in an abandoned hotel complex at the periphery of the strip was something that had all my instincts screaming, even if I'd picked the decrepit place. But the desire to see Greta again was stronger than my sense of self-preservation.

And if this wasn't a trap, and Greta really trusted me enough to meet me on my terms without protection like this then she was even more lost than me.

I went in through the staff entrance at the back and the rusty steel door creaked when I shoved it open, with my shoulder because I held guns in both of my hands and a flashlight wedged between my teeth. I hadn't wanted to risk taking the Famiglia jet, nor renting another private jet, so I had bought guns on the Darknet and picked them up on drive from the airport in a hiding place in a dumpster. I inched my head forward and peered into what must have been part of the laundry facilities of the place once. It was quiet inside except for my calm breathing. I stepped in and slowly crossed the laundry then a corridor and the kitchen before I made my way up a staircase. Again I cautiously opened the door to the lobby with my elbow, which had also been the casino of the hotel. Most of the slot machines had been removed and the carpet was missing in many places. It was dark inside, apart from the glow of my flashlight and another flashlight which laid on the floor in the center of the lobby.

I froze. Greta, in a ballet outfit, danced in the beam of her flashlight, to a music only she could hear. I swallowed hard, despite the flashlight in my mouth and slowly approached her. But it was a different kind of dance than the ones I'd seen before. It was desperate and forlorn.

My shoe caught on something, kicking it forward with a clatter. Greta's eyes fluttered open and she stopped moving, her arms slowly sinking to her sides as she locked gazes with me. I put one gun into the holster in my chest and lowered my other gun a few inches when I stopped in front of Greta. I took the flashlight out of my mouth and put it on the ground with its beam cast up so we could see each other.

Greta hadn't moved yet. She looked lost and small. Something haunted lay in her eyes.

I realized that everything I'd sworn myself, everything I'd done this last year didn't matter when I looked into her eyes.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," she murmured. Her voice was raw.

I smiled bitterly. "I shouldn't have come. This could be a trap."

"We're alone."

I shook my head and moved even closer until I towered over her. "You know many might think it's a bad idea to be alone with your enemy."

"Are you my enemy?"

"You are a Falcone and I'm a Vitiello. Our families are at war."

She blinked up at me. "Then why are you here?"

I shrugged, my voice low when I spoke, "I could be here to kidnap you, to hurt you in different ways, to kill you."

"And? Are you here to hurt me?"

My heart clenched. I cupped her head with one hand, bringing our faces closer. "Us being here is a bad idea. You being so trusting in me is the worst idea."

She shivered, even though I found it almost unbearably hot in here. "I needed you." Her lashes fluttered, and she closed her eyes against a horror only she could see. "I know it was wrong to call you. I don't know why I did it but I couldn't think of what else to do. I just knew I needed to see you. I've never felt so lost before, so little like myself."

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

Greta wrapped her arms around her middle, looking down and slowly she sank down, slipping away from my touch. She peered up at me expectantly and I sank down next to her and put my gun down on the ground beside my leg. She stared into the light beam and slowly sunk into herself, her cheeks hollowing as she gnawed on her lower lip, then she turned those eyes on me, and as I had a year ago, I fell hard. With one look, she sucked me in and I was unable to stop it. "You won't see me the same way once I tell you."

I doubted anything could change how I saw Greta. I had tried to hate her. I hated her brother effortlessly, and with such force and immediate passion that I'd hoped I could find a flicker of hatred for her as well. When that hadn't worked, I'd tried to forget her. And today I was here.

"It's really bad. Really really bad."

The anguish in her voice made me reach out to her and brush my thumb

across her cheek. My wedding ring caught the light and I lowered my hand. What were we doing here?

“I killed a man, two days ago.”

That wasn't what I'd expected. She was a Falcone so these words wouldn't have made a major impact a year ago, before I'd met Greta, talked to her, seen the abundance of kindness in her eyes, and even now she exuded kindness. I couldn't imagine Greta becoming violent without a very good reason. She certainly didn't do it for the fun of it like her brother, and even I did on occasion.

She leaned her head back until she stared up at the ceiling that the beam of the flashlight couldn't reach anymore, and without thinking I scooted over so I was right beside her.

“He burned alive, then Nevio killed him.”

“So you didn't kill him.”

“Nevio ended what I'd started. The man would have died either way. He was aflame.” Her eyes were wide and alarmed when she turned to me, her chest rising and falling, drawing my attention to the low neckline of her leotard. I forced my thoughts away from this path and focused on Greta's obvious distress.

“Tell me what happened, in detail, all right?”

She swallowed then nodded slowly before she began to speak in a hushed voice. When she was done, she looked at me anxiously, awaiting my judgment. I was fairly sure I wasn't the right person to discuss the justification for killing someone with her, but neither were the people in her family. And I liked that she sought me to talk to. She had no reason to trust me with this, or at all, our families were caught up in a war and she and I hadn't had any contact in a year, and yet she'd called me in her worst hour.

“You acted out of a place of kindness, Greta. You were probably in shock too. Despite your upbringing you aren't hardened to cruelty and violence, so seeing it has unsettled you enough to lash out without thinking. And as far as I'm concerned, the guy deserved death.”

“But who am I to decide who deserves to die or not?”

I chuckled darkly. “My father and I are judges over life and death all the time, and so are your father and brother. And we kill people without a hint of a kind motive.”

She put her cheek down on her knee, making herself even smaller as she watched me with her dark eyes. All I could think about was leaning forward

and kissing her.

“Thank you for coming, for listening,” she said simply. “For saving me again, though you said you wouldn’t.”

I nodded. “You’re welcome,” I said in a strangely gruff tone. “But I didn’t save you today. You weren’t in danger.”

She smiled strangely. “Maybe I’m now.”

I cupped her face once more. “Maybe.”

“Why do you make me feel like myself and at the same time like someone new.”

If I only knew. Why did she make me feel so unhinged and as if I’d finally come home at the same time?

“How long do you have before your family sends the cavalry?”

“I slipped out through Fabiano’s mansion.” She snapped her lips shut. “They won’t suspect anything until morning but I’ll have to be back before sunrise or risk running across someone.”

I nodded. It was past midnight in Vegas, three in the morning in New York, the end of a long day, and an even longer week. My heart and brain were a mess. Greta’s closeness wasn’t helping matters.

“You need to sleep. When do you have to return to New York?”

“I haven’t booked the flight yet but I need to be back Sunday evening.”

Greta regarded me. “Do you regret being here?”

I wasn’t sure. Fuck. “I need to catch some sleep and you should go back home.”

To the men who wanted me dead and who I’d kill if I got the chance.

I pushed to my feet even as my body ached to stay close to Greta, even as my heart called for her. Weakness I shouldn’t allow.

I couldn’t think straight with her in front of me, a fact I’d proven several times.

I held out my hand and Greta put hers in mine so I could pull her up. The desire to tug her against me and hold her close was almost overwhelming but I picked up the flashlight and my gun, forcing my face to stay emotionless. I could take the next flight in the morning and be back in New York in the afternoon.

“I’m going to spend the night in a motel. Is there a place where we can meet without being caught tomorrow?” I asked instead.

A hesitant smile pulled at her lips. “I have an animal sanctuary north of Las Vegas. I can give you the coordinates...”

“And you are alone there?”

I couldn't believe Greta was ever alone somewhere. My father would never allow Mom or Marcella to go anywhere without one of us or a bodyguard.

“It's a high security area, but I can let you in.”

“I'll be there tomorrow. Send me everything I need.” I took a step back. Then I looked around. “How will you get home?”

“The same way I came here. By bike.”

I shook my head. “I can't let you ride by yourself at night.”

Greta took a step back as well. “I can take care of myself. I can blend in. And this is my city. I know what corners to avoid.”

I couldn't imagine Greta could blend in. She stood out like a beacon.

“You can't bring me home, Amo. I'll be fine.” She picked up a black hoodie, and put it on. It was too big on her and reached her knees. It must have been Nevio's. She pulled the hoodie over her head. It was an absurd sight, the big black hoodie and Greta's graceful legs in her ballet tights and her ballet flats peeking out. “And if someone stops me, I'll tell them my name.”

Falcone.

Falcone.

A fucking Falcone.

She nodded at me, looking uncertain. “Until tomorrow?”

“I need the coordinates.”

Greta ran over to me, though it was so graceful, it looked like dancing. She pulled a sharpie from her pocket. “Do you have paper?”

I turned my arm and held out my wrist. She wrote down a row of numbers, her tongue wedged between her lips. “I'll be there around three pm. You can come over any time after so I can let you in.”

She peered up at me, her hair covered with the hoodie. I didn't think. I bent down and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. She exhaled when I pulled back, and just like that she breathed more life into me.

We walked out of the hotel side by side, not talking, not touching. Greta picked up her bike which leaned against the wall of the hotel and I got into my rental car. Then I watched her ride away on her bike. I started the engine and followed her for a while until we got too close to the Falcone mansion.

I did a U-turn and headed for the motel I'd booked with a fake name.

Tomorrow I'd see Greta again.

Tomorrow.

Chapter *Twenty*



Anno

I got up around noon. I hadn't fallen asleep until seven in the morning. Maximus had texted me to ask if I wanted to go out for drinks. We hadn't spent an evening together since the war and his bond with my cousin Sara. I told him I needed to be alone for a bit. He sent me a thumbs-up.

Everything okay?

Things had been rough for him. Maybe he wanted to have distraction.

He gave me another thumbs-up.

He'd rip me a new one if he found out why I'd lied to him.

I got some breakfast at the vending machine, a cap on my head to hide my identity. My height and size still stood out but luckily this motel had horrible reviews—for very good reason—and had plenty of vacancies.

Around two p.m. I couldn't wait any longer and departed. With the current traffic, the ride to the coordinates would take about forty-five minutes but I had every intention of checking out the area before I entered the premises.

I trusted Greta, but still my instincts told me to be cautious on Camorra

territory.

I'd been driving for a while, away from the city, when a high fence, a bit like you could find around a military base or a detention camp, rose up to my right. I passed the pebbled road leading straight toward it and tried to get a good look at it from a few other angles. The areal was huge with several buildings from what I could see. I parked a good distance away to avoid being caught on surveillance cameras and pretended I was taking a piss. I would have liked to walk closer but that would have looked suspicious.

I shook my head. This was a horrible idea in a row of many bad ideas.

I knew it but at the same time the pull to Greta was so strong that I threw caution in the wind. I got back into my car and did a U-Turn back toward the pebbled road leading up to a gate. I rolled down the window, making sure I kept my head in the car, though my cap would have probably hidden my face, and pressed a speaker button.

Static sounded, then, "Yes?"

Hearing Greta's voice, even distorted by speakers, made my heart speed up. "It's me."

A buzzer sounded and the gates slid open, but that didn't bring me inside the premises yet. There was a second gate so my car was now trapped between the closing gate behind me and the one rising up before me. I grabbed my semi-automatic from the passenger seat.

I glanced around for a sign of an ambush, but then the second gate glided open as well. I set the car in motion and followed the pebbled road past paddocks and stables with horses, donkeys, cows and even the occasional pig, sheep and goat. The pastureland spread to both sides of the road. This kind of ranch wasn't what you expected so close to the city of sin, but Remo was a resourceful man. Finally a white farmhouse came into view and behind it smaller cottages. A porch lined the entire front, complete with a swing.

I stopped the car but didn't get out right away. The curtains moved and briefly a face peeked out then disappeared. My gun in hand, I cautiously got out of the car, checking my surroundings. It was quiet except for the occasional bird song and cicada. It took my eyes a moment to get used to the bright sunshine.

The front door opened and Greta stood in the doorway, dressed in a white spaghetti strap crop-top, flowy white skirt and cowboy boots. Her hair was down, framing her beautiful face. I swallowed and slowly approached the porch, my fingers still holding onto the gun. When I began to ascend the

stairs, a low growl sounded and a big presence appeared behind Greta but she didn't let the dog pass.

"Bear, stop."

I kept my finger on the trigger as I stepped onto the porch. It was decorated with colorful flowers in small steel tubs and the wide swing had white cushions with mint pillows that said home. It looked cozy and with Greta's welcoming presence and sweet smile, I felt at home right away.

I stifled a sardonic laugh. Then my eyes met Greta's who watched me with a tilted head, her shoulder leaning against the doorframe. "I'm happy you're here." I could tell this meant a lot to her, maybe more than yesterday. This place was important to her and she wanted me here.

"Come in," she said gently and walked into the house, followed by Bear. I followed her into a high-ceilinged living room with wooden beams and a huge stone kitchen island. A pot stood on the stove, and a spicy smell wafted over to me.

"I made chili for us. I wasn't sure if you would get the chance to grab food somewhere."

I watched her as she opened the lid and smiled hopefully at me. Slowly she put the lid down on a wooden cutting board, her expression becoming more restrained. "I don't know how to act around you."

"Be yourself. No need to act." I strolled over to her. Bear sat on her other side, never taking his eyes off me. I met his eyes, because I was sick of him staking his claim. If I wanted to be close to Greta, I sure as fuck wouldn't let a dog stop me. His teeth flashed but I didn't avert my eyes and took another step closer.

He stood but didn't attack. With a low grumble he turned and walked over to his bed where he curled up beside Momo.

"You don't need that."

Greta motioned at my gun. With a nod, I put it back into my hip holster. She leaned her hip against the kitchen island, regarding me.

"I'm actually hungry," I said, nodding toward the steaming red chili.

Greta took out bowls and scooped generous portions into them before she carried them over to a rustic wood table around the corner. Floor to ceiling windows granted us a view of the paddocks. Greta motioned at the wooden bench and I sank down.

She sat down across from me and handed me a spoon. "I hope you like it. I made it with soy granules to imitate meat."

I took a spoonful. "It's good."

Her face lit up, and she ate a bite herself.

"What is this place?" I asked quietly as I watched her enjoy her food with a pleased expression.

"It's a safe haven for abused animals. It's still only in its beginning. I want to add more stables and a house where dogs can live in a pack, and I need a house for cats." She smiled embarrassedly.

"My best friend used to live in a place like this with his family."

"My cousin."

I nodded.

"Not anymore?"

"He has his own place now." I didn't mention Sara, it would have only brought attention to my own wife, and I had no intention to talk about Sara and Maximus anyway.

Instead, we talked about the farm as we sat across from each other, enjoying Greta's cooking. "My sister and her husband have two dogs as well," I said, nodding toward Bear.

"Really?"

"From a shelter."

"That's wonderful."

My eyes were drawn to another dog bed I hadn't noticed before where a black and white dog slept soundly. It's hind-legs and tail were bandaged. "The dog you saved?"

She nodded, compassion filling her face. "Dotty. She's sleeping a lot because of the medication but I think she's on the mend."

I didn't follow her gaze to the broken creature because I couldn't take my eyes away from her face.

Sitting like that with a woman and talking felt foreign, but at the same time right in a profound way I couldn't quite figure out and I knew it wouldn't ever be like this with any other woman, especially not Cressida. I'd either have ulterior motives or try to escape the situation as fast as possible. With Greta I was content just being close to her and hearing her take on things, which was so unique, positive and inherently kind that it felt even more foreign than our situation in itself. That didn't mean that I wouldn't have liked to kiss her, to touch her. Fuck, to do so many things to her, but right now, I was content. I couldn't remember the last time I'd just been content, without my mind running a hundred miles an hour thinking about all

the problems ahead.

This moment here was what my parents shared. It was what I'd never hoped to have, and now, with Greta, for a fleeting moment, I experienced it. But this couldn't last.

Anger at myself rose up like a flash flood. I put the spoon down. "I'm not here to chat and eat."

Greta jumped at the sudden change in my tone. She put her own spoon down. "Why are you here then?"

Fuck. If I knew why. "Greta, our families are at war."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

I smiled bitterly. "Your brother and cousins kidnapped my aunt and cousin. Isa still has nightmares."

Greta lowered her gaze, her lips thinning. "I know it was wrong. But you attacked us first. Kiara had a concussion."

"It was a mistake," I admitted. I wasn't sure why I said it. Only Dad knew what I thought of our failed ambush.

Greta looked up in surprise. "Thank you for saying this. I didn't think you would. I know men like you have trouble admitting to faults."

"You're welcome," I said in a strangely gruff tone.

I stretched out my hand on the table, my palm upward and Greta put her hand in mine without hesitation. I closed my fingers. How could this feel so fucking perfect when it was betrayal in so many ways?

She swallowed thickly. "Do you want me to show you around?"

I wanted many things, but not that.

Greta's eyes darted down to my lips as if she could read my thoughts on my face. She looked away, her brows snatching together.

"Are you often alone out here?"

"This is actually the first time. It was a hard fight to get this far. But I'm a good shot. I beat Alessio and Massimo at skeet shooting."

My eyebrows rose. "Really?"

She gave me an indignant look. "Really. It's a sport, which was why I agreed to take lessons, and once Dad saw how good I was he allowed me more freedom. I could defend myself if the need arose."

"But you wouldn't be shooting at clay pigeons."

"That was Nino's and Dad's argument until two days ago. Then they realized I was capable of violence," she said in a strangled tone.

"It's not the same."

She shrugged. “Nobody’s going to attack because only few people know about this place.”

“And one of them is part of an enemy family.”

“But you’re not going to use it to hurt me.”

“No.”

We looked at each other and the pull was so strong I wanted to tug her across the table to claim a kiss.

“Let’s go outside and sit on the swing for a bit,” she said, not waiting for my reply to get up.

I rose and moved toward her. As we headed outside, I put my hand on the small of her back without thinking about it. I’d never done something like that and had always wondered why Dad did it with Mom. She gifted me with a smile that lit up her entire face and even filled her eyes with a beautiful spark.

She sank down on the swing and pulled her legs up to her chest. I sank down beside Greta, causing the swing to finally move. She stared off toward the grazing horses.

I did the same, and the last bit of tension slipped away.

At some point, our hands moved closer together and Greta’s fingers brushed mine until we linked fingers once more. I angled my body toward her and suddenly our faces were very close. I cupped her cheek, ignoring the annoying gleaming of my ring and then I kissed her. A soothing, gentle kiss because Greta had been through a lot, that quickly became more heated. Her soft moans, her sweet taste, the playful way her tongue responded to mine, it all drove me higher and higher. I guided Greta to the cushions, and half covered her with my body. She tensed and I pulled back, searching her face for a sign that I’d crossed a line I had no business crossing.

Greta looked overwhelmed and I began to push up but she quickly cupped my face and raised her head for another kiss. “Stay. I was just surprised. I want this.”

I lowered myself once more and found her mouth for a deep kiss. Soon the unrelenting late afternoon sun wasn’t why I was sweating. “Let’s go inside,” she whispered.

I picked her up without a word and carried her into the house. She pointed at an assortment of cushions and patchwork blankets in front of a fireplace. Instead of logs, fake candles gave off a cozy light.

I put her down and followed suit, pulling her against me once more, my

lips finding hers for another, even deeper kiss. I lowered my hand briefly to slide the ring off and put it down on the floor somewhere before I pressed my palm to Greta's cheek again and deepened the kiss.

Greta was curled into me, her skirt ridden up because our legs were scissoring, her hot center pressed tantalizingly against my upper thigh. I was so hard it was painful. I pulled away to regard Greta as I allowed my knuckles to trace her cheek, then her throat and collarbone. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath the knit crop top and I could see the outline of her nipples pressing against the material. Greta locked gazes with me and reached for the thin strap of her top that had slid down to her arm. Her fingers were shaking slightly when she hooked them in the strap and dragged it further down. I watched mesmerized as the top peeled away from her left breast, revealing a rust-colored, small nipple and the gentle swell of her breast.

I could tell she was trying to find words but I knew what she wanted without her telling me. I leaned down and covered her nipple with my mouth, allowing my tongue to discover its texture and taste.

Greta pressed her pussy even tighter against my thigh as I continued my discovery of her nub. She cupped the back of my head as I sucked more of her breast into my mouth then stroked along the gentle crease beneath it with my tongue only to welcome her nipple back into my mouth. I closed my eyes as I tasted her, focusing on Greta's low breathing, on the clenching of her legs against my thigh.

"Amo," she whispered urgently, letting her arms fall to her sides, almost as if she was overwhelmed by her body's reaction to my ministrations.

I let up and gently untangled myself to give her some time to breathe. She gave me an embarrassed smile as she lay beneath me with spread arms, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Where's the bathroom? I need to gather myself and I think you need a bit time to yourself as well."

She pointed at a door to our right. I stood and quickly went there. Once inside I splashed some water in my face then gripped the sink for a few deep breaths. I straightened. My shirt stuck to my skin but at least my cock had calmed down enough that it wasn't digging into my pants anymore. Raking a hand through my hair, I tried to figure out what to do next. That I'd come here was already a very bad idea. Though that didn't even begin to cover the number of problems this meeting would cause if someone found out. But now that I was here, I didn't want to hold back, not if Greta didn't want me to.

I returned to the living room and paused at what I saw. Greta sat cross-legged, one side of her top still pulled down and she stared down at my ring that she held in her palm.

I should have left the ring at home in New York.

I walked over to her and sank down beside her. She still wasn't looking at me. Seeing her hold my ring, I wished she would have said yes to me a year ago.

"Cressida doesn't care about me. The only thing she cares about is the status a marriage to me brings her. I'm a means to an end, not the goal. We can't stand each other."

Suddenly she stood, her expression guilt-ridden. "I shouldn't have called you. I don't know what got into me. I promised myself to forget you."

I pushed onto my knees and gripped her hips, peering up at her. "I knew I'd never manage to forget you and I thought about you every single day. You won't believe how often I considered leaving New York and kidnapping you from Las Vegas so we could live somewhere far away. Just us."

"Just us," she whispered reverently then her smile turned sad. "But it's not just us. We both have people we don't want to leave behind and you have your responsibilities to the Famiglia and I have my animals."

"I regret every moment I'm not with you." The words left my mouth without thinking, but I immediately knew I meant them. It was why I hadn't hesitated to come here. The prospect of seeing Greta again had filled me with more joy and hope than I'd experienced in a very long time.

Greta stepped closer and touched my head with both her hands. I leaned my forehead against the bare skin of her sternum, my eyes closing. Her fingers raked through my hair gently, her nails scraping over my scalp in a way that almost made me want to purr. One of her hands traced the back of my head then stroked along my neck. Her touch was gentle, but left fire in its wake. My face slid lower and I let out a low breath against her belly, and Greta's body under me twitched. I brought my palms up from her hips to her naked waist, feeling her goosebumps as I slid my head even lower until my rough cheek rested against the silky skin of her belly and it felt like paradise. Her vanilla scent enveloped me. I opened my eyes and peered at Greta's skin right before me. After a while of her stroking my neck and my thumbs stroking her waist, a warm, heady scent wafted into my nose.

At first I was sure my mind was playing tricks on me. I drew in an even deeper breath, my head tilted further down and the note hit me again, even

stronger. I released a harsh breath, causing Greta to suck in her belly in a soft exhale. “Your breath against my skin...” she whispered, then trailed off.

I lifted my head, searching her eyes.

They were trusting and warm. “It feels good.”

I pressed my head against her belly once more, desire flooding my veins. I took her words as encouragement and pressed a feather-soft kiss to her belly button.

“I’ve never felt this way, Amo,” Greta admitted.

I had a feeling I knew what she meant and it was like fuel for my desire. “Aroused?”

Her fingers on my neck tightened and a new ripple of goosebumps overcame her body. I held her gaze, needing to see her face when she replied.

Her cheeks turned pink at her admittance, and if the heat of her belly was any indication, her body was aflame with desire. “It’s wrong of me to desire you, isn’t it.”

“Is it?” I rasped. In this moment I didn’t care if I committed a sin—fuck, sinning was in my nature—if it was wrong. I wanted the woman before me. I wanted nothing else.

I could see the confusion on her face. Maybe she didn’t realize how her body was responding to me, or maybe she was scared of her own reaction.

“Right now, right here, it’s only us. This is our moment. Pretend the world ends tomorrow.”

Greta opened her mouth, her expression argumentative.

“Pretend,” I murmured, licking along the waistband of her skirt. Greta’s fingers against my neck flexed.

“If tonight was my last night, I’d want to spend it with you,” Greta said.

I wrapped my arms around her hips, and buried my face against her lower belly, my lips practically at level with her pussy.

I drew in another deep breath and the intensity of her scent would have brought me to my knees if I weren’t already kneeling. “Greta,” I rasped. “Will you let me pull down your skirt?”

“Yes”, came her instant reply. I moved my head back a few inches before I hooked my fingers in her waistband and tugged it down. It slid over her slightly curved hips, down her slim legs, leaving her in white lace hipster panties and her crop top. I drank her in, the small gap between her thighs that accentuated her mound even more.

I could see soft curls pressing against the lace of her hipster panties and

the lace against her pussy was soaked, so it stuck to her lips and was wedged in her slit. It was such a beautiful sight. I swallowed thickly. Closing my eyes, I breathed her in. She was so lovely and so wet, I was nearing insanity.

When I opened my eyes, Greta was watching me with worry.

I gave her a smile. "Can I pull down your panties as well?"

"Yes please."

Please. Fucking please. As if she had to beg me to lay her bare. When the tiny piece of lace fluttered to her feet, I allowed myself to take her in. She had a triangle of gentle, black curls crowning perfectly shaped lips. Her little nub was still well hidden but I knew I'd make it peek out soon if Greta only let me. The idea that I might be buried with my face in Greta's pussy soon was almost enough to make me combust in my fucking pants. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt like this. Sex had been a bothersome necessity for a while. With Greta it almost felt as if I was a fumbling virgin, which couldn't be further from the truth. Greta stroked along my arm, bringing my attention back to her.

I saw how overwhelmed she was by the situation and so I reined myself in. Tonight my own desires would take a backseat.

I'd waited for this moment for too long. I'd enjoy every second of it. This moment belonged to us. Maybe the world didn't end, but we didn't know if and when we'd be able to see each other again. I needed to make tonight count, to give Greta memories she'd carry with herself all her life. Memories that would carry me through the darkness too. I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her mound. I gently guided her back until she sank down on the wide armchair. I kissed her left then her right knee before I met her gaze. Trust and need. I got the latter, not the first.

"Open up for me."

She elegantly raised her legs and draped them over the arm rests. With her legs parted widely, she offered me a breathtaking view of herself. "I won't ever forget this moment," I growled.

"Me neither."

"I'll make it unforgettable for you."

Chapter *Twenty-One*



Amo regarded me with a heated look I could feel deep in my belly. I wasn't shy about my body, but I'd never been this exposed in front of another person. Still, Amo's amazed and hungry expression gave me confidence to stay like I was, with my legs opened wide, showing Amo that I trusted him and was ready to give myself to him, if only for tonight.

My cheeks heated when Amo moved between my legs, his strong shoulders flexing. He ran his knuckles along the underside of my thighs, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the hollow of my ankle, and more heat washed over me. Slowly he kissed his way up my thigh then the crease between my ass cheek and thigh before he drew in another deep breath. I'd never thought he'd be this into my scent. Even I could smell my arousal. He leaned his stubbled cheeks against my inner thigh and began to rub his thumb very lightly over my outer labia, back and forth, before he slid between them to do the same to my more sensitive inner lips. His caress quickly had me breathless and aching to be touched at my pounding clit. As if he could sense it, he began to lightly brush my clit every time he stroked along my folds. I grasped the armrest in a tight grip, then I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by

the flood of sensations. Amo's touch, my body's reaction to it, Amo's musky scent, my own aroused scent. I needed to black out one sense to stay in control. Amo brushed a kiss against my inner thigh and now his thumb focused on my clit, drawing small circles on it.

"There," he rumbled. "Good."

I bit my lip at the appraisal in his voice and opened my eyes, needing to see him. His eyes were focused on his thumb that was still teasing my clit.

"Not hiding anymore. Just a bit more," he rasped with a smile that sent a pleased shiver through my body.

He leaned down and I held my breath as he parted his lips and lightly nudged my clit with the tip of his tongue.

I moaned, loving this new sensation. Amo's finger had been soft and gentle, but his tongue was even softer and hot and wet, entirely different. He gently nudged my clit with his tip, until I could feel a rush of more heat and blood. Everything got puffier between my legs. "Good," Amo repeated and then his lips cupped my clit and I shut my eyes briefly to come to terms with the throbbing spreading through my body at every tug of Amo's skilled lips.

"Greta," Amo murmured before his mouth cupped my nub once more. I gazed down at him.

His eyes held hunger and tenderness. "Watch."

I couldn't have looked away anyway, fascinated and aroused by the sight. Amo was gorgeous. Thick black hair, muscular shoulders, bulging biceps. So much strength and power. He worshipped me with his mouth. He closed his eyes, as his tongue gently caressed my sensitive folds. He looked pleased, almost reverent.

I panted softly and stroked his hair, needing to touch him, to caress him, so grateful for the gentle attention he gifted me with. Amo was a powerful, strong man, and my body reacted to the sight of him between my thighs with overwhelming arousal. His tongue teased my small nub and I whimpered. "Amo."

He opened his eyes but kept lavishing my clit with the softest circles. My body clenched, my insides tightening. "Amo," I whimpered again. "I think I'm going to..." I whimpered again, overwhelmed as his mouth guided me higher.

"I know, Greta," he rasped. I wondered how he knew but I couldn't voice the question. He dipped lower, to my opening and groaned, his eyelashes fluttering as he focused his attention there. The sensation wasn't as blinding,

it was a more sensual, a deeper feeling. I rolled my hips almost desperately.

“I want this to last forever,” I whispered, because this felt so wondrous, not only because my body was aflame but because of the look on Amo’s face, as if he honestly enjoyed it, as if he couldn’t imagine a better place than between my thighs.

Amo pulled back and I almost wept. “I’m going to eat you as often as you want. No need to hold back. Come for me.”

“Okay,” I breathed. He watched me as his tongue found my nub again. He fluttered gently over it and my mouth fell open, my eyes widened from the intensity of the sensation, from the look in Amo’s eyes. Possessive and pleased and tender. I didn’t look away as I gasped and whimpered, my body clenching. Amo wanted to see me. He deserved to see how he made me feel, how wonderful his ministrations were.

I cried out his name and he smiled against me as he kept up the gentle attention, but he slowed.



Greta shuddered, half lidded eyes full of gratefulness and wonder on me. I dragged my tongue down, needing to taste the proof of her arousal. She was wet and soft, and so fucking beautiful. I stroked my tongue along her opening, licking up her juices. She shuddered with a soft moan. Keeping my eyes on her, I dipped my tongue into her once more, teasing her with only the tip. My fingers stroked through the patch of dark hair to her swollen clit. Carefully I swiped my thumb over the pink nub, spreading her wetness.

Greta’s eyes widened and she jerked. I pulled away a couple of inches and rasped against her swollen flesh. “Too much?”

Greta hesitated, biting her lower lip. I kept circling her clit gently then

leaned up and closed my lips around it. I suckled lightly and Greta let out another soft moan. "Did you like that?"

"Yes," she whispered.

I suckled and caressed her softly for several minutes, pulling back whenever she came close to release and licking up her arousal. Greta was completely relaxed and her moans rang out low and breathless. Giving her pleasure like that was the best experience I could imagine. She was allowing me to do this, completely letting loose. She didn't hide her arousal from me. And when she arched up with a cry as I suckled that little nub between my lips, her toes pointed as if she was about to dance ballet, I drank the sight in.

Her hips bucked and her pussy spasmed deliciously against my mouth.

Eventually the tension slid away and she sat up with a sated smile, stroking my hair, and I smiled hungrily up at her as I lapped up every trace of her release. She watched me with fascination and gratefulness. I pulled back and pecked her clit before I cupped her face and pulled her in for a deep kiss. When I drew back, she licked her lips with a small frown, tasting herself.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes almost feverish. This had to be a lot for her to take in.

"I want to do the same for you," she whispered. I pushed a bit higher, bracing myself on the remaining armrest and kissed her again.

A phone rang, tearing us out of our own world, and Greta gave me an apologetic smile. I leaned back, so Greta could reach the phone that rested on a small side table beside the armchair. "Nevio," she said. "Video call."

I stood and stepped back, trying to rearrange my cock, but it was too hard. Greta only quickly pushed her strap back on her shoulder before she took the call. I assumed if she took too much time to answer his call, he'd suspect something was wrong and come here to protect her.

With the camera directed at her flushed face, she spoke up. "Hey Nevio, your call is early."

"We're heading out early this evening."

Just hearing his voice, the hairs on my neck rose, and my business mind jumped into action. Where were they heading? Could I ambush them?

"You look sick. You're all sweaty."

Greta gave a small laugh and outside of the camera's view she lowered her legs from the armrest but it gave me a kick imagining how Nevio would completely lose his mind if he knew what was going on here. "I'm fine. It's just really hot in here and I had to carry Dotty outside to pee."

“So you’re fine? I know you said you wanted to be alone to process what happened, but I can come over with Massimo and Alessio, and we can have fun together.”

“Nothing we can do out here is something you consider fun.”

“Touché. But I’d do it for you.”

I couldn’t believe how gentle his voice could be. Was this really the same violent, crazy madman I knew? But I supposed my voice changed too when I talked to Greta. What was it about this girl that made violent creatures, animals and humans alike, become docile?

Greta yawned.

“Already tired?”

I smirked. Two orgasms must have exhausted her. It was only seventy-three after all.

“I didn’t sleep well these last two nights.”

“Then go to bed and stop thinking about the asshole. He’s on me, I told you,” Nevio said. “And tomorrow you come back home. Your animals can do without you.”

Greta shook her head with a small smile. “I’ll be back the day after when Jill’s going to be back to feed the animals.”

“That whore shouldn’t have gone on a trip in the first place.”

Greta’s face flashed with disapproval. “She’s trying to reconcile with her father before he dies. And don’t call her that.”

“She is a whore. She worked in our whorehouse for two decades before you made her your zookeeper.”

“Nevio.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll have to head out now.”

“Be careful.”

I almost choked on a laugh.

They finally hung up. Greta really looked tired. She pushed to her feet, still naked from the waist down. She bit her lip shyly, obviously unsure what to do now. “You do look tired,” I said with a small smile.

She came over slowly and stopped right in front of me. “But I said I’d take care of you.”

I wanted nothing more but her eyelids were drooping and I couldn’t imagine her being into it after having talked to Nevio.

“Let’s get some sleep and maybe we have some time tomorrow.”

