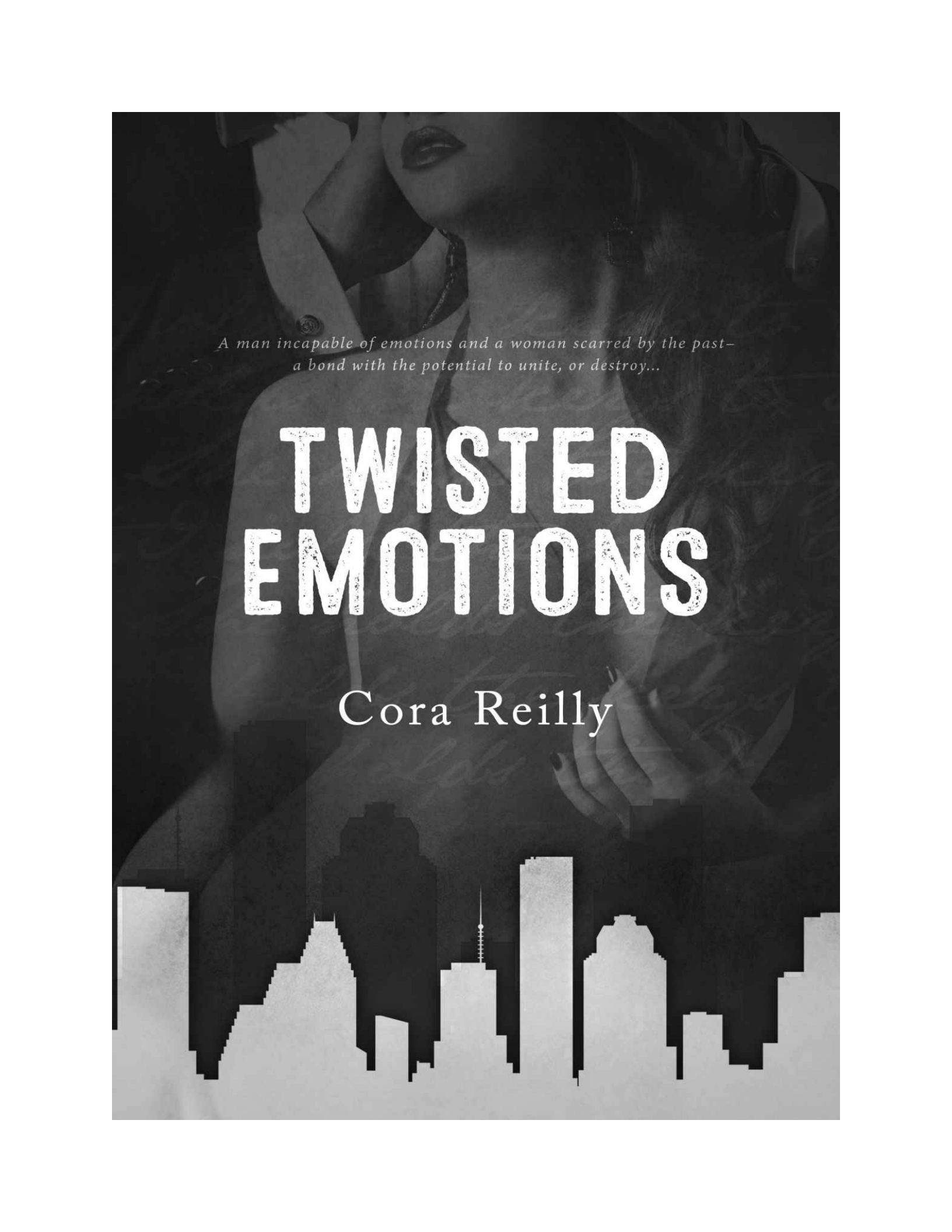




TWISTED EMOTIONS

*A man incapable of emotions and a woman scarred by the past –
a bond with the potential to unite, or destroy...*

Cora Reilly



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TWISTED EMOTIONS

PROLOGUE



KIARA

The Falcones were going to feel cheated. A sacrificial virgin was to be given to the monsters in Las Vegas for a promise of peace. I was never given the chance to be a virgin. That choice had been taken from me. *Painfully ripped from me.*

Fear, acute and raw, clawed at my chest as my husband led me into our room for the night and closed the door to the grinning faces of his brothers. Nino released me, and I quickly created distance between us, moving toward the bed.

Six years had passed, but the memories still woke me at night. I was scared of being close to a man, to any man, especially this man—my husband.

Standing a few steps in front of the bed, my eyes swept over the white sheets—sheets my family expected to see stained with my blood in the morning.

Blood that wouldn't be there.

I crept closer to the bed. There had been blood the first time, the second time, and even the third time. Lots of blood, pain, terror, and begging. There had been no presentation of the sheets back then. Our maid, who had never come to my aid, cleaned them.

I wouldn't beg tonight. It hadn't stopped my abuser many years ago.

It wouldn't stop my husband.

I knew the stories. I had seen him in the cage.

My only consolation was that I doubted he could break me more than I already had been all those years ago.

CHAPTER 1



BEFORE – NINO

“You do remember what I told Luca last time I saw him? I doubt he’ll have any kind of interest in working with us after that,” Fabiano muttered, pacing the room. “He will kill me the moment I set foot in his territory, trust me. Fuck, I would kill me if I were him.”

Remo shook his head. “He is angry, but he will see reason.”

I nodded. “He wanted to protect his property, his wife, but he’s still a businessman, and we have good arguments for cooperation. Drugs are still his main business, and our contact in his lab tells us they can’t produce enough for the increasing demand. Luca needs to import drugs, but he can’t because we hold the west and Dante holds the middle. His smugglers lose too much of the shit before it reaches the East Coast. If he works with us, we can guarantee safe transport through our territory and in return he promises us to stay out of our fight with Dante Cavallaro. We don’t even want his help.”

“We don’t need it,” Remo insisted, dark eyes hardening. We disagreed on that point; additional help facing an opponent like Dante Cavallaro would have been very appreciated, but like Luca, Remo let emotions get in the way of rational decisions.

Fabiano frowned. “Luca isn’t like you, Nino. Not every single one of his decisions is based on logical reasons. He’s furious because we insulted Aria, and his pride might stop him from making the logical decision. Trust me on that.”

Pride and fury. Neither were useful.

“If you tell your sister that you gave Leona that bracelet, she will convince him. She’ll think you are her little brother again. She’ll want to believe it. Take Leona with you. Make it out to be a family visit, for all I care, but convince Aria and Luca to talk to us. Tell him I’m going to meet with him personally,” Remo said.

I gave Remo a slanted look. Last time he talked to Luca hadn’t gone over too well. Years had passed, but if Luca held on to grudges, he’d remember that too. And Remo had a way of provoking people that didn’t go over well with the other Capo.

“He won’t believe that we’re trustworthy,” Fabiano said. “And you talking to Luca is the fucking worst thing that could happen. Remo, you are a fucking time bomb. You get a hard-on just imagining how it would feel to bathe in Luca’s blood, damn it. Do you really think you could stop yourself from trying to kill him?”

Remo leaned back with a smile on his face that I’d learned to be wary of. “The Famiglia is all about bonds to ensure peace, aren’t they? We give them what they want, what your sister wanted for you and everyone else.”

He hadn’t answered Fabiano’s question.

Fabiano stopped his pacing and crossed his arms. “And what’s that supposed to be?”

“Peace and love.” Remo’s mouth twisted as if he was going to start laughing. “We’ll suggest a marriage between our families. It worked between the Outfit and the Famiglia for a while.”

Remo hadn’t mentioned anything to me. Usually he consulted with me before he made these kinds of decisions. For Remo, it was a surprisingly reasonable plan. Marriages had prevented many wars over the centuries of human history—of course, they’d started just as many as well.

Fabiano laughed but I could tell that he was displeased from the

narrowing of his eyes. “For a few years and now they are back to killing each other.”

“A few years is all we require,” I told him. “Luca knows as well as we do that any kind of peace arrangement will always only be for a short period of time.”

“You can’t believe that Luca will agree to an arranged marriage.”

“Why not?” Remo asked, grinning. “It worked for him and your sister. Look at them, sickly in love. I’m sure he can spare one of his cousins. Didn’t you say his father had three sisters and two brothers? There have to be a few cousins in marrying age, or even a second cousin for all I care.”

“One of those sisters was married to a traitor whom our father killed. I doubt she will give her daughters to us,” I reminded Remo.

“One of her daughters is the fuck-thing of that bastard Growl. As if I’d accept her or her sister for our family,” Remo spat. I inclined my head in agreement. It would send the wrong message if we allowed the Famiglia to give us the leftovers of our traitorous half-brother.

“Luca wouldn’t choose either of them. But who the fuck is supposed to marry a woman from the Famiglia?” Fabiano asked, raising his blond eyebrows at my brother. “Don’t tell me it’s going to be you, Remo, because I won’t make that fucking offer. We all know that you are the last person we can parade around as a husband. You lose your temper all the time. That will end in a fucking bloody wedding and you know it.”

Remo grinned, his eyes shifting to me. That explained why he hadn’t consulted with me. “I won’t marry anyone. Nino will.”

Lifting my eyebrows at him, I asked, “Will I?”

Fabiano sank down onto the sofa, grimacing. “No offense, but Nino isn’t really the right person to play husband either.”

I tilted my head. I’d never considered marriage. It seemed

unnecessary. “If you’re referring to my lack of emotions, I can assure you that I can fake them if required.”

Remo shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a marriage for love. Nino doesn’t have to feel anything to marry. He only needs to say yes and fuck his bride, perhaps father a kid or two, and keep his wife alive as long as we want peace with the Famiglia. You can do that, right?”

I narrowed my eyes, not liking his tone. “I can do that.”

Fabiano shook his head. “That’s a fucking bad idea and you know it.”

“It’s unconventional,” I conceded, “but it’s a practice that’s been used in our circles for generations. Even before our families came to the US, they arranged marriages to establish bonds between different families. And the Famiglia has old-world values. They are the only family outside Italy that still follows the bloody sheets tradition. I’m certain that Luca’s family will welcome the idea of another arranged marriage between families; Luca needs to keep the traditionalists in the Famiglia happy, especially now that he had to take in some of his relatives from Sicily. And there are still traditionalists in the Camorra who’ll appreciate that kind of agreement.”

Fabiano shook his head again. “I tell you again, Luca won’t agree. He will kill me.”

Remo smirked. “We will see. I hear he needs to protect his children.”

Fabiano jerked. “Aria’s got kids?”

Remo and I had known for a while. One of our contacts told us. Luca made sure to keep Aria and the kids out of the press and even killed a few photographers who didn’t grasp the concept of privacy. Remo hadn’t wanted Fabiano to know because he worried Fabiano would get too emotional during his visit in New York. Apparently, he changed his mind.

“A daughter and a son,” I said. “He needs to protect them, and if we offer him peace in the west, that should convince him.”

Fabiano was silent. "How long have you known?"

"Is that important? It's not like Luca would have let you anywhere near his kids," Remo said.

Fabiano nodded but his mouth was tight. "You know Dante wasn't the main force behind the attack on us. It was my father." He looked at me then at Remo. "Dante might kill my father before we get our hands on him. I don't want that to happen. Let me go to Chicago and bring him to Las Vegas. We can still ask Luca for peace after that."

Remo gave me a pointed look, obviously needing me to be the voice of reason as usual.

"That seems unwise," I said. "You are too emotionally invested to lead an attack on Outfit ground, especially on your father. And we don't know for certain if your father acted without Dante's direct orders. Dante might not kill him."

"It was my father's plan. You heard what the Outfit fuckers said when we tore them apart. My father sent those fuckers because he wanted me dead," Fabiano growled. "And I want to kill him. I want to tear him apart limb by limb."

"And you will," Remo said firmly, touching Fabiano's shoulder. He paused. Again with that smile. "But it would be a good wedding gift. If we get our hands on Scuderi, we could have his death as a peace offering for Luca and his clan. After all, the Scuderi sisters don't hold much love for their father either."

"Of course they don't. He is a despicable asshole," Fabiano said.