She held out her hand and I took it, letting her lead me toward her

bedroom on the ground floor. Her dogs trotted after us and Bear curled up on a huge cushion in the corner but Momo seemed to have every intention to sleep in bed with us. Upon seeing my face, Greta smiled sheepishly. "I don't usually share my bed with someone so they're used to sleeping there."

I really didn't like the idea of being woken by a dog tongue in my face or somewhere else. "If I turn around in sleep, I could bury Momo under me. Trust me, it won't survive that."

That seemed to convince Greta. She picked up the ankle-biter and put it into a fluffy dog bed beside the huge cushion. As she did, she bent forward and gave me a stunning view of her ass and pussy.

I took a deep breath, my cock waking up again. She motioned at the door. "There's a small bathroom if you want to get ready for bed. I'll grab Dotty in the meantime."

I raised my eyebrows.

"She can't walk yet."

I followed Greta back into the living area where the last dog was still curled up in the dog bed.

"She'll be too heavy," I said.

"I've carried her before," Greta said firmly. "She doesn't trust men so you can't carry her. I don't want to cause her additional distress in the current situation."

I watched as Greta picked up the dog and straightened with it carefully draped over her arms. The dog hung trustfully in her grip and I watched as she carried it outside for a pee before she picked it up again and carried it into the bedroom where she put it down on another big cushion. She patted its head gently and whispered something in its ear.

With my overnight bag I went into the bathroom to give Greta a bit of privacy. It was small, only a sink, toilet and shower cubicle, no luxuries whatsoever. I put on pajama bottoms and nothing else. It was too hot. When I emerged from the bathroom, Greta sat cross-legged on her bed, her hair up in a messy bun and she was dressed in a loose fitting white nightgown with thin straps. Against her tanned skin and dark hair the fabric looked marvelous. She scooted off the bed then walked past me into the bathroom. "Make yourself comfortable on the bed."

I shook my head at the absurdity then stretched out on the bed. I would have slept on the sofa or fucking floor if Greta had asked me to, but that she wanted me in her bed... I ran a hand over my face and released a deep breath

before I opened my eyes again. Bear was eyeing me in a way that reminded me of Nevio, as if he'd like to bite a big chunk out of me. I knew which part. Dotty barely dared to look my way, obviously terrified.

Greta returned a couple of minutes later.

She gave me a shy smile then came over to me and sank down on the bed. "Are you okay with this?"

I tried to determine what she meant, with her being so close, with her dark eyes putting me on the spot in a way I couldn't quite explain, it was difficult to catch a clear thought. "Okay, with what?" I rumbled, then cleared my throat.

"Sharing a bed. I could sleep on the sofa. It's too short for you but I wouldn't mind if you're not comfortable with me in a bed."

"I think I should be the one asking you that, and you definitely won't be moving to the sofa because of me."

"I think I'll be fine with you in a bed. Your presence doesn't bother me like other people do. I like having you around."

"You don't have to worry about me. You know I'm experienced."

She tilted her head in an assessing way. "Oh, I know that you've had sex with many women."

She said it in a non-judgmental way and still I felt almost guilty. How did that even make sense?

"But that you're comfortable having sex with someone doesn't mean you're comfortable being vulnerable around them when you sleep. Nevio has been with many girls but he'd never share a bed with them. Of course, he's not *with* any of them. You have Cressida."

Her voice had become very quiet and she looked away, her arms wrapped loosely around her shins, her feet stretched in a very ballet-dancer way so only her tiptoes touched the mattress.

A thick strand had fallen out of her messy bun and hid half of her face from me. Sitting up, I reached out and gently brushed it behind her ear.

She tilted her head toward me.

"I don't share a bed with Cressida. I rarely even sleep under the same roof with her. I have my old apartment where I'm spending most of the time. I see her maybe once or twice a week, and sleep with her far less than that."

I wanted to be honest with her. I didn't want to have any secrets from Greta. That would have felt like a breach of her trust.

"And she doesn't mind?"

“As long as she’s got my credit card and my last name, she doesn’t care.”

“I would want to share a bed with you if you were mine. I would miss you, I do miss you, even though you’re not mine.”

I cupped her neck and gently pulled her down to me for a kiss. Greta snuggled up to me, her petite body pressing against mine in the most perfect way. I didn’t deepen the kiss, neither did Greta. I was content being with her in this innocent way, our lips lightly brushing. Eventually Greta fell asleep in my arms, her cheek resting on my bicep.

I watched her for a long time before I turned off the lights. Greta had drawn the black-out curtains so it was dark in the room though sunset was still ten minutes away.

My phone lit up with messages, but I ignored them.

I didn’t want anything to tear me out of this. This dream. I didn’t want morning to come, maybe that was why I hesitated to allow my body to rest.

Tomorrow I’d be flying back home even if it felt like my heart was slowly making itself at home somewhere else. New York was my home, had always been. But Greta...Greta, she kept my heart with her in Las Vegas.

Chapter *Twenty-Two*



Anno

I woke with Greta still in my arms, our legs entwined, her cheek on my chest. Her breathing was even and relaxed. The soft snoring of Bear filled the room. I carefully untangled Greta from me and sat up. She didn't stir, too deep asleep. Last night must have really knocked her out. I couldn't help but smile at the memory of eating Greta out like a beautiful treat and giving her multiple orgasms. My morning rod got even harder.

Grabbing my gun from the nightstand, I slipped out of bed. I had noticed it last night too but now I really looked at the emergency buttons all over the place. One behind the bedside table. One next to the bathroom door. I had a feeling that there would be a door to a panic room somewhere in this room as well. I strolled toward the wardrobe and opened it. Inside I found an automatic steel door in the floor. Good. I had been surprised when Greta had invited me here. But I'd never doubted that even out here she'd be protected. The fence and the two gates had been top-notch security too. Not to mention that the Falcone mansion was probably only a five to ten minutes helicopter ride away.

In the bathroom, I put my gun down on the washstand before I slipped

into the shower. It took up an entire wall so even I had enough room to shower in there. A sound caught my attention and I opened the shower to reach for my gun when Greta appeared in the doorway.

I turned off the water and got out of the shower. Greta handed me a fluffy towel before she leaned in the doorway with a look of curiosity on her face as I began to dry myself off. "Good morning," I said roughly.

"Morning," she whispered. When my body was dry, I stayed where I was, giving her the time to figure out whatever it was she needed to figure out. She approached me slowly, scanning me from head to toe once more but her gaze caught on my cock. "I've never seen a man like this."

It took me a moment to know what she meant and then my cock filled with even more blood than it already had under her scrutiny. She stopped right before me.

She peered up at me. "Can I touch you?"

I stifled a laugh. Did she really have to ask? I was burning up to be touched by her. All of my fantasies had revolved around that and around worshipping every inch of her gorgeous body.

"You can do whatever you want," I said roughly.

"I want to touch you."

I nodded because there was nothing I wanted more.

She pressed her palms flat against my chest then slowly moved them lower, mapping my abs before she halted and her gaze darted up to my chest. She moved her palms higher once more and brushed my nipples with her fingertips.

Fuck. My cock filled with more blood, as a wave of desire zapped through my body.

"I've always wondered if men liked to be touched at their nipples. If it's a sensual place for them."

"I never thought it was for me," I rasped as Greta kept stroking my chest.

"I suppose most men focus on their penis. I can't speak for all women but my nipples are a very sensual zone. I feel it everywhere if you touch me there."

I'd take extra care of her lovely nubs later.

She bit her lip. "I'm talking too much when I'm nervous."

"You're fine," I said. "And you don't need to be nervous."

I wasn't sure if Greta heard what I'd said, because she was focused on my cock once more. She trailed her hands down my stomach, her fingers

following the trail of dark hair going down to my erection. She began to trace the vein pumping blood into my cock from the base to the tip. I swallowed a moan, not wanting to interrupt Greta's intense focus. Her fingers circled my tip then stroked along the bottom of it up to the point where a drop of pure lust had gathered. She picked it up with the pad of her index finger before she brought it to her mouth and tasted it.

"Greta," I groaned. It cost me every ounce of restraint not to pull her against me, ravage her mouth and then make her mine.

Mine.

Mine. Fuck it.

She ignored me, and trailed her fingers down to my balls, cupping them. She began to massage them gently then peered up at me. "Do you like that?"

"I do."

My voice was raw and grumbly.

"Hmm." Greta nodded, brows puckering as if she was making a mental note. She got down on her knees but our height difference was too big. I leaned back against the washstand and got in a wide stance until my cock was at eyelevel with Greta. I wasn't sure what she was going to do and my brain was too frazzled to think too much anyway. With Greta you could never be sure. Maybe she was just going to stare at my cock and really take it in, but I hoped she'd discover me with her lips.

Greta fondled my balls again and brought her face closer to my cock. To my confusion she tilted her head to the side and then her tongue darted out and joined her fingers on my balls before she parted her mouth and sucked part of my ball into her mouth while her nimble fingers played with the other.

"Fuck," I gritted out, my balls jerking. I squeezed my cock hard in warning once, still shellshocked over Greta's move and so fucking turned on, I was worried I'd spill my cum on her black crown soon. Luckily my cock got the warning and calmed the fuck down.

Greta peered up at me with interest but she kept licking and sucking my balls. Her fingers soon moved on to my thighs and ass, raking her fingernails along my skin in the most tantalizing way. She let up, moving a bit higher, her lips grazing the base of my cock.

"Do you like it?"

I gave a terse nod.

"I didn't want to start with the obvious spot. That's like a man who starts with a woman's clitoris instead of working his way toward it, right?"

I didn't have the capacity to have a conversation. "You're perfect."

She gave me a small, pleased smile before she looked back down to my cock. She parted her lips and cupped my tip with them, and static filled my head. Slowly, meticulously she worked my length into her mouth until my tip hit the back of her throat and she gagged. She sucked in a breath through her nose and tried to take me deeper. I gently stroked her hair. "You don't have to take me all the way." Very few could. I was too thick and long, and Greta only had me halfway so far. She pulled back and took a shaky breath, licking her lips. Frustration flickered on her face. "I can't do this properly yet. I guess it takes practice."

"Blowjobs are never proper. Do what feels right, what turns you on. Don't overthink it."

"I want to give you pleasure."

"Trust me, if you're turned on, I'm turned on."

"Okay," she said, and her approach changed. She was no longer thinking about technique, she was simply acting. Her tongue circled my tip, then the rim following my vein down to my base once more. She closed her eyes as she worked her lips back up again and slowly sucked me into her mouth. She established a slow, sensual rhythm, her cheeks hollowing every time she took me deep into her mouth. One of her palms fondled my balls while her other hand was curled around my cock, pumping in rhythm with her sucking. I clutched the washstand in a death grip as I watched Greta suck me off. Every time my cock parted her pouty lips and claimed her mouth inch by inch, a low groan escaped my lips.

Greta found a steady rhythm that drove me higher and higher. I cupped her head, stroking her silky hair. She cast her eyes up but didn't slow. I was losing control. It was a new experience. For me to orgasm I had to focus on it, which meant I could usually last for a long time but seeing Greta with my cock in her mouth completely rid me of control.

"Greta, I can't last much longer. You need to pull back."

She smiled around my cock but didn't pull back or slow. Maybe she didn't understand what I meant. Fuck. It was hard to focus. I just wanted to spill into her mouth but at the same time I didn't. "I'm going to come in your mouth. Pull back."

Greta gave a small shake of her head and I couldn't hold back anymore. My balls clenched, followed by my dick and then my orgasm raced through me. Greta kept sucking even as I came in her mouth, and swallowed around

my tip but still some of my cum dripped out and slid down her chin before it dropped on her chest. I groaned at the sight and my cock jerked with another load.

Greta tried to swallow it too but more of it dripped out and onto her chest, then slithered below her neckline. Even when my cock had stopped twitching, she circled my tip with her tongue until I couldn't take it anymore. She was so beautiful when she sucked my cock. I gently pushed her back until my cock slid out of her, still half erect.

Greta gave me a proud smile as I tried to catch my breath.

I shook my head. "You didn't have to swallow."

"I wanted to. You seemed to enjoy my taste yesterday."

I closed my eyes briefly for a few deep breaths. When I opened them, Greta stood before me, her chin and neckline still covered in my sperm.

She reached between her legs with a hint of curiosity. "I'm wet."

She held up her middle and index finger, which were glistening with her arousal.

"Let me," I said. I had to feel this for myself. I reached under her nightgown, gently slid between her pussy lips and rubbed my fingers along her slit. I didn't need to delve deep. Her pussy was sopping wet. If she'd worn panties, they would have been drenched with her lust.

"I didn't think giving you pleasure would have such a strong effect on me, but your body is an immense turn on. Seeing it already makes me feel very hot but touching and tasting you, is so much more intense."

I cupped her cheeks, kissed her harshly. Her direct innocence would be my death one day. With every unorthodox word out of her mouth she made me fall harder for her and I wasn't sure how to stop it. I pulled back, not even minding that I had my own cum on my chin from kissing her.

"Let's get you cleaned up and let me taste your pussy."

I reached for the hem of her nightgown and pulled it over Greta's head, then dropped it on the floor, drinking in Greta's beautiful body. Seeing my cum on her made me feel impossibly possessive. I wanted to stake my claim on her in every way I could, in every way I shouldn't.

I led Greta into the shower when loud neighing carried up through the window, followed by mows. Greta smiled apologetically. "I'll have to take care of the animals first. We don't have enough time. Maybe you can taste me later?"

I chuckled and kissed her sweetly, smiling against her mouth. "I'll taste

you whenever you want, just say the word.”

Fifteen minutes later, Greta and I were dressed and heading outside. Greta carried Dotty again and I was amazed at her strength. Maybe it was more determination than physical power. The sun was beating down on us in a typical Nevada way. Greta in a pale yellow summer dress and cowboy boots didn't mind the heat, but me in my shirt and jeans I was already sweating, though I wasn't even carrying the dog. She put it down in the shade beside the barn so it could relieve itself before it lay down in the airstream from one of the ventilators. Bear and Momo were running around eagerly. I helped Greta feed the horses with hay and the cows and pigs with a special mix before we opened the gates so they could rush out into the paddock. I was used to a different form of physical labor but had to say I didn't mind this either, maybe because Greta's enthusiasm was infectious.

Greta beamed while she watched her animals enjoy themselves. She got joy from their happiness and I from hers.

“How long have you had this place?”

“Only about a year. Dad built it for me a few weeks after your wedding.”

She rested her arms on the fence and put her chin down on them, letting her gaze glide over the area. “It still needs plenty of work so I can welcome more animals.”

“Why don't you live here all the time?”

She blinked up against the sun. “My family would miss me.”

I nodded. It was one of the reasons why she'd said no to me. “They could still see you, just not as often.” I wrapped my arms around her from behind and rested my chin atop of her head. This felt so natural and Greta released a small sigh. “Is this about the farm or us?”

I drew in a deep breath then kissed her neck. There wasn't us, not really. There was Cressida and me, which existed in the light, though its base was rotten and dark, and then there was Greta and me, bound to the shadows, though our bond was pure in a way I hadn't thought possible.

“Both.”

She nodded and swallowed. “Sometimes...sometimes I regret...” She shook her head with a breathless laugh. I knew what she wanted to say. She turned around in my embrace. “How much longer until you have to leave?”

I glanced at my watch. “Three hours.”

She nodded, wistfulness filling her eyes though I was still here.

“We should make every minute count not waste it on what if's,” I

murmured as I hoisted her up on the fence. “Would you like me to taste you now?”

She nodded simply. I got down on my knees, not caring about the dirt. I lifted Greta’s skirt, revealing white panties. I kissed my way around the edge before I kissed her pussy through them. Hooking a finger in the fabric, I dragged it aside, revealing Greta’s glistening center. With my thumbs I stroked along her puffy lips before I pushed them apart to reveal a swollen clit and her tight opening. Remembering her words from earlier, I ignored her clit and began to focus all my attention on her opening, stroking, nudging, circling until she was clinging desperately to the fence, her boots pressed into the middle bar to find hold.

“Amo,” she moaned, her fingers raking through my hair. “Kiss me.”

Leaving her pussy?

“That’s what I’m doing,” I rasped, though I knew what she meant. I dipped the tip of my tongue into her before I played with her labia to emphasize my statement.

“My lips,” she said with a small laugh.

I raised an eyebrow as I peered up at her and suckled her pussy lips.

She let out an indignant laugh. “My mouth.”

“Okay,” I said with a smirk. “Just give me a few more moments.” I circled her clit with my tongue then stroked along her slit, back and forth, teasing more lust out of her. She clenched her thighs shut, her fingers in my hair tightening as her pussy spasmed against my mouth. With her thighs caging me in, her scent hit me like a wrecking ball, making me desperate for more. She shuddered violently, clinging to me for balance as she enjoyed her orgasm.

I shoved to my feet and she immediately cupped my face and almost desperately pulled me in for a kiss. I wedged my hips between her thighs, parting her wide, my bulge pressing against her pussy. I didn’t care if I got her lust all over my clothes.

She let out a breathless giggle. “I wanted to come with you kissing me, that’s why I told you to kiss me.”

I brushed my lips over her ear. “We can still make that happen.”

Her arms came around my neck and she pressed even closer, kissing me almost desperately. I wrapped my arms around her, feeling her heart slamming against her ribs, the same erratic rhythm as my own. Our lips slowed and I closed my eyes, pressed my nose into the crook of her neck. We

stayed like this for a long time, wrapped up in each other. I tightened my hold on her, my palm stroking along her hair.

"I don't want this to end," I growled.

Greta let out a melancholic sigh, her arms loosening around me. After a moment, I allowed her to pull back.

The wistfulness in her eyes felt like a gut punch. "You have to fly back in two hours."

"I know. That's not what I mean. You said no when I asked you to marry me. But maybe you'll say yes to this."

"An affair?" Greta whispered.

I stroked her cheekbone, then her lips. "Not an affair. This is more. Fuck. I don't know what it is. It's what's left of what could have been. I don't care as long as I can keep seeing you, talking to you, kissing you."

"Behind Cressida's back."

"I can tell her there's someone else if it makes you feel better. I wouldn't tell her a name or anything of course. She doesn't think I'm faithful anyway. I wouldn't care if she was with someone else."

"That's not what marriage is about."

I laughed darkly. "I know."

"So we'd meet here whenever you can carve out some time and a good excuse?"

"I don't care where we meet, as long as we do."

Greta looked toward the two horses that were slowly trotting our way. One of them was very thin. Another creature she'd saved. "Normally I always want to do the right thing, but with you...I think I'll choose wrong."

I motioned at the animals all around us. "You're doing enough good already. Being with me won't undo the good of your existence."

Greta laughed. "That's not how it works. You can't collect bonus points so you can act wrong on occasion."

"I always do the wrong thing so I wouldn't know. Do you not want to see me again?"

Greta buried her face in my neck. "I miss you already. No, I can't bear the idea of not seeing you again. The last year without you has been hard, so much harder than I thought."

I breathed a sigh of relief and hugged her tightly again. I put my cheek down on the top of her head. We both didn't move. I wondered what went on in her head. Was she trying to come to terms with what we'd just decided. I

didn't bother. I'd given up on myself when it came to reason around Greta.

I wasn't sure how I could possibly make this work. How often could I disappear for a weekend to visit her? How long before someone would notice something? And then there was another thing. While I wasn't possessive at all when it came to Cressida, the mere idea of Greta being with anyone else made my blood boil.

"I know this is hypocritical of me, and definitely an asshole thing to say, but I can't share you, Greta. If we keep this up, I need you to be mine only. I don't want you near any other men."

Greta looked up and shrugged. "It seems like a one-sided deal, definitely a bit hypocritical, yes." She pursed her lips and I was sure she'd just give up on us entirely. I knew I had absolutely no right to ask faithfulness of her, not in our situation, but it would tear me apart if I saw her with someone else. I wanted her for myself. "I don't have any interest in other men, and I don't think that'll change."

"To be honest, I'd probably kill anyone who dares to touch you."

I was being deadly serious and she needed to understand just how obsessed I was with her.

"That's something Nevio would say and do."

I hated being compared to him but in this case, Greta had a point. I would turn into a raging madman if another man touched her. "Then you know how serious it is."

Greta kissed me. "I won't be with someone else." With our faces still close together, she whispered, "But I don't want you to be with anyone either...I mean..." She closed her eyes with an ironic smile. "I know you have to be with Cressida, but I don't want you to be with anyone else." She shook her head, her eyes still closed.

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes, her expression pained.

"I won't be with anyone else, and if I can avoid it, I'm not even going to be with Cressida."

"Oh Amo," Greta said in a desperate tone. "What kind of deal are we agreeing on here?"

"I don't care. I just don't care. I want you. I fucking need you in my life. This trip, it made me realize it. There wasn't a single night in the last twelve months that I didn't dream about you."

She nodded, but her despair remained. "What if this ends badly?"

“What if it doesn’t?”

She put her cheek against my chest. “How could it not?”

Chapter

Twenty-Three



When Amo drove off, I felt as if he'd taken a piece of my heart with him. I held onto a column of the porch, petting Bear's head who was pressed up to my leg as if he wanted to steady me. Momo sat on the last step, his nose twitching as he smelled the air. I sighed and turned away from the driveway. We hadn't made a new date to meet again. How long would it take before I saw him again? A few weeks? Months? Longer than that? Even just communicating with our cells would be difficult and risky. I couldn't put my life on pause until then but it felt a bit like a part of me would lie dormant until we met again. With a sigh, I picked up Dotty from the blanket she rested on and carried her down to her favorite patch of grass in the shade beside the house so she could relieve herself.

My phone and watch buzzed. I peered down. A car had pulled up to the gates. I opened the browser window to check the security cam. A foolish part of me hoped it was Amo but the logic side of my brain told me it was probably just Jill coming back early from her meeting with her father, but when Nevio's grinning face flashed up on the screen, I froze. He didn't wait for me to let him in. He had the code to overrule every security lock, just like

my father and uncles. The car pulled out of view of the camera. Soon the eerie red glow of the headlights of Nevio's all black, pimped Dodge Ram came into view. Nevio always had the headlights on, day or night, because the red glow freaked people out, especially because everyone in Vegas knew to whom the car belonged.

The car stopped in front of the porch and Nevio jumped out. My pulse sped up considering what would have happened if Nevio had arrived ten minutes before. He jogged over to me as Alessio and Massimo got out of the car.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, surprised.

Bear growled when Nevio lifted me off the ground. "We're picking you up."

I gripped his shoulders, getting dizzy from him spinning me around. When he put me back down, I said, "Jill's not here yet. I can't leave."

Nevio rolled his eyes. "The pigs can entertain themselves for a couple of hours." He leaned down to sniff at me. "Do you use a new perfume? I don't like it."

"I'm not wearing perfume." My insides cramped. Did I smell like Amo? Alessio regarded me closely while Massimo sank down on a step and lit up a cigarette.

"You have so much medical knowledge and yet you smoke," I said, hoping to distract Nevio from my scent.

Massimo glanced over his shoulder at me, one dark eyebrow slanting up. "Considering our lifestyle, I'm fairly certain lung cancer or one of the other smoke-related diseases won't be the cause of my death."

"Come on, Greta. Let's get back to the city."

"We'll have to take the dogs with us," I reminded him.

"We can put their transport cages up on the truck bed."

"But you have to drive carefully."

Nevio gave me an exasperated look. "Fine."

I sent Jill a text that I'd be leaving the farm now and when she answered that she was already on her way and would be there in thirty minutes, I began to pack everything.

Fifteen minutes later, we were driving away from the farm. This place had always meant a lot to me, but now that it was also connected to Amo, it became even more special.

"I have a surprise for you," Nevio said after a while, drumming excitedly

on the steering wheel.

I gave him a wary look. That could mean everything and his nervous energy definitely gave reason for worry.

“She’s worried,” Alessio said from the seat on my right.

“As she should be when Nevio is excited about something,” Massimo said from where he lounged on the backseat. I resisted the urge to tell him about his chances of surviving a crash when he wasn’t buckled up. He knew, and would only give me the same answer as with the smoking.

“I was looking for something to cheer you up and one of our contacts gave me a tip about a breeding farm for these handbag dogs.”

“Chihuahuas?”

“Bless you,” said Massimo dryly.

I rolled my eyes at him.

“Whatever,” Nevio said. “We’re heading there now. You’re going to save a few dogs and we’re going to see if we can find some entertainment with the breeders.”



“Why do humans do this?” I whispered with a shake of my head, my heart filling with pity for the poor creature in my arms. We were on our way back from taking about thirty older dogs and forty puppies, some only a few days old, to a retired lady and her husband I had cooperated with in the past. They had a dog sanctuary that kept the dogs for as long as it took to give them a forever home and never put them down unless they had serious health issues that couldn’t be treated. Dad had made it very clear that he wouldn’t tolerate me raising puppies in our mansion and with Dotty, Momo and Bear Dad was already at the edge of his dog tolerance, so I’d only picked one of the Chihuahuas for myself.

Nevio shrugged. “They think it’s cute to give them huge water heads and matchstick legs, and they call me twisted.”

“People want dogs but they don’t want the commitment of walks and conditioning. When these tiny dogs need to pee their owners stuff them in a cat toilet and when they don’t obey they carry them in their purse. It’s

convenient,” Massimo said matter-of-factly.

“It’s a dog, not a toy! It’s not meant to be convenient,” I whispered, feeling close to tears. “If they want a pet that doesn’t require walks or conditioning, then they can get a hamster or guineapigs.”

Massimo swayed his head from side to side, disagreeing. “I read an article that hamsters are the most abused pets. People stuff them into the tiniest cages because they’re cheap or give them to their children as toys.”

“The parents are probably glad that the kids torture the hamster instead of bothering them,” Alessio said with a shrug.

My chest tightened as I thought about all the pets everywhere that were mistreated because people saw them as toys or didn’t bother researching their needs.

“And guineapigs and bunnies probably don’t belong in these people’s hands either. Most of them are kept in solitary confinement though they are group animals and people stuff them into cages with bars as flooring so it’s easier to clean. I once saw a medieval prison that was kinder than those cages,” Massimo continued. Nevio parked the car in front of our mansion.

“Stop it,” I gritted out. “Stop it! I don’t want to hear anymore.”

Nevio turned around in his seat and touched my shoulder. “Not talking about it won’t stop it from happening.”

“I know. It’s selfish, but I can’t take it, not when I can’t do anything to stop it from happening.”

“You’re too good for this world, Greta.”

I shook my head. I lowered my head and kissed the dog’s too big head with the bulging eyes, deciding to call it Teacup. I’d do everything in my power to save as many animals as I could and give them a better life. I knew that wouldn’t make up for the wrong I was doing because my heart didn’t leave me another choice, but it made me feel a tiny bit better.



I drove straight to Cressida and my townhouse from the airport. It was our obligatory weekly date night and I was already running late.

Every fiber in my body revolted against the idea of spending time with her today. I unlocked the door and entered the house. I found Cressida in an armchair in the living room, typing on her phone.

“You’re late,” she said reproachfully.

“I’m here.”

She rose to her feet, already dressed in a fancy dress, high heels and expensive jewelry. When she came to a stop in front of me, she scanned my outfit. I’d changed clothes in the airport so I was in a white dress shirt and black pants. “Where’s your ring?” Cressida asked with a frown.

I looked down at my hand. It was bare, except for the fine white line that marked the place where the ring usually was.

I must have left it in Vegas. Damn it. If someone found it there, this would be the end. The wedding date was engraved inside the ring, and every Falcone would put two and two together and go on a vendetta. I had to call Greta as soon as possible and warn her.

“Amo!”

I focused on Cressida. “I must have lost it during the last torture session. I’ll go looking for it when I return to the warehouse.”

Cressida’s mouth pinched. “I don’t want to know what you do for work. It’s distasteful.”

I cocked a brow. “My distastefulness makes sure you always have the newest stuff from Louis Vuitton and Balenciaga.”

Cressida didn’t want to be reminded of my darkness. She wanted to pretend. Our whole marriage was pretend.

“I hope you don’t think I’ll have sex with you when you’re not even

wearing your ring.”

“I’m not here for sex,” I said matter-of-factly. “I’m here for our weekly play-pretend date night so people think we actually share some kind of bond.”

Anger flared up in her eyes. I wasn’t sure why this made her angry. It was the fucking truth, we both knew it.

She stepped closer and pressed her palm to my crotch. “You don’t want sex?”

I grasped her wrist. “Let go.”

She laughed as if this was some kind of game. I shoved her hand away. The idea of being intimate with her appalled me. Not because Cressida wasn’t an attractive woman. She was, from a solely physical viewpoint, but I didn’t desire her. And now that I’d been intimate with Greta, I wouldn’t touch another woman.

Fuck. I almost laughed at the irony.

“What man doesn’t want to have sex?”

“I want sex but not with you.”

She smiled harshly. “Then go to your whores. I don’t care. I have everything I desire.”

I gritted my teeth. Rage bubbled right under the surface. But Cressida was a woman and my wife, so I used every ounce of self-control I possessed and reined it in.

“So where are we going for dinner tonight? I hope you made a reservation at this new 3 Michelin star place in the Mandarin Oriental. It’s impossible to get a table if you don’t book at least six weeks in advance and then the slots fill within a minute. I told my friends you could get a table there whenever you want.”

“Of course,” I said. “We have a table from eight to ten.”

“They actually dared to squeeze us into a time slot? And you let them?”

I had actually asked for a slot. They would probably have given me the table for the entire night, even if that meant cancelling three bookings of other people that night. But the idea of spending more than two hours with Cressida, especially in public, when we had to pretend we had something to say to each other was absolutely unbearable. “I have work to do tonight. Two hours is enough for six courses.”

She didn’t say anything but her expression made it clear that she was very unhappy.

“Are you ready to go?” I asked. It was 7:45 and I wanted to get this over with.

Cressida gave me a challenging smile. “You know what? I don’t feel this outfit anymore. I’ll go change. I’m sure they won’t mind if we arrive late. Then they can just give us the table for the rest of the evening.”

“We’re leaving now,” I said in a low voice.

She met my gaze then lowered her eyes quickly and gave a shrug before she stalked past me toward the door. Outside she held out her hand and I took it even if my body revolted against it as I led her to my car, opened the door for her and then took my place behind the steering wheel.

Every second in Cressida’s company felt like my personal version of hell. I felt this even more now that I’d spent the night with Greta, my fucking wish for heaven.



When I drove through the gates of Greta’s animal sanctuary three weeks later, I felt as if I had hibernated and was slowly waking up. I’d been busy with work and only seen Cressida one more time in private after our very stiff date night and one time at dinner with her parents, which had been an even worse experience than being alone with my wife.

My mother had been picking up that something was different and had tried to question me during our weekly family dinner. And Marcella, she was a blood hound on a trail. She knew too much. It was a good thing that Maximus was wrapped up in his own problems or he would probably have joined forces with my sister to figure out what was going on.

I pulled up in front of the farmhouse. Greta was already waiting on the porch, leaning against a pillar. The lamp above her head cast an almost angelic glow on her face. It was already nearing midnight and pitch-black around us, apart from the distant eerie backlight of the city. This Friday had been busy with a meeting with the Corsicans so I hadn’t been able to catch an earlier flight.

I threw open the car door and prowled over to her. She wore a white satin nightgown with her obligatory cowboy boots and a too big checkered shirt thrown hazardously over her shoulders. She looked perfect.

I took all three steps onto the porch at once and lifted her off the ground before I claimed her lips for a desperate kiss. Bear jumped back with a low growl but I didn't give a fuck.

For a heartbeat Greta tensed before she melted in my embrace. Fuck, how could anything feel this perfect? It didn't make sense. I held onto her for a little longer, my nose in her hair. "I missed you."

What a weak thing to say, but this woman...I just couldn't stop thinking about her.

"I missed you too," she whispered against my throat before she pressed a gentle kiss to the spot. I let her down to her feet and regarded her face.

"What is it?" She touched her cheek curiously.

"Nothing," I said roughly. "Let me grab my bag." I jogged over to the car and grabbed the backpack with everything I needed for the two nights. Greta held out her hand and I grabbed it, letting her lead me inside her house, where she kicked off the boots before we headed toward the kitchen where she'd set up food.

"I made sandwiches and a salad because I thought you might be hungry." She motioned at the bowl and plate then turned to me.

I cupped her cheek, running my thumb over her soft skin. "I am," I agreed in a low voice.

She flushed, then bit her lower lip. "For food?"

I chuckled low in my throat. "Maybe later."

I hooked my thumbs under her shirt and slid it down her arms. It fluttered to the floor. Greta's nipples hardened under the silky fabric of her nightgown, their outline tantalizing. I leaned down for another kiss. "I want to taste you first. Is that all right?"

Her yes was hardly more than an exhale. Grabbing her waist, I lifted her onto the counter and pushed between her legs. I fused our lips once more and cupped her neck with one hand while my other stroked Greta's arm and shoulder lightly. Soon goosebumps covered her body and she hooked her legs around my hips, bringing us even closer. I trailed my fingertips over the outside of her thigh. Her fingers on my shoulders tightened, and she pushed against me even harder. I cupped her breast and pulled back from our kiss, leaving Greta's lips swollen and her face flushed. I lowered my gaze to watch my hand on Greta's breast. Her nipple became rock harder against my palm as I massaged it through the fabric. I hooked my index finger under the spaghetti strap and dragged it down until a perky nipple came into view. I

swiped my thumb over it then wetted the pad and repeated the motion. Greta's lips parted as she watched my hand the same way I did. I took her little bud between my thumb and forefinger, then twirled it gently back and forth before I began plugging a bit harder. Greta moaned and rocked her hips against mine. I continued my explorations of her pretty breasts for a while, until Greta was panting and my own arousal was very uncomfortable.

I cleared my throat then rasped, "Lift your hips." She did as I asked and I slid her nightgown down. She wore a white thong this time, a tiny piece of lace that clung to her pussy and was completely soaked. Stroking the insides of her thighs, I really drank in the sight of her, the outline of her slit, the way the string disappeared between two perfectly rounded ass globes, the soft contour of her pubic hair against the lace. It all turned me on like nothing else ever had.

I felt possessive and hungry. I felt as if I might go crazy if I didn't stake my claim on Greta in every way possible. And I also felt a little unhinged and desperate because this was something I wanted all the time but couldn't have. Fuck. I wasn't used to not getting what I want, and it made me want to prove she was mine even more.

"Kneel for me," I demanded.

She began to lower herself from the counter but I stopped her. Confusion flickered in her eyes.

"On the counter with your ass toward me."

She bit her lip again and she climbed up on the counter and got on her knees and hands, with her ass pointing teasingly at me.

I swallowed as I regarded the way her string wedged between her pussy lips in this position too.

"Amo?"

"You are too perfect for words." I touched her ass, my fingertips ghosting over the smooth skin then up her back, over the bumps of her spine then back down again. I slid my thumb under the string of the thong and slowly pulled at it until it slid out between her ass cheeks and pussy lips, drenched as if she'd taken a swim.

"Fuck, Greta. I want nothing more than to make you mine, than to bury myself to the hilt inside of you."

I hadn't meant to voice my thoughts like that, but seeing her in this position made me lose control.

Greta tensed then glanced over her shoulder at me, her brows puckered.

“Wouldn’t this be a very painful position for a first time?”

“I’m not going to take your virginity today and definitely not like this,” I growled, close to losing my mind entirely. If I ever took Greta’s innocence, which I shouldn’t even consider doing, I’d do it right. With her in my arms, in a cozy bed.

I didn’t allow myself to dwell on the thought.

“Okay,” she said simply. I kissed her left then her right ass cheek before I ran my thumb over the tantalizing crease, groaning at her arousal. My thumb glided under her thong, brushing her swollen folds then her opening. I pulled down her thong to her knees then lightly ran my fingertips over her pussy. I allowed my index finger to circle her opening then dipped only the very tip in. I exhaled at the sight. Shaking my head, I took a step back. “Turn around. I need to see your face.”

Greta elegantly turned until she faced me once more with her legs parted after she’d kicked off her thong as she sat on the kitchen counter. She regarded my face with quiet scrutiny. “Is everything okay?”

I chuckled bitterly and stepped up to her, my hands cupping her face. “Just trying to maintain control,” I murmured before I kissed her.

I could see the questions in her face but I intensified our kiss, distracting her busy mind. Soon Greta stroked my chest through my shirt. She began to open the buttons until she could part my shirt. With her short nails she teased my abs and chest. I gripped her wrists, kissed one then the other palm before I put her hands down on the counter. “Let’s ignore my need for tonight,” I urged. My lust for Greta had accumulated like a thunderous storm cloud over the last few weeks, and today it mingled with frustration and dark hunger, both of which had no place when I was intimate with Greta.

I ran my knuckles down her belly then stroked my index and middle finger along Greta’s pussy. Greta watched with half lidded eyes as I used my two fingers to part her folds so I could massage the sensitive inner part. My fingers glistened with Greta’s need. Soon Greta rocked her hips against my hand, her lips parted, expression tight with passion. I sped up, focusing more attention on her clit. It didn’t take long for Greta to lose herself to her orgasm under my ministrations and my mouth became dry when she threw her head back and moaned deep in her throat. I leaned forward, my lips brushing her skin, then parting. But I stopped myself in the last moment, my teeth already against her throat. I couldn’t mark Greta like that.

I moved back and our gazes locked.

There was so much I wanted to say but couldn't, wouldn't.

"More," Greta begged and I smirked, glad she distracted me from my stupidity. "More?" I asked quietly, my voice tight with arousal. I could probably come in my pants if I really focused. She gave a terse nod and I ran my middle finger over her slit, back and forth. She was so wet. "Greta, I want —"

Before I could tell her, I wanted to put my finger in her, she put her hand on mine and used light pressure. "Amo, I need...I don't know. I need..."

I knew what she needed. I kissed her gently then rubbed the pad of my middle finger over her opening before I pushed my tip into her.

She exhaled, her brows dipping as she looked down her body to where my fingertip was sliding in and out of her channel.

I was mesmerized as I worked my finger slowly deeper into Greta's tight opening. In and out, coating it with her lust. My tip slid in easily then I pushed until my first knuckle before I pulled out again. My finger glistened beautifully as I rubbed Greta's opening with my pad gently before I delved into her once more, this time until my second knuckle. Greta's pussy clenched around me and I looked up for the first time since I'd started fingering her to check her expression. She too was looking down at my finger inside of her, but a subtle tension dominated her mouth.

"Is it too uncomfortable?" I asked in a low voice, my finger still sliding in and out slowly.

"It's the good kind of discomfort."

I released a harsh breath and claimed her lips once more as I drove my middle finger all the way into her. She gasped against my mouth, her pussy clenching, her eyelids fluttered. I curled my finger, my thumb pressing against her clit and the tension left her body with a strong shudder and a loud moan as she came around me. My balls jerked. I hadn't expected her to come this quickly and it was like fuel for my already burning desire for her. She kissed me desperately, her hips rocking as I kept fingering her through her orgasm. Her arousal dripped down my finger and palm. I kept my finger inside of her possessively as we kissed and I rubbed her neck gently. Greta's cheeks were rosy and her eyes filled with a longing I understood too well.

"Now you," she said firmly. I didn't argue as she opened my fly and pushed down my pants and underwear. My cock sprang free, my tip coated with pre-cum.

"Do you want me to—"

“Use your hands,” I gritted out. I was teetering on the edge of control. If I fucked Greta’s mouth today, I’d probably lose my mind and fuck her pussy too, or spill my cum the second her lips touched my cock because I was so fucking horny.

Chapter *Twenty-Four*



I curled my fingers around the base of Amo's erection or as far as they would go. He was very long and thick, making me wonder how he'd fit inside of me. His fingers were long and thick for fingers too, which wasn't a surprise considering his tall frame, but his erection was on another level. I knew it would fit somehow. It was physically meant to fit, at least in general.

My thoughts quieted at the first low moan from Amo's lips. I loved the sound. I stroked up and down his silky length, brushing my thumb over the tip. I loved exploring him.

Soon Amo began pumping his hips and his hand closed over mine, increasing the pressure. I locked gazes with him, and sucked in a deep breath at the look of lust and possessiveness on his face. Both took hold of me and sank into my heart.

When Amo came with a shudder and groan, and kissed me harshly, I couldn't help but smile happily against his lips. Amo chuckled. I glanced up, my teeth sinking into my lower lip. He kissed the tip of my nose, surprising me, and stepped back. "Let's get cleaned up. I'm starving."

"Again?" I asked.

He laughed, a real, deep laugh that filled my insides with butterflies. Though I'd always found the term very disturbing. The idea that any kind of animal took habitat inside of me didn't really conjure up pleasant images. I wished I'd known who'd thought coming up with a phrase like that was a good idea. "This time I mean food."

"Oh," I said, almost a little disappointed.

Amo shook his head, pushed between my legs again and kissed me hard. "Don't worry. I'll eat you right after the sandwiches."



After cleaning up the proof of our activities, Amo and I returned to the kitchen. Bear watched me almost reproachfully. As if I was betraying him by letting a stranger in. Dotty was curled up against him. He hardly ever left her side anymore.

I reached for my checkered shirt but Amo held out his white dress shirt. "Take it."

He helped me put it on. "I like you in my shirt. I still remember the basement."

"Me too," I said as I closed a button over my chest, but not the rest. Then I grabbed the plate with sandwiches and the salad bowl and put it down on the table. "The cutlery and plates are over there." I motioned at the cupboard beside Amo.

He glanced at it surprised, as if he had never set a table in his life, which was probably the truth. Still, he bent down and picked out two plates and forks before he walked over to me and sank down on the bench. I took a place beside him so our legs were touching. Amo hadn't bothered putting on anything but boxers and I enjoyed the sight of him half-naked.

He grabbed a sandwich and bit more than half of it off, before he finished the rest with another bite. I blinked. I'd prepared four sandwiches, now I wondered if that would be enough. "It's hummus and roasted tomato chutney," I explained.

Amo nodded appreciatively and finished a second sandwich. He glanced at me. "Aren't you going to eat something?"

“You can eat first. I ate before you came.”

He shook his head with a frown and held out a sandwich to me. Instead of taking it from him, I bit off a chunk and smiled. Then I filled my plate with salad, and watched Amo devour the remaining sandwiches.

“I didn’t think you’d be this excited about my vegan sandwiches.”

“I’m not a picky eater when I’m starving.”

He grimaced and swallowed the last bite. “That came out wrong. Your food is delicious.”

I shrugged. “Don’t worry. I’ve heard every possible insult about vegan food you can think of. I don’t think you can say worse.”

“Living in the Falcone household as a vegan must be hard.”

I knew he meant it in a teasing way but there was underlying tension in his tone and I felt protective. “I like being a Falcone.”

“I’d prefer you as a Vitiello.”

We both fell silent. I scraped my fork over the plate and speared a single kale piece then brought it to my mouth, biding time.

“Ignore what I said,” he gritted out. He leaned back and angled his body toward me, his eyes taking me in.

“Do you want to go to bed?” I asked.

He rubbed a palm over his eyes, exhaustion taking over. “Yeah. It’s been a very long day, especially with the time difference.”

“I’ll wash the dishes. You can go ahead and get ready for bed,” I said as I got up. Amo touched my waist and pulled me against him. With him sitting and me standing we were on eyelevel. “I’ll help you.”

I smiled. “That would be lovely.”

He rose to his feet and together we moved to the sink. I began to wash the dishes and Amo dried them. “You don’t usually do housework right?”

He gave me an ironic smile. “No.”

“Spoiled.”

He picked me up without a warning, causing me to gasp and almost drop the glass I’d been washing. I put it down quickly then wrapped my arms around his neck. The way he held me, I could look down on him.

“Why does it feel as if we’ve known each other forever?” he asked quietly.

I shook my head. I didn’t know the answer to his question. It felt like we knew each other longer than we did, and on a deeper level than should be possible after only a few encounters.

I put my face against his throat. This kind of deep connection, it was something I had never considered possible to anyone but my closest family, and what Amo and I had, it went beyond that in many regards.

I blinked tiredly. I had woken at five o'clock because I'd wanted to head over to the sanctuary early. Now I could feel tiredness settle deep in my bones. And Amo's warmth and his scent only made me more relaxed. I ran my fingers through the hair at his neck, and drew in his scent deeply.

"I love your scent," I murmured, then yawned. "And the way your body feels against mine. And your smile. Love's such a curious thing. No logic, no reason." I drifted off, my words coming out garbled to my own ears. "How do you know if you love someone?"



How do you know if you love someone?

My heart throbbed hearing Greta's words. I didn't have an answer to her question, not one I was able to put into words. What I felt for Greta...I didn't dwell on the thought. Greta's body softened against me and her breathing evened out. Feeling strangely touched because she'd fallen asleep in my arms like that, I carried her over to the bedroom. I carefully put her down on her bed then turned to grab my bag from the living room. Bear stood right behind me, his body stiff and his eyes set on me.

"Come on, don't make me hurt you," I said firmly. He didn't back off. Momo and another tiny dog dashed past him and hopped on the bed, then Dotty limped past Bear, made a beeline around me and stretched out in the comfy dog bed. With a glance at Dotty, Bear followed her and curled around her smaller body. I smiled wryly. I wasn't the only one who was led around by the balls by a female. I got ready in the small bathroom, then shut off all

the lights before I headed into the bedroom. Greta hadn't moved an inch, her expression angelic as she slept soundly. This strange place in the middle of nowhere felt more like a home already than the fancy townhouse in my city—all because of the woman in my bed.

I stretched out beside her and brushed my knuckles over her cheekbone, then pulled her against my body. She curled into me with a small sigh. Her hair tickled my nose and I brushed it away then kissed her forehead.

I knew this was wrong. Greta deserved better. But this felt too good to let it go. I wondered if Greta regretted saying no to me, but given her family situation she probably didn't have much of a choice. I definitely regretted not having the balls to cancel my wedding to Cressida, but I wanted to become Capo. I'd been willing to make a deal with the devil for it.



When I woke, Greta wasn't in bed. Neighing and mewing as well as the sound of an engine drifted in from outside. I swung my legs out and got up then grabbed my gun from the nightstand then froze as I spotted my wedding ring beside sitting on top of a note from Greta.

I scanned the note.

I didn't want to give this back to you last night.

I was glad she hadn't. It would have tainted our reunion, just like Cressida's existence tainted my life. I stuffed the ring into my bag before I searched the house for Greta then went outside, following the sounds. From the porch, I could see Greta driving a small forklift, and distributing hay bales between the stables and barns.

I leaned against the porch with a smile, stunned by what I saw. Greta was heiress to a fortune, hailed the princess of the west and here she was feeding cows and pigs and horses and picking up their droppings. She didn't shy back from hard work. When she spotted me, she waved at me while she steered the forklift with one hand in my direction. "There's coffee inside! I still need a bit before I can join you," she shouted over the stuttering of the engine then she rode past me. I returned back inside and filled the waiting cup with coffee before I went outside once more. Drinking my coffee, I watched Greta in the distance as she greeted the animals one after the other, even a huge pig, and

my lips pulled into a smile. This felt surreal in the best way possible. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt like smiling so often.

I never wanted a life in the countryside. I'd grown up in the big city. It was the place I felt most comfortable, and I still couldn't imagine trading my life in New York for something like this indefinitely, but Greta's presence made this place special. When I'd grown up, I'd always known what place to call home, my parents' house had been my safe haven, the place I'd call home without hesitation, but since I'd moved out and especially since my wedding to Cressida nothing had truly felt like returning home. My apartment felt like an interim step, not like the final destination, and the townhouse I'd bought for Cressida and me had always felt like a stranger's home and not one you felt welcome in.

I took another sip and Greta waved at me again in the distance, shouting something I didn't catch, but I waved back. Then I slowly lowered my hand. This right here, this sense of calm and belonging, it was something I wanted. But a year ago turning this dream into reality had already been up against high hurdles. Now? With me being married to Cressida, it was almost out of reach.

Divorce was a no-go, an unforgivable sin, in our world. It was the only way I could ever have Greta in more than the tiny slices of time I could carve out between the Famiglia, my family and Cressida.

Divorce was something that would end my aspirations as Capo.



My belly warmed at the sight of Amo on my porch, having coffee in only his pajama bottoms.

Despite how risky our meetings were, I couldn't imagine not seeing Amo

again. I felt guilty in many ways, toward my family, toward Cressida, even toward Amo's family. We lied to all of them in some way. But whenever I thought of ending things between Amo and me, my chest constricted with acute anxiety. One year ago, my choice had been clear, an impossible choice but one that was inevitable. Now the reasons for a certain choice in the past became less and less convincing.

I headed over to Amo once I'd fed all the animals, which took long without Jill's help. She hadn't asked why I'd wanted her to spend a couple of days with her sister in Reno. She knew better than to ask too many questions.

With a bright smile, I took the hand that Amo held out to me when I ascended the wooden steps. We walked inside and had breakfast, though seeing Amo in his state of undress my body had a very different hunger.

"How about you give me a detailed tour of the farm? We can hardly do a trip somewhere else."

I knew many places I would have liked to show Amo but he was right. This wasn't an option. And it touched me that he wanted to get to know more about my sanctuary.

"Just let me get dressed quickly."

I bit my lip. "You don't have to put on clothes for me..."

Amo chuckled, leaning over and cupping my neck to pull me in for a kiss.

His phone beeped, forcing us apart, and he glanced down, his mouth tightening.

"Anything wrong?"

He shook his head, with a forced smile, and quickly shoved the cellphone into his pajama pocket.

"Your wife?"

He rose to his feet, his smile still not the one he usually had around me. I'd seen it on his face when he'd interacted with others, though. "Let's enjoy the day."

I didn't push him, because I didn't really want to talk about her either. Even though she knew Amo wasn't faithful, I felt bad for what we did. I touched his lips with my fingertips when his forced smile remained. "I prefer your real smile. You don't have to pretend for me, okay?"

Amo's eyes softened and he finally stopped smiling. "Few people would realize there's a difference."

"I do, and I only want your true emotions. You don't have to force anything."

Amo kissed my fingertips. "I won't let anything ruin today. So let's get ready so you can distract me."

First, I led Amo to the paddock where I kept most of the horses and donkeys. I climbed up on the first board of the fence to get a better overview and pointed out the different horses to Amo. "This is Ruby." I pointed at a copper mare. "When I got her eight months ago she'd never seen daylight in the three years of her life before. She was in a miserable state and look at her now."

Amo nodded slowly but his gaze rested on me. I didn't quite understand his expression, only that it made me feel incredibly seen and... maybe even loved. I pointed out a few more animals and Amo listened without interrupting me. He gave me the feeling as if he was really interested in everything.

After a while, he stopped looking at the paddock again and instead watched me with an expression that filled my body with heat. I turned and perched on the highest board. "Am I boring you?" I had been talking about my animals and all their backstories and special needs for a ridiculously long time.

"Not at all," he said in a low voice that sent a shiver down my back. He stepped closer and between my legs. He cupped my cheek and tilted my face up for a kiss. Soon a simple kiss became so much more and it felt as I might burst into flames soon.

His hands roamed my body, my hips, thighs, my back, but never where I wanted him. I arched toward him, wanting more. Amo growled against my lips and slid his palm along my inner thigh until his fingers teased the edge of my panties.

I wrapped my legs around Amo's waist and he lifted me off the fence, his lips finding mine for a searing kiss. His fingers stroked along my ass then between my thighs from behind. When he reached my tender flesh, I moaned, eager for more of his touch. I clung to him, my kisses becoming uncoordinated as his fingertips teased me from behind. Soon his finger slipped in and out of me again while he held me up. It felt incredibly intense like this with our bodies flushed and my weight bearing down on his finger.

There was still a slight discomfort but my arousal overshadowed it. I began to rotate my hips in a gentle up and down motion as our kiss became deeper, more sensual. My grip on Amo's shoulders tightened as my walls began to spasm. I rocked harder, rubbing my clit against his abs as his finger

moved slowly but deep inside of me. It felt as if a knot was tightening in my core, ready to snap. I cried into his mouth as my orgasm shot through me, a wild foreign sound coming from my lips. The knot burst, sending a wave of lust through my entire body.

I sagged against him as the most violent waves of my release had passed and basked in the gentler prickling between my thighs. I'd known passion could manifest loudly, had on my occasional wanderings through the mansion overheard my parents or other family members having sex, but experiencing the sensation was something utterly intoxicating.

I still longed for more. Maybe I still felt like this might end any second, it still felt too surreal to be true. I wanted to feel more, experience more. I wanted to experience everything with Amo, was terrified that it might not happen because someone would discover our secret and rip us apart forever.

"Amo." I kissed his neck, then cheek as he carried me toward the house. My grip on his shoulders tightened further and my belly coiled with anxiety. "I want you to make me yours. I want to sleep with you."

My pulse raced in my veins, and I felt a little nauseous with nerves. I knew I wasn't ready for this step yet, but I'd rather do this now, before I was ready, than not at all. I wanted this with Amo. Only Amo.

Amo's body became very tight, his fingers digging into my waist as he froze on the porch. Apart from that he didn't react in any way. Finally, he pulled away and I leaned back too so I could see his face as I clung to his waist.

"Are you scared this is our last encounter?"

I was scared. Our life was based on so many frail lies, it was only a matter of time when they would come crashing down on us. What if we never got to say goodbye? Or would we figure out a way to reunite, no matter the cost?

"I don't know."

Amo swallowed, his finger brushing over my cheekbone as he carried me into the living room and sank down on the sofa with me on his lap. "We'll see each other again, I swear, and we'll enjoy each other every time, but I swore myself one thing, I won't sleep with you."

"Why?" I knew he wanted it. I knew he was holding back.

"Because you deserve to have your virginity taken on your wedding night and not like this."

"That's an old-fashioned, archaic view."

“And I’m an archaic man when it comes to you.”

“But then you’ll never take my virginity.”

He cupped my cheeks, staring deeply into my eyes. “Eventually this boundary will fall too, as all my good intentions have toppled over, but let me try to be honorable with you for as long as I can.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to be honorable. It’s my choice.”

“You deserve so much better. You deserve to be worshipped like a queen.”

“Don’t you worship me?”

“You are a queen in my eyes. My shadow queen.”

“I’m gladly your shadow queen. I don’t need the light.”

“But you deserve it.”

“Make love to me.”

Silence settled around us. To make love you had to love. We’d never admitted our love for each other. Maybe because it would have been like salt in an open wound.

“Greta, I swore I’d not do this. I already went too far, farther than I promised myself.”

“Amo.”

“You deserve to give this to your husband.”

“You want me to be with someone else.”

“No,” he growled, fierceness twisting his face. “You are mine, only mine.”

“And are you mine?”

Amo touched his forehead to mine. “Every part of me that matters, my soul, my heart, my love, is yours. It’ll always be yours.”

“That’s enough for me. Make love to me Amo.”

I saw the conflict in his eyes but also desire and longing. He wanted this, we’d both wanted this for so long.

“Not yet,” he murmured but his voice was becoming less convincing.

I smiled against his mouth. “Okay.” Deep down I knew it wouldn’t have been the right time, not yet, but eventually it would come.

We kept kissing and I didn’t want this moment to end. I wished we could conserve it, until our next encounter.

When Amo left the next day, our goodbye hurt even worse than the previous time. Maybe because no end was in sight. After a deep breath, I got to work in the stables. Life had to go on. I tried to focus on the good: my

animals, my family, ballet, and not on the part that was missing: Amo.



Over the next few months Amo managed to visit my sanctuary every three weeks. It wasn't enough. It was better than nothing. It was safer than to meet more frequently and to risk someone getting suspicious. It was... hard.

Lying became second nature. My anxiety when I looked at my brother or father or mother and lied without hesitation never ceased, and I took it as a good sign. I didn't want deceit to leave me cold. I wanted to feel anxious when I betrayed the ones I loved. I didn't want this to become normal, even if it was part of my life for now and the unforeseeable future.

This meeting felt even more potent, because it was early December and possibly our last meeting this year.

"I'll try to come here between Christmas and the New Year. I wish I could spend Christmas with you," Amo murmured against my temple as we lay in bed after a delicious make-out session that had my core still throbbing from the aftermath of two orgasms. I could never get enough of Amo's lips and tongue between my legs. Amo's resolve was still strong and we hadn't taken the next step. We enjoyed each other without sex, but I longed for an even deeper connection. I wasn't sure if sex would provide it.

"I know you'll be busy with your family over the holidays, just like me."

I loved Christmas, the decorations—though some of the flashing lights that Gemma and Savio put up gave me vertigo—the food, the cheer. Our Christmases were always wonderful, but I knew this year, even worse than last year, I'd miss Amo. Christmas was meant to be spent with your loved ones...yet, he was thousands of miles away.

I didn't want to think about it now. I tilted my head up and pulled Amo down for a kiss, my tongue sneaking in. Amo's fingertips brushed along my spine before he cupped my ass cheek possessively. Our touches became more urgent.

Amo's phone rang and he straightened with a groan then began fumbling in his pocket for his phone. Once he'd managed to pull it out, he slanted a look at the screen. "Maximus. He probably wants us to meet for drinks."

I bit my lip. I wished I could meet Amo's best friend. I wished I knew more about his daily life than what he could share with me. He told me more than he probably should, considering our families' problematic relationship.

He answered the call and instantly his expression tightened and his body became tense. "Where?" He nodded as he lifted me off his lap and stood. He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not in New York right now. I'll try to come over as quickly as I can but I don't think I can be there before tonight." Amo listened to something the other man said, then gave a sigh. "I'll deal with my father. Be careful and don't do anything stupid. I know this is personal but you need to keep a cool head."

He lowered his phone and his expression became regretful as he regarded me. He knelt on the bed and kissed me. "I'll have to leave immediately. I fucking hate it but my friend and the Famiglia need me."

"It's okay. You're going to be Capo soon. You need to be there when it matters."

Amo nodded once, gave me another kiss and rose to his feet.

I watched as Amo got dressed, put his gun holster on and stuffed his belongings into his bag while he talked to the pilot of the private jet rental. After I'd draped a bathrobe over my shoulders, I followed him outside onto the porch.

Of course, I'd known that Amo would have to leave soon—tomorrow—but our time together was so limited that being deprived of a night and several hours hit me hard. I tried to hide my emotions, not wanting Amo to feel guilty. Amo had responsibility in New York.

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me gently. "I'll come back as soon as I can. Maybe I can somehow free up a night before Christmas. I don't want to wait longer."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Two weeks felt like eternity, though I knew I'd find something to keep me busy with.

Amo took a step back then another before his expression turned resolute and he turned on his heel and got into his car. I sank down on the step when he drove off, feeling a strange emptiness. Soon Bear, Dotty, Teacup and Momo joined me and I patted them as I stared off into the distance.

When Amo and I had first agreed to meet in secret, it had seemed like a decent solution. We both couldn't have a serious relationship, for more reasons than I liked to think about. I buried my face in my hands. It had seemed so easy, but switching my emotions on and off was becoming more

difficult every day. My life was divided, into my time with Amo and the rest of my life. A life always partly on hold. A life full of lies, deceit and longing.

I wasn't sure how much longer I could live like this, but I knew I couldn't live without Amo either. Just thinking about it made my heart ache in the worst way possible.

Chapter *Twenty-Five*



Anno

When I got off the private jet that evening and turned on my phone, the number of missed calls from Marcella, Dad, and even Matteo was staggering. Maximus hadn't tried to call again. I'd given him a promise and he knew I'd keep it. When I tried to call him, only his voicemail answered. I called Primo instead. For a while he'd been working under Cassio in Philadelphia but had recently returned to work at Maximus' side as Enforcer. "Where's Maximus?"

"He's on his way to a warehouse in Newark."

No news. It was why I'd asked the pilot to land in Newark. I didn't want to waste any time.

"He's alone?"

"I think Romero might be with him. I hope so. Dad and I are on the way there too. Maximus didn't want to wait. You know how eager for revenge he is. Your father and a few more men are heading there now too."

"Okay. Send me the exact address. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I jogged to the parking lot of the rental car service. One of the staff tossed me the keys to the motorcycle I'd rented via a phone-call. I nodded my

thanks. He was a loyal cocaine customer and would get a special price for his next order.

The warehouse address wasn't far from the airport and with my bike I could weave through traffic, so I arrived at the designated spot within ten minutes. I spotted Maximus' car, an old Ford truck he mainly used to transport stuff for the sanctuary or bodies. I dismounted my bike, pulled my gun and hurried over to the car, but Maximus wasn't inside. I began to search the area, hoping Maximus hadn't been crazy enough to go in alone. Maybe Primo's assumption was right and Romero had joined Maximus. He had every reason to be part of this after all.

Maximus had said the informant had spoken about at least three Russians inside the building. He was a good shot, but he was fueled by anger and that was never a good thing. I rounded the building and found Growl and Primo beside one of the steel doors, trying to get in.

"Why didn't he wait for you?"

"He tricked us," Primo murmured. "We wanted to scout the area first and make sure the informant didn't lead us into a trap, but Maximus didn't want to wait."

I shook my head. Growl finally managed to open the door. I took the lead and went into the dim inside of the warehouse with Primo and Growl close behind. This was a small warehouse for the Bratva, which made it a target, but that wasn't why Maximus was here of course.

Voices drifted over to us and I motioned Growl and Primo to duck behind the wooden crates. With our heads lowered, we moved closer to the voices. I tensed when I spotted two tall forms behind one of the crates, then relaxed when I recognized Maximus and his father-in-law Romero. They pointed their guns at us then lowered them. I knelt beside them and Romero pointed at a gap between the crates while Maximus had his gaze firmly locked on the scene in front of him. I looked through the gap.

Three men were playing a game of cards at a table and drawing lines of their own stuff. My lips curled. A Famiglia soldier who sniffed our stuff would be punished harshly. You couldn't be your own best customer if you wanted to run a successful business.

"The one without hair and the one with the big wart over his lip, those are two of the men who got us." I could hear pain beneath the rage in Maximus' voice. I had to admit I was relieved Maximus had taken Romero with him. If he'd gone here alone, he would definitely have done something stupid. I

rarely felt guilty but I really hated that I'd been too far away to be by Maximus' side the moment he needed me.

I touched his shoulder. "Wart guy is the leader of the lot?"

Maximus nodded. "He's a low soldier high on the limited power he has over only slightly less stupid soldiers."

"I'll go ahead and you watch my back?"

"This is my fight, Amo. I waited but I want their blood."

I patted his shoulder and nodded. Then I motioned him to go ahead.

"Don't kill them." His eyes burned with hunger for revenge. "I want to take my time."

"We both do," Romero said. I slanted him a look and nodded. In recent years Romero's work as Captain had been less violent than that of Maximus, but I could feel his need for bloodshed.

On a sign from Maximus, all five of us jumped out of our hiding place. The Russians hadn't expected an attack and they were high on cocaine, which made our job easy. I managed to tackle the guy without hair to the ground while Maximus got the one with the wart. Romero took care of the third while Growl and Primo kept watch over our surroundings in case there were more Bratva soldiers we didn't know about.

The door burst open. I hit the guy in my hold over the head with my gun then pointed it at the intruders but lowered it when Dad and a few soldiers stalked in.

I got to my feet. Dad barely glanced my way as he went over to Growl and talked to him before he moved on to Romero who'd managed to tie up the Russian with cable straps.

"I want to take them over to our sanctuary," Maximus said.

"You need to question them. I realize this is very personal, for both of you." Dad's gaze moved from Maximus to Romero. "But we need all the information out of them."

"They'll sing like canaries," Growl said in his deep, growly voice.

Dad gave a harsh smile. "I trust in all of your abilities."

Since Dad was content ignoring me for the moment, I went over to Maximus. "Do you want me to help you torture them?"

Maximus shook his head. "Romero and I should do it." Romero glanced toward him and nodded.

"All right. Call me whenever you need me. To talk, get drunk or dance the adrenaline away. I'll be there."

Maximus gripped my hand. “Why don’t you come with us? I’d like you there even if you’re not part of the torture.”

“First I need a word with you,” Dad said to me.

“I’ll come as soon as we’re done.”

Maximus and the others carried the three Russians out while Dad’s soldiers rummaged in the crates to take stock of what was in the warehouse.

“Come on. Let’s go somewhere else.” Dad didn’t wait for me to agree. He turned and expected me to follow. I could tell how pissed he was. Considering I hadn’t answered his last seven calls I knew why. I followed Dad out to his car. He looked around and finally his eyes settled on the rental motorcycle. His eyes narrowed. “Where’s one of your bikes? Or car? Since when do you need a rental?”

“Is this what you want to discuss?”

Dad got in my face. “A few calls and I’ll know where that rental car is from and a few more calls and I’ll know exactly where you’ve been.”

I had always known my deceit would eventually be discovered. I was fairly sure Dad could have found out a long time ago but he’d chosen to ignore what was right before him. “I need a rental because I’m cheating on my wife with a prominent politician’s wife, and I don’t want the news to spread.”

I wasn’t sure if Dad believed me. Probably not. I almost wished he’d find out everything. All this secrecy was starting to bother me. I didn’t want to meet Greta in secret. I wanted to scream my feelings for her from the fucking rooftops. I wanted Cressida out of my life and Greta in it.

Dad’s expression lost a hint of the harshness, which caught me by surprise. “I know you hate being married to Cressida, but you can’t disappear for hours or days without a fucking trace. You have responsibility.”

“I work my ass off for the Famiglia, Dad. I’ve given my life to the cause. Fuck I married a woman I despise with all my heart for the cause, so don’t tell me I’m not doing enough. When your job for the Famiglia is done you return to Mom, not an empty apartment or a townhouse with a woman that you can’t trust. You get your fucking reprieve, so I won’t fucking apologize for trying to get my mind off things once or twice a month for a day or two.”

“You’re not working a nine to five job. Your duty is never over. We’re at war. You still remember, do you?”

I smirked. “Trust me, Dad, that’s something I’ll never forget. That’s something you forced upon me as well. I was against the attack!”

Dad gripped my shirt. “You know fucking well why I did it. You left me no choice! It was the only way to make sure you wouldn’t keep pining for that girl.”

I nodded and took a step back, so Dad had to drop his hand. “Good job.”

Dad searched my eyes and his face became a mask of wariness. “Amo. Do you really want to die?”

“Would you die for Mom?”

Dad closed his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“What I should have done right away.”

I didn’t give Dad a chance to say more. I mounted the bike and drove away. Tonight was about Maximus, nothing else. But tomorrow, I’d take my life into my own hands. And if anyone wanted to stop me, they’d find out what those hands were capable of.

Fuck. What was I going to do?



I felt torn, between my loyalty for my family and my feelings for Amo. Eventually it would tear me apart. I couldn’t carry the weight of my betrayal alone anymore. I needed to confide in someone. I needed another view, some insights that might help me decide how to go on. How to keep living this divided life.

When I returned home from my sanctuary on Sunday, I found Mom doing aerial yoga in the yoga room she’d set up in our wing of the mansion. She was hanging head down in the colorful cloths that were attached to the ceiling.

I sometimes practiced yoga with Mom, but I did it less for the mental aspects and more for the stretching that had a positive effect on my ballet

skills.

Mom smiled at me, despite her red head and slowly brought herself into an upright position. "Do you want to join me?"

"I need to talk."

Immediately, Mom's expression clouded with worry and she lowered herself to the floor. She grabbed a towel from her matt and wiped her face, then she motioned at the low sofa in the corner. We sank down and Mom touched my shoulder. "You can tell me anything, Greta. Absolutely anything. I can keep a secret."

"Even from Dad?"

Asking the question made me feel guilty but Mom needed to know the severity of the situation and not stumble into it blindly.

"For you I'd keep a thousand secrets even from your father." She touched my cheek, her eyes soft. "But your father loves you and our family more than anything else. He would forgive anything."

"Not this. Too much is at stake."

Mom swallowed, her pale brows drawing together. "Okay. Now you got me really worried."

"I don't even know where to begin."

"The start is always a good point."

That was something Nino might say. I loved how we all rubbed off on each other. I loved so much about this family, which was why this deceit felt like a boulder on my heart. I decided not to beat around the bush. There was no easy way to say what needed to be said. "I have an affair with Amo."

Mom sank back against the cushions, her mouth falling open. She looked away and let out a deep breath. "Oh wow. I didn't expect that." I could see how hard she fought for composure. She swallowed hard before she turned back to me and regarded me. Her eyes scanned every inch of my face. Maybe she was looking for the daughter she thought she knew. She let out a stunned laugh. "You really went in for the kill."

I frowned, not sure what she meant by that. I'd never meant for this war to happen, never meant for people to die.

"You didn't sugarcoat things," she said as if she could see my confusion. She took another deep breath. She stood and blew out a long breath.

"Mom?"

"Just give me a moment, Greta. This is a bit more than I expected."