"We can't waltz into Chicago and drag their Consigliere out. You realize that, right? Dante will have put every possible protection in place." I had to say it because it was becoming increasingly obvious that neither Remo nor Fabiano would make the wise choice when it came to bringing down the

Outfit. “The only logical choice is to send me to New York for the meeting with Luca. I’m not emotionally invested. I will be able to deescalate the situation if required.”

Remo shook his head. “I am Capo. I should be at the front. Only a fucking coward would send his brother out to risk his sorry ass in a situation like this.”

“What about my fucking ass?” Fabiano muttered.

“Your ass is safe because of your sister. No matter what Luca says, he’ll always think twice before putting a bullet in your head. With Nino, nothing’s holding him back.”

“He won’t shoot me. His next delivery will have to pass our borders in the upcoming days ... if our informants in Mexico are to be believed. We intercept it, keep hold of his men and his drugs until the meeting, and I’ll give the order to have them released as a peace offering, a sign of goodwill.”

“Drugs and expendable soldiers won’t stop Luca from killing you,” Fabiano said.

“We will see,” I said. “It’s the only logical choice.”

“Your fucking logic is pissing me off,” Remo muttered.

“I’m the future husband, so it is the *logical* choice to send me. We’re doing this on my terms, Remo. I won’t have you two mess this up with your emotions.”

“I think he’s pissing me off on purpose,” Remo said to Fabiano.

Fabiano nodded. “I think he is.”

“It doesn’t take much effort to piss you off, Remo.”

Remo narrowed his eyes at me. “The logical choice would be to take someone with you. You shouldn’t go alone. Take Fabiano.”

Fabiano rolled his eyes. “Yeah, take me. Because apparently I’m bulletproof because I’m a fucking Scuderi.”

I regarded the blond man. “Maybe your presence would rip open too many wounds for Luca. We don’t want to start on the wrong foot.”

“I think that ship has sailed,” Fabiano said.

“Do you want to come with me to New York?” I asked, my expression doubtful.

“I’d rather go to Chicago and kill my fucking father, but if an insane marriage between you and some poor Famiglia woman brings me closer to that goal, I’ll go to New York and talk to Luca fucking Vitiello. But I don’t think he’ll be very happy to see me. He won’t believe I’ve changed for one fucking second.”

“You haven’t really. Except for your behavior toward Leona. You are still a cruel bastard, so Vitiello shouldn’t trust you,” I said.

Fabiano looked between Remo and me. “Am I going or not? I’ll have to figure out a way to tell Leona about this without freaking her out.”

Remo shook his head. “I should go as Capo.”

“We’ll save that reunion for the second meeting when Vitiello is convinced the benefits of a bond outweigh the joy of cutting off your head,” I said.

“I take it that means I’m going.” Fabiano got up. “I really hope this fucking ordeal allows me to kill my father, or you two will have a lot to make up to me.”

I still wasn’t convinced that Fabiano’s presence would improve our situation. He was Aria’s brother, true, but even that wouldn’t protect him forever. Taking Remo was out of the question. I’d have to make sure Luca and Fabiano would follow my reasoning and not let their unpredictable emotions run the show.

Kiara

I stood off to the side as usual, far enough away from the dance floor so no one would feel obligated to ask me to a dance. My eyes followed Giulia as she danced with her husband, Cassio. Her eyes caught mine briefly, and she smiled. She had already moved out when I had to move in with Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix six years ago, but she and I had become close friends nevertheless, closer than anyone else, especially my older brothers. They were allowed to stay in Atlanta after our father was killed by my cousin Luca. I shivered at the memory.

Giulia was one of the few who looked at me with kindness and not a superior sneer. I resisted the urge to rub my arms; it seemed like I was always cold. Even the music failed to set me at ease. I couldn't wait to be back home and feel the keys of my piano under my fingertips.

My spine stiffened when Luca headed toward me. His wife, Aria, probably took pity on me and told him to ask me to a dance. I really wished he wouldn't.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked, holding out his hand. Since I'd turned eighteen last year, I was expected to attend social events. Even Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix couldn't find excuses to keep me away anymore. I was still shunned by many, not openly, but I caught their looks when they thought I wasn't paying attention.

"It's an honor," I said quietly and took his hand. My body revolted at the physical contact, but I forced it into submission and followed Luca toward the dance floor. He was my cousin and I'd known him all my life, not that I knew him very well. We had too many cousins in our family to allow a closer bond.

I tried to brace myself for the next step, for his hand on my waist,

tried to prepare so I wouldn't flinch, but the moment his palm touched my hip, my entire body seized. Luca regarded me but didn't pull back. He was probably used to that kind of reaction from people. His reputation and size would have sent even a normal woman running. I tried to soften my body in his hold as we danced, but it was a losing battle and eventually I gave up.

"Your father was a traitor, Kiara. I had to kill him."

I'd never held it against him. My father knew the consequences of betrayal, yet Luca seemed to think that was the reason I couldn't stand his touch. I wished it were that. God, how I wished it were only that, wished it was only Luca's touch that brought me close to panic. I swallowed the memories of the nights that had broken me.

"You had to," I agreed. "And I don't miss him. He wasn't a good father. I miss my mother, but you didn't kill her. That was my father."

In my head I began playing the melody I'd been working on over the last few weeks, hoping it would calm me. It didn't.

Luca nodded. "I talked to Aunt Egidia and Felix. They are concerned that you aren't married yet."

I was nineteen and hadn't been promised to anyone yet. "Who wants to marry the daughter of a traitor?" I muttered. Deep down I was relieved. Marriage would reveal a secret I needed to hold on to, a secret that would turn me into a pariah in our circles.

"You did nothing wrong. Your father's actions don't define you."

People were watching me. "Why don't you tell them," I spat, looking around at our audience. I cringed at my tone. "I'm sorry." Luca was Capo. I needed to show respect.

He regarded me, wearing a blank mask. "I don't want to promise you to a soldier. You are a Vitiello and should be married to one of my Captains or Underbosses."

“It’s okay. I have time,” I said quietly, my cheeks flushing in shame. I didn’t really have time. I was getting older and being unmarried and a traitor’s daughter would only make people talk more.

The dance was finally over, and I gave Luca a quick, forced smile before I made my way back to the side. After that, I did what I could do best—had learned to do best—I pretended I wasn’t there. My aunt choosing modest dresses in subdued colors from last year’s collection definitely helped with that. I couldn’t wait for the Vitiello Christmas party to be over. Christmastime was connected to too many horrible memories.

ChristmasTime seven years ago

I couldn’t sleep. No matter how I twisted and turned, I always managed to lie on the bruises. Father had been in a horrible mood today. Mother said it had something to do with us being in New York. Tomorrow, we’d finally return to Atlanta, and then his mood would be better. Soon, everything would be better. Soon, Father would have solved all of his problems and we’d finally be happy. I knew it wasn’t true. He would never be happy, never stop hitting us. Father enjoyed his unhappiness and he enjoyed making us suffer.

Something clanged downstairs. I got out of bed and stretched, trying to get rid of the soreness in my limbs from the beating I endured this morning. A sound in the corridor drew me toward the door, and I carefully opened it, peering out the crack. A tall man lunged at me. Something over my head gleamed in the light, and then a knife was wedged into the wooden doorframe. I opened my mouth to scream, but the man clamped his hand over my mouth. I struggled, terrified of the huge stranger.

“Not a sound. Nothing will happen to you, Kiara.” I froze and took a closer look at the man. It was my cousin Luca, my father’s Capo. “Where is your father?”

I pointed toward the door at the end of the corridor, my parents' bedroom. He released me and handed me over to Matteo, my other cousin. I wasn't sure what was going on. Why were they here in the middle of the night?

Matteo began to lead me away when my mother stepped out of the bedroom. Her terrified eyes landed on me a moment before she jerked and fell to the ground.

Luca threw himself to the ground as a bullet hit the wall behind him. Matteo shoved me away and darted forward, but another man gripped me in an unrelenting hold. My gaze froze on my mother, who stared at me with lifeless eyes.

Only Father had been in the bedroom with her, and he had killed her.

Dead. Just like that. One tiny bullet and she was gone.

I was dragged downstairs and out of the house, pushed into the backseat of a car. Then I was alone with the sound of my shallow breathing. I wrapped my arms around my chest, wincing as my fingers touched the bruises on my upper arms caused by my father's outburst this morning. I began rocking back and forth, humming a melody my piano teacher had taught me a few weeks ago. It was getting cold in the car, but I didn't mind. The cold felt good, soothing.

Someone opened the door, and I shied away in fear, pulling my legs up to my chest. Luca poked his head in. There was blood on his throat. Not much but I couldn't look away. Blood. My father's?

"How old are you?" he asked.

I didn't say anything.

"Twelve?"

I tensed, and he closed the door and sat in the front beside his brother, Matteo. They assured me I was safe. Safe? I had never felt safe. Mother

always said the only safety in our world was death. She found it.

My cousins took me to an older woman called Marianna, whom I'd never met before. She was kind and loving, but I couldn't stay with her. As honor dictated, I had to stay with family, so I was sent to Baltimore to live with my Aunt Egidia and her husband, Felix, who was Underboss in the city like my father had been Underboss in Atlanta.

I had met her only during family festivities because she and my father hated each other. Luca took me to them a couple of days after my mother's funeral. I was silent beside him, and he didn't try to make conversation. He looked angry and tense.

"I'm sorry," I whispered when we came to a stop in front of a large villa in Baltimore. Over the years, I'd learned to apologize even if I didn't know what I'd done wrong.

Luca frowned at me. "What for?"

"For what my father did." Honor and loyalty were the most important things in our world, and Father had broken his oath and betrayed Luca.

"That's not your fault, so it's nothing you should apologize for," he said, and for a little while I believed it to be true. Until I saw Aunt Egidia's disapproving face and heard Felix say to Luca that it would reflect badly on them if they took me in. Luca wouldn't hear it, so I stayed with them, and eventually they learned to tolerate me, and yet not a day passed when I wasn't acutely aware that I was seen as a traitor's daughter. I didn't blame them. From a young age, I'd learned that there was no greater crime than betrayal. Father had tainted our family name, had tainted my brothers and me, and we'd always carry the blemish. My brothers, at least, could try to make a name for themselves if they became brave Made Men, but I was a girl. All I could hope for was mercy.

Today

Being regarded as a traitor's daughter, facing the pitying or disgusted expressions wasn't the worst part about these gatherings. Not even close. He was. He caught my eyes from across the room, and his face held the knowledge of what he had done, the triumph over what he had taken. He stood beside my aunt—his wife—beside his children—my cousins—and was regarded with respect. His eyes on me made my skin crawl. He didn't approach me, but his leering was enough. His gaze was just like his touch; it was humiliation and pain, and I could not stand it. Cold sweat covered my skin, and my stomach churned. I turned around and hurried toward the women's restroom. I'd hide there for the rest of the night, until it was time to leave with my Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix.

I splashed my face with water, ignoring the minimal makeup I wore. Luckily it was waterproof mascara and a hint of concealer to cover the shadows under my eyes, so I didn't do much damage. I needed the cold of the water to help me get a grip on my rising panic.

The door opened and Giulia slipped in. She was beautiful in her bold violet dress with her light brown hair. She carried herself with confidence and had for as long as I could remember. That was probably how she had managed to make her marriage with Cassio work despite their age difference.

She came toward me and touched my shoulder, her brows drawing together. "Are you okay? You left the party."

"I'm not feeling well. You know I'm not good around so many people."

Her eyes softened further, and I knew what was coming. "Luca would kill him if you told him what he's done."

"No," I croaked, my eyes darting to the door, afraid someone would come in and overhear us. I often regretted that I'd confided in Giulia shortly

after it had happened, but I had been broken and confused, and she was always kind. “You swore not to tell anyone. You swore it, Giulia.”

She nodded, but I could tell that she didn’t like it. “I did, and I won’t tell anyone. It’s your decision, but I think Uncle Durant needs to pay for what he did.”

I shuddered, hearing his name. Turning my back on her, I washed my hands again. “You know that I will be the one to pay, Giulia. This world isn’t kind, least of all to a woman like me. I can’t go through this. I will be worse off than I am now. Your parents already have trouble finding a husband for me. If the truth got out, I’d die a spinster. They would never forgive me.”