"I told you it was something Dad would never forgive."

Mom gave a one shoulder shrug. “He’d forgive you, of course. But his actions regarding the Vitiellos might not be considered forgiving.”

“He’ll kill Amo.”

“He wanted to kill him for various reasons before this. I fear death won’t be enough in your father’s eyes in this case.”

I closed my eyes and buried my face in my hands. Despair clawed at my chest.

The sofa dipped and Mom wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “It’s going to be okay.”

“How?”

“I don’t know yet. But it’s going to be okay.” Mom stroked my head as if I still were a small child. “How long has this been going on?”

“Five months.”

“I noticed that you changed but I didn’t want to pressure you into talking to me. I knew you’d come when you felt ready.”

I pulled back. “I feel lost. I don’t know what to do.”

“Would you consider stopping what’s between you and Amo—” She shook her head. “I can see in your eyes that that’s not an option, right?”

“I can’t imagine living my life without him. Whenever we’re apart, I miss him so much. I wish we could be together all the time.”

“What about him? He’s married.”

“He doesn’t love her and he assures me she doesn’t love him either.”

“I believe that’s true. I know how arranged marriages work, and love is rarely part of the deal but the Famiglia is traditional and divorce isn’t something that’s accepted. I don’t know of any Capo or even Underboss who went through a divorce.”

“I know. I don’t see a way for us to be together, but I can’t imagine to never see him again either. I hate going behind everyone’s back. I hate the lies, I hate the hurt that the secrecy might cause. I hate that Amo cheats on his wife, even if she knows about it. I want things to be easy for us.”

“Love’s rarely easy or uncomplicated. It wasn’t for your father and me, not by far. I never told you the full truth about Dad and me. But I think it would help you feel better. Your father kidnapped me on my wedding day.”

I nodded. Nevio had once made a strange comment when we were fifteen and I had immediately started my research. It hadn’t taken me long to find newspaper articles about a kidnapped bride, my mother. She was supposed to marry another man that day. Mom smiled strangely. “Of course you found

out. I guess I should have told you sooner.” She sighed. “Why I’m telling you now is that some might consider my actions as cheating. I was promised to someone but I was intimate with your father. I didn’t have feelings for the man I was supposed to marry, and neither had he.”

“But you returned to your family despite your feelings for Dad. How did they react?”

“They didn’t know I had feelings for Dad. For them it was incomprehensible. Your father was the enemy. He’d kidnapped me after all.”

“Do you think it would have changed things if you’d convinced them of your love for Dad? Would there have been peace between the Camorra and Outfit? Your marriage could have united what was divided.”

Mom laughed bitterly. “Oh no. That was never an option. There was too much bad blood between the Camorra and the Outfit. And my family would have never accepted my love for your father. I had tried to explain things to them, not as outright as I should have, but I tried in my own way. Your father’s actions were unforgivable in their eyes.”

“Isn’t it the same with me and Amo? There’s war.”

“It’s different. There isn’t as much personal hurt involved. But I won’t lie, it would be a miracle if Luca and your father made peace. If Amo weren’t married, there would be more options but a divorce would cause a major rip within the Famiglia. If Luca isn’t willing to face the backlash, I doubt he’ll allow Amo to leave Cressida.”

I’d thought about all this a million times. Maybe Dad would accept Amo into the Camorra if I begged him, but Amo would never take orders from Dad or Nevio.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered.

Mom seemed at a loss too. “I wish I knew. Maybe you should think about talking to your father.”

“If he knows, he’ll stop me from seeing Amo. I can’t risk that.”

“That’s a possibility. He might not listen to me either in this case.” Mom brushed her fingertips across her temple as if she had a headache. “I want nothing more than to see you happy. But I also want you to be safe. You meeting Amo behind everyone’s back is a risk.”

“Amo won’t hurt me, Mom. I trust him absolutely.”

Mom pressed her lips together in a tight smile.

I shrugged. “And you thought Nevio was the only trouble maker.”

Mom laughed. “Nevio is causing havoc for every reason but love.”

“The end result is the same. Love can be as destructive as hatred.”

Chapter *Twenty-Six*



Anno

I spent the night at the Trevisan house. It reminded me a little of Greta's sanctuary, but Maximus' family kept only dogs, mostly Pitbulls, Staffordshire Terrier, Bulldogs and Rottweiler. As per Maximus' request I didn't join in the torture, neither did his father or brother. Romero and Maximus had taken the Russians to one of the kennels at the end of the premises, but the screams carried all the way up to the porch where I was sitting with Primo and Growl. The dogs in their enclosures and houses howled and barked.

"Sounds as if they want to join in," I said.

Only five dogs lived in the house with the family. The rest wasn't socialized enough or too dangerous.

"Maximus knows better than to use the dogs for torture. They've tasted enough blood in their lives." Cara, Growl's wife, stepped out onto the porch, wrapped in a wool blanket. Her gaze sought the distance as if she was trying to see what was happening.

Growl pushed to his feet and walked over to her. He touched her shoulder. "You should go back in. You shouldn't hear this."

“I hear it inside too.”

“But inside you won’t see Maximus once he’s done. I don’t think you want to see him like that,” Growl said.

“Ryan, I don’t care if he’s covered in blood. I’ll be there for my son when he needs me.”

Growl gave a nod and led Cara over to one of the cozy rattan chairs.

Maximus didn’t return until the early morning hours. I patted his shoulder as he stalked into the house to go to bed. Romero was close behind him. Neither was in the mood to talk, no surprise there. Growl, Primo and I went to the kennel and cleaned up the mess that was left.



After a late breakfast, Maximus and I headed to the Famiglia gym to let off some steam. Maximus didn’t want to talk about last night’s events so I didn’t push him. After a heated training session, we went into the changing rooms, but I could tell something was bothering Maximus.

He sank down on the bench across from mine. For a while he watched me removing the tapes from my wrists before he leaned forward, arms on his thighs. “What the fuck is going on?”

I motioned at the two men who were hurriedly getting dressed. They grabbed their stuff with a nod and gave us privacy. When the door fell shut, silence settled around me and Maximus. I wasn’t sure how to say what I’d decided. It was absolute madness. I trusted Maximus with my life, and through his marriage with Sara we were practically family. “I know you’ve been taking days off for months now. I didn’t ask questions but I can’t help but wonder where the fuck you’re going. It took you hours to get to Newark yesterday. You weren’t around the corner.”

I stared down at my boxing shoes. “I came back as fast as I could.”

“I know, and I’m not here to play the guilt card. You have a fucking life. That’s okay. I just want you to know that you can trust me. You helped me after the shitshow with Sara. Fuck, you’re still there whenever I need you, so why the fuck are you keeping a secret from me?”

I smiled bitterly. “Because I’m betraying the Famiglia.”

Maximus leaned back slowly, his nostrils flaring, eyes full of disbelief.

“Never. You’d die—” He searched my eyes. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to see. Then he shook his head and let out a laugh. “I hope I’m wrong with this, so please tell me you’re not seeing Greta Falcone behind everyone’s back.”

His voice had been so quiet if I hadn’t known what he’d say I wouldn’t have heard him. I looked at him, tired of lying to him.

“Amo.” Maximus shoved to his feet, running a hand over his head. He stared at me, then shook his head again. “What the fuck is wrong with you? We’re at war and you go fucking the enemy’s daughter.” He tilted his head and a hopeful smile pulled at his lips. “Or is this a devious plan to break the Camorra?”

I really wish that were the case. “No devious plan. And I’m not fucking Greta and I won’t until she’s officially mine. I won’t dishonor her.”

Maximus plopped down on the bench, utter shock on his face. “I hope this is a joke.”

I only stared at him. I knew how ludicrous it sounded.

“Have you decided if you’re going to tell my father about my betrayal? You’re his Enforcer.”

Maximus jumped to his feet and shoved my shoulders hard, catching me completely off guard. The bench tipped backwards because of my weight and I landed on my back with a groan. I didn’t bother getting up, only smiled wryly at my best friend. “I suppose that’s a yes?”

“Fuck you, you moron,” Maximus growled. “I’m going to be your Enforcer longer than I’ll be your father’s Enforcer. I won’t ever reveal your secrets, no matter how fucked up they are. I’ll follow you as my future Capo, but where the hell will you lead me and the Famiglia?”

“To peace with the Camorra.”

“No way. Not after the shitshow at your wedding. Matteo won’t agree after what happened to Isabella and Gianna. Not to mention that the Falcones are definitely holding a major grudge for how we tricked them. Peace has never been farther away.”

“I’m going to divorce Cressida and ask for Greta’s hand. I can’t keep living like this. I want Greta by my side. I’ll stop at nothing, absolutely nothing to make her mine this time.”

Maximus held out his hand and after I had accepted it, he pulled me to my feet. He gripped my forearm. “And you think she’s going to say yes this time?”

“I do.” What Greta and I had, had grown even more and I knew she regretted her past choice. Together she and I would find a way and bring peace back between the Camorra and Famiglia. There was no other option. Greta would break if she came to New York with me without her family’s approval while there was still war. “I’m going to ask her this weekend.”

“Don’t tell me where you’re meeting her. The less I know the better. Your father’s going to have me skinned if he finds out I know about this. Fuck, man.”

I patted his shoulder. “He’d have to skin me first. He’ll come around eventually.”

Maximus gave me a doubtful look.

Dad was definitely a hard nut to crack. But first I had to face a person who’d take the news even worse. “I’m heading to Cressida tonight to tell her.”

Maximus lips parted. “You have to talk to your father first.”

“I won’t ask for his permission. I made my decision and I’ll go through with it no matter what he says.” I was done asking. I would take what I wanted, something I should have done a long time ago. I wouldn’t spend the rest of my life with Cressida. She made me miserable and I knew she wasn’t happy with me either. She couldn’t possibly be happy unless human emotions didn’t matter to her at all.

Maximus blew out a long breath. The concern was clear on his face. “She won’t go quietly, Amo. Cressida has a vicious streak. This won’t be a pleasant Christmas. She’ll try to take you down with her.”

“I don’t care. This farce of a marriage ends tonight.”



When I set foot into Cressida’s townhouse—it had always felt like hers, not mine—I knew today’s conversation wouldn’t go over well.

Cressida sat in the living room with a glass of champagne in her hand and a dark-haired Asian woman by her feet who was painting her nails.

“I’m busy,” she said when she spotted me and took another sip of her drink.

“Leave,” I told the woman. She shoved to her feet without hesitation and

gathered her stuff. I handed her a one hundred dollar note as she rushed past me and she took it with a muttered thanks before she left the room.

“You’re not done!” Cressida shrieked but the woman grabbed her coat in the lobby and a moment later the front door opened and closed. My word was the one that counted, not Cressida’s. She glared at me. “What am I supposed to do about my nails now?”

“Paint them yourself?”

Her eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe the audacity. “A woman of my position shouldn’t have to do her nails.”

“My mother does her own toe nails so I can’t really see why you can’t. She’s a Capo’s wife. You’re not.”

“Your mother’s...” She trailed off, obviously thinking better than to insult my mother in front of me. She gave me a sugary smile. “You’re as good as Capo. Your father can’t do it forever.” She took another sip of her champagne. She was probably hoping for his early death just so she could finally rise up to ultimate glory.

She inched one shoulder up in a careless shrug. “I suppose now that you’re here we might as well spend some quality time together.”

I looked around the room with its too plush sofa in an ugly lilac, the frilly cushions with the flower pattern. The white high gloss wood furniture with golden brackets topped by the Versace logo. This place was as foreign to me as it had been the first time I’d set foot inside of it. “When did we ever spend quality time together, Cressida?”

Every single of our encounters had been filled with arguments, guilt trips, punishing silence or angry sex.

She didn’t say anything, only regarded her feet critically, as if their lack of nail polish was more important than the dismal state of our marriage.

“This marriage has been doomed from the moment you forced me into it. We should have never gotten married.”

Cressida finally raised her gaze from her nails and smiled triumphantly. “But we are.”

I stared into her eyes, feeling absolutely nothing. I wasn’t even sure if they were blue or green or gray. I’d never looked into them long enough to determine their exact color.

I didn’t hate her, definitely didn’t like or even love her. She was completely inconsequential for me. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Confusion then incredulity flashed across her face. “What are you saying?”

“We’re getting a divorce.”

She froze, then she laughed haughtily. “You can’t divorce me, then you won’t become Capo.”

My expression became harder. “I’ll become Capo.”

She stumbled to her feet. “The Traditionalists won’t accept you! They’ll side with my father. You’re going to be nothing without me!”

“They can accept me or feel my wrath.”

“You won’t divorce me,” she whispered, shaking her head. “You can’t. There are rules, traditions. You took my innocence out of wedlock and there are consequences for such an act.”

I stalked toward her. “Stop playing the victim. You and I had very enjoyable, consensual sex. I never said anything about marrying you, never pretended to even like you. You decided to have sex with me out of wedlock, so you, too, have to accept the consequences. So far only I had to pay the price, now it’s your turn. And if I see it right, you’re still not going to pay the price because nobody will know we had sex before we married.”

“I’ll have to live in shame because you divorced me!”

“You’ll get about fifty million dollars of compensation for less than two years of marriage. That’s a good deal if you ask me, especially when I consider the 10 million dollars you already spent in the meantime.”

I could see her mind working behind her eyes and suddenly the anger dropped from her face and her expression became pitiful, her lower lip trembling. “Amo,” she simpered, running her palms over my chest. She looked up at me through her lashes. “You can’t do this to me. I’m your wife.”

She missed the point but I tried to squeeze any droplet of kindness that I possessed out of my heart and said, “Listen, Cressida, you can’t tell me you’re happy in our marriage. You don’t even like me much. Maybe you thought you did when we married but don’t tell me you still do. We don’t have anything to talk about. Do you want to keep living a miserable life?”

Last Christmas had been the worst of my life. Celebrating with the Antonacis had been awkward and stiff. No warmth, no sense of family. Even Mom’s holiday spirit hadn’t been enough to improve the situation. I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to spend another Christmas with Cressida and her parents.

“We don’t even have to see each other anymore. You can stay in your

apartment the entire time if that's what you want. You can keep sleeping with other women, and I'll look for a constant lover. We'll live separate lives. One day we can use insemination to get me pregnant."

"And then what? Once children are there, we can hardly keep living in different households. Children deserve a family and parents that don't despise each other."

She let out a laugh. "Why? My parents don't like each other and it worked."

And look how it shaped you...

"They can go to boarding schools, then they won't see us together often."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to send my children away or let them be born into a miserable marriage."

Cressida huffed and stalked away, grabbing the champagne bottle. She drank straight from it, then hissed. "Don't act as if you'd care about children or anyone. You're not kind. And neither am I that's why we're a good fit."

A match made in hell. "I'm not kind, you're right. But if I have kids, I want them in my life."

She bared her teeth in condescension. "You think you'd be a good father? They'd hate you for cheating on their mother."

"I won't cheat on the mother of my children, but it won't be you." I didn't say anything about her masseur. I was fairly sure she had an affair with him. There was no proof and she'd probably deny it. It was irrelevant anyway. I'd told her to seek a lover and she'd followed my advice.

Realization settled on her face. "There's someone else."

"I told you before."

"There were several women you fucked, do you think I cared or remembered?"

I hadn't been intimate with anyone but Greta since our first encounter on her farm. "There's one woman."

She let out a shrill laugh, her face turning red. "Is she the reason why you haven't slept with me in forever?"

I didn't say anything. I had a feeling discussing Greta with Cressida would only make me mad.

She clutched the champagne bottle in front of her chest. "You were faithful to your affair but not your wife?"

I pressed my lips together. Anything I said now would make things worse. I'd said everything I wanted. I wouldn't waste my breath on more.

She regarded me like a scientist a bug he was trying to dissect. “It’s the girl from the wedding, isn’t it? The Falcone girl. The way you looked at her... I thought I’d imagined it. I didn’t, did I?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Do you think you love her?” She laughed. “You aren’t capable of it.”

“Cressida, there’s nothing to say anymore. We’ll get divorced and both find happiness elsewhere. I won’t add more mistakes to my life because of a single mistake from my past. This ends now.”

She let out an enraged cry and threw the Champagne bottle my way. It exploded against the edge of the marble side table, throwing an expensive Tiffany lamp to the ground, which broke apart, and breaking the edge off the marble table.

I swallowed trying to rein in my own anger. I’d sworn myself I’d deal with this calmly. “You can keep this house. It’s always been yours. Once the divorce papers are signed, you’ll get the fifty millionsmillion.”

I turned on my heel and walked into the lobby. It wouldn’t do any good to prolong this conversation. If Cressida had some time to think about my offer, she’d see it was the best solution. She was an attractive woman. She’d find a new husband.

She staggered after me and reached for a crystal vase from another expensive sideboard in the lobby. “You think you can buy me off with lousy fifty million?”

“How about seventy million, will this make your obvious heartbreak more bearable?” I gritted out.

Her eyes widened and she threw the vase in my direction. It smashed before my feet. I had enough. I stalked toward her and backed her into the wall. “That’s enough. Eighty million. That’s my last offer and you better take it.”

Her eyes burned with loathing. “I hope you’ll die.”

I gave her a harsh smile. “Many have tried.” I stepped back and walked out. I knew this wasn’t over. Cressida would call her father right away and he’d try to gather the Traditionalist around himself to force me to reconsider my decision, which wasn’t going to happen. I would divorce Cressida and marry the woman I really loved. The woman I’d be faithful to for the rest of my life.

When I left the townhouse, I felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I turned the music up as I steered my car toward my family’s

home. Telling Cressida of my plans had been only the first step of many, the first of many difficult confrontations. Now I had to tell Dad, though maybe Antonaci was speaking to him right now.

The last and most difficult hurdle to overcome would be Remo Falcone.

I shook my head with a wry smile. I grabbed my phone and dialed Greta's number. I'd never before called her but today I simply needed to hear her voice.

"Amo! Are you hurt?"

Hearing the concern in her voice and imagining the kindness in her eyes, I knew I'd made the right decision, a decision I'd never regret no matter what happened now. "No, I feel better than I have in a long time. I need to talk to you."

"I need to talk to you too. If you hadn't called, I would have asked you for a call. Amo, I can't do it anymore." My heart sank. Fuck, was she breaking things off? I would never accept that. Whatever was forcing her to make this decision—I would fucking smash it apart.

"I despise the secrecy. I know I told you I don't mind being your dark secret but I do. I want us to be together all the time. I know we can't but—"

"Greta, you aren't a dark secret. You are fucking everything and I want everyone to know. I want everyone to know you're mine. I don't ever want there to be someone other than me."

"There's always only you."

My heart swelled. "I told Cressida I want a divorce."

Greta sucked in a sharp breath. "Really?"

"Really. I'm heading to my parents now. Once I've told them and handled the backlash, I'm going to book the next flight to Las Vegas and ask for your hand again. I hope this time your answer will be different."

It would be the best Christmas present of all time.

"Amo." Greta's voice shook. "I'm scared I'm dreaming all of this."

"If this were a dream we'd already be on our honeymoon and I'd be making you mine over and over again."

Greta released a breath. "What if—"

"No matter what happens, we'll be together. I'm going to face the consequences. Whatever happens will be worth it a thousand times over."

"I talked to my mother. And I'll tell my family as well."

Greta had her own confrontations ahead of her.

"I should have told you before, but it never felt right, and maybe now

isn't the right time either because we're on the phone but I simply need to tell you." I took a deep breath because I'd never uttered those three words before. "I love you."

"Oh Amo," Greta whispered.

"Don't cry." I couldn't stand the thought of Greta's tears when I wasn't there to hug her.

She let out a small laugh. "I won't. I'm just happy. And I love you too."

I grinned but the smile disappeared when I pulled up in front of my parents' house. "I'm at my parents'. Tell me how your chat with your family goes. Soon we'll be together and then I won't ever leave your side."

We hung up, and after a moment to compose myself, I got out of my car and headed for the front door. I didn't get the chance to ring the bell. The door opened and Valerio stood before me. He gave me a wide-eyed stare and grimaced. "You have balls to come here now. Mom's trying to talk Dad off the ledge."

He grinned. "I've been practicing my Capo look in front of the mirror these last fifteen minutes. What do you think?" He gave me a stern look.

"You look constipated."

He shrugged. "Dad won't retire tomorrow so I'll have a few years to practice."

"Good luck."

Valerio patted my shoulder. "You need luck more than me."

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Aria

“Maybe you misunderstood him, Luca. He never mentioned Greta. Please don’t overreact.”

Luca kept pacing back and forth in the living room while Valerio and I were having lunch. Luca was too upset to eat.

“You didn’t see his expression. I’m sure he’s been seeing that Falcone girl behind my back all the time!”

“Takes guts to do that,” Valerio said with a cheeky smile. I sent him a warning look. This wasn’t the time to annoy his father, even if I loved his trickster mentality. He reminded me so much of my brother Fabiano. When Valerio had been a young boy, he’d looked so much like him and now that he was seventeen, he was how I imagined Fabiano would have been if our father hadn’t tried to kill him and turned him cold and jaded.

Since the war, I hadn’t seen Fabiano. If Amo had really seen Greta despite the war...

Cheating had always been a touchy subject for me given Luca’s and my past, but I couldn’t be mad at Amo or Greta. I’d seen how much Amo hated his life with Cressida, how it drained him in addition to an already draining work day.

Luca’s phone rang and when he checked the caller ID, his expression darkened. “Antonaci. I have a fucking bad feeling about this.”

I rose from the chair and smoothed my wool dress, needing something to busy my fingers with.

Luca’s dark brows slanted down, and dread settled in my belly. “Slow

down.” Luca’s eyes flared with fury. “You better watch your tone. Family or not, I won’t have you raise your voice at me. If you want to keep your tongue, you better choose your words more carefully.”

I moved closer, hoping to catch figments of the conversation but Antonaci had obviously heeded Luca’s warning. “You won’t do anything. If I find out you stir up shit then I’m going to come after you. I’ll talk to Amo. I’m sure Cressida misconstrued his words.”

Luca hung up and his expression was frightful. “Amo told Cressida that he wants a divorce.”

Valerio let out a low whistle.

Relief filled me, followed by shock at my own reaction. I’d never liked Cressida. She’d used Amo for her purposes. I’d always wanted love for Amo but with her it wasn’t possible.

Luca shook his head. “Don’t look so pleased. This is a goddamn debacle. Do you know what the Traditionalists will do if our son divorces his wife?”

“They’ve always been against the changes you implemented. They are stuck in the past.”

“Fuck. I can’t believe he did this. He’s going to take his words back and apologize to Cressida. I don’t care if he has to get drunk to go through with it.”

“He won’t, Luca. If he really met Greta all these months despite the war and if he went to Cressida and asked for a divorce, then he’s made up his mind, and I doubt anything can change it.”

“He’ll change his mind, believe me. I’ll make him. He went too far. I’m still Capo and if he doesn’t get a grip on his rampant hormones, he won’t follow in my footsteps.”

“I’ll go practice my best Capo looks then,” Valerio said with a smirk.

“This isn’t the moment for your fucking jokes!” Luca snarled.

Valerio shrugged and walked out of the living room, leaving me alone with Luca. Valerio had a canny talent to brush off Luca’s outbursts.

I touched Luca’s chest, tilting my head back to look him in the eyes. The rage in them didn’t scare me. It had in the beginning but I knew Luca’s love for me and our children trumped any darkness he harbored. “If you try to force him, we’ll lose him, Luca.”

“Damn right, because I’ll kill him if he doesn’t obey my orders.”

“Don’t say something like that, Luca. Not even in rage. Please.”

Luca cupped my cheeks. “Aria, this could divide the Famiglia for good.

We're at war at three fronts. We'll be torn apart."

"Maybe not. If Amo really loves Greta, that could lead to peace with the Camorra."

"It led to war in the first place."

"Because you chose war."

Luca stepped back, his jaw tensing. I could see the conflict in his eyes. "Amo can't have Greta. He couldn't have her back then and he can't have her now. The Falcones won't ever allow it. I did it for Amo, so he wouldn't let a crush ruin his life."

"He was never happy with Cressida."

"You sound as if their marriage is already over."

"It is, no matter what you say."

Amo's and Valerio's voices drifted over to us from the lobby.

"We'll see about that," Luca growled.

"Luca, please. Just stop and consider Amo's feelings for a moment. What if he feels for Greta what you feel for me?"

Luca walked past me without another word and I rushed after him into the lobby where Amo and Valerio were still chatting. The difference between the brothers always amazed me. Amo was like Luca, in character and appearance, which made them butt heads so often, but it also gave me hope for this confrontation. Valerio was a potent mix of Fabiano and Matteo.

Luca didn't slow as he stalked toward Amo who didn't back down, not even when Luca grabbed his throat and shoved him against the wall. I tensed, my heart jerking hard in my chest.

"Luca!"

Valerio touched Luca's arm. "Dad—"

"You stay out of this!"

Amo gave his brother a tight smile. "It's okay."

His voice was raspy from lack of air.

"Luca," I said more firmly.

"You'll go back to Cressida right this moment and apologize."

Amo chuckled despite his skin turning increasingly red. "I won't, and nothing you do will convince me. I'm going to divorce her and then marry Greta."

The way he said '*Greta*'—gentle, loving, protective—told me all I needed to know. Vitiello men had high walls around their hearts but once they fell for a woman, they fell hard, and Amo was utterly in love with Greta.

Luca shoved him against the wall again. I couldn't watch anymore. I grabbed Luca's arm but neither Luca nor Amo paid me any attention.

"You know the punishment for betrayal and for disobedience."

"If you think I should die for loving someone as much as you love Mom, then go ahead and try to kill me, Dad."

Try to kill me. I could see that Amo was willing to fight Luca over this. Amo had always respected his father too much to fight back, but Greta meant too much to him. I could see my family falling apart right before my eyes and I couldn't bear it.

Luca released Amo and took a step back. "You know full well that I would never kill you even if it would be the right thing to do!"

Amo rubbed his throat. I moved in front of him and touched the red skin. I swallowed hard. I knew this world was harsh. I knew Luca had to make sure Amo was ready for the tasks ahead but this was a lot to stomach for me as a mother.

"I'll follow my heart, Dad. You can accept it or not, but the outcome will be the same. Greta will be my wife."

"Once you kill Remo and Nevio and all the other crazy fuckers?"

"If that's what it takes."

Amo couldn't be serious. I didn't know Greta well but she'd seemed to have a good relationship with her family. I couldn't imagine her forgiving him if he hurt them.

"I suppose then I can start preparing Valerio for the position as Capo?"

Luca crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Amo shrugged but I knew him. I knew how much he wanted to become Capo like his father, and I knew how proud Luca had always been that Amo would take over one day. What was happening here was breaking my heart.

"I don't want to be Capo," Valerio said, no humor in his tone for once. I gave him a smile. "I never wanted that. It's Amo's job."

"One son doesn't want a position thousands of soldiers would kill for and the other doesn't respect that it takes sacrifice to become Capo."

"I'm willing to sacrifice a lot for the Famiglia and this family, Dad. I'll be a good Capo like you, but have you ever considered that you are a good Capo because Mom has your back? You have her by your side when the carnage and bullshit get too much. Without her, where would you be today?"

Luca looked at me and tears welled in my eyes. "I'd be in a very dark place and probably a worse Capo than my father had been."

I didn't believe that. Luca had always been better than his father, but it meant a lot that he thought I had helped him be a good Capo.

"I need Greta by my side to be Capo. I love her. I always admired what you and Mom have, but I never thought I could have it because it's so fucking rare in our world."

Luca regarded Amo with narrowed eyes. "And you think you have it with Greta?"

"I know it."

I walked over to Luca and linked our hands. He gave me a tired look before he turned to Amo once more. "This will cause a major scandal, fuck, possibly a revolt. We'll have to spill blood to shut up Antonaci's supporters. Lots of blood if we can't bribe him into silence somehow, which I doubt."

"I'm willing to spill as much blood as it takes."

Luca released a long breath. "If you think she's worth it—"

"She is."

"Then I stand by your side and spill as much blood as it takes. I've spilled blood for far less."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore and Valerio wrapped his arms around my neck from behind, his chin on top of my head. "Blood spill, in time for Christmas. What a jolly message. Born in Blood, Sworn in Blood indeed."

I choked on a laugh and slapped his hand. The prospect of a major conflict within the Famiglia terrified me but at the same time I knew it was unavoidable to give Amo the happiness he deserved, which was all I wanted for him. If blood was the price that we all had to pay, then so be it.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight



The buzz of the phone call with Amo quickly evaporated when I thought of the upcoming conversations with my family.

I went in search of Nevio. I knew he was the hardest nut to crack. I found him in my ballet studio, working out. He was doing pistol squats, a look of concentration on his face as he watched himself in the mirror to check his form.

“You’re not here for ballet,” he pressed out and straightened. My eyes were drawn to the scar on his belly. It was only a white line against his tanned skin—one of many scars battling for attention with a handful of tattoos—but it carried the memory of one of the hardest days in my life. Nevio hated Amo. And even if he didn’t say it outright, Amo felt the same way about my brother. How could I ever unite those two? Or at the very least not make them want to slaughter each other?

Nevio followed my gaze and his lips pulled into a hard smile. “That’s the last scar a Vitiello is ever going to inflict on me.”

“Nevio, can we talk?” I wrung my hands, not sure how to tell him. Talking to Mom had been hard, but it was nothing in comparison to this. Dad

would be difficult too but Nevio's reaction terrified me more.

Nevio became alert at once and came to my side, touching my shoulders. "What's wrong?"

The worry in his voice always warmed my heart because worry wasn't one of Nevio's strong character traits.

"You know I love you, right?"

Nevio's dark brows snapped together, confusion mingling with wariness in his eyes. His instincts were spot on as always. "Just tell me what you need to tell me. You're not sick, right?"

I shook my head quickly. "Not sick, no. I'm fine, physically. I—"

"Greta, just tell me!"

My eyes burned with tears. I could barely swallow past the lump in my throat. "I've been seeing Amo these last few months."

Nevio dropped his hand and stepped back, his expression becoming stone cold. "What?"

The low vibration in his voice raised goosebumps on my skin.

"I love him."

Nevio took another step back, every muscle in his body tautened to the maximum. "You love him?"

The condescension in his voice hurt worse than his rage. "Nevio, please try to understand. I love him and I want to be with him."

He turned away with a harsh laugh, drew his gun and fired at the mirrors. I flinched, my hands flying up to cover my ears. The floor-to-ceiling mirrors exploded one after the other with an ear-splitting screech. Shards flew through the room, split the sunlight into hundreds of fragments like my heart splintered because of Nevio's reaction. He turned to me slowly, his chest was bloody from several cuts and a single shard was stuck in his cheek.

Tears ran down my cheeks. He reached up and jerked the shard out, causing a rivulet of blood to trail down his face.

"So you're choosing him over me, over us, over our family."

My mouth became dry and my heart began pounding, my hands becoming clammy.

"If you're leaving Vegas to be with Vitiello you're saying you don't give a fuck about me."

I couldn't believe what he said. It wasn't true, and he knew it, but he still managed to make me feel guilty.

I'd felt guilty from the first moment I'd considered being with Amo,

because I'd known what it would mean. I'd have to leave Nevio, something I'd never thought possible. I was the calm to Nevio's rage, and I was terrified that without me by his side, the darkness would win. His actions just now fired up my worries.

His rage was potent, it washed over me like an avalanche taking my breath away. The door to the ballet studio ripped open and Dad, Nino, Alessio and Massimo filtered in with drawn guns.

They all froze when they saw us.

I ignored their inquiring stares. This was between Nevio and me.

"Don't you want me to be happy?" I asked softly.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Dad snarled.

Nevio stepped toward me, glaring down at me. "Weren't you happy with us? With the people you belong to?"

I swallowed. "I was. I never thought I'd want for more than I had, but then...then I met Amo, and I tried to fight it. I hoped it would pass, but it didn't."

I could see the confusion on the others' faces.

Nevio shook his head, looking away. "We're at war. You can't have both. If you choose him, you're ditching us. End of story."

"There can be peace again."

"Would someone explain to me what the fuck is going on?" Dad stepped between us, his furious gaze darting between Nevio and me.

"Not if I kill Amo, then Luca won't ever agree to peace again." His grin was full of darkness. It was the smile he carried at night. It wasn't a smile he showed me.

"You'd do that to me?"

Nevio's eyes remained indifferent. "I'd do it for you even if you can't see it."

Other people's lives meant nothing to him. Very few people mattered to Nevio, but these select few were his whole world, and he would do anything to protect them, and to keep them close. He would stop at nothing. I knew that better than anyone. Nobody knew Nevio better than me.

Nevio loved to see the world burn but so far he'd always made sure the flames didn't touch me.

I shook my head. "No, you'd do it for yourself. You're being selfish."

"You would know all about being selfish." Nevio turned to Dad. "Greta has been fucking Vitiello these last few months. She's a fucking traitor."

Nevio stormed off, followed by Massimo and Alessio.

I was trembling, from sadness, anger and shock. When Dad's incredulous gaze hit me my legs almost buckled. Even Nino's analyzing presence didn't help.

"Explain," Nino said.

Dad only stared at me as if he was on the verge of finishing the remaining mirrors with his gun.

I pleaded them with my eyes to understand as I told them the truth. The words rushed out of me, my voice breaking.

"Do you realize the danger you put yourself in by meeting the enemy?" Nino asked.

Dad still hadn't said anything.

"I trust Amo."

"Then you obviously can't be trusted," Dad growled. "He could have killed you."

"He wouldn't."

Dad grabbed my arm and pulled me closer, his eyes full of rage. "You lied. You risked your life and the safety of everyone who loves you."

"I don't want to lie anymore. That's why I told Nevio. But I knew how you'd react when I told you and I was right."

"What do you expect? I made my standpoint about Amo very clear and that was before there was even war."

I closed my eyes and more tears slid out. "Dad, I know you're angry, but please try to understand. I love Amo. It hurts to be apart from him. Please allow me to be with Amo."

"He's married and we're at war, Greta," Nino said as if I might have forgotten.

"He's going to divorce Cressida for me, and he'll convince his father to negotiate another truce, if you're willing to do so as well."

Dad shook his head. "Mia cara, this is something I can't allow you. I won't agree to a marriage with Amo Vitiello. You won't leave for New York, and most certainly not be subjected to the old-fashioned traditions in the Famiglia. There won't be peace with the Famiglia, not as long as I'm Capo and given Nevio's reaction, there won't be under his rule either."