Her lips formed a thin line. “My parents never treated you the way they should have. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. They took me in. They never hit me, never punished me harshly. It could have been worse.”

“I could ask Cassio if one of his men would be a good match for you. There are many decent men in his ranks.”

Decent. Cassio ruled over Philadelphia with an iron fist. What he considered decent probably didn’t qualify as decent for other people, but I had no right to be choosy or judge others.

“No. That would offend your parents. You know how they are.”

“Yeah, I know ...” Her brows tightened.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m in no hurry to marry,” I said. Marriage would be my final ruin.

CHAPTER 2



NINO

“I assume you will hold back during our meeting and not offend Vitiello,” I said as Fabiano and I boarded the plane.

“I’m not a genius like you, but I’m no imbecile either. Don’t worry, I know when to shut up.”

I nodded as I sank down into one of the comfortable leather seats. Fabiano usually had a good handle on his emotions, unlike my brother. “That Luca even agreed to meet us at all is a good sign.”

Fabiano sat in the seat across from me. “It might be, yes, or Luca wants to put a bullet in our heads.”

“No,” I said. “He won’t risk war with the Camorra. Remo would attack, and he wouldn’t do it with subtle tactics like Dante Cavallaro. He’d go to New York and go on a killing spree they haven’t seen in the Famiglia before.”

Fabiano smirked. “Yeah, he’d do that. But I hear Luca has gone on a few impressive killing sprees in the last few years to get the Famiglia under control and shut up the Bratva. He and Remo are pretty similar when it comes down to it.”

“To some extent, but Remo doesn’t have wife and children he needs to protect.”

Fabiano raised an eyebrow. “Remo protects Savio and Adamo, and even you and me by some degree.”

“That’s different,” I said.

Fabiano regarded me carefully. “You really think marrying is a good idea?”

“It’s—”

“Don’t say it’s the logical choice,” Fabiano muttered. “I want to know if you really think you can be with a woman like that. You are messed up, Nino. Not in the same way Remo is messed up, but still fucking messed up. Fuck, even I’m messed up, and it almost cost me Leona. And it’s still fucking difficult sometimes to make this relationship work because I keep saying or doing things that unsettle her. And let’s be real: I’m the fucking epitome of normalcy compared to you. Women aren’t like us. They want their fucking knight in shining armor. They want roses and all that emotional shit. They want declarations of love. That’s not something you’re going to give your future wife. To be honest, I think most women would kill themselves within a few weeks of marrying you rather than live under a roof with all you Falcone fuckers.”

“From what I know, arranged marriages aren’t based on emotions. They are based on tradition and rationality. A woman who’s given to me in marriage knows what’s expected. She’ll know it’s business. She’s a chess piece. And I can assure you, I will prevent her from ending her life for as long as her survival is required for peace.”

Fabiano sighed, touching his temple. “Maybe you should keep your thoughts to yourself as well. Most of the shit coming out of your mouth won’t set anyone at ease, least of all a woman.”



My muscles tensed when I pulled our rental car up in front of the abandoned Yonkers power plant. After we landed in New York, Romero had sent me a text saying that was where Luca would meet with us. The building was

decrepit, and the area was deserted. A good place to torture and kill, I had to give that to Luca.

“This is fucking great,” Fabiano said, his lips curling. “I’m not in the mood to die today.”

“Neither of us will die today,” I said, pushing open the car door and getting out. My eyes searched the area. On the roof of the building, two snipers were lying in wait. The moment Fabiano stepped up beside me, a gate in the old factory building swung open and three men emerged. I recognized them as Luca, Matteo, and Romero.

“I assume you saw the snipers pointing their guns at our heads,” Fabiano murmured. Despite his words, he appeared relaxed from the outside.

I inclined my head in confirmation.

The three men stopped about two car lengths away from us. Luca evaluated me for a moment before he narrowed his eyes at Fabiano. “Do you remember what I told you last time you were in New York?”

Matteo and Romero held their guns, the former particularly looking like he’d gladly put a bullet in Fabiano’s head. I could tell that the feeling was mutual.

Fabiano nodded. “You told me I was a dead man if I returned to New York.”

Luca nodded. “And here you are asking for death.”

“We are here to offer truce, Luca.” I interrupted what would have surely soon turned into a less than pleasant argument. “As Consigliere of the Camorra, I hold the power to negotiate a peace treaty between our two families.”

Matteo snorted and exchanged a look with Romero.

Luca took a step forward. “You really think I’m going to work together with the Camorra after the message Remo sent me through Fabiano

last time, after you threatened my wife years ago.”

“Remo wanted to size you up. He didn’t mean to insult you or harm your wife.” That was only a half-truth, but there was no point in revealing it to Luca.

Luca sneered. “Every word out of your mouth is a lie. I know you caught one of my drug deliveries. You’re probably having my soldiers dismembered as we speak. I have absolutely no reason to trust you.”

“I don’t trust anyone, Luca, and trust isn’t required for truce.”

Luca and I whirled around toward the voice. Remo sauntered in our direction, completely naked except for black briefs. “I’m not armed as you can see.” My brother was even barefoot. I narrowed my eyes at him. This was insanity. I wasn’t sure why I still bothered making plans if Remo always acted on his own accord.

“One day, I’m going to kill the crazy fucker,” Fabiano muttered. “He just signed our fucking death warrant.”

Remo gave me his twisted grin as he clapped my shoulder then Fabiano’s before walking closer to Luca and the others. “I thought it would be good to talk face to face, Luca. From one man of honor to the other. From Capo to Capo.”

Luca’s face reflected hatred, but there was also respect present. “And I thought you were a coward who sent out his Enforcer and his brother to fight his battles.”

“I’m many things, Luca. A coward isn’t one of them,” Remo said.

“You know what, why don’t we put a bullet in your head and help Las Vegas to a new Capo. Someone less fucked-up,” Matteo said, aiming his gun at Remo. Romero pointed his gun at me.

Fabiano pulled out his own gun, but Remo shook his head. I walked to his side. “Killing us wouldn’t serve any purpose,” I said calmly. “Savio

will contact Cavallaro the moment we're dead and offer them cooperation, and even you can't fight both the Camorra and the Outfit."

"Your brother Savio is only sixteen. He won't be able to control the Camorra."

"I was only seventeen when I began my fight to win my territory back. You were only seventeen when you crushed a man's throat. Savio is a Falcone. He is a born killer, Luca. He can control the Camorra. The name Falcone holds power in Las Vegas and beyond," Remo said.

Luca narrowed his eyes, but I took it as a good sign that he hadn't killed us yet. "Do you want to risk cooperation between the Outfit and the Camorra? You can't have peace with Dante Cavallaro unless you send him your sister-in-law and your Captain." I nodded toward Romero.

Luca still didn't say anything. He was probably trying to decide if he should just end us. My finger rested loosely on my trigger, but with the snipers on the roof, even my skills wouldn't save us.

Remo moved even closer to Luca until they stood at arm's length. Luca was about an inch taller than Remo, but that didn't come as a surprise.

"What is there to talk about, Remo? And this time I know your brother Nino isn't aiming at my wife, so there's nothing stopping me from bathing in your fucking Falcone blood."

Remo grinned. "The Camorra doesn't have any interest in hurting your family, Luca. Not your wife *nor your children*."

Luca lunged, his fingers clamping down around Remo's throat. My brother made no move to defend himself. He didn't take his eyes off the Famiglia Capo as he rasped, "We aren't the only ones who know about your children. The Outfit does and so does the Bratva. The Outfit attacked my territory when they thought I was vulnerable. Who do you think they will attack to hurt you, Luca? Scuderi tried to get rid of Fabiano, his own son, *his*

heir. What will he do to the daughters who disappointed him so greatly, who ruined peace between the Outfit and the Famiglia?”

The Famiglia Capo looked like he wanted to crush Remo’s throat, and I knew he could have done it. Remo was one of the most vicious fighters, brutal to the very core, but a fight with Luca would probably kill them both. Even Fabiano and I couldn’t prevent that, not with Matteo and Romero and the snipers.

Remo’s face turned red, but he kept talking. “Dante Cavallaro is our enemy, and I’m going to walk into Chicago and show him what it means to be at war with the Camorra, show him why we are despised even among our own. I will make him pay, and it won’t be quick or fair. As for Scuderi, Fabiano is going to kill him very slowly, and if you want, we can send you the video footage so you can share it with the Scuderi sisters. You want Cavallaro’s death as much as we do.”

Luca released Remo. “Don’t underestimate Cavallaro. He is a cold fish on the outside, but he is a cruel fucker like you and I. And Scuderi is a nasty piece of shit but a strategic genius. That’s why he remained Consigliere under Dante’s rule.”

Fabiano made a low growl but otherwise remained silent.

Remo nodded, rubbing his throat. “I know what kind of man Cavallaro is. And I don’t doubt that Scuderi is a mastermind of twisted plans, but I will attack where he and Cavallaro don’t expect it. I will beat them at their own game. And I will enjoy every fucking minute of it.”

Luca narrowed his eyes. “I’m not going to join you in your crusade. I have a feeling I won’t like your plan. You are fucking insane.”

“I’m not asking you to join me. I’m asking you to stay out of my fight. In the past, the Camorra and the Famiglia worked together. Peace in our territories can lead to peace between our families in Italy as well.”

“My territory is my only concern.”

Remo shrugged. “We can both profit from a union. I can offer you safe delivery routes for your drugs through my territory. You lose more than half of your deliveries because either my men or Outfit soldiers intercept them. Peace means you won’t have to worry about it anymore. You can double your profits. And I will keep Dante busy with attacks so you can focus on the Bratva and not worry about your family so much.”

“And all you want in turn is for me stay out of your war with the Outfit?” Luca sounded suspicious.

I spoke up. “Dante might approach you after we start our attacks. We want to make sure he doesn’t manage to convince you to help him.”

Luca smiled coldly. “I have no intention of working with the Outfit. I want Dante Cavallaro dead, trust me.” He narrowed his eyes. “So how do you want to go about peace?”

“First, we will release your soldiers and your drugs,” Remo said with a smile. He motioned at me, and I reached for my phone, causing all guns to swivel in my direction.

I sent a quick message to Savio so he’d arrange the release of the Famiglia men. I nodded. “Your men are being released as we speak, and your drugs will arrive safely in your territory.”

“Why don’t you just spill it?” Matteo muttered. “There’s more to this. I’m running out of patience over here.”

I tossed Remo a look. Matteo sounded just like him.

“We want to show you that the Camorra is willing to allow change,” I said calmly. “Fabiano is allowed to be with an outsider. He gave her that bracelet your wife gifted him.”

“I don’t give a fuck about any of that,” Luca growled. “I don’t care if Fabiano’s found a whore to fuck.”

“Careful, Luca,” Fabiano hissed, taking a step forward.

Luca raised his eyebrows.

“Why don’t we get back to business,” I suggested. “You need peace. We need peace. You want Cavallaro and Scuderi dead. We will kill them.”

Remo opened his arms. “And to show you that we are very serious about truce with you and the Famiglia, I want us to arrange a marriage between one of yours and one of mine.”

Matteo chuckled. “Oh, this is getting good.”

“We’re being serious,” I said because Remo’s expression worried me. I could tell that Matteo was starting to seriously piss him off. “Arranged marriages between Famiglias have ensured peace for centuries, and your Famiglia has always upheld the tradition. You and Aria are proof that it’s the perfect solution.”

Luca’s mouth tightened when I mentioned Fabiano’s sister. “It was supposed to bring peace with the Outfit and now there’s war.”

“Well,” Remo said, gesturing at Matteo and Romero, “that was your Famiglia’s doing. I can assure you we will uphold our part of the deal.”

“If I gave one of our women to the Camorra, who would guarantee she was safe?” Luca asked.

“Our women are as safe as your women, trust me. They have nothing to fear in our territory,” I said. Nothing that they wouldn’t have to fear in every marriage in our circles, at least.

Luca’s mouth curled in distaste as he regarded my brother. “I won’t give a woman to you in marriage, Remo. I don’t trust you one bit. You are too fucking crazy for my taste.”