I stepped close to Dad, frowning. "You taught me that my opinion matters, that you respect my choices, and now you don't allow me to marry the man I want?"

Dad's face was stone but his eyes they burnt me with the fierceness of their emotions. He cupped my cheeks. "Greta, in the Camorra you are safer than you'll be anywhere else. My word is the law. No harm can ever come to you here, but there it's Luca's word and later Amo's. You'll fall under their fucking jurisdiction, and you know as well as I do that they handle things differently from us. I can't protect you the same way if you're in New York than when you're here. I'd still tear down their fucking city if you needed me but until then you'd be at their mercy."

I covered his scarred hands with mine, holding his gaze as I gave him a reassuring smile. "I know you'd all die to protect me and I know I'm safe here but with the same certainty I know I'll be safe in New York because Amo is there and he'll protect me. Please, respect my choice. Please give Amo and peace a chance."

Dad exchanged a look with Nino, kissed my forehead and stepped back. "The answer is no."

I blinked, resignation filling me. "Dad, you can prevent peace but you can't prevent me from being with Amo."

Dad's nostrils flared, and his mouth pulled into a harsh smile. "Oh mia cara, this is my city, my territory, my rules. As long as I take breath, I'll stop you from seeing Amo again, even if I have to lock you in your room."

"You can't treat me like a captive."

"I can and I will. Give me your phone."

When I didn't react, Dad reached for my phone purse and cut it off with his knife.

I couldn't believe what was happening. I'd never thought that my family would react this badly. Maybe I was really naïve when it came to them.

"I hate you," I whispered.

Dad tensed. I whirled around and ran out of the studio, even as I regretted my words. I didn't stop running until I was in my room and threw myself on the bed. Momo and Teacup joined me, feeling my distress. I cried harder than I ever had. Soon a rough tongue licked my hand. I turned my head to the side to find Bear's head perched on the bed. Beside him sat Dotty and watched me with way too understanding eyes for a dog.

I wasn't sure what to do. This was really shaping up to be a decision I'd never wanted to make. A decision between my family and Amo. I sobbed.

A knock sounded and Mom came in without waiting for my reply. One look at me and she rushed over to the bed and sank down beside me. She

rubbed my back gently.

“Dad told you?”

“I wouldn’t call it telling. He’s raging downstairs. We’ll have to buy new Christmas decoration.”

“He took my phone and wants to keep me away from Amo.”

Mom sighed. “That’s what I gathered.”

“What am I going to do?”

Mom looked away. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’d have thought I’d tell you to follow your heart but I don’t want to lose you. I can’t imagine not seeing you again. With this war...” She swallowed. “To be honest, right this moment, I truly realize how hard this must have been for my family. I didn’t really have a choice, and I want you to have one. I don’t want things to end like they did for me.”

“You think I’ll do what you did and leave so I can be with Amo?”

“Won’t you?”

I could see the fear in Mom’s eyes. Fear that filled me too. But there was also acceptance in her expression. She’d already come to terms with the fact that she might lose me. “I don’t want to be without my family. I don’t want to make this choice.”

Mom wrapped her arms around me, her cheek on my head. “I’ll talk to your father. But I don’t want to give you false hope.”

“I know. What about Nevio?”

“He left with Massimo and Alessio. I doubt he’ll return tonight.” Mom straightened. “You know Nevio...”

I did. He would spill blood tonight. He’d let his monster win, would unleash it.

I’d always felt responsible to cage it back in but I needed to learn to let go. I wasn’t sure how to do it, how to give up the people I loved so much. I still hoped I wouldn’t have to make this decision.

Chapter *Twenty-Nine*



My fight with Nevio kept repeating in my head. His harsh words. I knew they'd come from a place of hurt and fear of losing me, but they still stung.

And Dad's reaction? It wasn't completely unexpected but I'd hoped he might see how serious I was and take me serious in turn. Mom's words hadn't changed his decision. He was determined to keep me in Las Vegas against my will, which was why I found myself at my sanctuary with two bodyguards that would guard me like a prisoner. I was only allowed to spend one night out here before I had to return.

The worst was that I had no way to contact Amo without a phone. I'd considered stealing a phone from the bodyguards but they were exceptionally careful around me. I didn't even have the code for the front gates anymore, so I couldn't leave the premises without them.

Dotty let out a whine and I sat up. What time was it? I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Two in the morning.

Dotty scratched at the ground in front of my bed. "What's wrong, girl?" I asked, but then an alarm rang out. I slammed my palms over my ears. What if Amo was here? He'd promised to fly over during our phone call. What if he

thought I was in danger because he couldn't reach me? My heart raced in my chest. If he got captured...panic bloomed in my chest. Would I be able to convince Dad to spare him?

The images from many years ago when my begging hadn't saved the man in the basement flashed before my eyes. If Dad or Nevio killed Amo...

But something about the alarm was different. What was going on? This wasn't the standard security alarm. I jumped out of bed and opened the curtains, even if that meant I had to remove a hand from my ear. I froze.

At least, one of the barns was on fire. Orange flames illuminated the night sky and embers danced like shooting stars against the blackness.

I began running, out of the house, spurred on by the fearful neighing and mows. I had to save my animals. I wasn't sure what was going on. I never had open fire near the barns, and neither would Jill. Maybe one of the guards had smoked outside despite my warning. They should know better! When I stumbled off the porch, the two guards were standing off to the side, one of them on his phone, the other unmoving.

"Get the water hoses!" I screamed but I didn't stop moving. I stormed toward the burning barn. Pain shot through my feet as my bare soles touched ember, but it didn't slow me. I opened the barn door. The pigs stormed past me, but the horses and cows were panicking and had crowded in a corner. The roof was on fire and so was the right side. The alarm seemed to shrill even louder.

"The house is burning too!" Jill screamed, dressed in pajamas and her gray hair all over the place. The alarm must have woken her too. Her house was on the other end of the premises because we both preferred solitude.

"Save the dogs!" I screamed.

Had my dogs come out with me? Oh God. I staggered toward the horses despite my pain and tried to usher them away from their corner. I clapped one of them hard on its bum and it ran out but the others only watched me with wide panicked eyes and flaring nostrils. A burning ember hit my bare shoulder. I cried out. More and more embers rained down on the animals too. I stumbled toward the footboard I used so I could reach the horses' backs when I cleaned them and used it to get on Calimera's back. She bucked at once. She still had trouble being ridden and in a situation like this she wouldn't have it. I rammed my heels into her sides, even if it pained me to do so. She tried to throw me off but then she began running. She bucked and bucked until I landed hard on the ground, but because she was the leading

horse, the other horses ran after her, and even the cows, except for one. Mildred, the oldest of the bunch. My body ached from the fall and my head rang. I tried to push to my feet to get her out as well when part of the roof came down in a surge of excruciating heat and flying embers. The stench of burning hair filled my nose and I quickly extinguished my hair. I scrambled backwards, out into the open just in time before the remaining roof crashed down, burying Mildred beneath it.

Sirens still filled the night. The guards were at the house, which was completely aflame too. I heard eager barking somewhere, definitely Dotty. But what about all the others? Bear, Momo, Teacup?

I coughed and pushed to my feet. I took a step forward when a shadow fell over me. I looked up to find myself staring at an unknown man. My lips parted but before I could say anything, burning pain filled my abdomen. I stared down, following the man's extended arm, to his hand and the knife handle. I couldn't see the blade.

It was buried inside of my lower belly. I blinked, trying to understand what was happening. He jerked the knife back out, which hurt even worse and I cried hoarsely, then choked on my next breath when he slammed the knife into me again, a bit higher this time. He pulled the knife out again and I sank to my knees and fell to my side. The man slammed a hammer down on my left knee and I cried out when pain shot through me. He raised his arm for another blow. A low growl sounded and Bear slammed into him. Momo was yapping wildly around them, I slowly rolled on my back. I wanted to see the night sky.

This was it. Wasn't it?

The guards appeared by my side. One of them pressed something against my belly and I screamed in pain. "Fuck it, fuck it!" he muttered, his eyes frantic.

"Get the dog off me! Get it off me!" my attacker screamed.

"Bear, stop," I croaked.

"You'll wish that dog had ripped you to shreds!" the other guard said.

Bear's hot breath hit my cheek and Momo licked over my hand. Dotty and Teacup kept their distance, terrified. I smiled weakly.

So many faces flashed before my eyes as I tried to breathe past the agony. So many people and animals I loved. Some people have many regrets in their last moments, but how could I regret a life that had so much love?

Amo's face lingered as my vision became dimmer.

“Greta,” one of the guards shouted, “Stay with us. Don’t close your eyes. Help is on the way.”

“Bring me the fucking medical kit!”

“What about him?”

“Shoot his feet and kneecaps, you asshole!”

Shots rang out, bursting through the wool in my ears. The following screams soon quieted.

I still stared up at the sky. My pain was slowly fading. Would I be seeing my family again? Would I see Amo again?

Chapter *Thirty*

Remo

The ringing of my phone tore me from sleep. Fuck it. What now? Couldn't these fuckers deal with their shit without me for one night? I reached for my phone. One look at the caller ID and I swung my legs out of bed and turned the lights on. Serafina slept in the guest bedroom because she was angry at me. I took the call as I stalked out of the bedroom.

"What is it?" I growled.

Sirens wailed in the background of the caller, only interrupted by a loud crackling that I couldn't place.

"There's fire everywhere, and an attacker stabbed Greta." My ears began to rush with blood, my heart pounding hard and fast. "I called our emergency team—"

"She dies, you die." I didn't return to the bedroom or go to the guest bedroom. I wouldn't tell Serafina. There was nothing she could do. And if Greta died...fuck it, she wouldn't die. I would not let her die. The last time we'd talked we'd fought. Fuck it. Fuck it all.

I stormed into Nevio's room. He jerked up in bed, the knife he slept with brandished at me. I was surprised to find him here. He'd been going on a rampage these last two nights and I hadn't tried to stop him. Fuck, I had tortured two debtors just to let off some steam and it wasn't nearly enough.

"Get up."

"What?"

"Greta was stabbed."

Nevio leaped out of bed, staggering after me as I rushed into Nino's wing. "Dad? Dad? What the fuck are you talking about?"

“Got a call that she was attacked.”

Ten minutes later, Nino was flying our helicopter toward Greta’s farm. Nevio stared at me with wide eyes. I knew the same unhinged look would be on my face as well. I could feel my control slipping. The only reason I hadn’t lashed out yet was that there was no one to lash out at and I needed to get to Greta first. I needed to protect my girl.

Whoever had hurt her would pay tenfold. If this was Luca’s doing because he didn’t want his son to be with Greta, I’d make peace with the Outfit, the Bratva, and whoever else it required to bring down the Famiglia. I’d burn them to the ground.

Soon the flashing lights of Las Vegas were exchanged by the flickering of all-consuming flames. The farm house and the barn were on fire, and so was some of the bushland. Illuminated by the fire eating away at the wreckage that had been the barn, I spotted four bodies.

Nino had to give the flames a wide berth as to not steer them up further and landed the helicopter on the other side of the property. I jumped out and ran toward my daughter. Nevio caught up with me and together we arrived at the scene of the attack. I fell to my knees beside Greta who looked lifeless as she lay on the ground. I scanned her quickly: two knife-wounds in her abdomen and a smashed knee. Corrado was putting pressure on the wounds. Blood had soaked the earth around her.

I cupped her head and bent over her. “Mia cara.”

“Greta,” Nevio croaked as he hovered beside us, then his eyes slanted to the stranger who was bleeding profusely from his legs. “Was it him?”

“We need him for questioning,” Nino warned as he sank down beside us, two medical kits in his hands. I stroked Greta’s hair away from her bloody forehead. It was shorter than it had been, burned off at places and a few small burn blisters covered her shoulders.

“Mia cara,” I said again, hoping to get a reaction from her. The heat was almost unbearable this close to the burning remains of the barn and the flames licked at my consciousness, eager to bring force memories I didn’t want to recall now. Memories that so far had marked the worst moment of my life—until today.

Greta’s eyes opened and took a moment to focus. I swallowed.

“You’re going to be fine.”

Nevio sank down beside her and took her hand. “I won’t let you leave me, you know that.”

She smiled weakly then winced and closed her eyes briefly again. Her chapped lips parted and she said something but I didn't catch it from the crackling of the flames. At least the alarm had been turned off by now.

"You have to say it again," I urged, leaning down to catch her words.

"Get Amo, please."

I froze.

Nevio's expression was stone as he leaned back, shaking his head. I gave him a warning look. "Greta," I began but she touched my arm. "Please, Dad."

I nodded, because there was no way I could refuse her wish, not when I wasn't sure if she'd make it. Fuck. I wanted to be in her stead. I jerked out my phone and scrolled through my contacts until I found Amo's number. I called him.

He picked up after the third ring.

"What do I owe the pleasure, Remo?" Amo asked in a hard voice but I detected a hint of worry behind the obvious mask.

I stared down at my daughter, covered in blood, surrounded by Nino and the doctors and nurses that had arrived by now, trying to stabilize her for the helicopter ride to a hospital. "My daughter asked to see you. She was stabbed and is fighting for her life."

"What? Where?" I heard commotion in the background and another male voice I didn't recognize. "What's going on?"

"If this incident is in any way connected to you, you better think twice about setting foot on Las Vegas ground because I'm going to kill you as brutally as I can."

"I'll take the private jet. I'll be there as soon as I can. Can I talk to her?"

Greta peered up at me hopefully. Gritting my teeth against an onslaught of emotions I was fully unprepared for, I held the phone to her ear.

"Stabbed, twice, in my abdomen," she whispered. "I don't think I can. This feels like dying." I took her hand.

Nevio shoved to his feet and went over to Greta's attacker. I motioned at Savio to keep an eye on him. He slammed his foot down on the man's ankle a few times but I focused on Greta.

She closed her eyes, and nodded. "I love you too." She shuddered and lowered her hand.

I squeezed her hand but she didn't react. Her chest kept rising and falling but she'd lost consciousness.

When I'd found out what had gone on behind my back in my own

territory, I had been furious. I always knew what was happening in my territory. Maybe I'd turned a blind eye to the truth because I didn't want to see it.

Greta loved that fucker Amo Vitiello.

"It's on him. Amo Vitiello. He's the reason for this, I just know it!" Nevio snarled, covering his face with his hands and shaking his head wildly.

"If she dies," he snarled, eyes gleaming with despair.

"She won't," I warned.

"We're ready!" Nino shouted, and he and a doctor lifted Greta on a stretcher. I stayed by her side as we headed for the helicopter. Nevio jogged after us, expression conflicted. I could feel his bloodlust, his need to destroy Greta's attacker. I got it. Fuck, I wanted to rip him apart piece by piece.

"There'll be time for revenge later. Now Greta needs us."

With a last look at the attacker, Nevio hopped into the helicopter. Savio, Massimo and Alessio would make sure the attacker was taken to Las Vegas where he'd spill all his knowledge and die an excruciating death.

An hour after we'd arrive in the Camorra hospital, Serafina came rushing in. She was in her pyjamas, her hair a mess, and her eyes red from crying. I caught her before she could storm into the operation room where Greta was undergoing surgery.

"Where is she?"

"She's in surgery."

She hammered her fists against my chest, eyes desperate. "You should have woken me!"

"You couldn't have done anything."

Serafina hit my chest again then she sagged against me. I touched the back of her head. On occasion I wondered if I possessed a heart. In moments like this I knew I did, but it only beat for very few people.

Fabiano caught my gaze over Serafina's head. "How is she?"

I took a deep breath. "She'll pull through."

She had to survive.

Serafina and I sank down beside Nevio who had his arms propped up on his thighs and was staring at the floor, ignoring everything around him.

"I'll return to the mansion for additional protection. Call me once you know more." Fabiano headed back out.

Five hours later Nino came back out of the operation room. He'd kept an eye on the doctors to make sure they did everything in their power to save

Greta. His face didn't bode well. I rose to my feet, my chest constricting.

"She's stable," Nino said but I knew that was the good news. "Due to the severity of her injuries the doctors had to perform a hysterectomy. The knee will need another surgery but it's uncertain if Greta will be able to dance again."

Serafina let out a desperate sob and sank down into the chair.

Nivio shoved past Nino and went into the operation room. A minute later he returned, paler than I'd ever seen him. "Someone will pay for this."

He stalked outside, shortly after I heard an enraged shout.

Serafina peered up me. "How much more blood does have to be spilled for this madness to end? Isn't it enough?"

"It's part of this business. And if this is linked to the Famiglia plenty of blood will be spilled."

She shook her head as if she didn't know who I was, which was fucking ridiculous considering blood spill had always been my favorite pastime. "Remo, our girl is fighting for her life. Do you even realize what she lost? She won't ever carry a child, might never dance again. Do you really want to take Amo from her as well? This is cruel, even for you."

Serafina's words hit me like a sledgehammer. "For Amo and Greta to be together, more blood will have to flow, trust me. Luca will have to make a bloody statement that he's been too comfortable to do in a long time. It won't be pretty. Many will die. This bond will come with a price, Angel, and many more will bleed for it."

Serafina gave a tight nod. "As long as it's not Greta's blood, I don't care, Remo. You always told me you wanted Greta to take her own fate into her hands. You always despised women that accepted their fate. Greta wants to be with Amo. Give her this. She's suffered enough."

I bent down and kissed Serafina's forehead. "I'll think about it for you and for Greta, but now I'll have to spill the blood of Greta's attacker and he'll meet my cruelest side."

Serafina gave me a strange smile. "I hope he begs for mercy and you won't grant it."

I brushed my lips over hers. "You know me." I straightened and risked a glance into the operation room where the doctors and nurses were getting Greta ready to be wheeled into the wake-up room. Seeing her pale, still face my heart clenched tightly. Tonight had been a close call and too much had been lost. "Watch over our girl."

Chapter *Thirty-One*



Anno

Dad hadn't stopped me when I'd told him I needed to leave right away. Instead he gave me the Famiglia private jet and the permission to negotiate with Remo.

But I couldn't think about peace or anything but the woman I loved who was fighting for her life.

When I arrived at the airport, Alessio was there to pick me up. I hadn't expected an escort from the Falcones and despite my wariness I got into the car.

"How is she?" I asked immediately.

Alessio started the car and pulled away from the waiting area. "Last I heard she was stable but her injuries were pretty bad." He shook his head. "You should talk to Remo or my father."

I nodded. My mind was too frazzled to consider how a conversation between those two and myself might end. I didn't care.

"Do you know who did it?" Rage tinged my voice. My mind had gone over the options. The Falcones had many enemies, but few would stoop as low as to attack Greta. Definitely not the Outfit. Maybe the Russians but

considering that Remo had a tentative bond to the Russian Pakhan in Chicago I couldn't imagine it either. Another option flitted through my head but I didn't want to dwell on it.

"Nevio and Remo are currently questioning the attacker. Whatever he knows we'll soon know as well."

"Good."

We pulled up in front of a non-descript warehouse at the outskirts of Las Vegas. Faded lettering and boarded-up windows.

Alessio parked the car and got out. I followed him without hesitation. Fuck. This was enemy territory. For more than a year the Camorra and the Famiglia had been at war. Still I didn't hesitate to follow Alessio. I would have followed him straight into hell if Greta was there. Maybe it was a trap. Considering that the Falcones knew all about my relationship with Greta, they probably couldn't wait to dispose of me.

Alessio pressed a button beside the door and a few moments later, Nino opened the door. He looked exhausted. After a curt nod, he allowed me to enter. It felt like a nightmare, one I couldn't wake from.

"I didn't think we'd meet so soon. Not like this certainly."

I nodded.

Nino motioned me to follow him. Soon I spotted Remo waiting in front of a door. "War is on hold for the time being. Greta asked for you, so of course you're safe here," Nino said.

I barely listened. All I could think about was Greta lying behind that door.

Remo stepped in my way and our gazes locked. "You are alive for only one reason, Greta," he said. "You will be safe in my territory because of her and for as long as she wants it. And unlike your word at your wedding, we'll honor said promise."

"Thanks, but nothing in this world would have stopped me from coming to Vegas to see Greta. Not even the prospect of being torn apart by you crazy fuckers. I'll go through hellfire for Greta if necessary."

Remo gripped my shoulder, his fingers digging into my skin. His eyes burned with rage. "Good. Because you will. Nevio and I questioned the attacker and you know what he said?"

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of my stomach, one I hadn't wanted to entertain. "Cressida." The voice was a hoarse rasp.

Remo's lips pulled wide, not a smile, a grimace. "Indeed. Your wife."

Fury and guilt raged inside of me. I'd truly underestimated her. For the

second time in my life. “Who else was involved? What about the attacker?”

“He said he belonged to Antonaci, spewed some religious bullshit, and didn’t stop going on about the Famiglia’s traditions until Nevio made him.”

I nodded. Because Cressida couldn’t have done it without her father. He would die, and so would Cressida. So would every single fucker involved in this.

“Let me see Greta now. There’s time for talk about revenge later.”

Remo moved even closer, his face right before mine. “Greta thinks you love her.”

“I do. I love her. She’ll be my wife once Cressida is gone.”

“Divorce won’t be necessary, true.” Something in his expression shifted, pain in his eyes that stirred up my worries. He gave a nod toward Nino. I was starting to grow tired of this conversation. I just wanted to see Greta.

“You might want to know that Greta won’t be able to give birth. Her injuries were too severe.”

I froze, swallowing hard. “What?”

Remo nodded. “They didn’t go in for the kill. They stabbed her abdomen and shattered her knee. Your dear wife thought taking away the ability to bear children and to dance would break Greta and maybe make you see her as less worthy.”

“I love Greta. I’ll still love her if she can’t ever dance, even when she can’t give me children. I love her and I want to be with her. Nothing will change that, and you won’t stop me from being with her either. This time absolutely nothing will stop me.”

Remo stepped aside and pushed open the door. I walked inside and everything seemed to stand still.

Greta looked small and breakable in the hospital bed. Her lips and face were almost white, she was so pale. In two large strides, I was by her side and bent over her, cradling the back of her head and kissing her forehead. My heart throbbed in my chest, every pump as painful as a bullet shot to the heart. “Oh Greta,” I rasped. “I’m so sorry. I should have protected you. I won’t ever leave you unprotected. As long as I live, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

I kept my more violent thoughts to myself. That I would make sure everyone involved in this would die an agonizing death. After another gentle kiss to her forehead, I lifted my head to look at her face. Even now she was painstakingly beautiful. I ran my fingers through her shaggy, chin-long hair.

The tips were burned. I hadn't noticed before but she smelled like a bonfire.

I didn't want to think about the pain she had to endure, about the absolute terror. Women should be protected in our world, kept away from harm. Maybe it was an old-fashioned view, but I simply wanted them protected. With Marcella my family had failed and now with Greta another woman I loved had suffered.

I could feel Remo's eyes on me the entire time, but I didn't care. I'd learned from my father that loving someone didn't mean you were weak.

My eyes burned as if I might cry. I couldn't remember if I'd ever cried in my life. Mom said I had on occasion when I was a little boy, but since then nothing had ever brought me close to tears. Not even when my sister had been kidnapped by our worst enemy and I'd been sure we wouldn't see her again. Certainly not pain.

But looking down at Greta's pale face and her bandaged hand resting on her belly, where no child of ours would ever grow—, I was on the verge of tears. I fought it and my eyes remained dry. I linked our fingers and my gaze slid down to her leg which was in splints to keep it immobilized. The cast looked massive on Greta's slender leg. I pressed my forehead to hers. Just like I never cried, I never prayed, but now I sent a prayer up, asking that Greta would dance again. I didn't want to consider that she lost that too.

My hand that wasn't holding Greta's hand curled into a tight fist. I would kill Cressida. I'd never killed a woman in my life. Looking at the woman I loved more than life itself and thinking of how I'd soon have to tell her that she would never carry a child, though she was one of the most caring and kind people I had ever met, I knew it wouldn't be a quick end for Cressida either.

I knew why she'd told the attacker to stab Greta's belly. She'd wanted to make sure that Greta could never bear a child, *my child*. Maybe she'd thought I wouldn't want her then. She could never fathom what it meant to love someone as I loved Greta. Nothing would ever tear me away from her again.

"Where is he?" Nevio snarled somewhere outside of the room.

Remo turned and barred his son's way. "This isn't the time for you to lose control. Greta needs quiet to heal."

"I want to see him!"

I kissed Greta's fingers then I straightened and walked toward the doorway where Remo was still trying to hold his son back.

The moment Nevio's eyes met mine, his flared with hatred.

“We can talk but not when Greta can hear us.”

Nevio leaned forward in his father’s hold, his lips curling like a dog baring its teeth. “Now you’re making the rules in Las Vegas?”

Remo pushed him back and I stepped out of the room and closed the door behind my back.

Nevio ripped away from his father and got in my face. I shoved him away, and despite my desire to do so I didn’t reach for my gun. Greta had suffered enough. No matter how much I hated the crazy fucker in front of me, she loved him.

He was a crazy ass killer and his eyes would have scared the shit out of most people.

“Where is the bitch?”

I shook my head. I knew whom he was talking about, but this was Famiglia business. I still needed to call Dad and inform him about the Antonaci and Cressida situation. Who knew what else the old bastard had planned. Maybe he and his Traditionalists were on the verge of a revolt. We’d kill every single traitorous asshole with our bare hands if necessary.

Nevio grabbed my shirt. I clamped my hand down on his and jerked him forward, bringing us face to face as my patience ran thin. “Not now. Not in front of Greta’s door.”

“Tell me where Cressida is, or I’ll kill every fucking member of the Famiglia until I find her. The bitch will die.”

“She’s mine to kill.”

Nevio shook his head. “Greta wouldn’t want that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And you care? Come on. You want her to have a reason to stop loving me. That would be your chance.”

“You’re right. If it were up to me, you’d be dead right now. Because all of this is your fucking fault, but Greta seems to care about you for some ridiculous reason, and as long as that’s the case, I won’t act against you. With a little luck, she’ll hate you once she finds out your wife ruined her fucking life, then all bets are off.”

I gave him a harsh smile. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“Nevio has a point. This is our revenge to dish out. We want your wife and everyone who was involved. If the Famiglia wants peace, you’ll deliver them to us on a fucking silver platter, or we’ll march into New York and get them ourselves, but then you can kick peace goodbye.”

Nevio opened the door to Greta’s room. For a moment his expression

softened and it was such a strange thing to see on his madman face that it creeped me out more than his murderous glare. “Greta needs you. I don’t know what she fucking sees in you. Do you really want to complicate things between you only because you insist on killing the whore yourself? If one of ours had attacked your sister or mother, you and your father would have insisted on dishing out punishment yourself. When my father and Nino found out about Kiara’s past, you allowed them to dish out punishment. This is our revenge. You know Greta wouldn’t want your wife’s blood on your hands. She’d probably want the whore to live.”

I looked down at her peaceful face, knowing he was right. Even after Cressida had taken the most precious thing from Greta, she’d still not want me to kill her. Greta was too kind. A new wave of burning rage crashed down on me. Cressida should have never touched Greta. This had never been about me or her goddamn heart. She’d wanted to protect her status in the Famiglia. She’d gone too far.

Remo didn’t say anything, only walked toward Greta and kissed her forehead. “Mia cara. The world will burn for you. We’ll burn it down.”

Remo straightened and fixed me with a hard stare. “Where? We’ll find her either way. It’s up to you if we kill every soldier standing in our way, and her whole goddamn family.”

Cressida was my wife. If the Falcone’s killed a future Capo’s wife, our soldiers would demand revenge and peace would become a distant dream.

“We don’t know if her entire family was involved. Her father yes, but I doubt her mother knew.”

Nevio scoffed. “Her family is at fault. They raised her. They obviously failed. They deserve death. End of fucking story.”

“Let me call my father.” This would be a hard pill to stomach. The Falcones wanted revenge, so did I. Nothing would ever do justice to what Greta had lost.

Dad picked up after the second ring. “Amo?”

“It was Antonaci. Cressida asked him to attack Greta. Several of his men were involved.”

“Damn it!”

If I’d ever thought Greta was in danger, I would have killed Cressida that day instead of telling her about the divorce. I wished I’d strangled her with my fucking hands. A new wave of utter rage and guilt slashed through me.

I could hear voices in the background, possibly Marcella.

“Fuck it, fuck these goddamn Traditionalists and most of all Antonaci!”

“Dad, you know what this means.”

“The Falcones want revenge.”

“Of course.”

“We’re at war. If we were at peace, it would be understandable that we allow our allies to dish out revenge in our territory like we did with Kiara, but Antonaci acted against the enemy, so he might have acted without my direct orders but that won’t be enough.”

“Greta’s injuries are so bad, she won’t ever have kids. I won’t ever have children, Dad. All because Cressida’s ambition and her father’s fanaticism. I want them all dead. I want them to die in the cruelest way possible. And I’ll tell the Falcones that they can have them, that they can kill every fucker who was involved. I’ll fucking applaud them while they skin them. And then there’s going to be peace, and whoever from the Famiglia doesn’t want peace can die alongside Cressida and her damned family.”

“You’re not Capo yet.”

“But I will be and this is the decision I would make.”

Dad was silent on the other end. “They can have Cressida for all I care, but every Famiglia soldier involved will be killed in a public meeting of the entire Famiglia as a warning.”

“Then we should let the Falcones be part of the meeting and allow them to kill Antonaci and the other involved men together with us.”

I heard Marcella’s voice in the background again.

After almost a minute, Dad released a harsh sigh. “That’s how we do it.”

Utter relief washed through me. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Amo?”

“Yes?”

“Make sure your girl gets better.”

I swallowed and hung up.

Then I went back to Remo to tell him our decision. This would pave the way to peace, to Greta’s and my future together.

I found Remo, Nevio and Serafina in front of Greta’s room. I nodded a greeting at Serafina. My interactions with her in the past had been limited to a couple of meaningless pleasantries. I didn’t know much about her, except for her kidnapping story.

“And?” Remo asked with a challenging expression.

I told Remo about the decision.

“We don’t want to wait for revenge until the Famiglia decides it is time. We don’t need a public meeting to spill blood,” Remo said. Nevio nodded.

“It’s the only way. And it’s a chance for peace.”

Nevio laughed. “We don’t need peace.”

Serafina turned to Remo. “Greta needs Amo. She lost so much. Do you want her to lose the love of her life as well?”

For the first time since I’d known Remo Falcone, his eyes flickered with intense emotional pain.

I shoved down my own emotions. I hadn’t allowed myself to really think about what Greta and I had lost. Whenever I’d dreamed about a future with Greta, I’d imagined us having children who filled the house with laughter.

“There is no retribution fitting for what Greta has lost,” Serafina whispered, touching Remo’s chest. “You can slaughter every member of the Famiglia but it won’t help Greta. The only thing you can do for our girl is to give her a future with Amo and for that to happen there must be peace.”

Nevio shook his head with a scoff, but then he exchanged a look with his father, and finally Remo nodded. “We’ll wait for the meeting to kill the rest, but Cressida will die now.”

“By my hands,” Nevio added.

Serafina’s expression twisted with worry. If she worried about Nevio’s mental wellbeing if he killed a woman, she needn’t have bothered. I doubted Cressida would be the first and she wouldn’t be the last either.

“Send her my greetings,” I gritted out.

Chapter

Thirty-Two



My first memory when I woke was the acute pain in my belly, followed by a burning sensation in my knee. It made me want to recoil, but there was no running from this. Then faces became distinct before my eyes, slowly, one after the other. First Dad who sat on my right, his hand around mine, his dark eyes full of concern. “Pain?”

I nodded and winced. Dad reached up and pressed a button on the infusion that would release more morphine into my veins. At once, the stabbing in my body dulled and I could relax. Movement on my other side made me turn my head and my eyes grew wide when I spotted Amo straightening in his chair. He was holding my other hand. “Amo?”

He nodded, his expression grave in a way that told me something horrible had happened. I tried to sit up. Dad and Amo reached for me at the same time, then halted and their eyes met. I waited for the inevitable but Dad sank back down with a tight expression and allowed Amo to help me into a sitting position. I sent Dad a grateful smile. He gave a small nod. I knew how much this must cost him.

Mom stirred on the sofa and when her eyes landed on me, her tired face

lit up with relief and she shoved to her feet and rushed over to me. She kissed my forehead several times before she leaned against Dad. Dark shadows spread under her eyes and both Amo and Dad hadn't shaved in days. Dark stubble covered their chin and jawline.

Amo peered down at me with drawn brows as he rubbed my hand gently. "How do you feel?"

His voice was careful and gentle, as if a word spoken too loudly might break me.

I wasn't sure I could speak. My throat felt dry and too tight but after a couple of coughs I pressed out the first tentative words. "I'm alive." I'd thought I would die. It had felt like dying. But I was here. "Where's Nevio?"

The last time I'd talked to him, we'd argued. Maybe he was still angry, though I couldn't imagine that being the case. The memories after my attack were murky. He might have been there afterward but I couldn't put together the pieces of my memory to make sense.

The other, more likely explanation why he wasn't here was him being on a rampage trying to kill everyone who might be responsible for what had happened.

"He's getting coffee," Mom said. "We all didn't sleep much these last few days."

"Days? How long was I unconscious?"

"They kept you under for five days."

For them to do so I must have suffered severe internal injuries and possibly infection. Face your fears was what Dad always said but I was terrified when I looked down my body. I could feel thick bandages around my abdomen and my leg was in a cast.

"Do you know who did it?" I asked instead of the more burning questions in my head.

Amo's mouth tightened, a hateful gleam in his eyes. "Cressida."

I nodded. I had suspected something like that. While my family had many enemies, the timing had been too obvious. Jealousy, or maybe fury over losing her position in the Famiglia, were potent incentives.

"Don't kill her on my behalf, okay? I don't want anyone to die."

Amo looked down, a muscle in his jaw working. I could see how difficult it was for him to fight for composure. Acute fear spread in my body.

I turned to Dad. "Dad."

The look in his eyes told me it was too late to save Cressida. "What

happened?" I glanced toward Amo. "Did you kill her?"

Amo shook his head. "I was on my way here the second your father told me what happened. I wanted to be by your side and I haven't left since then."

I closed my eyes briefly, realization settling in. I knew who my avenging angel had been, the one person who wore this mask with ease. "Nevio."

Amo nodded. "He flew over to New York a day after the attack and returned two days ago."

While I was relieved that it hadn't been Amo who'd killed his own wife, something he would definitely have done if Nevio hadn't been quicker, I felt a deep sadness for Nevio. Eventually all this killing and rage would take the last of his light and plunge him into eternal darkness. "This will make things worse. People in the Famiglia are going to demand blood."

"They can count themselves lucky your brother only killed that woman and not her entire rotten family. That'll have to wait until later," Dad growled.

"Don't kill more people for me. One life is enough."

"For what you lost, her life isn't enough retribution," Amo said in a raw voice.

My brows puckered. "What did I lose?"

Amo looked away, his expression twisted with something very dark. Dad rose to his feet and looked at Mom. "Fina, can you?"

Dad never shied back from a confrontation.

"Will I ever walk again?" Seeing the state of my knee that was the only explanation for their overwhelming sadness. Maybe my knee was shattered so badly, I would never dance again.

Mom's face softened. "Yes. But the doctors can't say about ballet yet. It'll take months for you to regain mobility in your leg." I could tell there was more they hadn't told me yet.

Amo still clutched my hand.

"Maybe you can give us a moment," Mom told Amo and Dad. Amo met my gaze, and the look in his let a heavy weight settle in the pit of my stomach. He kissed the back of my hand then my lips before he rose to his feet. He and Dad walked out of the room.

Mom sank down on the bed beside me. She took both my hands and clutched them tightly. "Your injuries to your abdomen were bad." Her voice wavered and she stopped. "They couldn't save...they had to remove your womb."

I blinked at Mom, trying to understand. “A hysterectomy?”

“Yeah.” Mom’s eyes filled with tears but I still didn’t fully understand. “You won’t be able to...”

I’d read enough of Nino’s medical books and magazines to know every detail of what this meant for me. “Carry a child,” I finished for Mom, and it sank in. Becoming pregnant, having a child, hadn’t been on my mind, and because of Amo and my uncertain future, I’d never given it a thought, but having any chance of it taken away? I suddenly realized that for a future *with Amo*, I might have wanted children, a big messy family with dirty kids who grew up with many animals.

I let out a shuddering breath, feeling a little lost. Mom stretched out beside me and hugged me. She cried against my hair and I gripped her tightly. Finally, I cried too. I cried for a loss of something I’d never really had, a loss for a piece of me that had seemed irrelevant. The loss of a future that could never be. I wasn’t sure how long Mom and I cried together, how long we mourned the loss of a piece of my future, a life that might have been.

The ache was a new kind of pain. One that I’d carry with me for a long time, maybe forever.

A new thought crossed my mind. “Amo needs an heir.”

Mom pulled back, her eyes swollen. “Oh sweetheart. This should be the last of your worries.”

My brows puckered. “But it’s the truth.”

“I saw how he looks at you. He loves you so much. He won’t care about an heir, trust me.”

Maybe. I was so confused, so lost.

“Can you send him in? I want to talk to him.”

“He knows, okay? He knows what your surgery means.”

I shook my head. Maybe he thought he knew. Mom got up and gave me an encouraging smile. “I’ll get him and he’ll tell you what I told you. That it doesn’t matter to him.”

Mom walked out and less than a minute later Amo came back in. His eyes swam with concern as he walked over to me.

I patted my mattress.

Amo perched on the edge as if he was scared of hurting me but I leaned against him, needing his closeness despite how fragile my body felt. He wrapped me in his arms, surrounding me with his warmth and strength like a cocoon of consolation. It felt wonderful, like something I never wanted to

miss again.

I wanted a future with Amo, wanted nothing more but he needed to know that it wasn't a future he'd always had in mind.



Amo

Greta's body tensed in my embrace. I pulled back slightly and looked down at her pale face. Traces of tears shone on her cheeks. I wiped them away with my thumb.

Greta peered up, those dark eyes forlorn. I couldn't imagine what the news of her surgery had done to her.

"You can't ever have kids with me Amo. This time nothing can change that. My body can't hold a baby anymore. If you want an heir, you must choose someone else."

What the hell was she talking about? I cupped her cheeks and softly kissed them. Nothing in this world would separate me from Greta again. "I won't be without you again, Greta. You are mine until I take my last breath. I love you more than everything else in the world."

"The Famiglia is your destiny, Amo. You are meant to be Capo."

I nodded because deep down I knew it to be true. "I'm also meant to love you. I don't need an heir. I need you. Marcella is pregnant with a boy. She's the oldest. He can become Capo. That'll carry on the bloodline too."

I'd always wanted children, but I wanted Greta more, and maybe there were other options to explore eventually. "All that matters now is that you heal quickly so we can marry."

Greta let out a whispy laugh. I kissed her temple. "I love you so much. It kills me that you had to suffer so much. You have the kindest, biggest heart of anyone I know. You don't deserve this."

“Maybe I did.”

I cupped her cheeks. “Fuck no. Don’t ever think like this, okay? I need to know that you’ll be okay.”

“I think I’ll be okay, eventually,” she whispered. “I want to dance again. I want to see my animals again.”

I kissed her forehead. “I know you’ll be. I’ll be with you every step of the way you have to take to heal.”

“Won’t you have to return to New York? You have responsibilities, especially at a time like this.”

“Dad, Valerio and Matteo handle the situation for now. Officially I’m here to negotiate peace.”

“Will there be peace?”

I smiled. “Of course. Our families don’t have a choice. Soon they’ll be one family.”

I had already bought a ring for Greta but had left it in New York. But once I got it back, I’d ask Greta officially for her hand.



For the next ten days, I didn’t leave Greta’s side, but it was time to settle things in the Famiglia. Our soldiers were starting to grow impatient, eager for an explanation for the many arrests. Antonaci and seven of his soldiers were waiting for their punishment in our Famiglia cells. Rumors were making the rounds, especially because of Cressida’s disappearance. The body hadn’t been found. I assumed Nevio had chopped her into tiny pieces.

“Don’t worry about me,” Greta assured me for the hundredth time. At first, I’d refused to leave her in Las Vegas, especially less than a week before Christmas. But my father had insisted I needed to be there during the probably bloodiest meeting in the history of the Famiglia. I knew he was right.

“She’s safe here,” Nino assured me.

“We’ll make sure of it,” Savio said.

Remo had upped the protection surrounding the mansion. I’d slept in the hospital for the last two weeks, only separated from Greta when I went to the toilet or showered. Leaving her now felt wrong.

Adamo touched my shoulder. He'd arrived a few days ago with his wife and son, and he would come to New York with me, Fabiano, Remo and Nevio. The rest would stay in Las Vegas to protect the women and children.

"Go," Greta whispered. I kissed her gently despite everyone around us. Nevio wasn't present anyway. He tried to avoid me, which proved difficult. I wasn't sure how things between him and Greta were at the moment but I had a feeling the tension between them wasn't helping Greta heal.

"I'll be back soon."

I followed Remo, Adamo and Fabiano outside. Nevio was already in the car.

Tumultuous times lay ahead of us. Peace wouldn't happen easily in the minds of our soldiers. But many would be willing to accept it because it meant more safety for their families and more money in their pockets.

Adamo sat down beside me. "I didn't think I'd get the chance to return to New York so quickly and I wish it weren't for such an occasion. I really hope this will lead to peace."

"There will be peace because Greta and I are going to marry."

Adamo shook his head with a chuckle. "I can't believe we might become family. Have you asked Remo yet?"

I glanced at the Falcone Capo. He was looking out of the window but turned to us as if he could feel us talking about him. Our interactions had been civil. We wouldn't miraculously become family, but we'd manage to get along. "No. I won't ask for approval. Greta will be my wife."

"Sure. I get it. I've butted heads with Remo in the past. We don't agree on many things. But Remo will be your father-in-law. Greta loves him, and he loves her. Once the bloody part of this peace deal is over, you'll have to figure out a way to make peace with him. Asking for her hand might be a start."

"If he says no and I marry her anyway, that won't make for a good start, trust me."

"He won't say no."

I gave Adamo a doubtful look. He and I had bonded many years ago during his stay in New York over motocross. He was an avid racer. But once he'd returned to Las Vegas our contact had ceased. He was ten years older so this had been one of the reasons. So far he was the only Falcone man I didn't mind calling family one day.

"Are we talking about the same man?"

“He won’t say no because Greta made her choice and he won’t risk losing her like Serafina’s parents lost her.”

Maybe Adamo was right. I’d cross that unpleasant bridge later. Now another difficult task lay ahead of me.



Dad waited at the airport for us. The private jet had a separate hangar so bystanders weren’t around, which was a good thing considering Dad had ten soldiers as entourage. That Matteo wasn’t with him wasn’t a good sign. He was still out for blood because of what had happened to Isabella and Gianna.

Remo motioned at the gathered men. “This doesn’t look like the beginning of peace to me.”

“Things are still tense,” I said and with a nod toward Nevio, who had his hand on his gun. “And if you don’t keep yourself in check, they’ll get even tenser.”

I headed for Dad. To my surprise Maximus was there. I gave my friend a brief nod before I stopped in front of Dad. “Why all this?”

“Better safe than sorry. There’s been too much bad blood. I want to talk to Remo before I lower any security measures.”

“Luca,” Adamo said with a tight smile. He extended his hand and Dad took it. After that Fabiano briefly shook hands with him, which surprised me. They’d never been fond of each other. This was a sign. I would thank Fabiano later.

Remo and Nevio didn’t bother with pleasantries, and I hadn’t expected them to.

“We meet again. I hope this time your invitation isn’t an ambush,” Remo said.

“Your son left my territory unscathed after he killed Cressida. If I wanted you dead, he would have died that day.”

Nevio scoffed, giving Dad a challenging smile. “You wouldn’t have caught me. You should be grateful I only killed her and not the rest.”

Dad’s jaw clenched. “The reason why you killed her is because Amo and I gave our permission, don’t forget that.”

Nevio got in Dad’s face, a flicker of madness in those dark eyes. “I would

have killed her anyway. And I would kill her again and again if I could. I'd kill every fucker who's even remotely related to the bitch too if it weren't for Greta's feelings for him. Maybe I'll do it one day. If you want to try killing me for it, good luck. I act out of lunatic rage."

Dad smiled as if Nevio was a bothersome fly not worth his troubles. "Trust me, I know."

I wished I had that ability to stay calm in the face of his madness, but Nevio still managed to rile me up.

That guy had the destruction force of an atomic bomb. Remo was a fucking madman. Nevio made his father look like a fucking choir boy.

But for Greta I'd stifle my dislike. For her we would all swallow many difficult pills. Becoming a real family would be a long, bumpy road, and I wasn't sure if all of us would make it to the end.



After we'd dropped off the Falcones at a guest house, Dad and I drove to my parents' house to prepare for the upcoming meeting tomorrow.

"I've gone through plenty of hard times over the years, but this tops it all."

I turned my gaze away from the road. Dad seemed to have aged several years in the last few weeks. His hands around the steering wheel were white from the pressure he put on it.

"I know. Things got out of hand. Thank you for accepting my decision to stay at Greta's side these last couple of weeks."

"You didn't really give me a choice."

"I love her."

Dad let out a deep sigh and turned into the street where the mansion was. "Officially, Nevio killed your wife. On paper she still was your wife, Amo. We haven't officially announced it yet. But someone saw him in the city and Cressida disappeared."

"I should have never married her, then none of this would have happened. I'll never regret anything more than that."

Dad nodded, surprising me. "If I'd known the extent of your connection to Greta, I would have never insisted you do."

“I should have stood my ground and refused, but I was so fixed on becoming Capo that I’d have done anything, only after it was too later, I realized that I couldn’t fucking live without Greta.”

Dad parked the car in front of the house. Two guards sat in a black limousine in front of it. “If we agree on a truce with the Camorra, we’ll have to give our men an explanation as to why.”

“I’m willing to give them the truth because they’ll eventually figure it out anyway once I marry Greta.”

Dad smiled darkly. “I feared you’d marry her.”

“I will. Nothing in this world will stop me. Not you, and not a Falcone either. Greta will be mine.”

Dad leaned back in the seat with a sigh, running his hand through his hair, looking tired. “This could break the Famiglia.”

“You could disown me for being with Greta,” I said even if the words hurt, but nothing could ever hurt as badly as thinking I’d lost Greta, of finding out we’d lost part of our future, and seeing Greta’s face when she realized what had happened.

Dad touched my shoulder. His eyes softening. “I won’t ever disown you, Amo. You are and will always be my son.”

“Some won’t understand.”

Dad nodded. “We’ll try to convince them. And if that fails, we’ll handle it as we’ve always done. Our word is law and they either bow or die.”

It wouldn’t be as easy as that, but that Dad was willing to risk this battle, I was eternally grateful. I hugged him.

“I won’t ever forgive you for making the Falcones family though.”

I let out a raw laugh and pulled back, glad Dad broke this too emotional moment with his dry humor.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Luca

Matteo got in my face. “You allowed the little shit who kidnapped my daughter and wife to traipse into our territory and go around killing people.”

“Cressida got what she deserved.”

Matteo scoffed. Every single of our last fights had been about how I’d handled the situation with the Camorra after Nevio and his two buddies got their hands on Isabella and Gianna. I understood his anger only too well. Fuck, I was the protective madman from the two of us.

“And when will Nevio and Remo get what they deserve, and it’s not a fucking warm welcome in our city. I don’t want them here, not now, not ever. The Falcones attacked someone in our territory, we should retribute.”

Marcella shook her head. “Matteo, that piece of shit and her family had Greta stabbed. The girl probably won’t ever have children.”

Marcella touched her round belly, and swallowed hard. I patted her arm. I didn’t want her to work herself up.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s useless to coddle her. She gets mad at me every time I try,” Maddox said. When Marcella had picked him, the Famiglia was in an uproar. Now Amo’s choice would top that. My children chose love, and it was bringing the Famiglia to the brink of an internal war.

“We’re lucky Nevio didn’t burn down New York and every fucking member of the Famiglia. He’s fucking crazy. Even worse than his father. Fuck, Luca. You can’t allow them to be part of our meeting. We’re at war. And I don’t want peace with these bastards.”

“There can’t be war,” Marcella said. “Amo won’t live without Greta, not after what happened, not again. If we don’t negotiate a truce, we’ll lose Amo.”

He loves Greta like you love Gianna and Dad loves Mom.”

“And I love you,” Maddox reminded her. She rolled her eyes, but smiled to soften the blow. It was still hard to believe that my little girl had picked a biker, an enemy of the past. It was ironic that Amo too had to choose an enemy. I wasn’t sure if this was sign of bad parenting on my and Aria’s part, or not.

“Matteo, we need this peace. Gianna and Isabella will be safer without a war.”

“They will be the safest if we kill all the Falcones.”

“That won’t happen.”

“You can’t really consider making them family. I won’t be in the same room with Nevio Falcone without killing him.”

Matteo turned on his heel, stalked out and almost bumped into Amo, then he shook his head and left without another word.

Amo turned to me with a grimace. “He’s not taking it well.”

“He wants to protect Gianna and Isabella.”

“They’ll be safer with the Falcones as family.”

“I can talk to them,” Marcella suggested. “I’m sure Gianna and Isabella will vote for peace. They don’t care about revenge. And Matteo will listen to what they say.”

She pushed to her feet.

“You are the only heavily pregnant woman who wears eight-inch heels,” Amo said with a tight smile.

“Four and a half inches, Amo. Men really need to measure right. And I’m six months along, I won’t pop out this baby tomorrow, so chill. We have other things to worry about.”

Maddox gave her a grin I didn’t want to dwell on.

Marcella kissed my cheek before she patted Amo’s chest and whispered something in his ear that made him swallow and nod. Then she stalked out.

“Maddox,” I said before he could follow her.

His blond brows pulled together. “What’s up?”

“You mentioned that you would become part of the Famiglia if I ever allowed it.”

Maddox froze. Making a former biker a Made Man would create new waves, but I wanted to show strength and Maddox had proven his loyalty over and over again. I needed every loyal man at my side that I could find.

“Sure,” he said slowly, glancing to Marcella who had appeared in the

doorway again.

“Then I’m going to ask for your oath very soon—if we all survive tomorrow’s meeting.”

Maddox nodded wide-eyed. “It’s an honor, Luca. I’ll have your and Amo’s back tomorrow, don’t worry.”

Marcella bit her lip, smiling proudly. She sent me a thankful smile before she and Maddox left.

“That’s been long overdue,” Amo said.

“Sometimes it takes me a long time to make the right decision,” I said. I still regretted my decision about Cressida.

Amo nodded. “Tomorrow we can try to make it right.”

It would take more than one bloody meeting to make things right. The months and years to come would be hard. Keeping the Famiglia united, and uniting two families that hated each other. Just thinking about it gave me a headache. But for Amo I’d do it.

Amo’s face had lost the last hints of boyishness. This world didn’t leave room for it. “I’ll always be grateful for what you’re doing for me tomorrow.”

I touched his shoulder and squeezed. My decisions from the past had ultimately led to this point. I should have made a bloody statement sooner. I wouldn’t show mercy this time.



Aria wrung her hands.

“Last time you ordered a meeting at the Yonkers power plant I didn’t sleep all night. I was terrified of losing you.” She swallowed hard, her eyes full of fear. “Tonight I’ll have to worry about you, about Amo, Marcella, Valerio...” She closed her eyes briefly and when she opened them, the determined gleam in them made me shake my head. She had made up her mind about something and I had a feeling I wouldn’t like it.

“Let me go with you.”

“No.”

“Luca, please. I need to be there with you, with my family.”

“No.”

She pressed her palms against my chest. No matter what she did she

wouldn't soften my resolve. Tonight's meeting was too dangerous for her to be present. "Luca, I know you're worried that things escalate and I die. But if things escalate, and all of you die, my whole heart dies, and then I'd rather die by your side than live on without my family."

"Aria, I love you more than anything else in the world, and nothing, absolutely nothing will convince me to have you there. If I die, if we all die, I still want you to live your life."

"What life?" She glared but then her expression shifted. "Would you want me to remarry?"

Possessiveness raged through me, as Aria had intended. I'd never not be madly jealous at the thought of anyone having her. She gave me a knowing look, because she'd been certain of my reaction. I loved her absolutely, and wanted her to be happy, but still my cold, possessive heart couldn't bear the idea of her ever being with another man even once I was dead. "I know what you're trying to do, love, but the answer is still no. Tonight might make history, and if that's the case, I don't want you around."

"You'll need every trustworthy man at your side. I don't want protection if that means you'll be low on men."

"I have enough men," I said. But of course, Aria had seen the problem. There were many people I needed to protect. Romero's family, Matteo's family, Aria. Though, Matteo had refused to join the meeting. He was still pissed and didn't want to be near the Falcones. Matteo had always been by my side, no matter how dangerous or difficult the situation. That this decision might drive a wedge between us hurt like a fucking knife in the heart, but I'd made up my mind and wouldn't change it again. I owed it to Amo, and his girl too.

Aria began to shake her head. I touched her cheek. "I never thought I'd say this, but considering that we'll create a bond with the Camorra that's stronger than ever before, I accepted Fabiano's suggestion that he would watch you. Adamo will be there as well."

Aria's eyes grew wide in surprise. "You're accepting help from the Camorra?"

"Not in my fight against the Traditionalists, should it arise. That's my responsibility. The Falcones can kill the people that hurt Greta, but the rest who might want to revolt are mine. The Famiglia is mine to deal with but if Adamo and Fabiano's help guarantees your safety and that of your sisters and their children, then I'm going to trust them."

I glanced at my watch. We needed to leave soon. Before the official meeting, I'd meet with the most loyal men in my rows.

The bell rang and glance at the camera showed Fabiano and Adamo. Fuck. If someone had told me this would happen a month ago, I would have silenced them with a bullet to the head.

Amo joined me in the lobby, patting Aria's back when she hugged him tightly as if he were a small boy. For her our children would always remain her babies. It was difficult for her to see them in danger, and it wasn't easy for me either. But this was our life.

I opened the door and let Fabiano and Adamo in. Aria tore away from Amo and went over to her brother, hugging him too. Fabiano briefly hugged her but public displays of affection weren't his thing.

I stepped up to Adamo. "This is a major show of trust. I hope you know this."

"I do, we both do." Adamo glanced at Fabiano who nodded. "Remo wants peace. We all want peace. For Greta. For Amo. For all of us."

I pulled Aria against me. She smiled sadly. "Don't worry about me, okay? I'll be fine."

The bell rang again and I tensed, not expecting anyone else. The camera showed Matteo, Isabella and Gianna in front of the door.

I let them in. Isabella gave me a quick smile before she headed toward Amo. She hugged him. "I'm sorry for what happened to Greta."

"Thanks, Isa."

Gianna shoved Amo's shoulder. "You have a lot of explaining to do. You've always been a troublemaker."

"I guess I have that from you," Amo said. Gianna huffed and went over to Aria.

I turned to Matteo who hovered in the doorway, looking wary. "Good job sending your daughter over to us for a guilt trip. Marcella has a way with words that breaks everyone's resolve."

I clapped his shoulder. "I'm glad to have you by my side." I narrowed my eyes. "You won't use tonight to sink your knife into Nevio, right?"

Matteo's lips thinned. He nodded toward Isabella and Gianna. "They want peace. It was a two to one vote."

"We should leave," Amo said, motioning at his watch. He was right.

"Valerio!"

Gianna rolled her eyes. "That boy will be late even for his own death."

Valerio jogged down the stairs in that moment. “I have a huge party planned for my eighteenth in January. I definitely won’t die any time soon.”

I realized this moment marked the end of an era. Even our youngest was no longer a child. He had been inducted for a while, but his attitude had always made me see him as a boy. In more than one way he reminded me of Matteo. Now he’d fight by my side. He gave me a wink and tight smile, tightening his gun belt around his chest.

“Let’s go,” I ordered.

Aria’s parting gaze tore at my chest. I would bring all of our children back to her. I’d give my last drop of blood to protect them. Today our family would stand together.

Chapter *Thirty-Four*



Amo

Before the official meeting, we met with the people Dad and I trusted the most in a small hall adjacent to the main hall of the Yonkers power plant: soldiers, Captains and Underbosses that were loyal to the core.

As I scanned the men before me, I was surprised by the number of them. Dad smiled grimly at me.

“That’s what I’m aiming for. One day I want to have this kind of loyalty from my men.”

“These men are loyal to you too. That’s why they’re here.”

I nodded at Growl and his sons, Romero and Flavio, Matteo, Maddox, Cassio and his sons, Orazio and his son, Demetrio and his son. Dad had given his trust to many of these men in advance and they’d repaid him, and found a home in the Famiglia. They now repaid him with loyalty daily. But what we’d ask of them today was more than ever.

“Welcome, my friends, and thank you for coming here so quickly,” Dad said. He rarely uttered the words thank you, but tonight’s activities required it.

Nevio and Remo were still hidden.

Their immediate presence would have caused too much confusion and bad blood.

Dad gave me a nod and I stepped forward. We'd decided I would explain the situation to our men. Soon whispers arose among them as I told them why we were here tonight. It was strange to reveal so much about something this private, something that many still regarded as a weakness: feelings for a woman. But the men here had all lost their hearts to a woman so I knew they'd understand.

"Let me get this straight," Cassio said in his usual controlled voice. "We're going to have peace with the Camorra again and allow them to kill a few of our men tonight."

"It's their revenge to dish out," I said. Dad nodded. Not a hint of doubt reflected on his face though I knew he still harbored some.

Cassio blew out a long breath and exchanged a look with a few others. "I have to admit, I think peace is necessary, but this is a peculiar way to go about it."

"The circumstances require it," I said.

After a few more discussions, the consensus was that the present men were willing to follow our judgment. It was the first step in the right direction. One step of many.

"I'll ask Remo and Nevio to join us now," I said. I could tell that the men were still a bit confused because I was leading the meeting but Dad had decided we needed to split power between us more. I was eager to take over more responsibilities but knew tonight was a difficult time to start. Not everyone would be happy about.

I went to another smaller room where Remo and Nevio had been waiting. The moment they joined us, the tension in the room skyrocketed. It certainly didn't help that Matteo gave Nevio a look that suggested he was on the verge of slicing him open. To my surprise Nevio ignored it completely. Only his eyes revealed his willingness to kill us all.

Remo even managed to keep a civil face despite Growl's presence. Maybe tonight would go more smoothly than expected.



Dad, Valerio and I stepped on the platform. The hall was filled to the maximum with Made Men. The air was ripe with nervous energy. Matteo, Maximus and Romero dragged the seven men who were involved in the attack on Greta onto the stage, and for a moment my own need for bloodshed was so strong, I had to look away from Antonaci or risk losing control. If I fucked up our plan, I'd kick myself. Dad was risking so much with this, I had to stay in control.

Dad must have sensed my conflict because he took the lead again and faced our soldiers. He explained the situation to them and soon the noise level grew to unpleasant heights.

"Silence!" I roared, losing my patience.

The last few whispers died when I stepped to the very edge of the platform. "As my father has said. We have negotiated a new peace with the Camorra for all of your safety and prosperity. Many of you have been longing for peace. But it comes with a price."

"You want peace because you want the Falcone girl!" one of the men shouted.

"What about your wife? Where's she? There are rumors that a Falcone killed her."

"I was about to divorce Cressida, and ask Greta Falcone for her hand." New whispers arose. "Cressida tried to have Greta killed."

"She was the enemy, so what?"

"She is the woman I chose to be mine," I growled, fixing the man who had spoken with a glower. "And nobody touches what's mine. I allowed Nevio to avenge his sister as I did with the men who hurt my sister many years ago. And tonight the Capo of the Camorra and his son are here to finish their revenge with our help as a sign of our new truce and show of our unity as a soon to be family."

Remo and Nevio stepped up on the stage in that moment on Dad's sign.

I motioned Remo and Nevio to join my father and me at the front. "We'll be stronger than before. We'll create new, stronger bonds and we'll beat down our enemies with utmost cruelty."

Remo gave me a twisted grin. I imagined he appreciated my words.

"What about you, Matteo," an older soldier stepped forward. "That Falcone boy kidnapped your wife and daughter with his friends and you tell me you're going to become family?"

Matteo's answering smile had my pulse spike again. Nevio still managed

to appear completely unperturbed. I wondered if Remo had given him a sedative. That crazy fucker had never controlled his rage before.

“I don’t like to dwell in the past and neither should you,” Matteo said. “Neither Isabella nor Gianna were harmed physically that day. The matter is settled. We spilled enough blood in the months that followed. Now we’ll settle our differences and join forces as a very messed up family.”

A few men snickered. Matteo always managed to find humor in the most twisted situations.

“I think it’s time to deal with these men now.” Dad motioned at the men responsible for Greta’s injuries.

Nevio braced himself beside me as if he were ready to pounce on them and tear their throats out with his bare teeth.

“Let us hear what Antonaci has to say! He must get the chance to defend himself,” one of the Traditionalists shouted.

I scanned the room to count the men who nodded their agreement. Maybe a third of our men.

“This isn’t a fucking democracy,” Matteo said.

But I stepped forward and bent over Antonaci, my gaze locking on his. He didn’t look away. It took all my willpower to simply remove the tape over his mouth and step back.

“The Camorra killed my daughter! He killed my daughter!” He tossed his chin at Nevio, who bared his teeth in a scary grin. “It was an absolute pleasure.”

“Your daughter tried to kill Greta Falcone,” Dad said, trying to defuse the situation, which was a lost cause. “Nobody attacks without my permission. And we don’t ever attack women, not even at war.”

“Why don’t you tell everyone what really happened? That your son cheated on his daughter with that little Falcone whore?” another Traditionalist screamed.

Rage blinded my vision as I jumped off the platform before anyone could stop me, shoved into the crowd and slammed the man to the ground. My hand wrapped around his throat. It was all too familiar. I’d often wondered why Dad had used his bare hands to kill a man who insulted Mom. But feeling the frantic throbbing of panic against my fingertips as I choked the asshole was fucking beautiful and so much more satisfactory than the detached use of a knife or gun.

“Never speak of her again, understood?”

“You let Falcone kill your own wife. You should be ashamed.”

“She had long stopped being my wife, and she’d never really been it in the true sense of the word. If Nevio hadn’t killed her, I would have done it and I would have enjoyed every second of it.”

Antonaci let out a cackle. “I hope you’ll enjoy her barren body. No babies for you.”

I was on my feet before he’d finished his sentence and stormed back onto the stage. Nevio was quicker. He sat atop Antonaci and gripped his throat, nose to nose, a wide grin on his face.

I reached his side when Remo threw a knife at the man I’d choked moments before, impaling it in his throat, causing blood to spew out and cover everyone around.

“I could tell he was going to say something to piss me off again,” Remo said with that twisted grin.

Nevio pressed his fingers into Antonaci’s eyes but I shoved him aside. He looked ready to attack me too. “Not his eyes,” I growled. “I want to see his suffering in them.”

Nevio smiled as if for the first time in his life, he didn’t want to kill me. I held out my hand and Maximus tossed me a hammer and a few nails.

“He’s mine, don’t forget,” Nevio said in an eager voice.

“Don’t worry. There’s going to be enough left of him for you to torture.” Once I’d impaled Antonaci’s knees, shins and palms with nails, I swallowed my own rage and stepped back to allow Nevio his turn.

If I’d thought he’d been surprisingly controlled before, I now got why. He’d held back his rage to have it for Antonaci.

When Remo and Nevio were done with the seven men the stage and everyone on it was covered in blood. It dripped down the stage onto the ground below, reached the shoes of the soldiers standing too close.

“The Famiglia and the Camorra stand together from this day on. We’ll be stronger. We won’t tolerate disobedience. You’re either loyal or you’ll die,” I shouted.

Chapter *Thirty-Five*



Mom watched me take one hard-earned step after the other. I worked even harder now that Amo was in New York. I wanted to make progress so he wasn't so worried about me anymore. I wanted this to be his Christmas present.

"Do you have a moment?" Mom asked.

I limped over to her with my crutches and sank down beside her. "Is something wrong?"

Mom shook her head quickly and took my hand. "I talked to the doctors who did your surgery and also a few other specialists."

I frowned. Had she not told me everything? Was there more? What if my injuries were even worse than I thought?

"Don't look so scared. This is positive. I think it is." She let out a nervous laugh, and touched my cheek. "When they did the surgery on you, they didn't have to remove your ovaries."

I nodded, because I knew that. It was why I didn't have to suffer through an early menopause.

"That means you can have your own babies."

“I could, but I can’t carry them.”

Mom nodded, her hold on my hand tightening. “You could use a surrogate.”

I began to shake my head. That would require an amount of trust in a person that was difficult to achieve. The idea that a stranger had my baby inside of her and could possibly hurt it...

“If you trust me, I’d gladly carry a baby or babies for you.”

My lips parted in utter shock. “Mom.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “I talked to the doctors. My age won’t be a problem because we’re not using my old eggs, only my womb and that’s still fine.”

Mom was only forty-one. Chances were high she could still conceive too. “You hated being pregnant.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It was. You threw up so much when you were pregnant with Giulio and you told me your first pregnancy with Nevio and me was incredibly hard on your body.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let me give you this gift, okay? Nothing’s worse than seeing your child suffer. Trust me, I want nothing more than to give you the chance to become a mother yourself, and you can experience the pregnancy through me, can be there when I give birth.”

“You really thought it through.”

I was completely overwhelmed. I hadn’t spared another thought on children, hadn’t dared to do so. I’d focused on walking and maybe dancing again, because that was something in my grasp.

“You don’t have to decide today, or tomorrow, or even next year. Just know that I want to do this for you.”

I threw my arms around her. “I can’t think right now. Thank you, Mom. Thank you so much.”



It was the day before Christmas and I was practicing walking with my crutches under Kiara’s watchful eyes in Mom’s yoga room again when Nevio

stepped into the room. Surprise washed over me. I hadn't expected them to be back again.

Nevio stuffed his hands into the pockets of his black cargo pants, hovering in the doorway. He had avoided talking to me since the attack. I had heard only figments of what had gone down in New York. Nevio looked as he always did when he was with me, not like the monster he let out more and more.

"Can you give us a moment?" he asked. Kiara nodded. She touched his arm briefly as she walked past him.

I resisted the urge to ask where Amo was. Nevio obviously wanted to be alone with me, and he deserved my full attention. He wasn't used to sharing it.

"Won't you come closer?" I asked.

Nevio strode toward me, his eyes lingering on my cast before he met my gaze. "I know you don't want to hear it but I killed everyone who did this to you. I poured all of my rage into it. For you."

I smiled and released my crutches to hug him. Nevio quickly wrapped his arms around me, obviously worried I'd fall. "I know that's how you show me your love."

"You're really going to leave Las Vegas?"

I peered up into his haunted eyes. "I have to follow my heart. We can see each other all the time now that there won't be war anymore."

"It's not the same. You'll have a new family."

I let out a tight laugh, though I felt more like crying. "I'll never replace you and our family. And creating my own family won't be so easy." I touched the bandage over my abdomen that was hidden by my wide dress.

Nevio's mouth twisted. "Fuck, Greta, that's not what I meant. I wish I could do something."

"Don't let the dark swallow you just because I'm not there to watch over you. One day you'll find someone who'll shine brightly."

Nevio shook his head with a dark laugh. "I'll try to dip my feet into the light on occasion, but don't expect me to have feelings for anyone, Greta. Even if I hadn't been averse to the idea of it before, seeing what your feelings for Vitiello did is a huge deterrence."

I rolled my eyes.

"So you're not mad at me?"

"I was never mad at you."

“Really?”

He shrugged. “I’m raging mad at Vitiello.”

“Don’t be. I want you to try to get along.”

“You’re asking a lot from me.”

“I know. It could be my Christmas present.”

Nevio’s gaze slanted to the doorway. He must have heard steps because Amo stepped in a moment later. I gave him a weak smile, my heart filling with longing. After having spent two weeks together in hospital, being separated for several days had seemed like eternity, which was irrational considering we’d been apart longer than that before.

Nevio released me slowly. “Can you stand?”

Amo crossed the room before I got the chance to answer and put his hand on my back to steady me. “I can take over.”

A look passed between them and Nevio stepped back with a strange smile. “Take good care of her. You saw what I did on stage.” He gave me a wink and disappeared. Those words, though part threat, had been his way of a peace offering. The best Christmas present ever.

Amo cupped my cheeks and lowered his lips to mine. The kiss was gentle and careful. I still felt a little frail so I was glad for his consideration. “How are you feeling?”

“A little better every day. I can’t wait to be rid of the cast so I can start mobilizing my knee.”

“You will dance again.”

I nodded, because I believed it too.