“I’m not the one who will marry. It’s my brother Nino, and you will find that he’s absolutely in control of himself. Look at him. Doesn’t he look like every mother-in-law’s dream?”

I gave my brother a warning look before I turned to Luca. “It’s a good deal for the Famiglia and the Camorra. Don’t let old grudges or feuds ruin your chances of optimizing the Famiglia’s profits and securing your territory.”

“This is ridiculous,” Matteo said, but Luca was silent. He was a businessman. He knew what safe delivery routes through our territory could mean for him. Luca motioned for his brother and Romero to follow him. They walked out of earshot.

Remo smiled.

“I don’t know what you’re smiling about. This isn’t Texas Hold ’em. Going all in isn’t the way to go,” Fabiano murmured. “This is a fucking train wreck.”

“Luca will agree,” I said firmly.

My brother and Fabiano looked at me curiously.

“Are you sure?” Remo asked.

“Luca isn’t the man he used to be before he had his wife and children. He won’t risk open war with the Outfit, but he wants Dante dead and he prefers us on his side. If you have something to lose like he does, you choose the safe option.”

Romero walked toward us.

“He’s the one who broke truce with the Outfit by popping your sister’s cherry, right?” Remo whispered.

Fabiano grimaced. “He did, and I let them fucking shoot me so they could escape. I was a fucking idiot.”

Romero regarded us with open distrust. “Luca will consider your offer. We have another drug delivery in three days. If it reaches our territory safely, we can discuss a truce in more detail.”

“It will arrive safely, don’t worry,” Remo muttered.

Romero nodded. “Luca wants you to leave New York now. We will contact you in a few days if everything goes as planned.”

“Everything will go as planned,” Remo said, grinning widely. “Luca better start looking for a wife for my brother. We’re looking forward to meeting her.”

CHAPTER 3



KIARA

Despite the warmer temperatures that March brought, I was glad for my thick wool sweater. I'd never grown used to the colder climate of Baltimore. The weather in Atlanta had been so much warmer. My fingers were stiff as I settled them on the piano keys and began to play. Melancholic low notes of music filled the room, a reflection of my current emotions. I had started fiddling with the composition a couple of days ago, but it was still far from good.

When my aunt stepped into the living room, perfectly styled—as always—in a beige cashmere dress, her dark hair piled on top of her head, I lifted my hands off the keys and the sound died off in a soft exhale.

Uncle Felix entered behind her. He was a tall man, heavy around the middle, with a mustache that twitched when he talked. They exchanged a look and something heavy settled in my stomach.

“We need to have a word with you,” Felix said.

I got up from the bench and followed them toward the seating area. They sat on the couch, and I took the armchair across from them. It felt like I was facing a tribunal.

“It hasn’t been easy on us, taking you in,” Felix began, and I curled my fingers into the leather of the armchair. It wasn’t the first time I heard it, but it still stung. “But we did what we could. We gave you what we could to raise you.”

They had given me shelter and education, but affection or even

protection from the harsh whispers of society ... No. Never that. I was grateful anyway. I knew how important outward appearances were, and they had risked their reputation by taking in a traitor's daughter.

"But you are a grown woman now and it's time for you to have your own home, to be a wife and mother."

My insides tightened, but I kept my face blank. Over the years I'd learned to hide my emotions. "You found a husband for me?"

Who would have agreed to marry me? Perhaps they had settled on a soldier after all. It was for the best. If I married down, the wedding and marriage would be a low-key affair, no attention, little potential for scandal. A soldier might see me as a way to improve his position, because despite being a traitor's daughter, I was the Capo's cousin. Maybe that would make him overlook my defect.

Aunt Egidia smiled but her eyes showed guilt, perhaps even shame. Felix cleared his throat. "I know you aren't aware of the details of my business, but the Famiglia is at war."

As if anyone didn't know that. Even small children were brought up with the knowledge that we had to be vigilant because the Outfit might attack, or heaven forbid, the Camorra.

"I know, Uncle Felix," I said quietly.

"But Luca was approached with an offer of peace. You don't need to bother with the details, but it might be the final step to destroy the Outfit."

My breath stuck in my throat. What was he talking about? If the offer didn't come from the Outfit, who else was willing to agree on a truce?

"It's an honor, Kiara. After what your father did, we thought we would have to give you to a soldier or never find a husband at all."

"Who is it I am going to marry?" I forced the words out, but they sounded strangled.

“You will marry up,” Aunt Egidia assured me with a tense smile, but her eyes ... her eyes still held pity, and deep down I knew that whatever horrors my past held, they would soon be accompanied by new horrors.

“Who?” I rasped.

“Nino Falcone, second in command to his brother Remo Falcone, the Capo of the Camorra,” Felix said, avoiding my eyes.

I heard nothing after that, rising without a word and walking out. I went upstairs, continued into my bedroom, and sank down on the chaise longue, staring blankly at my bed. It was neatly made. I didn’t let the maids make it, hadn’t let them make it in years. Every night I took my pillow and blanket and curled up on my chaise longue to sleep, and in the morning I returned everything and made my bed so no one found out that I didn’t use the bed and hadn’t in six years.

Six years. I was only thirteen.

As I stared at my bed, the horrors of the past took shape again like they did every night when I closed my eyes.

SIX YEARS AGO

It was dark in my room when footsteps woke me. I turned around and recognized my Uncle Durant under the gleam of moonlight. He had come to Baltimore with his wife, Aunt Criminella, to visit Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix for a few days.

Confused by his presence, I sat up. His breathing was loud, and he was dressed in a bathrobe. “Shh,” he said as he leaned over me, his body forcing me down.

Fear shot through me. I wasn’t supposed to be alone with men in my bedroom. That was a rule I had learned from an early age. Stiff with terror, I

watched as he removed his bathrobe; he was naked beneath. I had never seen a naked man. His hand grabbed my shoulder, and his other hand pressed down on my mouth. I was supposed to show respect to my elders, to men in particular, but I knew this wasn't right. I began struggling.

He tore at my clothes. He was too strong. He tugged and pinched. His hands hurt between my legs. I cried, but he didn't stop. He moved on top of me, between my legs.

"This is your punishment for being a dirty traitor."

I wanted to say I didn't betray anyone, but pain robbed me of my words. It felt like being torn apart, like breaking and falling and shattering. His breath was hot on my face, and I cried, whimpered, and begged. His hand only clamped down harder around my mouth, and he grunted as he shoved himself into me again and again. I cried harder because it hurt so much.

I hurt all over, my whole body and deep in my chest.

He kept grunting above me. I stopped struggling, breathed through my clogged nose. In and out. In and out. His sweat dripped down on my forehead. He shuddered and slumped down on top of me. His hand slipped off my mouth.

I didn't scream. I was quiet, motionless.

"Nobody will believe you if you tell them about this, Kiara. And even if they do, they will blame you and nobody will want you anymore. You are dirty now, Kiara, you hear me? Worthless."

He pulled out and I cried from the sharp pain. He slapped me. "Be quiet."

I pressed my lips together, watching him get up and put on his bathrobe. "Have you had your period yet?"

I shook my head because I couldn't speak.

"Good. Wouldn't want you to have a bastard, right?" He leaned over

me again, and I flinched. “I will make sure the maids know you got your period, don’t worry. I won’t let anyone find out that you are a worthless little whore. I will protect you.” He stroked my cheek before he pulled back, and I didn’t move until he was outside. When his steps had faded, I pushed up and managed to stand despite the pain.

Something warm trickled down my legs. I stumbled forward, grabbed my discarded panties, and pressed them between my legs, crying out again. Shaking, I curled up on the chaise longue, staring into the darkness at the bed.

Before sunrise, the door opened again, and I pressed against the backrest, making myself small. One of the maids, Dorma, stepped into my room. She was one of the younger ones who looked at me like I was a bother. Her eyes moved over me. “Get up,” she said sharply. “We need to clean you up before the others wake up.”

I stood, wincing from the soreness between my legs. I looked down at myself. There was blood on my legs and something else that made my stomach pinch sharply. Dorma began gathering the sheets. They, too, were covered in blood. “You better keep this quiet,” she muttered. “Your uncle is an important man and you are only a traitor. You are lucky they didn’t kill you as well.”

I waited quietly as she bunched up the sheets and set them down on the ground. Then she began tugging at my clothes, ignoring my flinching, until I stood naked. I felt dirty, worthless, and broken under her cruel eyes.

She added my nightgown to the bloody heap on the ground then helped me into a bathrobe. “We’ll go to the bathroom now, and if anyone asks, you got your period, right?”

I nodded. I didn’t ask why. I didn’t fight it.

That night, Uncle Durant came into my room again, and again the night after, and again until he finally had to leave for Atlanta. Every morning

Dorma cleaned the sheets and me. A few days after he'd left, she wore an expensive necklace. The price for her silence.

TODAY

A knock sounded, tearing me out of the painful memories. I took a deep breath and willed my voice to be strong. "Come in."

Aunt Egidia opened the door, but she didn't enter. Worry tightened her mouth. "Kiara, that was very rude," she said. She regarded me then averted her gaze, and again it was filled with a hint of guilt. "You should be honored to be given to someone of importance. With your background, it's a blessing. Your wedding will be a spectacle. It'll bring honor to your name."

"And yours," I said quietly.

She stiffened, and I instantly regretted my words. I had no right to criticize her or my uncle. "We braved a lot of unpleasantness because we took you in. You can hardly hold it against us that we are happy to have found such a honorable match for you."

"Has it been decided?" I asked quietly.

She frowned. "As good as. The Falcones insist on Luca's relative for the marriage, naturally, so Felix suggested you. Luca would like a word with you before he makes the offer, which isn't how it used to be done, but if he insists on your consent, we can hardly refuse him. We invited him and his wife over for dinner." Her eyes met mine, finally. "You will tell him you are delighted by the honor, Kiara, won't you? This is your chance to redeem your family and yourself. Maybe your brothers will even be allowed to become Captains if you marry someone like Nino Falcone."

My throat closed tightly, and my gaze found the bed again.

"Kiara, you will tell him you agree, won't you? Your uncle already

told Luca you would. It will lead to rumors if you refuse.”

I looked back at my aunt, who looked worried.

“I will agree,” I whispered, because what else was there left to do?



That evening before dinner, Luca pulled me aside to talk to me without my aunt and uncle, which displeased them greatly, made plainly clear by the scowls on their faces.

“I’m not going to force you to marry if you refuse,” he said. His presence made me nervous.

“I’ll be twenty this fall. I need to marry.”

“That’s true,” Luca conceded. His gray eyes regarded me as if he thought he could pull any truth out of me with just his watchful gaze, but I had learned to hold on to my secrets. “But you could marry someone else.”

I could, but if I refused to marry Nino Falcone, I’d be even more of a pariah in our circles. Uncle Felix and Aunt Egidia would be disappointed, and they would have an even harder time finding someone else. And how would I justify my refusal? In our world, you married the man your parents chose for you, no matter how bad the choice. “Who would marry Nino Falcone in my stead?”

“Most of my cousins are promised or married. I’d have to choose one of the daughters of my Captains. A few of them will be turning of age this year and aren’t engaged.”

Another girl given to the monsters in Las Vegas. A girl more innocent than me. A girl who deserved a chance at happiness no matter how small it would be in our world.

Nobody had protected me all those years ago, but I could spare another girl this fate. “I will marry him. You don’t have to choose anyone

else.” My voice didn’t betray my terror. It was firm and determined, and I forced myself to meet Luca’s gaze for the first time this evening.

Luca stared at me a moment longer, but I could tell he approved of my decision. Duty and honor were the pillars of our world. Each of us had to do what was expected. It would have made him and the Famiglia look bad if he couldn’t have offered one of his cousins to the Camorra. These were the rules we lived by, and his own wife had been given to him for peace. This was how it was done, how it would always be done.

After dinner, it was Aria who approached me. She smiled kindly and touched my arm while the men drank their scotch in the smoking lounge and Aunt Egidia got espresso ready for us. “Nobody would blame you if you refused,” Aria said.

“You married Luca. You did what was expected, what honor dictated, and I know the same is expected of me,” I said with a smile.

She frowned. “Yes, but—”

“It’s not like this has ever been my home. Even if I wasn’t the one who broke his oath, I’m paying for my father’s mistake. I want to move on from it. This is my chance to redeem myself. Las Vegas can be a new start for me.”

Those were the words expected of me, but they fell heavily from my lips because I knew that my marriage to Nino could destroy everything. My reputation and any chance at peace. And beneath these worries, lay a deeper, darker fear—a fear born in the past that haunted my present and would determine my future.

NINO

“This was too risky and you know it, Remo. One day you will get yourself

killed,” I said as Remo and I settled at a table in the Sugar Trap. I knew he was starting to grow tired of my lectures, but as long as he acted impulsively, he’d have to listen to them.

Remo threw his feet up on the table, watching the stripper sway her hips, her tits bouncing up and down. The Sugar Trap was deserted, except for the women preparing for the evening.

“When that happens, you are there to rule over the Camorra.”

I frowned. He was taking this too lightly. He was the born Capo. Nobody could scare people into submission as easily and fast as Remo. I didn’t want to become Capo. That was Remo’s birthright, not mine.

“Don’t give me that look, Nino. I know you would have handled things differently.”

“Anyone would have handled things differently.”

“It worked. Luca got his drugs, and he agreed to give this union a chance. And I bet Aria played a part in the matter. She wants her brother back. She is a woman. They want peace and love. They like to meddle.”

“You aren’t an expert where women are concerned. When was the last time you talked more than two sentences to a woman?”

Remo swung his legs off the table and got up then pointed at the stripper. “I want to fuck. Get your ass into the changing room. I’ll be there in two minutes. You better be naked.” The woman nodded and hurried backstage. Remo raised one dark eyebrow. “See? Four sentences.”

I sighed and rose to my feet. “That wasn’t talking, that was commanding. A monologue, at best. For it to be an actual conversation, she has to say something in return.”

Remo grinned. “Why would I want to hear what she has to say? I prefer her mouth filled with my cock.” He pointed at another stripper who entered our club. “Why don’t you take that one? In a few months, you’ll be a

married man. No more stripper pussies for you then.” He laughed at his own joke, knowing Made Men could do whatever they wanted, and clapped my shoulder. “Come on, relax a bit before you have to meet with Luca tomorrow.”

He had a point. I met the woman’s gaze and motioned her toward me. I’d fucked her before. “C.J.,” I said, and her eyes widened. They were always surprised that I remembered their names, but I never forgot a name or anything else.

“Yes, Mr. Falcone?” She licked her lips because she thought it was what turned me on. I found it more distracting than anything else. If I didn’t already intend on fucking her, I wouldn’t have called her over. There was no sense in trying to turn me on further. Remo had already headed backstage. I grabbed her wrist, led her to the restrooms, and fucked her up against the stall. She moaned, but I knew it was fake. She was wet around my cock, but she definitely hadn’t come. Her body didn’t exhibit the telltale signs of orgasm. As a whore, she was used to faking it to make her customers happy, but I fucking hated it. I gripped her harder, narrowing my eyes, and fucked her faster. “You know what happens to people who lie to me?”

Fear flashed across her face. I reached between us, flicked her clit, and eventually she had to surrender to me—as they always did—and she came. I followed a few moments later, pulled out of her, threw the condom into the toilet, and left her standing there.



Luca and I decided to meet in Nashville. It was neutral ground, which was the best option for a second meeting considering we’d both be alone. Luca sized me up as I walked over to him in the deserted parking lot of an abandoned cinema complex.

I held out my hand for him to shake. He took it and to my surprise he didn't try to squeeze my hand into dust like some people did when they wanted to intimidate. Maybe he knew it didn't have that effect on me.

"We meet again," he said with narrowed eyes. "Last time we didn't get to talk in private. You were the one who threatened my wife."

"I didn't threaten her," I objected. "I found a weakness in your safety measures, and Remo pointed it out to you to stop you from killing him."

Luca's gaze hardened. "You won't threaten my wife ever again."

Maybe the average person was afraid of him, but I regarded him coolly, my pulse as calm as always. "Scare tactics don't work with me. I don't have the disposition for them to have an effect on me. I have no intention of threatening your wife in the future. I think a truce between the Famiglia and the Camorra is the logical solution to our problem with the Outfit, and for truce to work, we will have to agree not to threaten or kill each other for the time being."

Luca regarded me for several seconds, a sneer on his face. "Are any of you Falcone brothers sane?"

"What is your definition of sanity?" I asked. "Society regards neither you nor I as sane. We are psychopaths because we enjoy killing. Or are you trying to tell me you feel guilty when you torture and kill?"

Luca shrugged. "Maybe we are psychopaths, but you and Remo make most psychopaths look sane."

I knew Remo and I were the result of the same catalyst. Animals adapted to their environment if they wanted to survive. It was an evolution process that sometimes happened on a small scale within a single being. Remo had turned toward his emotions, had let them loose, and as a result had barely any control over his rage.

My body had survived by getting rid of emotions altogether. I

preferred my adaption to his. It made life more predictable.

Adamo hadn't been born when Remo and I became the men we were today, and Savio had been only three years old, too young to understand or remember. They didn't share Remo's and my dispositions. "I'm perfectly capable to act accordingly based on society's standards if I want."

"And you want to marry for truce?"

"It is the only reason why I would consider marrying," I said honestly. "Marriage really serves no other purpose. I don't need companionship. I have that in my brothers and Fabiano. And I don't need marriage to fulfill my sexual drive. There are enough women in Las Vegas for that."

Luca let out a dark laugh. "I believe you."

"I got the impression that you were in favor of a marriage between our families."

"I'm not in favor, but as you said, it is the logical choice. I have to think of the Famiglia and my own family. I don't want you crazy Falcone fuckers on my back. I prefer you making Cavallaro's life hell. I have my hands full with the Bratva. I don't want to deal with him. That you're going to kill Scuderi in the most brutal way anyone could come up with is an added bonus."

"Then it's settled. Given your family's background, your Captains and Underbosses are in favor of the union, I presume."

"They follow my judgment, but arranged marriages are very popular in the Famiglia, of course."

Arranged marriages were still popular even among the Camorrista. "Have you chosen a woman for me yet?"

Luca's mouth tightened. "It won't come as a surprise if I tell you that most of my Underbosses and Captains aren't eager to send one of their

daughters to the Camorra. The name Falcone has a certain reputation.”

“I’m perfectly capable of fulfilling my duties as a husband. I can provide protection, father children, and money isn’t a problem either.”

Luca grimaced. “I don’t give a fuck about that. What I want to know is if I will have to attack Vegas to save one of my cousins from you and your brothers.”

“You won’t have reason to save anyone, and even if you tried, Las Vegas is too strong for you. But I assure you, my wife won’t suffer violence.” I paused. “And must I remind you that it’s your family who upholds the tradition of bloody sheets and not ours? That forces any husband’s hand on the wedding night.”

“Some traditions can’t be overruled.”

“The question remains: Do you have someone in mind?”

Luca nodded. “One of my cousins is of marrying age. Her guardians suggested her for the union. She won’t be sad to leave the Famiglia.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Guardians? What is wrong with the girl?”

“Nothing. She’s more than capable of becoming a wife, but her father, my Uncle, was a traitor, and many people won’t let her forget it. She grew up with our Aunt Egidia.”

“A traitor’s daughter for us. Some people might consider that an insult.”

“Will your brother Remo be one of them?”

It was always hard to say with Remo, but he didn’t give a fuck about family history. “Remo judges people by their own actions, not by their parents’ wrongdoings. And she is still your cousin.”

He reached for his back pocket, and I lifted my hand to my holster.

Tension shot through Luca’s body. “Phone.” He pulled out his cell, and after a moment he turned it to me. On the screen was an image of a

young woman with dark brown eyes and almost black hair but her naturally olive skin was rather pale, which suggested she didn't leave the house very often. "This is my cousin, Kiara Vitiello. Nineteen. An honorable woman." The last was said with a hint of warning.

"She will do," I said.

Luca put his phone back into his back pocket. He nodded once then sighed. "Then it's settled."



I returned late that night to our mansion. Remo was awake as usual. He never slept more than a few hours. He got up from the sofa the moment I stepped into our game room. Savio and Adamo were busy playing a video game, some kind of race. Adamo was in lead; just like in real life, he knew how to drive a car.

"And?" There was a hint of eagerness in Remo's voice. I wasn't sure if he hoped Luca had disagreed after today's meeting so we could attack the Famiglia or if he really wanted peace. Remo only ever thrived in chaos and violence.

"He suggested one of his cousins, Kiara Vitiello."

"If her last name is Vitiello, her father must be one of Luca's traitorous uncles."

"You are right. Her father was killed for betraying Luca."

"So he gives us the daughter of a traitor?" Remo asked in a low voice.

"We don't care about these kinds of things."

Remo threw one of his knives at one of the armchairs, and it wedged itself into the leather. There were more holes in it already. "But the Famiglia does. The arrogant asshole probably wants to send some fucking message with the marriage."

“Perhaps Nino is meant as a punishment for her,” Savio mused as his car crashed into a wall, his brown eyes alight with what I assumed was amusement. Adamo didn’t seem to care that he won the game. He put down his controller and regarded me with a face that was probably supposed to convey boredom.

“Sometimes I think Nino is my punishment as well,” Remo said. “It makes sense that Luca would punish his cousin by giving her to Nino.”

I had considered that option as well, but Luca wasn’t the type to punish a woman like that, especially an innocent woman. “If it wasn’t for me, you would be long dead.”

Remo shrugged. “Maybe. We’ll never know.”

“So you’re really going to marry?” Adamo asked. His hair had grown too long and fell into his eyes so he had to push it back constantly. Unlike me, he never put it in a ponytail or styled it back.

“I am.”

“But you haven’t even met the woman. What if you can’t stand her?” Adamo asked.

Savio rolled his eyes. “Could you sound any more like a pussy? You really need to get fucked.”

Adamo’s face turned red. “Shut up.”

“Come on, you are almost fourteen. When I was your age, I’d already fucked a few girls.” Savio looked at Remo. “Lock him in a room with a few hookers so they can fuck him into shape.”

Adamo shoved Savio’s shoulder. “Shut up! I don’t need your hookers.”

“If you want to be a real Falcone, you can’t be a fucking virgin. It’s pathetic. Or perhaps you are a fag?”

Adamo jumped up and threw himself at Savio. They both tumbled to

the ground and began punching. Adamo hadn't yet fought in the cage like Savio, so it wasn't wise of him to attack.

Remo shook his head, but he didn't intervene. I moved closer to get a better view in case things got too rough. Savio had gotten the upper hand and straddled Adamo, punching him hard once, twice, and then lifted his arm for another punch. I took a step forward to stop him, but Remo swung himself over the sofa, landed beside Savio and grabbed him by the collar before pulling him off Adamo and shoving him away. Savio landed on the sofa, breathing hard and making a move to get back up.

"You stay there," I ordered. His eyes held challenge before he nodded and slumped against the backrest.

Adamo was sprawled out on his back, face red and lips busted. He shook but made no move to stand. Remo bent over him and held out a hand. Adamo didn't take it, only glared. "Adamo," Remo said. "Don't try my fucking patience."

Adamo accepted Remo's hand and let him pull him to his feet. Adamo winced, then with a last glare at Savio, he stormed toward the French doors and fled outside.

"Fuck, perhaps he's really into guys," Savio said, scrunching up his face. Then his eyes widened. Sometimes when we were out on business, he managed to act like a man, but in moments like this it became obvious that he wouldn't be turning seventeen for another month. At his age, Remo and I had already been hardened by years on the street. I wasn't sure if we'd ever been teenagers. "Will you kill him, then?"

Remo got into Savio's face. "We are brothers. We will stand by each other. I don't care if Adamo is into fucking goats or ducks or men. He is our brother."

Savio nodded slowly. "He's annoying as fuck. If fucking a guy makes

him more tolerable, I can live with that.”

Remo snorted. Then he turned to me. “Talk to him. You are the only one who can deal with him.”

I headed into the garden, following the stench of smoke, toward one of the lounge chairs beside the pool. Adamo was hunched over, smoking a regular cigarette. Since Remo’s last warning, he hadn’t touched anything harder. I was curious how long that would last. I ripped the butt out of his mouth and threw it into the pool. “No drugs.”