Amo cleared his throat. “I know today isn’t the best time and this isn’t a good place but I don’t want to wait anymore.”

My brows puckered then darted up when Amo got down on one knee. He pulled out a ring from his pocket and held it up between us. My lips formed an O as I stared at the beautiful piece of jewelry. It was a delicate rose gold ring with an amethyst center stone in a color that was a beautiful pinkish lilac tone. It was surrounded by smaller white diamonds.

“When I saw it in the shop window, the color of the stone reminded me of the tutu you wore when I first saw you dance in your studio.”

He shifted the ring so it caught the light and became a bit lighter in color—indeed almost my tutu.

My smile widened but my heart still felt as if it might jump out of my chest.

Amo cleared his throat and locked gazes with me. “Greta, I don’t want to spend a single day without you. I want you by my side. I’ve always admired my parents’ bond and their unwavering love, and I know our marriage will be like that. Will you marry me?”



It was the first time these words left my lips and it felt as if it marked a new beginning, wiping out the many wrong turns I’d taken in the past. I had no doubt Greta was the path I was meant to follow.

She covered her mouth with her fingers and swallowed audibly, before she finally nodded. “Yes. Yes!”

I pushed the ring on her finger, relieved when it fit perfectly. I didn’t even have it altered. I’d stumbled upon it by chance like I’d stumbled upon the gorgeous ballerina.

I pushed to my feet and wrapped my arms around Greta’s waist, lifting her off the ground with as much care as I could. Her arms snaked around my neck and we kissed.

After a while we pulled apart. “I thought maybe we can marry this May. By that time, you should be healed enough to walk down the aisle without trouble. Of course I wouldn’t mind carrying you either but I guess that’s not how you imagined your wedding day.”

Greta gave me a sheepish smile. “I never imagined my wedding.”

My eyebrows rose. “That’s a blow to my confidence.”

She laughed. “I never allowed myself to dream about it because it seemed out of reach.”

“It isn’t anymore. We can marry. Our fathers agreed on peace. The Famiglia stands behind the decision and the Camorra probably won’t doubt

your father's decision either."

Greta narrowed her eyes in thought. "Did you have to kill many to make this happen?"

"A few had to die, but most of the Traditionalists allowed us to persuade them with certain concessions."

"Concessions?"

I shrugged. "They cling to their traditions, hence the name. Dad agreed to make the bloody sheets obligatory once more and to put a stronger focus on arranged marriages again. The sanctity of marriage was a big point."

"So we'll have to present sheets after our wedding night."

I grimaced. "It's expected, yes. Maybe we could figure out a way around it—"

Greta gave a resolute shake of her head. "No. I don't want an exemption. I want to show your men that I'm willing to respect their rules." She bit her lip. "But that means you'll have to wait before we can have sex."

"I would have waited anyway. I want to do this right. A few more months won't kill me."

Greta tilted her head up and I bent down to kiss her. "Did you talk to my parents yet?"

"That's next up on my list. I wanted to ask you first."

"Do you want me to come with you for moral support?"

"I'll be fine. You keep practicing so you can walk down the aisle."

I walked out. Kiara was still in front of the door. "I'm glad you two found each other even if the way to be together was painful."

I dipped my head in thanks. "Where can I find Remo?"

"I'll take you to him," Nino said, appearing out of nowhere.

I gave him a smirk. "I guess I'm not allowed to roam the mansion on my own yet?"

"You just talked to my wife alone. That's a great show of trust."

"You were close by."

Nino gave me a cold smile but he didn't look particularly unfriendly. "Some habits are difficult to lose."

"Trust must be earned, I agree. But none of your women will ever be in danger around me."

Nino didn't comment but he led me into the common area of the house where most of the Falcone clan had gathered. It was a chaotic assembly. To top it off, Gemma was trying to stop her little daughter, who was laughing

hysterically, from tearing at her hair.

I tore my gaze away and turned my attention to Remo.

“Can I have a word with you?”

Serafina came in from another room in that moment. “And you too?”

Serafina immediately came toward me and Remo followed. “Where can we talk in private?”

Serafina gave me a smile as if she knew exactly what I was going to say. Remo’s enthusiasm was nonexistent.

“There are no secrets in this house. You might as well pop the question right here and spare us the less accurate retellings later,” Savio said. Gemma shoved the toddler toward Savio so he could bounce her on his leg and calm her.

I shrugged. “I asked Greta for her hand and she said yes.”

“Some might consider it disrespectful not to ask me as her father first.”

“That’s a rule we follow in the Famiglia but I know you’re more progressive in the Camorra so I tried to adapt to your local customs.”

Remo gave me a sharp smile. “Ahh, already being rude when the ink on our truce hasn’t even dried yet.”

Serafina touched my arm and gave me a warm smile. “I’m happy for you and Greta. Now you better make her happy.”

“This isn’t the Christmas present I was hoping for,” Remo muttered.

Nevio sauntered over to me, and I couldn’t help but be wary. I remembered how he’d separated Greta and me last time.

“You heard my mother. Be good to her or I’ll be very unpleasant.” He didn’t mention his actions on stage again, and he didn’t have to. I’d remember that meeting all my life, for various reasons.

“No knife in my side this time?”

Nevio shook his head. “Not from me this time.” He clucked his tongue.

“I’m sure there are enough people out there who would love to stab him,” Massimo said dryly.

“He’ll be family. I’ll have to protect him, I guess.”

My lips curled in a condescending smile. “Thanks, I can protect myself. As long as you keep your crazy outbursts away from me, I’ll be fine.”

Nevio bared his teeth in that crazy fucker grin of his. “Will try my best.”

The sound of crutches carried over to us and a moment later Greta came in with Kiara. “Everything all right here?” She looked between me, her father and brother.

Remo walked past me and kissed her forehead. “Now I’ll have to make sure New York is a safe place for you.”

Greta smiled and hugged him.

Chapter *Thirty-Six*



Once my cast was removed and the doctors had cleared me for travel, six weeks after the attack, Dad allowed me to fly to New York for the first time.

Amo had to fly back to New York a week ago, which had taken considerable convincing on my part, but he needed to show presence in the Famiglia. This would be the first time I would meet his family and his best friend. I was nervous but also excited. It was still hard to grasp that New York would be my home soon.

Mom joined me on the flight and because of that, Dad did too. Mom wanted to help Aria with wedding preparations, since I still wasn't fit enough to rush from one location to the next. I was happy to give them plenty of freedom with their decisions. Mom knew my style so I was certain I would be happy with the outcome. Dad would meet with Luca for their first meeting as future in-laws. The thought still seemed strange and I was a tad worried about their encounter though Dad had assured me it would be fine.

Amo waited for us at the airport. I still needed to use crutches, though I could walk a few steps without them. Bending my knee was still difficult and would take weeks of more physiotherapy before I would be able to walk

without a noticeable limp.

Amo lifted me off the ground when he reached me and kissed me. At once I felt a sense of utter happiness that let me forget the hardships of my knee injury.

Amo put me back down, but didn't release me. I'd missed him so I was eager for his closeness. "My parents are expecting us for dinner."

"What a pleasure," Dad said. Mom elbowed his side but he didn't react.

I sat with Amo in the front of the car, his hand holding mine. Dad ignored our displays of affection.

My heartrate picked up when we pulled up in front of the Vitiello home. The last time I'd been there I had been anxious for very different reasons. Now I worried whether the Vitiellos would like me. I had my family in Las Vegas, but I knew life in New York would be easier if I got along with Amo's family, not to mention that it would mean a lot to him too.

Amo gave me a reassuring smile and helped me out of the car. Before we reached the steps leading up to the front door, it opened and Aria stood in the doorway. Her warm smile hit me like sunshine and relieved my anxiety at once. I smiled up at her while Amo helped me climb the stairs.

Aria didn't try to hug me, though Amo had mentioned that she was a hugger. Maybe once I knew her better, I could hug her. "It's so wonderful to see you again."

Luca stepped up behind his wife. He gave me a small smile. I knew he was an imposing man, someone who scared many, but because he reminded me of Amo and because I was used to my father and brother, I actually didn't feel wary of him. "Greta. Welcome to our home."

"Thank you. It's a pleasure."

Amo led me past his parents and into the living room so our parents could greet each other. His brother Valerio, a man who must be Marcella's husband Maddox and Marcella who was very heavily pregnant sat on the couch. They all got up when we entered. Even Marcella managed to lift her remarkably big belly quickly. Seeing her, I remembered Mom's offer. I hadn't told Amo about it yet. I'd needed time to process it myself and decide what I wanted to do about it. But I knew this wasn't something I could decide alone.

Marcella came over to me. "Good to see you. If you ever want to talk about my brother's annoying nature, or anything else, call me."

"Thank you."

"I'm glad my brother finally marries a decent woman."

Maddox shoved Valerio who only laughed. “Ignore him. The filter between his brain and mouth isn’t working. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m not easily offended. My brother doesn’t have any kind of filter between his brain and mouth.”

“Or knife hand,” Amo added.

We all laughed and I relaxed even more. I could tell that I would feel welcome in Amo’s family. Maybe it wouldn’t take long until it would feel like my family too.



Dad didn’t allow Amo and me to sleep in the same room just like he hadn’t in the weeks prior. Since I didn’t want to test his patience, I accepted his order, even if it was ridiculous considering Amo and I had already shared a bed. But I noticed that Amo seemed almost relieved about it. Maybe he worried about his abilities to stay honorable and not claim my virginity before our wedding night.

Mom, Dad and I slept in a suite in the Mandarin like last time.

When I limped out of my room into the living area of the suite very early in the morning because I couldn’t sleep, I found Dad on the sofa, staring into the dark. I limped over to him and sank down close beside him. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

“I never thought I would have to let you go.”

“You make it sound as if we can’t see each other. I’m just a flight away.”

Dad looked at me. In the dark it was difficult to make out the details of his expression but I knew him well enough to realize he was worried. “I’ll be safe.”

“Safer than under my watch hopefully.”

I put my hand on his scarred one. “It wasn’t your fault. Nobody could have suspected this. I don’t blame you or Amo or even the guards. Sometimes bad things happen.”

“They shouldn’t happen to you. I need you to be safe and happy.”

“I’m happy most of the time. Sometimes the attack haunts me, especially because my body’s still not fully recovered but I’m a Falcone, Dad. I’ll

survive this and come out stronger, right?”

Dad chuckled. “Right.” He fell silent. “I really want to cling to my dislike of Amo. But sometimes when I see him looking at you with that sappy adoration I can’t help but tolerate him.”

I stifled a laugh and squeezed Dad’s hand in thanks. We sat like that for a while before I spoke again. “Did Mom tell you about her offer?”

“She did.” His voice was gentle and loving, a very rare thing even around me. I bit my lip. “I’m thinking of taking Mom up on her offer.”

“You should,” Dad said quietly. “Your mother wants to give you this.” He swallowed. “I could only exact brutal revenge. That’s what I can do, but your mother’s gift is far more precious than mine.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder. “The both of you have always done everything you could to make me happy, and I’ll always be grateful for it. No matter where I live in the world, a part of my heart will always stay in Vegas with you and the rest of my family.”

Dad pressed a kiss to my head. “You should go to sleep. Amo picks you up in a couple of hours.”

“Are you angry that I’m meeting Maximus and even Growl and his family?”

“My grudges of the past don’t have to be yours. As long as you don’t expect me to make peace with my half-brother too.”

“Maybe one day you’ll want to.”

Dad didn’t comment. “We can all count ourselves lucky if I manage not to kill Luca for insisting on the bloody sheet tradition. Everything else would be a miracle.”

“I’m fine with the sheets.”

I bit my lip. “You sent sheets of your first night with Mom to the Outfit Capo and her parents, so I think you’ll be brave enough to see my wedding night sheets.”

“If I’d known my future daughter would find out about this and use it against me, I would have reconsidered my decision.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Mom said, stepping out of the bedroom in her white nightgown and messy bed-hair. “You got a kick out of it.”

With a smile, I returned to my own bed, leaving my parents to their arguing. Dad was right. I needed to sleep.



Amo

“Remo will cause a scene when we present the sheets,” Dad said.

Mom shrugged. “You didn’t want to see Marci’s sheets either.”

“They wouldn’t have been red anyway,” Marci said, balancing a small bowl with chips on her belly. Before her pregnancy she wouldn’t have touched these fatty carbs with a ten foot pole.

Mom gave me a nervous look. “Your father can give you tips on how to create false bloody sheets. You aren’t the first couple that consummated their bond before their wedding.”

I didn’t want to discuss the details of my parents’ wedding night. “I didn’t consummate anything. I’ll wait until the wedding.”

Dad gave me a surprised look and Marci even put her chips away to give me an incredulous stare.

“Oh my God, Amo, I didn’t peg you a romantic gentleman.”

My lips curled. “I respect Greta.”

Maddox grinned in a dirty way. “I respect your sister too. But she would have kicked my ass if I’d made her wait this long for it.”

Dad sent Maddox a look that would have sent many people running.

“It’s our peace offering for the hurt pride of the Traditionalists.”

“I don’t want to discuss this anymore.” But one thing was sure, I didn’t want to share any piece of my first night with Greta with anyone.



Greta buzzed with excitement when we drove to the Trevisan dog shelter.

“You’re more eager than before you met my family.”

Greta looked shocked. “That’s not true. I was too anxious to be excited before I met your family, but animals always like me, so this will be easier. And if Maximus and his family love animals as much as I do, then I’ll get along with them too.”

“I doubt there are many people who don’t like you.”

Greta remained silent, her gaze distant. I could tell that her mood had changed and I wondered what had caused it.

“My mother offered to carry our baby.”

I almost swerved off the road. I hit the brakes and pulled the car to a stop on the shoulder of the road. I turned to Greta, not sure if I’d heard her right. “What?”

“Mom would carry the baby in her womb if we used IVF to fertilize my eggs with your sperm.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to think about anyone’s womb, and the rest hardly made sense too.

Greta took my hand and explained everything again, even slower, as if I were a small child. When she was done, I was completely stunned. “That’s possible?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you want to do it?”

I couldn’t deny it. The prospect of Greta and me having a child one day made me deliriously happy. Yet, I didn’t want to push Greta toward something she wasn’t comfortable with. Her expression was difficult to read. “What about you?”

One corner of her mouth tilted up. “Answering a question with a question in turn...But I started it, so I guess it’s only fair.”

I’d promised myself I would be honest with Greta. My first marriage had been full of lies and deceit, I didn’t want this with Greta. “I want to do it, yes.”

Greta blew out a breath and gave me a small smile. “Me too. Not now, but in a few years.”

I leaned over, cupped her head and pulled her in for a kiss.



When we pulled up in front of the Trevisan' house, Maximus was already waiting in front of it. He and Sara lived in an apartment in the city close to her parents and siblings, but Maximus came here often. His hands in his pockets, I could see the tension in his body when I got out of the car. I wasn't sure if it was because of Greta and their families' history or because things with Sara were still difficult.

He strode over to us while I lifted Greta out of my G-Class. I didn't want her to jump out yet. Her knee still needed time to heal.

Maximus patted my back then he gave Greta a cautious smile and righted the cap he was wearing as if he needed to occupy his hands.

Her answering smile was without reservations. "It's so nice to finally meet you. Amo's told me so much about you so it's great to finally see you in real life."

Some of the tension leaked from Maximus. "Sadly, Amo has been very close-lipped about you for a long time so you were the mystery woman."

Greta laughed. "It was complicated."

"That's one way to put it," I said.

Greta's entire face lit up when she turned her attention to the closest enclosure where several dogs were begging for attention. She gave Maximus' a hopeful expression. "Can I go over to them?"

He shrugged and motioned her to go ahead. "These are the socialized ones, so you can even pat them if they don't shy back. The dogs in the kennels farther down are unpredictable though."

Greta nodded and slowly walked over to the fence. She still couldn't bend her knee fully so she was limping.

Maximus stepped up beside me and squeezed my shoulder. "I never quite got it but seeing how you look at her now, I get why you went through all the trouble."

"It was worth it."

Maximus' eyes reflected his own conflict.

"It'll be worth it with Sara too."

"I know," he said quietly. "And I'm doing all I can to make it work."

"Maybe she and Greta can become friends. Sara is pretty quiet and thoughtful like Greta."

Maximus nodded. "That might work. She's at her parents' house today. Primo's on his way here. Mom has prepared lunch, in case Greta is willing to eat with the unwanted part of her family."

I didn't have a doubt that Greta would say yes. She didn't hold the grudge her father kept up for the most insane reasons. "Greta, should we stay for lunch? Cara, Maximus' mom, cooked for us."

She turned away from the Pitpulls she'd been petting through the fence and her entire face lit up. "I'd love to meet them!"

I gave Maximus a I-told-you-so look. He stifled a smile. "I'll tell my mom so she can really get going. I can give Greta a more detailed tour later."

"I'll try to tear her away from the dogs."

I went over to her. She looked as if she couldn't be happier. "I miss working in my own sanctuary."

Most of it had been destroyed by the fire and Remo hadn't allowed Greta to return there. "Your animals are all taken care of."

"I know, they found good homes but I miss working with animals."

"I talked to Growl a few days ago."

She straightened, curiosity lighting up her face. I'd always preferred women with very long hair, but Greta with her chin-length bob made me reconsider my past preferences. Of course, I still couldn't wait for her hair to grow back. She tugged a strand behind her ear. "I'm still getting used to it too. I've never had short hair. I miss being able to put my hair up in a ponytail so it doesn't get in the way."

"It'll grow back." I stroked my fingers along her cheek then over the skin below her ear, feeling a small burn scar there. She also had a couple of smaller burn marks on her shoulders. "And you are beautiful."

She smiled. "What about Growl?"

"I told him about the sanctuary you had in Las Vegas and he suggested that you can work together with him and his family. So far he only takes in dogs, but if you want to expand on the shelter I'm sure he won't mind helping you. The premises can be expanded with barns and there's pasture land close by."

Greta's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really. I know you wouldn't be happy living in the city all the time, so I thought we could build a house close to this place and split our lives between that place and an apartment in Manhattan or a townhouse in Brooklyn."

"What about the house you shared with—"

"It was never a place that felt like home and I spent less than twenty nights there in total. Dad already sold it to a business partner."

Greta searched my eyes then she nodded. "Okay."

Nothing from my past with Cressida would ever touch our lives again. Greta would carry the marks of the past on her body, I could do nothing about that, but that was the extent of the past's grip on us. Cressida was dead and I would make sure the memory of her would die too.

"Lunch's ready!" Maximus called from the doorway.

A pick-up pulled up in the driveway in that moment, and I tensed, my arm coming around Greta protectively until I recognized Primo behind the steering wheel. He jumped out and strolled over to us. "Hey long-lost cousin," he said with a smile.

Greta grinned. She gave me a pleased smile as we followed Primo toward the front door. When we entered the big kitchen, Cara immediately turned away from the stove, an apron protecting her gym clothes from the meatball sauce.

She headed over to us but didn't try to hug Greta as I'd told them about Greta's need for space when she didn't know people very well.. "Greta, so nice to finally meet you."

"It's so nice to meet you too. Thank you for cooking for us."

"It's the first time I tried vegan meatballs so please don't be too critical." Cara let out an embarrassed laugh.

"I'm sure it'll taste wonderful. It smells so good."

Growl rose slowly from the kitchen chair from where he'd been watching the scene unfold with his usual caution. His expression remained wary as he stopped in front of us.

"Hello uncle," Greta said in a soft voice, her expression warm. "I'm glad I can finally meet you. Is it okay if I call you uncle or are you uncomfortable with that label?"

Surprise crossed Growl's face. He glanced at Cara then at me before the hint of a smile pulled at his lips. "Nice to meet you too. And you can call me uncle if you want."

She nodded eagerly.

"Let's eat," Cara said after she'd cleared her throat, obviously a tad emotional.

"See you'll have blood family here too," I whispered in Greta's ear before we headed over to the kitchen bench to sit beside Primo and Maximus. I wanted Greta to find a home in New York.

Chapter

Thirty-Seven



After my first visit to New York as Amo's fiancée my anxiety about living there had lessened considerably. Aria in particular was so warm and considerate, she treated me like one of her children. Not to mention that the meeting with my uncle and his family had been so much better than I'd ever thought possible.

Dad hadn't mentioned the meeting though he knew I'd been at the Trevisan house. Since he had enough to stomach with my marriage to Amo and my move to New York, I didn't push him. I held hope that one day he'd come around and allow the past to rest. It wasn't easy, it was something I too had to work on every day.

Every time I looked in the mirror at the two fading scars on my lower belly, the memories of the attack came back and with them the realization of the consequences. Amo hadn't seen this scar on my body yet, as we hadn't been intimate since the attack three months ago. Too much had happened and my body needed the time to heal. It still didn't feel like my body on some days.

I'd always been able to move however I wanted, to bend my body to my

will. Now I had to be patient, take one small step after the other toward healing. I hadn't tried to do ballet yet. All my focus had been on managing to walk without a limp. With only four weeks to go until the wedding I'd finally accomplished my goal. My gait still felt off to me, and if you looked very closely and knew me very well, you noticed that it wasn't as fluid as it had been before the attack, but for the passing glance it wasn't visible. I was still doing physiotherapy every day to make my leg and the rest of my body stronger to regain this last bit of mobility and strength back.



Mom and Aria tugged at my hair and dress. It had taken several attempts to create a hairdo with my shorter hair that I was happy with. But eventually Mom had managed to pin my hair up at the back of my head with a white hairpin with flowers and pearls. Only one thick strand was falling down the left side of my face and curled slightly. Long white earrings that looked like several tiny flowers had been strung together matched my hairpin.

My dress was a minimal long-sleeved chiffon piece with a deep Bohemian V-neck. I especially loved the sheer puff sleeves that felt as if I wore nothing.

Mom clapped her hands when she was done wrapping the silk-ribbon around my ankle then she peered up at me with an emotional smile. "I love that you picked ballet shoes."

They weren't real ballet shoes, but the white flats imitated ballet shoes and even had silk ribbons that wrapped around my ankles and calves. High-heels had been out of the question despite the height difference between Amo and me. I didn't want to overstrain my knee and I had rarely worn heels in my life and didn't want to feel uncomfortable on my wedding day.

"I should have worn flats on my wedding day," Aria said with a laugh. "It would have spared me the blisters. Though my hurting feet were the least of my worries on that day."

Mom laughed and exchanged a knowing look with Aria. "I remember how nervous I was about the prospect of marriage when I was promised. But my wedding to Remo was so relaxed and easy-going."

“I really wish I could have enjoyed my wedding day like you’ll hopefully enjoy today,” Aria said to me. She lightly touched my shoulder. “Amo is a good man. I know he’ll do everything he can to make you happy.”

“This isn’t the beginning of a sex talk, is it?” I glanced between Mom and Aria. “Amo and I have already been intimate, tonight is only the final step we haven’t taken yet.”

Aria flushed a bright red and laughed. “Oh Amo warned me about your directness.”

Mom’s smile was a bit tight too. “No talk, we promise. You and Amo will figure it out I’m sure without our unnecessary advice.”

I nodded and blew out a long breath as I regarded myself in the mirror once more. Aria left with a wave.

I pursed my lips in confusion.

“She wants to give us a moment alone,” Mom said, coming up behind me and hugging me gently. She was several inches taller than me.

“I know you and Amo love each other, but I want to make sure you’re still okay with everything that’s going to happen today. Especially tonight. Even if you and Amo have been intimate, I want you to know that nothing forces you to take the final step tonight. If you feel anxious or just not ready, then you should say stop. Amo can fake the sheets like his father did.”

Mom and Aria had exchanged many stories from the past, apparently even intimate ones I didn’t want to hear about. I was glad that they’d hit it off though, considering that Dad and Luca still had trouble being in the same room without a fight.

“I thought I wouldn’t get the talk.”

“It’s not a sex talk. It’s a talk about consent and your emotional wellbeing.”

I gave Mom a doubtful look. “Amo respects my boundaries. And it doesn’t matter what you call it, it’s not necessary. I have confidence in Amo’s abilities to make tonight special for both of us.” I patted her arm to ease the blow and didn’t comment on her blush. Considering how often I’d overheard her and Dad by accident, it was surprising that my mere mentioning of sex made her feel so uncomfortable. “I’m grateful for your concern though.”

A knock sounded.

“That must be your father. Don’t tell him what you just told me.” Mom scanned me once more before she went to the door and opened it. I tensed

when Dad stepped in, worried he'd try to talk me out of the wedding. I knew Nevio still wished I'd turn into a runaway bride, and while Dad wasn't as vocal about his dismay he too wanted me to stay in Vegas. Their love and worry for me were the reason for their reaction but today I didn't want to hear about it.

Dad's dark eyes softened when they scanned me from head to toe. Mom whispered something to him, then kissed his cheek before she left.

"Dad?" I slowly walked toward him and peered up at his face. Many people called it cruel and merciless, but for me it had always held warmth and love, and it was no different today.

"Do we get your blessing?"

Dad chuckled in his usual derisive style. "Blessings aren't my style." He cupped my cheek. "But I respect your choice, Mia Cara. You aren't a little girl anymore. I want you to find happiness in New York, but never forget that a loving home is always waiting for you in Las Vegas if you ever choose to return."

I hugged him briefly, knowing this was Dad's version of a blessing and I was so relieved.



Dad and Remo sat across from each other on the sofas in the backroom of church. I wasn't sure why Mom had thought it a good idea to have them with me before the ceremony. They weren't the best moral support.

The only one who'd been somewhat tolerable was Matteo who'd cracked a few jokes that had lifted the tension. Valerio had already rushed off, probably to flirt with Camorra girls he had no business being close to.

"It's almost time," I reminded them, hoping they'd take the cue and leave.

Remo got up but he walked over to me. He handed me a couple of printed out photos. I cocked an eyebrow when I scanned them. They showed a blood-splattered room. The bed in the center was an even worse mess. It looked as if they'd slaughtered a pig on it. But it wasn't an animal carcass that lay sprawled on the bed.

If Remo thought he could intimidate me with these images, he forgot what my last name was. I'd pummeled a biker to a bloody pulp with a hammer as a teen when we'd saved Marcella.

"When you're thinking about creating bloody sheets tonight, remember what Nino and I did to Kiara's uncle at the last big wedding between the Camorra and the Famiglia."

Dad got up too and shook his head. "You took photos of the fucking mess you created back then? It took weeks to renovate the room. You acted like barbarians."

"Thanks for the pleasant images before the happiest day in my life."

Remo narrowed his eyes at Dad. "Many would call it barbaric to get off on virgin blood covered sheets."

I gritted my teeth and sought Matteo's eyes in the mirror, trying to give him a silent sign to remove those two from the room, or at least Remo.

Dad smirked. "I'm half tempted to call Dante so he can tell us how kindly he took your presentation of the sheets of your first night with Serafina."

"At least I presented real sheets."

"Enough." Matteo shook his head and handed them both flasks. "Take a few gulps of this special concoction. It'll lift your mood."

"What about me? The groom usually gets a flask."

Matteo winked. "You need your wits about you. Tonight's a special night, I don't want you to pass out too soon."

Dad sniffed at the flask, then narrowed his eyes at Matteo. "What is it? The scent is familiar."

"It takes plenty of poison to kill me," Remo said with a twisted grin at Matteo.

"We'll see."

Holding Matteo's gaze, Remo took a tiny gulp, then his lips curled.

"It's Cannabis moonshine. Gianna and I brewed it as an experiment a while back and took a shine on it." He winked again. I had a feeling he'd gotten a head start on the cannabis moonshine already. If that made sure he wouldn't kill Alessio, Massimo or Nevio today, I didn't care if he smoked a

few bongos too.

“Fuck it. We don’t consume our own product!” Dad growled.

“It’s not our stuff. Gianna bought it at a Russian dealer. She says their ware is superior and cheaper, which is something we need to work on, by the way.”

Remo closed the lid of his flask and shoved it at me. “I’ll let you to your discussions about the dismal state of your drug production and go to my daughter.”

I knew he would threaten me a few more times today. I would probably have been disappointed if he didn’t. Greta deserved to be treated like a queen.

Dad stepped up behind me and our eyes met in the mirror. “Don’t drink that stuff. You should have your wits about you tonight.”

Matteo patted my back and took the flask from me. “He’s right. I’ll take care of it.” When he walked out, he took a long gulp from the flask.

Dad sighed. “If this day ends without a bloodbath, I’ll call it a success.”

I nodded absent-mindedly and smoothed my silver tie. Dad put a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll make sure everyone behaves today. This day is yours and Greta’s.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He patted the spot over my heart. “I should have let you follow your heart. I should have known if you risked so much for a woman that it was serious. I tried to make you prioritize the tattoo over your heart when that’s something I have never done since I married your mother.”

“The past is the past. Today we start a new chapter.”

Dad nodded, then his expression became warning. “I don’t think this is necessary, but I’ll tell you anyway. Treat your wife like a queen tonight. The Famiglia is the place to lose control and allow the monster to come out, never your marriage or family.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Dad, because you showed me all my life.”

Dad stepped back with a controlled smile, but I’d seen the hint of emotion in his eyes. When he left and I was alone in the room, I took a deep breath.

This was it. The moment I’d waited far too long for. I was marrying the woman I loved with every fiber of my being.



Today wouldn't be a bloody wedding, but plenty of blood had been shed for this wedding to happen. We all had bled and some had died because they hadn't wanted Greta and me to marry.

Dad nodded at me from the first row. He'd had my back. He'd done what he hadn't wanted to do in so long, and made a bloody statement. While the Traditionalists had paid with blood, they'd also won on other fronts. Their rules had been reinforced and the Famiglia was moving backwards in certain areas.

All the blood, all the pain meant nothing when Greta stepped into church. She looked absolutely stunning in a simple white dress. Her smile was pure and unreserved as she strode toward me at her father's side. She was more than I'd ever expected. She was so much more than I deserved, but by God, I would never let her go again.

Chapter *Thirty-Eight*



Anno

I engaged the locks to our presidential suite when Greta and I retired for our first night as a married couple. Dad had even put guards into the corridor in front of the suite in case any Falcone, Nevio in particular, felt the need to disturb our night.

The warning in Remo's eyes when I'd led Greta away had been nothing in comparison to the rage in Nevio's eyes. The party was still in full swing downstairs. Matteo must have given many guests his moonshine, but I hadn't drunk more than a glass of Champagne.

With my hand on Greta's back, I led her into our bedroom. Rose petals covered the path to the bed and formed a heart on the white covers.

"That's very pretty."

"Our mothers probably came up with it."

I ran my knuckles over Greta's neck and she tilted her head up with a trusting smile. My desire had burst to life the moment we were alone but I had no intention to rush things or lose control.

"I'm ready."

I let out a laugh and cupped Greta's face, claiming her lips for a kiss.

After a moment I pulled back and motioned at the knife sheathed in the holder under my jacket.

Greta bit her lip. "One of your particular traditions?"

"We could cut the dress without you in it. Nobody would know."

Greta lightly touched her fingertips to the knife. "No, let's honor your traditions. I want to do this right."

I pressed another kiss to her lips. "There's no right or wrong tonight. As long as you enjoy it, we're doing good."

Greta nodded. I unsheathed my knife and brought the blade down on the V-neck of the dress. The material yielded under the unrelenting pressure of the steel.

I felt barbaric, animalistic, cutting Greta out of her dress. I'd waited too long for this moment.

"Is this a symbol for the wife's loss of virginity?"

I glanced up at Greta, trying to follow her train of thought when my mind was going somewhere very different.

"Knives often symbolize a phallus. So you cutting me out of my dress, the fabric parting under the knife, stands for my hymen breaking when you enter me?"

"Maybe," I murmured. I had never thought about it but Greta talking about me taking her virginity fired up my need.

Her dress fell to the floor and she stood before me in only white lace hipsters. My eyes took in the scars below her bellybutton, a familiar wave of rage washing over me.

Greta pushed her fingers into my hair. I peered up at her face. "Today isn't about the past or anger, it's about our love, and that you can finally make me yours."

I nodded and finally noticed her shoes. I couldn't help but smile. "Soon you'll dance for me again."

"Very soon," she said.

I got down on one knee. "Mine," I murmured against her belly, kissing the red scar. Seeing what Greta had to endure for this day to happen was another good reminder that I should always be grateful for having her at my side. I shoved to my feet and lifted her off the ground. She wrapped her slender legs around my hip, pressing herself against my abs. I could feel her heat through the thin material of her panties. I stroked my fingers along her cheek and into her hair then tilted her head for a kiss, my tongue sliding

along her lips until she parted for me. I carried her over to the bed and ripped the covers with the rose petals away, revealing the white sheets beneath. Protectiveness washed over me when I remembered we'd have to present bloody sheets tomorrow.

I lowered Greta on the bed and pressed a kiss to her lips then lower, her throat and collarbones before my mouth teased her pebbled nipples. My tongue traced them, loving how hard they felt. I stroked along Greta's side, my hand slipping into her panties. My index finger dipped lower, parting her pussy lips, seeking her wet heat. I dipped even lower, parting her silky inner pussy lips and gathered the wetness pooling at her entrance. My desire to finally be inside of her, to lay claim to this part of Greta was almost overpowering but I held back, wanting to do this right, wanting to worship Greta like a queen. I pulled my hand out, my finger wet with her juices then I brushed it across Greta's lips, until they were shiny.

She opened her mouth, her eyes swimming with curiosity and desire. She trusted me to take her on this journey and make it as pleasurable as possible, and I wouldn't fail.

I bent over her face, sucking her lower lip into my mouth, tasting her. My hand wandered down again. I stroked my finger along her seam over and over again, basking in her wetness, her heat, her silkiness. Then I pushed my finger into her, sliding in and out at a lazy pace while my tongue teased her mouth. Soon Greta's moans increased in volume from my fingering and I pushed another finger into her. Her walls hugged my fingers tightly and Greta moaned even deeper, her hips arching up to meet every thrust of my hand. I pulled back to watch her face, as it twisted with pleasure, her eyes hooded, her lips swollen and shiny from our kiss.

My gaze traveled down her gorgeous body to her pussy, my chest swelling as my fingers parted her. They were coated in her juices. I sped up, and slapped the heel of my palm against her swollen clit with every thrust. Her mouth parted wide and she cried out, her fingers clamping down on my wrist to keep me in place, with my fingers buried all the way inside of her as her orgasm overwhelmed her.