“It’s a cigarette, not pot or heroine,” he mumbled.

I pulled another chair toward him and sat down across from him. “What’s going on?”

He glared. “Nothing.”

“Adamo, if you want to be treated like an adult, you have to act like one. Now tell me why you are acting the way you do.”

His gaze lowered to his sneakers. “I don’t want to screw a hooker or any of the strippers you take home.”

“That became obvious when you attacked Savio. What did I tell you about fighting?”

“Only attack if you are sure you can beat your opponent.”

“You can’t beat Savio. Not yet.”

“I won’t ever be as good as all of you. I don’t enjoy hurting people as much as you do.”

I had figured as much. Adamo had never been a very violent child. “You are strong and a good fighter. You don’t have to enjoy hurting or killing to be good at it.”

He swallowed hard. “I don’t want to kill again.”

He had killed his first man during the attack on Roger’s Fight Arena, and unlike Remo, Savio, and I, his first murder haunted him. “You will get

used to it.”

“Maybe I don’t want to get used to it,” he muttered. “I’m not like you.”

“You have time,” I said. There was no use discussing this now. He still had five months until he turned fourteen; he wouldn’t be inducted until then. “What’s your problem with the women your brothers and I take home?”

He stiffened and his head shot up. “I’m not gay.”

I regarded him but his face remained in the shadows, making it even harder to read him. “Remo wouldn’t punish you for it. We are brothers, Adamo. Nothing will change that.”

Adamo gnawed on his lip then winced.

“I will have to stitch that up.”

He nodded. “I’m not gay.”

I tilted my head, but he continued without further prodding.

“I don’t want a hooker because they don’t even like you. They screw you because you are their boss or because they are scared. I don’t want that. I want a girl who likes me and who wants to be with me.”

“In our world it’s difficult to find that.”

“Because you aren’t looking. Fabiano found Leona.”

“He did, but he went through a lot of women before that.”

Adamo shrugged. “I don’t want to be forced to sleep with a hooker.”

“Remo won’t force you nor will I.”

“Really?”

“Really.” I couldn’t understand Adamo’s reasoning. He was a teenage boy. At some point his sexual drive would be too strong to wait for someone he cared about, even more someone who cared for him. “But, Adamo, we are Falcones. People always act differently around us. Finding someone to trust is difficult.”

“Don’t you want your future wife to like you?”

“Affection isn’t necessary for a marriage. I have no expectations like that.”

“But what if she wants affection?” His mouth twisted at the word, and he winced again.

I gave him a look and stood. “You know me.”

Adamo shrugged. “I kind of feel sorry for her.”

“Come on. Let me stitch up your lip now.” Maybe I would have felt sorry for Kiara Vitiello as well if I were capable of it.

CHAPTER 4



KIARA

Aunt Egidia looked incredibly pleased as she entered the library where I had been hiding all day from her and my uncle. “Luca had a meeting with Nino Falcone today.”

I put down the book I was reading, trying to keep my face emotionless. “And?”

“Luca showed Nino a photo of you, and he agreed to marry you.”

She watched me expectantly as if she thought I’d do a happy dance because Nino had approved of my looks. I swallowed hard. “That’s good news.” It was all I could manage, and it lacked enthusiasm.

My aunt pursed her lips. “Kiara, really, I don’t think you grasp what this means.”

Oh, I knew exactly what it meant, and that was the problem. “It takes some getting used to, the idea of marrying him, Aunt Egidia. Don’t worry, by the time I’ll have to marry him, I’ll be able to convey my excitement properly.”

It was a blatant lie. If I managed not to flinch at every touch, that would be a huge success.

“Well, you don’t have much time. Remo Falcone insists things progress quickly. The wedding is set for four weeks from now.”

I dug my fingers into the leather of the armchair, the color draining from my face. “Four weeks? But that’s not enough time to plan everything.”

Definitely not enough time to mentally prepare myself for marrying a

Falcone—if I could even prepare for something like that.

“Don’t worry. I already contacted a few bridal shops. Of course some of the most popular dresses are already sold out, but they assured me that they have enough beautiful pieces left.”

“That’s good,” I said in a monotone voice.

Aunt Egidia nodded. “Aria and Giulia will join us. I already talked to both of them, and they are excited. Aria was so nice to make an appointment with the best bridal store in New York. New York seems the most sensible choice, given that we can’t expect the wife of the Capo to travel all the way to Baltimore. Of course, the store managed to squeeze us in tomorrow. Who could refuse Aria Vitiello?”

“Tomorrow?” I asked horrified.

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Wonderful,” I managed to say.

Aunt Egidia frowned again. “Anyway, Felix and Luca are trying to figure out the best place to hold the wedding. It’s not going to be New York. Luca doesn’t want the Falcones in his city.”

Didn’t he? I almost laughed.

“I’m sure there are enough other options,” I said quietly.

“Yes, yes. I’m sure,” Egidia said, smiling. “I should call a few florists and make arrangements with them.”

I didn’t bother pointing out that it wouldn’t make sense until we knew where the celebrations would take place. This was Aunt Egidia’s show, even if I was the main attraction.

When she left, I closed my eyes. Four weeks.

Four weeks until my wedding night.

Four weeks until Nino would want to claim his prize.

Four weeks for me to figure out a way to hide that someone had taken

that prize years ago. Sickness washed over me, and I pressed a hand to my stomach.

Ten minutes later, Giulia called. “Did my mother already talk to you?”

“A few minutes ago,” I said.

Giulia sighed. “I don’t like this, Kiara. Four weeks, really? It’s like they can’t throw you at Falcone quickly enough, as if they’re worried they might start feeling guilty if they waited any longer.”

“At least that leaves less time for me to fret.” I’d worry anyway. My nights would be haunted by even worse nightmares than they had been before.

“Even Cassio is wary of the Falcones. He showed me a video of Nino Falcone in the cage. It’s sick.”

“A video?” I echoed. “Where can I watch it?”

There was silence on the other end. “Don’t. Don’t watch it.”

My throat tightened. “Where?”

“It’s a forum in the Darknet that the Camorra uses to show their cage fights and illegal street races.”

“Give me the log in information.”

“Kiara—”

“I’m nineteen, not nine. I want to see him, Giulia. *I need to.*” If I was faced with this monster the first time on our wedding night, I’d bolt. I needed to see what he was capable of, even if a cage fight wouldn’t even begin to cover it.

“Give me a sec. I need to ask Cassio for the info again.” I heard rustling followed by silence on the other end for a while until I heard muffled voices. After what felt like forever, Giulia spoke again. “Do you have somewhere to write it down? It’s long and complicated. The Darknet uses

several steps to keep people out.”

I grabbed the pen and paper that I always kept close by when I read a book; I liked writing down my favorite quotes. “I’m ready.”

After jotting everything down, I listened to another one of Giulia’s warnings before we ended the call. Clutching the paper in my sweaty palm, I walked to my room to grab my laptop. My fingers shook as I logged into the forum. There was a list of fights from the last few years. I entered Nino’s name in the search engine, and several fights popped up immediately. I clicked on the latest from only a few weeks ago.

The camera was trained on a massive cage. A broad man stood inside of it, but he was in his thirties and didn’t have any hair. He was too old to be Nino Falcone. A hush went through the crowd and another man stepped into the cage, taller than the first, and I froze. For several moments, my breath stuck in my throat. If a mere video already summoned that kind of horror, what would real life Nino do?

Nino was tall and muscled, and every inch of his torso and arms was covered in tattoos. Flames and knives and screaming faces, and more images and words I couldn’t make out. The flames traveled down his arms to his wrists. They also snaked into his fighting shorts, ending on his muscled thighs.

His expression was focused but completely emotionless.

My fear turned into pure terror when the fight began. Nino was a fighting machine. Every single one of his hits was *precision*, but what was worse was his analytic expression. He didn’t look like he was fighting in a cage. When his opponent landed a hit, Nino’s face hardly reflected any sign of pain. He kicked and punched hard and fast, without mercy, even as his opponent fell to his knees. Nino was on top of him in a heartbeat, ramming his knee into the man’s back so he sprawled out on the bloody floor. Even

that wasn't enough. Nino wrapped his forearm around the man's throat and cut off his air. His opponent thrust his elbow into Nino's side, but he didn't even wince, only tightened his hold further and eventually the man passed out. Nino released him then and stood. His gaze flitted over the crowd until it focused on the camera. It was as if he was looking straight at me, and the cold, hard look in his eyes awakened the horrors I couldn't shake off.

I couldn't believe this was the man I was supposed to marry.



I didn't sleep more than two hours. Every night, Uncle Durant's face haunted my dreams as he hovered over me and broke me, but this night it was a different face that had hovered above me, a beautifully cold face.

When our bodyguard drove us to Philadelphia to pick Giulia up, my aunt tried to involve me in a conversation about dresses, but I was too upset to engage in any kind of interaction. I was glad when Giulia joined us in the backseat. After one glance at me, she quickly distracted her mother by talking about her summer plans with the kids.

I sent her a grateful look before I trained my gaze on the window, watching as the landscape rushed past me.

Unlike many women, I didn't have a dream dress. I never looked at wedding dresses unless I was at a wedding.

Aria waited with her bodyguard inside the store because it was hailing. The moment we stepped inside, a vendor rushed over to us. "Who's the happy bride?"

Giulia, Aria, and Aunt Egidia looked at me, and the vendor touched my arm. "Exciting, isn't it? You're going to be a breathtaking bride. I can tell."

I gave her a small smile and followed her toward the display of

dresses. “Why don’t you browse the dresses and show me the ones you’d choose for me?” I asked, sinking down into one of the plush armchairs.

That garnered a look from the vendor, but at this point I didn’t care anymore.

Aria and Giulia nodded immediately and set out to look for dresses, but Aunt Egidia’s expression made it clear that she disapproved. However, after a moment she began looking for suitable dresses as well.

Of course, Aunt Egidia chose dresses that would have made most Disney princesses jealous. Too flashy, too eye-catching, just too much. Not me at all. Luckily, Aria and Giulia worked together and found dresses that were closer to my taste.

I chose a simple white mermaid, off-the-shoulder dress with lace trim around the neckline. A sheer veil was attached to the neckline as well and fell down my back and over my bare arms so I didn’t feel quite so exposed.

“Beautiful,” Aria said with a gentle smile. She was still trying to figure out my true feelings regarding the wedding, but I had learned to hide them well over the years. It was the only way to survive after what happened.

Giulia nodded, her eyes watering, and even Aunt Egidia seemed pleased with my choice—even if it wasn’t as flashy as she’d originally planned. “You look very elegant and sophisticated. A true lady.”

I took a deep breath, hoping Nino would treat me as a lady. The man I saw fighting in the cage didn’t strike me as someone who would.

NINO

We pulled up in front of the massive stone and stucco Vitello villa in Baltimore, where the engagement party would take place. With only two days before the actual wedding, there was no logical reason to get officially

engaged at all, but logical decisions weren't the Famiglia's forte. Savio, Adamo, and Fabiano remained in Las Vegas to make sure things went smoothly over there. They would only fly over for the actual wedding. It wasn't as if any of us cared for the festivities. It wouldn't be a huge affair like Aria and Luca's wedding had been many years ago. Our Underbosses and Captains would stay in their territory. Remo wouldn't risk anything after the Outfit attack.

"If they've invited that fucker Growl, I will paint their walls bright red with his fucking blood and that of any Famiglia fucker who gets in my way," Remo growled.

"He won't be invited, Remo. Luca won't risk it. He knows you and Growl will tear into each other."

"What about you? You'd fucking stand by and watch that fucker prancing around when he killed our father before we could?"

"Of course not. I'd slice him open ear to ear."

The moment we got out of the rental car, the door to the house opened, and Felix and Egidia Rizzo appeared in the doorway. Remo shot me a look, one corner of his mouth curling up. "Someone kept an eye on the window, it seems," he muttered as we walked up to my future wife's aunt and uncle. The engagement wouldn't be a grand feast, only held to appease the traditionalists in the Famiglia who required an official engagement before the wedding, but the Rizzos were dressed up in a tuxedo and a long evening dress anyway.

"I think we are underdressed," I said quietly. I had put on a black turtleneck and black dress pants with black wingtip shoes. Remo was dressed in a similar fashion, minus the turtleneck, which he'd swapped for a black dress shirt.

Remo shrugged.

“All in black,” Mrs. Rizzo said with raised eyebrows after I kissed her hand. “What a curious choice for the occasion.”

“It’s the choice color for our profession. Blood is so very difficult to wash out,” Remo drawled in his best Oxford English as he kissed her hand. That was pretty much the only thing he’d learned during our time in England. Of course, he only used it to unsettle people.

Mrs. Rizzo took a small step back from Remo, tugging her hand out of his grasp.

I shook hands with Mr. Rizzo, and he squeezed harder than was necessary. I tilted my head, eyes narrowing. If he tried this with Remo, the black shirt would prove its worth. “We are honored to give you Kiara in marriage,” he said, releasing my hand. “Please call me Felix, and this is my wife Egidia.”

I sent Remo a warning glance before he shook the man’s hand.

“Come in,” Felix said, stepping back. Remo and I followed him inside. It was a large old house with lots of dark wood and rugs in the entrance hall.

“The guests have already gathered in the living room and on the patio, but you and Kiara should enter together,” Felix said then turned to Remo. “Perhaps you can join the guests. My wife will lead the way.”

Egidia gave a tense smile and motioned for Remo to follow, but he made no move to do so. “I think for now my brother and I will stay together.”

Felix blinked then nodded slowly. “Very well. Come on. I chose the library for your first meeting. It’s the place Kiara spends most of her time.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “She likes to read?”

Felix hesitated. “She does, but she is also very beautiful and demure. The perfect wife despite her intelligence.”

Remo rolled his eyes behind the man’s back. We stepped into a wide

room that was filled with dark wooden bookcases. A book lay opened on the small table beside the reading chair. I walked toward it as Felix frowned. “She should be here.”

“Perhaps she decided to run off,” Remo offered helpfully.

“She wouldn’t,” Felix said quickly, but I caught the hint of worry on his face—and so had Remo.

I picked up the book. It was about the history of Las Vegas. It pleased me that she made an effort to learn about my hometown’s history.

“There she is,” Felix said loudly.

I put the book back down, and my eyes moved toward the doorway.

Kiara Vitiello was a fine-boned woman, shorter than I’d expected, almost breakable in appearance, but her hips curved nicely under her dress, and she had above-average-sized breasts. She wore a dress the color of light rose, almost white, but it made her look even more fragile. Clearly it was to emphasize her innocence, but I would have preferred bolder colors. Her dark eyes settled on my face—not my eyes, though—lower, perhaps on my nose, and her shoulders tensed ever so slightly. She hadn’t moved from the doorway, appearing almost frozen. Her palm pressed up to the doorframe, and I knew it was to steady herself.

Remo looked at me, gauging my reaction, which was a futile effort on his part.

Her uncle motioned for her to come closer. “Come on, Kiara. Greet your future husband and brother-in-law.”

A second passed before she pulled herself away from the doorway and walked toward us. Her movements were elegant and purposeful but underplayed with a hint of a tremor she couldn’t suppress.

She stopped beside her uncle.

Even wearing heels, she only reached my chin. “It’s a pleasure to

meet you,” she said in a soft voice. Her eyes darted from my face to Remo’s then quickly back to her uncle.

“The pleasure is mine,” I replied, and Remo’s smile pulled wider. Kiara flinched slightly, almost imperceptible, but Remo had noticed, twitching his lip, and so had I.

Her uncle cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“I would like a few minutes alone with her to give her the ring and get to know each other,” I said, never taking my eyes off her.

“Well,” her uncle said, his eyes flitting between Remo and me and then to Kiara. “I’m not sure—”

Remo flashed him a twisted smile. “They will be married in two days. Then she will come to Las Vegas with us, but you are worried about her being alone for a couple of moments with my brother? She will be subject to his will for the rest of her life.”

Kiara’s shoulders rounded, caving in, and she swallowed hard.

Felix paled, his eyes hardening. “This is for peace. Don’t forget that.”

I spoke up before Remo could because he looked like he would have used his knife instead of words, and I wanted this annoying power play to end quickly. “You shouldn’t forget it either. Kiara isn’t your concern anymore. She is mine.” I showed him the ring, and her eyes flitted toward it briefly. “Today, I will put this ring on her finger, and then my word is the law, not yours.”

Resignation filled her face, and her shoulders slumped, but she caught herself quickly and straightened again.

“What do you say, Kiara?” her uncle asked. “Do you agree to talk to Nino?”

She met his gaze, her lips tense. “This is the first time you’ve asked me if I agree. As Mr. Falcone pointed out, I will be under my future

husband's rule soon enough, so I don't see how it matters now."

Her uncle stared at her, a blank look on his face. Obviously he was not used to any objection from her. He gave a jerky nod and turned on his heel, rushing out of the room.

Before Remo moved to follow, he turned to Kiara. "Never call me Mr. Falcone again. That was my father, and I would have burned the fucker alive if I had been given the chance."

He stalked past Kiara, and she shied away from him so his arm wouldn't brush hers. Remo threw the door shut, and Kiara jumped. She wasn't naturally submissive, even if she acted that way.

I held out my hand, a silent order, and wondered if she'd comply. She stepped up to me and put her palm in mine, not meeting my eyes. I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, my thumb pressing against her veins. She shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin.

Dilated pupils, accelerated breathing, racing pulse, trembling, Kiara had the telltale signs of terror. I kept my thumb on her pulse point as I regarded her. She finally raised her gaze to mine, and her pulse sped up further. Her body's reactions could have been a sign for arousal as well, but I knew they weren't.

"So you didn't agree to marry me," I pointed out.

Her cheeks flushed, and her gaze returned to my chin. "I did agree when Luca asked me, but my uncle never asked when he made the offer."

"Why did you agree when Luca asked, then?"

Her brows drew together. "Because it wasn't really a choice; it was disguised as one. In this life women aren't given choices."

I regarded her for a few moments. She seemed angry. Her anger suited me better than the submissive terror she'd displayed before. I lifted her hand, and she tensed again as if she'd forgotten about my touch. Her pulse

raced against my fingertips. I showed her the ring. “I won’t tell you that you have a choice to accept this or not. We both know you will accept it like you will say yes in two days.”

She blanched and gave a small nod. “Otherwise there won’t be peace.”

“Indeed.”

Her fingers shook as I put the engagement ring on. The jeweler had recommended it after I told her money wasn’t an issue. A simple gold band with a big diamond in the middle. I never understood the reason for engagement rings. She swallowed again, and I realized it was to contain some of her terror. “You realize this isn’t a death sentence.”

Dark brown eyes rose to meet mine. “Death isn’t the worst that can happen.”

“You will be my wife,” I told her. Whatever she’d heard about my brothers and me, and what was going on in Vegas, she didn’t have to fear that kind of thing.

The door opened and Kiara quickly pulled her hand from mine, swallowing again, but she didn’t manage to erase the fear on her face. A woman with long brown hair, a lighter shade than Kiara’s, poked her head in, eyes roving between Kiara and me. She narrowed her eyes then stepped into the room. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

I recognized her from photos of the Famiglia Underbosses and Captains I’d studied. Giulia Moretti, wife to Cassio Moretti, Underboss of Philadelphia. “I think that was the purpose of your appearance, wasn’t it?” I drawled.

She didn’t look guilty as she moved to Kiara’s side and gave me a haughty expression. “It’s not proper for you to be alone with her yet. I don’t know how you handle things in Las Vegas, but here we handle them like

this.”

I gave her a cold smile. “Don’t worry, I’m very aware of your traditions, as peculiar as they may be with the presentation of the sheets.”

If I’d thought, Kiara had been scared before, my mentioning of that tradition upped her fright.

I held out my hand but looked at Giulia. “Kiara and I are supposed to make an appearance together, Mrs. Moretti ... unless that tradition has been changed recently?”

She glanced at Kiara, who gave her a firm smile. “He’s right, Giulia. We don’t want to disappoint the guests.”

She slipped her hand back in mine and lifted her chin. My thumb found her wrist again, and she shivered. *Thud-thud. Thud.* An erratic rhythm. *Thud-thud. Thud.*

Giulia left, but she didn’t close the door.

Without another word, I led Kiara into the living room, where the guests were waiting for our appearance. They began clapping when we entered. What a display of fake excitement. Remo stood beside Luca, his brother Matteo, and Romero. The women of the family were gathered on the other side of the room, probably because of my brother. Remo’s expression didn’t bode well. Maybe he was pissed that he didn’t get the chance to spill our half-brother’s blood, but I had told him Luca wouldn’t dare invite him.

Luca and Kiara’s uncle spoke a few words as was expected. After that, I released Kiara, so she could show off her ring to the women.

“And what do you think? Are you satisfied with your future bride?” Remo asked with a grin as I stopped beside him. Luca tossed us a hard look. Remo being his usual provocative self hadn’t bothered to lower his voice.

“It’s too early to assess my level of satisfaction yet,” I said, considering her again. Her face was evenly shaped with the right proportions,

pleasant to look at, and her dark eyes and hair contrasted in a pleasing way with her pale skin. Her body fulfilled all the requirements to attract male attention: narrow waist, slender legs, round ass, and bigger than average breasts. I would have no trouble claiming her on our wedding night.

“Done with your assessment?” Remo said as he followed me toward the spread of delicacies on the dining table. “You will definitely enjoy fucking her. I wish I could get a taste.”

“But you won’t,” I said plainly.

Remo tilted his head. “In the past, the king had the right of the first night.”

“*Ius primae noctis*.”

“Maybe I should establish something like that in Vegas.” Remo chuckled, his eyes scanning the crowd for suitable women. “Bring all your virgins so I can break them.”

I shook my head. At least this time he had the sense to speak quietly. Luca needed peace as much as we did, but his patience certainly had its limits. “You aren’t king, Remo. And you don’t have a right to the first night with Kiara.”

“Jealous isn’t like you,” Remo said with a hint of ... was that curiosity?

“I’m not jealous, but there are a few things I don’t want to share with you and Kiara is one of them.”

Remo waved me off. “She is all yours. Don’t worry.” I wasn’t worried. Remo was unpredictable, twisted, and brutal, but he was my brother and he would never lay hand on someone who was mine. “But I will have to give this ... what did you call it?”

“*Ius primae noctis*,” I provided.

“Yeah, that. Maybe I will have to give it another thought.”

I regarded my brother, trying to figure out if he was being serious. It was often hard to tell with Remo, and my lack of understanding human emotions had little to do with it. “You realize that most men won’t find the idea of you *fucking* their women very appealing. There is a limit to what people will take, even from you. Fear has its limits. At some point, humans revolt.”

Remo rolled his eyes. “You realize you are human too, right?”

“I always got the impression that you and I had little humanity left.”

Remo clapped my shoulder. “True.” His smile turned dangerous. “Who needs emotions and morals when they can fuck and maim and kill as they please?”

I had never seen the appeal of having emotions.

Kiara glanced at me from across the room again but quickly looked away when I met her gaze. She was trying to hide her emotions, but I could sense her terror even from the distance. Emotions were always a weakness.

CHAPTER 5



KIARA

Aunt Egidia handled the wedding preparations with Aria's help. The Falcones didn't seem to show much interest in the details of the celebration. For them it was business, nothing else. It was decided that the wedding was to take place in my parents' mansion in the Hamptons—the place where they had been killed. My mother by my father and my father by Luca. It was almost symbolic that this was the place where I would lose my life as well.

On the day of my wedding, I stepped into the foyer of the mansion, a place I hadn't set foot in for years. It had been mostly deserted since then. My brothers had inherited the place—not me since I was a woman—and they had preferred to stay in Atlanta, away from Luca and away from me. They were much older, so we never had much in common anyway. They were busy making names for themselves, despite our father's wrongdoings. My marriage to Nino was supposed to wash away the blemish of the past, but my secret could ruin us all.

Over the last few days, cleaners and interior designers had awoken the place from its desolate state. The main party would take place in a massive party tent in the garden. It was late April and planning the party outside without any shelter would have been too risky.