She closed her eyes, her head thrown back, bared her pretty throat. I couldn't resist. I lowered my head and sucked her skin between my teeth. She winced, her walls clenching my fingers more tightly as she cried out again, shuddering through another small wave of pleasure. I kept suckling her skin then pulled back to admire my work. A beautiful hickey would mark her

elegant throat in the morning. She was mine and I wanted everyone to see the proof of it.

My gaze slid lower once more. I pulled my fingers out of her, and brought them to my mouth, licking her arousal off. Greta watched me with parted lips, the desire in her eyes firing up my own. She reached for my jacket and helped me out of it, then she quickly opened the buttons of my shirt so I could shrug it off. Her fingers stroked over my chest, then lower, following my happy trail to my belt. Soon I knelt on the bed completely naked and the heat in Greta's face as she regarded me was almost more than I could take.

I didn't give Greta a chance to touch my cock. I was already rock hard. Now I needed to make sure Greta was as ready as I was.

I got down on my knees on the floor and pulled Greta toward the edge of the mattress before I lowered my mouth to her pussy. Her taste made me groan low in my throat. She was already so wet. "I'm ready, Amo."

I chuckled against her mount. "Trust me."

"Okay." The word morphed into a moan when I sucked her clit into my mouth. Greta opened her legs wide, her feet in her ballet shoes pointed as if she were about to dance. So fucking beautiful. I stroked along her calf and began opening her silk ribbons while my lips kept teasing Greta's clit. Soon she was rocking her hips again, chasing another release. I circled her opening with my fingers to test her readiness. She eagerly pushed against my fingertips, needing friction. So wet and ready. I pulled away despite her protest.

I got off the bed and hurried into the bathroom, returning shortly after with a towel.

"Lift up," I ordered. Greta did without hesitation but confusion swam in her dark eyes when I spread the towel under her.

"Amo, what about the bloody sheets?"

I knew Greta would bleed, given our very different stature, and while I personally couldn't wait to see this sign of me claiming my wife, I didn't want anyone else to see it. That was just for me to see.

"Open your legs for me," I said roughly.

Greta parted her legs wide, her pink pussy already soaked and ready from my fingerfucking and licking. I removed her ballet shoes and tossed them away before I settled between her thighs.

A hint of nerves flashed on Greta's face but she smiled at me. I began to

rub the crown of my cock over Greta's pussy lips until she was panting again. The next time I glided along her flesh, I stopped with my tip against her opening. With my hand, I intensified the pressure until I could feel her body part for me bit by bit, allowing me to inch forward. My brows snapping together, I pushed a bit deeper until my tip was nestled inside of Greta's pussy. Greta's released a harsh breath, her belly muscles flexing. I swallowed hard as I watched how her pussy lips stretched around my thick shaft. The sight was such a huge turn on. My weight propped up on one arm, I released my cock and began to gently rub her clit then lifted my gaze to her sweaty face. Pain shone in her eyes but she still gifted me with a smile.

I shifted my hips and began to dip just my tip in and out of her until that simply wasn't enough anymore. I lowered myself on top of Greta, my back curved so I could cradle her face in my palms. "I need this," I growled.

She nodded, her lips meeting mine again. I moved my hips, working against the pressure until Greta's walls gave way, allowing another inch to slide into her.

"If it's too painful, we can stop."

Greta cupped my neck, her nails digging in. "I've waited for this moment for a long time. I gladly take pain for it."

We'd both suffered pain for our love, yet Greta so much worse than me. I loathed adding to this but at the same time I couldn't stop. Slowly I worked my cock deeper into Greta while I kissed her gently. Her body became tenser under me while it tried to accommodate my girth. When Greta gasped in pain and I was buried almost to the hilt inside of her, I halted. Greta locked eyes with me and smiled shakily.

I kissed her mouth. "I love you. I can't believe you're finally mine."

"I'm only yours."

I nodded and carefully pulled out a bit before I sank back into Greta's heat. When her body didn't clamp down on my cock like a vice anymore, I began to move back and forth a couple of inches at a slow pace.

I slid one arm under Greta, cupping her firm ass in my palm and lifted her slightly, shifting the angle as I got on my knees. I never stopped kissing Greta as I thrust into her slowly, my fingers kneading her ass. Soon the intense friction became close to unbearable, my balls ready to burst and I sped up slightly. Greta's grip on me tightened as she tried to meet my thrusts.

My control began to slip as pleasure mounted and I squeezed my eyes shut with a guttural moan as my orgasm hit me.

I pumped into her two more times, releasing into her with every thrust, then I stilled, my eyes closed as I relished in the sensations coursing through my body. Greta's soft fingers on my back brought me back to reality.



I couldn't stop stroking muscled back and drew in another deep breath, loving Amo's musky scent that mingled with the smell of sex. It was such a sensual, erotic scent.

If I hadn't felt so sore and raw between my legs, I might have been turned on again. Instead I focused on the feeling of utter fullness. Amo was still inside of me, stretching me to an extent I hadn't thought possible.

The pain reminded me that this was real, not another dream I'd wake from. This time Amo was really making me his.

Amo lifted his head and kissed me gently, his expression full of concern as he pulled out slowly. I bit my lip to stifle a wince. My body relaxed when Amo was completely out of me and I drew in a shaky breath. Amo gave my ass a light squeeze before he removed his arm from under me. I'd really enjoyed his touch there and would probably appreciate it in the future as an additional turn on. Now my body needed to recover.

Amo stroked my cheek, his warmth comforting. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

He pulled back and glanced down at the towel. He shook his head. "I'm glad I thought of the towel. This is only for our eyes." He kissed the scar on my knee then gently patted me with the towel before he removed it from under me and tossed it away. He stretched out beside me and pulled me against his chest.

"Next time will be better for you."

“It was good for me.” I traced Amo’s bicep, loving its hardness and the strength behind the muscle. I curled my hand over it, wondering why it pleased me so much that my hand looked so small against his arm.

Amo pulled back to look at my face, his disbelief obvious.

“It was good in the sense that I appreciated the symbolism of the sex, that you made me yours.”

Amo’s eyes flashed with a dark possessiveness that sent a pleasant shiver down my back. Another unreasonable reaction my body displayed because of Amo. Then a slow, ironic smile pulled at his lips. “Next time I want you to appreciate the sex for the mind-blowing pleasure, not the symbolism.”

“It’ll be good either way.”

Amo chuckled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I can’t tell you how fucking happy I am knowing that I’ll get to hear your quirky comments all my life.”

“I still can’t believe it.” Another thought crossed my mind. “But what are you going to do about the sheets?”

“I guess I’ll continue Dad’s legacy and create a new Vitiello tradition.”

“You’ll cut yourself, right?”

Amo nodded.

“You could have spared yourself the pain if you’d just used my blood and not put the towel beneath me.”

Amo cradled my face. “I didn’t want to share even this tiny part of you with the world.”

I frowned. “You realize many people have seen my blood before?” Blood from a first time wasn’t any different than any blood from a cut or other wound.

Amo laughed, a boisterous, deep laugh that warmed my belly. “Oh Greta. I can’t wait to spend my life with you.”

I shrugged and pressed my cheek against his chest. “If you feel possessive over my blood this might cause quite a few problems in the future. Unless you get a medical education and treat me yourself.” I bit my lip. I was teasing him now, but I couldn’t resist.

“If that’s what it takes,” he murmured, then his voice became harder and lower. “But I’ll make sure that you won’t ever suffer a wound, not even a fucking papercut.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he pressed his finger against my lips. “I don’t want to know the statistics or any facts.”

“Okay,” I whispered against his skin then kissed his finger. I closed my eyes and breathed in his comforting scent.



Flames reflected on cold steel. Agony ripped through me and a scream tore from deep within my body.

“Greta.”

I jerked upright, blinking into the darkness. I pressed my hands against my belly, feeling for a knife handle, but I touched bare skin. My breathing rattled in my chest. The lights came on then dimmed down and Amo’s face came into view. He wrapped a strong arm around me and cradled me against his side. His lips brushed my temple. “I wish I could protect you from your nightmares. I wish I wasn’t the reason why you have them in the first place.”

I touched his hand. “Amo, my actions are as much responsible as yours if you really want to put blame on someone. We agreed to let the past rest. Eventually the nightmares will stop. They always do.”

Chapter

Thirty-Nine



Anno

After Greta woke from her nightmare in the early morning hours, I didn't fall back asleep, but she slept until our alarm rang. Traditions didn't even allow newlyweds to sleep in. You couldn't expect the relatives to wait until lunch to see the sheets after all.

I untangled myself carefully from Greta who hadn't heard the alarm and slid my legs out of bed. With a last look at Greta's sleeping form, I headed into the bathroom. I took a quick shower to get rid of the blood on my cock and to clear my head from my dark thoughts that had followed Greta's nightmare.

I was glad Nevio had killed Cressida. Maybe I would have held back because she was a woman. I doubted Nevio had had these qualms.

I was rubbing my body dry when Greta appeared in the doorway, dressed in a fluffy white bathrobe that seemed to swallow her small frame. She gave me a sleepy smile and tiptoed toward me, wincing on occasion.

"Are you sore?"

She gave a nod. Then her gaze traveled along my naked body. "I wish I wasn't."

I grinned and hoisted her on the washstand. I got down on one knee. “Show me.” My voice was rough and low.

Greta’s brows rose a fraction but she parted her bathrobe. I touched her knees and pushed them apart. Blood had dried on the insides of Greta’s thighs and her pussy lips, which were still swollen and so was her entrance.

Seeing the proof of last night, knowing I’d finally made Greta mine in the last way that had been missing, I released a harsh breath.

“It’s not that bad anymore.”

I nodded.

“I need to get cleaned up.” She was about to close her legs but I touched the insides of her knees and locked gazes with her. “Let me.”

Greta licked her lips. “Really?”

“Hmm,” I ran my nose over the soft skin of her inner thigh. The metallic tang of blood mixed with the sweetness of Greta’s arousal and my very own scent. Even her pussy smelled of me. A guttural groan left me.

It was a primal need, to taste her now, like this, her pussy still swollen and bloody from my cock’s claiming last night.

Greta touched my head lightly, almost shyly but I could feel her searching gaze on me.

I cast my eyes up when I opened my mouth and ran my tongue along the trace of dried blood from the curve of her ass to her clit. “You taste like mine.”

Her fingers tightened in my hair when I slipped my tongue between her pussy lips, thoroughly tasting her. Soon the metallic tang was replaced by the warmer, muskier aroma of her lust which coated my lips and tongue.

I couldn’t resist. I pressed my tongue firmly against her sore opening. Her body resisted the pressure, but I needed more. Tilting my head and opening my mouth wider, I increased the pressure until the tip of my tongue finally forced Greta’s pussy to surrender. Her walls closed around my tongue and the taste of her—sweet, musky, tangy, metallic—bloomed heavily in my mouth. I greedily soaked it up as I fucked her with my tongue. She was tense at first. The primal need to claim her again was too strong to allow me to stop.

I held Greta’s gaze, telling her with my eyes that she was mine as my tongue parted her swollen opening again and again. “Amo,” she whimpered. A little pain and plenty of lust.

Soon her lust ran down my chin as she gripped my hair with one hand while the other clung to the sink.

“Give me everything,” I rasped and she arched up with a cry. I closed my lips around her clit as her pussy pulsed against me, her arousal dripping down onto the floor.

My breathing was harsh and my cock so stiff it was excruciating. I pulled away. Greta’s pussy still twitched, glistening and even more swollen than before.

Greta stroked my hair, swallowing. She smiled down at me in wonder. “Every time you taste me, I feel so worshipped, but today was special. Thank you for this.”

“My pleasure,” I rasped.

She bit her lip as her gaze dipped lower to my cock. “You can have me if you want.”

I rubbed my thumb very lightly over her pussy. I could tell how tender it was. If I took her now, it would be as painful as last night, if not worse. I leaned forward and kissed her sore flesh. “Not today.”

There would be plenty of times for me to claim her in the future and I had every intention of doing so at every possible chance.

I glanced at my watch and cursed. Greta followed my gaze. “We only have five minutes before the old hawks from my father’s side of the family will descend on us to gather the sheets.”

Greta gave me a worried look. “The blood.”

“Get ready, I’ll take care of the blood.”

After a quick kiss, I went into the bedroom and picked up the towel, stuffing it into my suitcase. I didn’t trust the cleaning staff not to do some shit with it. I’d burn it later at home.

I grabbed my knife from the nightstand and brought the tip down on my upper arm. Once I’d spread some blood on the sheets to create a satisfying image, I got dressed. Not a moment too soon because a knock sounded. I opened the door and allowed my aunts and some wives from traditional families to gather Greta’s dress and the bloody sheets.

Gianna stepped in their way when they tried to leave. “You realize how misogynistic this tradition is, right?”

“It is a tradition we all agreed on. Even your daughter will have to follow it,” one of the women said haughtily.

“Over my dead body.” The women pushed past Gianna who glared at their backs.

Mom and Serafina lingered in the hallway, not bothering to be part of this

show. Mom gave me a sympathetic smile.

“I really hope this was fake,” Gianna said with a warning look at me. She turned on her heel and stalked away.

Mom poked her head in, and Serafina hovered beside her. “Everything okay?”

“You can ask Greta yourself,” I said with a knowing look. I doubted Mom or Serafina were worried about my wellbeing, and I couldn’t really blame them.

When Greta emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a white dress with red polka-dots and red flats, her eyes grew wide at the sight of our mothers hovering in the entrance area of the suite. “Is everything okay?”

Mom laughed and exchanged a look with Serafina, who said, “That’s what we were going to ask you.”

“Oh,” Greta said, her cheeks blushing, and a pleased smile parted her lips.

“No words necessary after that look,” Serafina said, flushing too. “I guess we’ll give you another moment. But you should be downstairs in ten minutes.”

With a wave, they disappeared, closing the door after them.

I pulled Greta against me. “It’s a pity that we still have social responsibilities. But we have to face the wolves now.”

“Are you referring to my family?”

“Definitely. Don’t tell me you think they won’t cause a major scene at the presentation of the sheets.”

Greta looked sheepish. “They are protective, but sometimes they behave.”



Of course, I was right. I could already feel the Falcone bunch buzz with angry energy when Greta and I entered the room. They probably would have questioned her right away if my old aunts hadn’t sauntered into the ballroom in that moment, carrying the sheets as if they were a hard-won treasure.

The blood-stained sheet spanned between the two as they turned to the crowd. I glanced at the Falcones. Nevio stood slowly, pulled his knife while Massimo poured liquid from a flask on a cloth napkin, which Nevio pierced with the blade, and Alessio lit it up with a lighter. Greta followed my gaze

and so did a few others, like my dad, Matteo and Remo. Nobody did anything.

Nevio hurtled the knife with practiced precision through the room so it cut through the sheet and let it burst into flames.

My aunts and the other women around it let out screams and dropped the burning sheet. Soon the carpet was burning too.

“If someone still wants to see blood, they can come to me and I’ll show them their own!” Nevio shouted while the fire spread on the carpet.

With a howl the fire alarm began and a moment later water exploded from the sprinklers above our heads, extinguishing the fire and bathing us in cold water.

“I knew it,” I muttered.

Greta peered up at me with an embarrassed smile, her hair plastered to her face. Soon her dress became see-through. I removed my jacket and draped it over her shoulder.

“I knew it would never get boring with you.”

Greta laughed and together we watched as most guests began to rush out of the room. Nevio perched on the edge of the table and toasted us with the flask before he took a deep gulp. He looked as if he was still hungover from last night. As long as he didn’t cause more problems than this, I could deal with it.

All that mattered now was that Greta was my wife and that we’d be leaving for our honeymoon in Spain tomorrow.



I anchored our yacht near a bay that was supposed to be one of the most beautiful in Ibiza. We’d been cruising the Mediterranean for the last twenty-four hours. I headed toward the bow of the boat and watched people milling on the beach or splashing in the clear-blue ocean.

Many of them were stark-naked. This was Ibiza for you. I shook my head with a wry smile. Soft footfall sounded and my smile broadened.

“I can’t wait to take a dip,” Greta said. I was glad Remo had insisted she learned to swim after she jumped into the Hudson. I turned and froze. Greta was completely naked, every gorgeous inch of her. Rust colored nipples

perky, and the triangle of soft curls on her mound teasing me.

"I thought you want to head to the beach?" I said, unable to tear my eyes from my gorgeous wife.

Greta nodded, her gaze moving past me to the coastline. "It's a nude beach."

Possessiveness roared its furious head. "You won't walk around naked in front of anyone but me."

Greta tilted her head in that pensive way of hers, her dark brows bridging and a smile playing around her heart-shaped mouth. "It's just skin and body hair. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't change that I'm yours."

I stalked toward her and grabbed her face between my hands before I planted a kiss on her mouth. "Mine. Only mine. I don't want anyone to see you but me."

"Amo," Greta began but I silenced her with another kiss before I lowered my head and snatched one nipple between my lips, sucking sharply then whispered. "Mine."

I sank to my knees and left kisses on every inch of her belly then lower. "Mine."

She leaned against the rail, holding onto my head, and her lips parted in a soft moan when my tongue dove between her folds to get my very first taste of the day. For a while, I teased her like that, only lightly fluttering over her sensitive nub, never giving her what she needed.

I pulled back and peered up at her lust-hooded eyes. "Ride my face."

Her fingers around the rail tightened and she rose on her tiptoes, her leg muscles tightening before she lowered her pussy fully to my waiting mouth.

The softness of her pussy against my mouth made me groan. Greta moaned softly as I stroked her puffy lips before I parted them, wanting to get a deeper taste.

The moment her sweetness bloomed on my tongue my cock twitched and I groaned.

"Amo," she whispered in awe as she always did when I worshipped her pussy, which I would do very often. I loved everything about eating her out, her taste, the softness of her folds, her moans, the flood of juices when she came.

"I love it when you do this. My entire body feels as if it might splinter into a million pieces from the sensations, but I'm not afraid, because I know you'll hold me together."

I would, until my last breath. My tongue moved faster and Greta was beginning to sway, almost as if she were in a trance. She released the rail, balancing on her tiptoes for a moment, almost suspended in the air before my hands shot up and our fingers interlinked. She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back, trusting in me to hold her up as I gave her pleasure. She settled fully on my face allowing my lips to enclose her pussy fully and my tongue to fuck her deeply. She arched her back, her fingers tightening against mine and a cry tore from her body that I hadn't thought possible from someone as frail looking. She rocked back and forth, and her lust dripped on my tongue. I licked it up eagerly until her rocking slowed and eventually stopped altogether. I kissed every inch of her pussy and inner thighs before I let her lean back against the rail. I shoved to my feet and pushed down my boxers, then kicked them away carelessly. I lifted Greta up on the railing and parted her legs with my hips. Greta gripped my shoulders, her gaze dipping to my cock which I stroked along her folds. I teased her for a while before I entered her with my tip. She held her breath like the first two times we'd had sex. She was still so incredibly tight that it took every ounce of control I possessed to cause her as little pain as possible, but she urged me on with her heels on my ass until I was buried all the way inside of her.

We both groaned and stayed like this for a moment. I grabbed Greta's ass, loving the feel of it in my palms as I lifted her off the railing.

I loved how she was so much smaller than me that I could carry her in my arms with my cock buried deep inside of her. Holding her up, I found my balance before I began to thrust into her from below. My arms helped Greta bounce up and down on my cock, driving it deeply into her. With the sunshine on our skin and the soft whooshing of the ocean this felt like a dream, one I never wanted to wake up from.



I clung to Amo as he pushed into me deeper than before. This was only my third time and my body was still not accustomed to the penetration.

My eyes widened at another even deeper thrust. The stretching sensation was intense, painful, but beneath the discomfort pleasure was building.

With a searing kiss, Amo walked over to the lounge area of the yacht and lowered me on it, never pulling out of me. Once we'd settled on the soft leather, he began to thrust into me at a faster pace. I dug my fingers into his shoulders, focusing on the pleasure spikes between the twinges.

Every moan from my lips seemed to spur Amo on and made him speed up even more. He looked at my face as he pushed up halfway on his elbow and snuck a hand between us. He began rubbing my clit while he thrust into me.

I loved the feel of Amo's body on top of me, his utter strength, the power behind every thrust.

"I want you to come this time," he growled.

I wanted that too, but I wasn't sure if it was going to happen. Amo slowed and kissed me gently, his tongue teasing mine. He pushed up, pulling out of me and rolled on his back. "Sit on my face."

I climbed up his body until I hovered over his mouth. Gripping the railing, I lowered myself to Amo's mouth. I let out a low moan when his tongue parted me, stroking along my already sensitive flesh. I propped my arms up on the railing and put my chin down on it, my eyes on the glittering waves as I succumbed to Amo's pleasurable teasing. His tongue was almost playful, switching between firm pressure and feather-light strokes that made my toes curl in the best way.

I barely moved, too caught up in the pleasure. Amo's palms cupped my ass, massaging my cheeks as he guided my movements. I squeezed my eyes

shut, my moans reverberating through my body.

“Amo!”

I was getting closer and closer. Amo lifted me off his face. “Scoot down.” With his help, I slid down his body until his tip pressed against my opening. My need was too great for hesitation. I lowered myself almost all the way. My body began to shake, torn between pain and pleasure. Amo wetted his thumb and pressed against my clit as I rocked my hips. Soon my movements became even more frantic, driving me slowly further down and when I settled all the way on Amo’s pelvis, he knifed up, snatching my nipple between his lips for a hard tug as his thumb flicked my clit, and pleasure coursed through my body. I cried out, my eyes squeezed shut.

Amo kept thrusting upward when I couldn’t move anymore, too overwhelmed by the sensations and then he too came with a groan. I sagged down on him, my breathing labored.

I grinned. Amo wrapped his arms tightly around me and for the rest of the day we did nothing but lounge on the sofa or take dips in the ocean. It was more perfect than I could have ever imagined. This still felt like a dream, as if we were caught in another dimension, far away from reality.

I knew things wouldn’t always be like this. I’d feel homesick on occasion, miss my family, but I’d find my place in New York. Most people had welcomed me warmly so far, and I had my four dogs with me. Once things had settled down, I’d go in search for more animals that needed my help.

Our life together had only just begun and I was excited for it.

Chapter *Forty*



Anno

Greta and I had been married for two months. Life had returned to normal, or what now was my new normal: returning to a welcoming home every night after work.

The elevator doors slid open and immediately I was ambushed by Bear, Teacup, Momo and Dotty. I'd never wanted animals, had rolled my eyes when Marcella had taken in dogs from Growl's shelter, and now here I was with a pack of my own. They were the reason why we were looking for a townhouse with a garden. An apartment in Manhattan just wasn't the right place for them.

I petted them and headed for the kitchen. Greta was dressed in a tutu and preparing dinner while she talked to someone on the phone. She gave me a quick smile and pointed at the phone with an apologetic look. She held up two fingers. I could wait two minutes. I nodded and leaned against the kitchen counter, pouring myself a glass of the red wine that Greta had already opened so it could breathe.

I knew Greta had been practicing ballet in secret when I wasn't home. She didn't want to dance in front of me yet, not happy with her performance.

I couldn't wait to see her dance again but I wasn't going to push her. I was just happy that she seemed to settle in much better than I'd feared. She got along great with Sara, and the rest of the Trevisans. My mother positively adored her and pretty much saw her as another daughter, and even Marcella and Greta bonded over their shared love for dangerous beasts, in human and animal form. Marcella had become a softie since giving birth anyway. It was a strange thing to witness.

I tried to imagine Greta as a mother. The thought always made me smile. We hadn't decided when to start our own family, but we needed more time together and for our families to arrange themselves with the new situation.

Greta finally ended the call and hopped over to me, giving me a kiss. I caught the hint of concern in her eyes.

"Let me guess, your brother messed up again?"

"Not worse than before. It's impossible to talk to him."

"He's lucky Aurora ran to you and not her parents."

"You can't ever mention it to Fabiano or anyone."

"I swore it."

I stroked her hair away from her face. "You can't save everyone, especially not your brother."

"I know, but Nevio needs someone."

Nevio needed an exorcist at the very least.

"When will you see Aurora again?"

"Tomorrow in Gianna's gym. We're doing yoga together."

Nevio's mess up had one good thing at least. Greta had Aurora as a familiar face in New York, at least for a while, and Mom had someone to dote on now that Valerio had moved out.

"If you want you can invite her to the Hamptons too. She can spend time with you, Sara and Isabella when I go jetskiing with Maximus."

"Really?"

"Really." I kissed her then risked a glance into the pot. It was some sort of creamy soup with gnocchi. "Soy cream?" My lips curled.

Greta pursed her lips. "I tried a cream on coconut base this time. And the gnocchi are homemade since you didn't like the last vegan ones I bought."

I sighed. "I love everything about you, except for your food ethics."

"You can eat meat and eggs and cheese any time you want, I just don't want to prepare it." She narrowed her eyes in a playful manner. "And I bet you had an emergency hot dog on the way home."

I grinned. Maximus, Matteo, and even Dad had taken it upon themselves to supply me with meaty snacks and lunch during the workday. “I like meat. You know I’m not a good man, and eating meat is one of my less severe sins.”

Greta shook her head. “Will you try my gnocchi soup?”

“You know I always do. And if it’s inedible I’ll wash it down with plenty of wine.” I kissed her indignant mouth to soften the impact of my words then helped her set the table. Even if I had to eat tofu scramble, seitan schnitzel and soy ice cream for the rest of my life, I’d still be the happiest asshole in the whole world.



“I’m ready,” Greta said with a nervous smile as she took my hand and led me toward the ballet room she’d installed in our new house. We’d only moved in a few days ago and hadn’t unpacked the majority of our boxes yet. We’d be celebrating Christmas in Las Vegas this year and our flight was leaving in the morning so we hadn’t rushed unpacking.

“I’ve been practicing every day. I hope you’ll like it.”

“I’ll love it,” I said when Greta released my hand to walk into the center of the room. I hadn’t wanted anything for Christmas from her except for a dance and today she’d finally grant me my wish.

My mouth ran dry as I watched her. I wasn’t sure why Greta had waited this long to dance for me. She was pure perfection as she twirled and bent her body to the music. She was grace and passion wrapped in one. If her knee gave her trouble, she didn’t show it.

I could have watched her forever, especially the utter happiness and passion on her face as she gave herself to the music.

When the final note faded away, Greta straightened from where she’d bowed low. Her eyes shone with excitement, then hopefulness.

“It’s the best Christmas present I could ask for.”

She smiled broadly. “It feels amazing to dance again.”

She headed for the bar at the mirror. “I still have trouble holding the Grand Plie for long and sometimes my leg cramps if I’m standing on my toes for very long but I’m improving every day.” She showed me which moves

she meant, completely in her element. She raised one leg while she rose on her tiptoe, and I was momentarily distracted by the way her thong wedged between her ass cheeks. She was watching me in the mirror as she lowered the leg back to the ground. I prowled toward her like a starving lion. Her nipples puckered beneath her leotard. She wasn't wearing tights or a bra. Apparently, I would be getting another present. All my fantasies about claiming Greta in her ballet outfit would finally become reality.

I came up behind her and touched her slender waist, towering over in the mirror. "Lift your leg."

With an elegant move she raised her leg and put her ankle on the bar. This position allowed me to see how the crotch of her leotard wedged between her pussy. My mouth watered. I sank to my knees, shoved her leotard thong aside and licked her from behind, loving the access this ballet move gave me. I could feel Greta watching me eat her out in the mirror.

I didn't give her leg a chance to give in from strain. I drove her toward her orgasm at high speed, too eager to fuck her in front of the mirrors.

She came in my mouth, her little clit pulsing against my lip, her juices dripping on my tongue.

Her fingers around the bars were white, her eyes closed as she basked in the pleasure.

I pressed a kiss to Greta's swollen pussy lips before I scooted backward and pushed to my feet.

I unzipped my pants and freed my cock. Greta still had her eyes closed and her chest was heaving, her nipples hard.

She had lowered herself to her sole, one leg still suspended on the bar. "Get back on your tiptoe," I said gruffly.

She did without hesitation but when she moved to lower her leg, I touched her calf. "This one stays up."

She bit her lower lip as I guided my tip to her opening, widening my stance so I could reach her. I rubbed my tip over her slick opening before I pushed in my tip. Greta's lips parted. I lowered my gaze, loving the sight of my fat tip buried in Greta's beautiful pussy, how it welcomed my cock even though it seemed like it would never fit. Discomfort filled Greta's face and I stroked her calf and thigh but didn't stop.

I pushed deeper in, groaning as my tip was squeezed and stroked by Greta's inner walls.

Greta's fingers tightened further around the bar and I tilted her head back

and lowered my mouth to hers as I filled her entirely. We kissed for a bit before I pulled back, unable to resist the need to see my cock buried in Greta.

This raw act of claiming Greta was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

Greta released a shuddering breath. Her muscles briefly tightened their hold, making me grit my teeth before they loosened. She was always tight around me but I knew I could move now.

"It feels so good. Don't stop."

Soon Greta became even slicker as I worked my way in and out slowly. My cock glistened with her juices and I sped up. I wrapped my arms tightly around Greta's chest as I pushed into her. In the mirror I watched Greta's lust-filled face, her tiny nipples puckering against the sheer material of her leotard and my cock claiming her sweet pussy.

We came at the same time and both sank to the ground in a breathless heap, Greta in my lap.

"Since the first time I saw you in your tutu, I've wanted to do this," I rasped.

"You desired me back then already?"

"Oh yes. I was completely obsessed from the first second. I never believed in love at first sight, but you converted me."

Greta laughed, her expression doubtful. "It sounds like lust at first sight."

"Trust me, it wasn't just lust. I've felt lust before but what I felt when I saw you it was so much more potent and scarier."

"So I scared you in the beginning?"

I chuckled. "You could say that. It was a new experience. Does that shock you?"

She grinned cheekily. "Not really. I'm a Falcone."

I laughed and slammed my lips against hers. After a moment I pulled back. "You're a Vitiello now." I'd never grow tired of hearing someone call her Greta Vitiello, especially around Remo or Nevio.

She tilted her head, her eyes soft and loving. "I'm both."

I knew her heart would always be split between Las Vegas and New York, and that was okay. Greta's heart was big enough for her family and me. I would eternally be grateful that she'd opened her heart for me at all.

Epilogue



Three years later

I touched a cold cloth to Mom's forehead. She cried out again. Her teeth sinking into her lower lip, her face flushed and sweaty, her hair sticking to her forehead.

She sunk her fingers into the linen, her palms braced against the bed, rotating her hips as she breathed through the next contraction.

She had been in labor for five hours and seeing her pain, I felt grateful and awed over her sacrifice.

I rubbed her back and she relaxed as the contraction faded away and she got a moment to breathe. She gave me an exhausted smile. "I don't think it's long now. I can feel it. A head is bearing down really strongly. Soon you'll have your babies."

"What do you need me to do?" I wanted to help her in any way I could. These last nine months, she'd endured morning sickness, back pain and intense fatigue as she'd carried Amo's and my babies in her body. It was a gift I could never repay her.

Mom touched my cheek. "Just keep doing what you do." Her face twisted

under a new wave of pain.

I guided her through her breathing, rubbed her back, put pressure to her lower back and later wiped her forehead.

After another hour of contractions, Mom had to settle on the bed and ten minutes later, my daughter was born and two minutes later my son slipped out. I sank down beside Mom with a stunned expression as the nurses checked the two little babies with their crowns of thick black hair. Mom let out a choked sob and I too couldn't hold back the tears.

"Lie down beside me," Mom whispered. I did and kissed her cheek, not sure what to say, how to thank her for something like this. Our eyes locked and she touched my cheek with a trembling smile. "I know, I know."

The nurses came over with the two little babies.

I held my breath, unable to proceed what was happening.

"Open your bathrobe," the nurse told me. I'd spent the first two hours of labor with Mom in the birthing tub and hadn't bothered getting dressed.

I glanced wide-eyed at Mom.

She nodded. "They're yours, Greta. You should hold them."

I parted the bathrobe and the nurses put both babies on my chest. I began to cry when I felt their small bodies against my skin, when I smelled their sweet scent. Mom leaned her head back, completely exhausted and watched me while a doctor stitched her up. My heart had never felt so full before as if it might not be able to hold all the love I carried inside of me.

"Should I call in your husbands?" The nurse asked after Mom was covered up.

Mom nodded. "Please."

She opened the door and a moment later Amo came in and froze as his gaze settled on me. He swallowed hard. Dad stepped in behind him and clapped Amo's shoulder a bit too hard. "Congrats on the first Famiglia Capo to be born in Las Vegas."

I gave him a teary, indignant smile. Amo and I hadn't wanted Mom to come to New York heavily pregnant and so we'd flown over for the birth. Dad walked over to me to kiss the top of my head before he went over to Mom and kissed her lips. The look he gave her made my heart swell. On occasion I'd worried that the conflict my bond with Amo had created had hurt their marriage, but his eyes told me he loved Mom more today than he'd ever had before.

Amo stopped beside me, his eyes soft and incredulous as he looked at our

children. “They are really here,” I whispered. Until very recently it had felt like a dream that I might wake up from.

Amo leaned down and kissed me, then lightly brushed his fingers over our babies’ backs. He caught Dad’s gaze and I knew that these two babies would make the bond between our families stronger than ever before. My twins were Vitiellos and Falcones.

Amo linked his fingers with mine. Our love had burned stronger than any enmity.

THE END

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If you want to be among the first to get updates on books, please join my Facebook group: [Cora’s Flamingo Squad](#)



This book deals with several dark subject matters, or topics that might be triggering for some people.

Torture, excessive violence, infertility, cheating, death, animal abuse.

[Click here to return to beginning of book.](#)

Note from the Author

If you're wondering why I didn't include Serafina's point of view, the explanation is that her sacrifice requires more background and explanation than a short chapter in this book allows. That's why her version of events will appear in the Camorra Anthology in Remo's and Serafina's novella. As soon as I know a publication date, I'll post it in my Facebook group and my Instagram.

If you want to find out more about the Vitiellos and Falcones, you can find their stories in the Born in Blood Mafia Chronicles and the Camorra Chronicles.

Luca & Aria – [*Bound by Honor*](#)

Serafina & Remo – [*Twisted Pride*](#)

Nino & Kiara – [*Twisted Emotions*](#) & [*Twisted Bonds*](#)

Growl & Cara – [*Bound By Vengeance*](#)

Marcella & Maddox – [*By Sin I Rise Part 1 & 2*](#)

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About the *Author*

Cora is the *USA Today* Bestselling author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with her small daughter, a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.