I walked up the stairs slowly, and my eyes found the spot where my mother had died. With a shudder, I quickly scurried into my old bedroom. It, too, had been prepared for the day. Fresh flowers had been set up in vases around the room, probably to cover the musty scent of neglect. My aunt was

talking to the stylist, who'd do my hair and makeup, at the vanity. A floor-length mirror had been set up for the occasion. My dress was spread out on the four-post bed.

It was a beautiful dress: white, the color of innocence and purity.

I looked at my aunt and considered telling her what had happened to me six years ago. As always, I didn't because I'd be less in her eyes. Something broken, something dirty. Not worthy of that perfect white dress.

Giulia slipped into the room, already dressed in a beautiful burgundy dress, and hugged me. "I can't believe they chose this place for the celebrations," she muttered.

"It belongs to her closest living relatives, her brothers. It's what honor dictated."

Honor dictated so many things in our lives, it hardly left any room for choice.

Giulia rolled her eyes. "So it had nothing to do with the fact that nobody wanted to risk their mansion for the party because the risk of a bloodshed is too high? After all, that's why this isn't taking place in a hotel."

Aunt Egidia pursed her lips at her daughter. "Giulia, really, one would think your marriage to Cassio would have put a stop to your insolence."

"Cassio likes my insolence," she said, her cheeks flushing.

Aunt Egidia sighed then narrowed a nervous glance toward the stylist; she was always worried about leaving a bad impression in front of others. "I think we should start now. With your unruly hair, it'll probably be a while before your bridal hairdo is done."

My aunt proved to be right. The stylist took forever taming my curls into a braid that traveled down my back. A thin strand of gold leaves and pearls that she wound into it adorned the simple style.

"You are so very beautiful," Giulia said quietly.

Egidia clasped her hand in front of her stomach, regarding me with more affection than I'd ever seen before. "You are."

The stylist left the room with a small smile, which I returned even as my facial muscles felt ready to burst from tension.

Egidia smoothed out the veil lining my neckline again before she faced me, touching my shoulders. "As women, we have to fulfill our duty to our husbands ..." she began, and I tensed because I knew where she was going with it. "You don't have to be—" She stopped herself. Don't have to be scared? Those were the words every mother spoke to her daughter on their wedding day. I knew because Giulia had told me Egidia said the same thing to her on her wedding day. I met Aunt Egidia's gaze and the guilt I'd seen in her eyes before was back. "Make him treat you like a lady."

Giulia stepped up to Egidia. "Mother, let me talk to Kiara, okay? I think she will feel more comfortable around me."

Aunt Egidia nodded, looking relieved. She patted my shoulder then walked out, leaving me alone with my stepsister.

Giulia sighed as she regarded me in the mirror. "I don't like this, Kiara. You shouldn't be marrying a Falcone. You are the last person who should."

"Why? Better than someone innocent."

Giulia gripped my hand hard. "Stop it. You aren't dirty or less or whatever you think you are because of what he did to you. And you don't deserve this."

"Who deserves this? I don't wish this fate on any other girl. I will survive."

Giulia perched on the vanity. "I don't know what to tell you."

"Don't say anything. There's nothing you can tell me that will set me at ease," I told her quickly. I knew what was going to happen tonight, and I

had lived through it before. I swallowed. “I won’t fight him. I will do what he wants. Then surely it will be endurable. I’m not thirteen anymore.” My words were hushed, broken vowels strung together.

Giulia breathed deeply. “My God, Kiara. Tell Luca. He can still find a way out of this for you.”

“Cancelling the wedding today? That would be a slap in Remo Falcone’s face. He isn’t a man who will turn the other cheek. He will seek revenge, no matter the price.” I took a deep breath. “No. I will marry Nino. Did you get the pills I asked you for?”

She held out a small package to me. “One should do the trick, but I really don’t think you should drug yourself to be calm.”

“It’s a light sedative. It won’t knock me out.” Although, I would have preferred that effect, but Nino would not appreciate it if I were unconscious when he claimed me. My stomach pinched sharply, and I pressed my palm against it.

“Kiara—”

“No. I’m doing this. Many choices have been taken from me throughout this life, but I choose to salvage my honor, choose to hold my head high no matter what happens. Let this be my choice.”

Giulia nodded and got up. “Because the Falcones are feared, because they rule without mercy, doesn’t mean Nino won’t treat you with kindness. Some men don’t bring violence home to their wives. Some men can distinguish between the ones they need to protect and those they need to break. I think Nino might be one of them.”

I wondered if she really believed her words or if they were just to console me, but I didn’t have the courage to ask her. I stuffed the pills into the small white purse that matched my dress. “Can you give it to me at the party? I can’t carry it down the aisle.”

Giulia took it and hugged me briefly. "Of course."

NINO

My brothers and I weren't religious, so we had refused to marry in church, much to the Famiglia's disapproval. I wasn't sure why they clung to their beliefs when they broke every rule established by their religion on a daily basis. Every man would end up in Hell, if what they believed was truth.

I waited at the altar that had been set up in front of the tent in the gardens. Remo stood beside me as my best man, his eyes undressing Kiara's bridesmaid Giulia in a way that made her husband Cassio scowl. I sent Remo a warning look but he ignored me. He probably would have preferred a bloody wedding, and from the look on Matteo's face as he sat in the first row, he would too. Adamo and Savio sat a few seats away from the Vitiellos. To my surprise, Luca had allowed Aria to sit beside Leona. They seemed to be getting along well, and even Fabiano exchanged the occasional word with his sister.

Remo rolled his eyes when he followed my gaze. He should have been happy that his insane plan was working. A truce between the Famiglia and Camorra seemed like a valid possibility.

A hush fell over the crowd when the music began to play and Kiara appeared at the end of the aisle. She had chosen an elegant dress with a veil that covered her shoulders. Felix led her toward me, but Kiara never raised her eyes to meet mine, instead keeping them fixed on my chest.

When Felix handed her over to me, her hand shook in mine. I pressed my thumb against her wrist, feeling her pulse raced under my fingertips. I regarded her face. Her expression was neutral, but in her eyes was a look I'd often seen in people's eyes before I started to torture them.

Given our reputation, her terror was understandable, but it was completely unfounded. She wasn't my enemy but my wife. I hadn't given her reason for that kind of reaction.

She never once glanced my way as the pastor gave his long-winded sermon and finally declared us husband and wife.

"You may kiss the bride," the pastor said.

I turned to Kiara and her pulse sped up even more. Her terrified eyes finally lifted to mine, and she swallowed hard. Holding her gaze, I cupped her cheek, ignoring her trembling, and pressed my lips to hers. They were soft and quivered against mine. When I pulled back, she swallowed again.

We made our way past the guests and stopped beside a table, which had been set up with champagne flutes.

After we'd accepted congratulations from our guests, the buffet was finally opened. Kiara was tense throughout dinner and hardly ate anything. She only relaxed when she got up and walked over to Aria and the other Scuderi sisters to talk.

"Excited about making your wife bleed tonight?" Remo asked the moment she was out of earshot as he leaned back in his chair. I was surprised he'd bothered to wait until she couldn't hear his words.

Leona's eyes widened, and she looked up at Fabiano. "He's referring to the tradition of the bloody sheets that the Famiglia still upholds. It requires the groom to present the sheets he and his bride spent the night on."

Leona pursed her lips. "You are joking, right?"

"And they call us barbaric," Remo said with a smirk. "But I have to tell you, I envy you your chance to spill some blood tonight. It's been too long. I really want to kill someone."

Fabiano rolled his eyes at Remo.

"When has there ever been a day without blood in our lives?" I asked.

Remo's eyes tightened with an emotion I could not read. "True," he said. "Remember, no taking her up against the wall or bent over the desk. Bloody sheets is what the dear Famiglia wants." He raised his glass and took a sip of wine, but neither of us would get drunk today.

"Don't worry. I will provide bloody sheets."

Remo smiled twistedly. "I know you will."

My eyes found my wife again. She was still talking to the Scuderi sisters but turned her gaze to me when she noticed my attention. She tensed and swallowed, the hand holding her glass shaking slightly.

Fearing me like she did, she'd probably bleed her second and third time as well. I knew how to please women with my hands, tongue, and cock, but even sexual skills had their limits when faced with terror.

When it was time for our first dance, I stood and Kiara came over to me, accepting my outstretched hand. I led her toward the center, and our guests gathered around us to watch. She allowed herself to look into my eyes for longer than she ever had. Fear and uncertainty flickered across her face. When she didn't find whatever it was she was looking for, she lowered her gaze back to my chest and swallowed hard. It must have been her way to suppress the fear.

I touched her lower back and pulled her against me. She made a small sound in the back of her throat, a strong sound of unease. I regarded her face. She was breathing faster and her cheeks had paled. This was only a mere dance. If this unsettled her, the consummation of our marriage would be particularly unpleasant. She wasn't the type to fight, too dutiful and raised to please. She would yield to me, but it wouldn't make things any easier for her.

Maybe words of consolation would have soothed her terror, but I wasn't a man who comforted others.

The song ended. As was expected, Luca, the Capo who had given her

to me, stepped up to take over. Kiara didn't soften. She was as scared of dancing with him as she was of me. I forced myself to release her. She wasn't in danger. This was a dance. There was no reason to make it out to be more.

I turned to Aria. Luca narrowed his eyes at me. I ignored his unreasonable reaction and held out my hand to his wife. She took it and gave me a smile. She was a good actress. If it hadn't been for the slight tension in her fingers and the acceleration of her pulse, I might have believed her expression.

Pulling her against me, we began to dance. She was easy to steer, took my lead, and kept up a pleasant smile.

"You have Fabiano's eyes."

Her gaze flew up to mine, and her expression faltered. "He is my brother. Even if you made him believe something else."

"We didn't make him believe anything," I corrected. "We taught him that blood doesn't define your loyalties."

"You turned him into—"

"Into what? A killer? A torturer?"

She sighed.

"Every man in this room is a killer, and the boys are on their way to becoming one." And from what I knew of Luca, he definitely was one of the cruelest men in our circles, but Aria probably had limited knowledge when it came to her husband's business habits.

"This isn't wedding talk," she said. "I hope this wedding will allow us to find peace, and I hope your brother will allow Fabiano to be close to his blood family."

"It's up to Fabiano, but he is with the Camorra now. Don't forget that."

"I won't, trust me," she said sharply. Her eyes followed her husband

and my wife as they danced. Kiara was stiff in Luca's hold.

"Kiara is very tense around men," I said.

Aria frowned. "Most women are tense on their wedding day."

"They are?"

She gave me a look, but I couldn't read it. "Men," she said under her breath. It had nothing to do with me being male, but I didn't elaborate. "For a bride, a wedding night holds quite a bit of terror."

"Fear of the unknown is common, but it is only the joining of two bodies. Nothing to be fearful of."

Aria blinked up at me. "Perhaps for you, but Kiara might disagree, like any other woman, especially considering who she has to join bodies with."

"I am more than capable of fulfilling my duties as a husband."

"I don't doubt that you can go through with it. The Camorra is notorious after all." She grimaced. "It's not my business."

But her voice made it clear that she wanted it to be her business. "It's not. You are right," I drawled. A truce didn't mean Remo or I would allow the Famiglia to meddle in our business.

When the last notes of the song faded, she rushed to say, "Her father hit her before he was killed. That might explain her problem with men. But I think there might be more ..."

"More?"

She stepped back. "Thank you for the dance." She turned and moved toward Luca, who was waiting for her at the edge of the dance floor. Kiara had already been handed off to Felix.

I moved toward Remo, who stood beside Fabiano close to the buffet. As my oldest brother, it would be his turn to dance with Kiara after her Uncle Felix. I grabbed his arm, and he raised his dark eyebrows.

“Try to scare her as little as possible.”

“I can be pleasant and gentlemanly if I try,” he said.

Fabiano laughed. “Sorry, Remo, but that’s the best joke I heard in a while.”

“What am I supposed to do to set your little wife at ease?” he asked, but his eyes followed a young woman who walked past us. I really hoped he wouldn’t try anything with one of the Famiglia’s women.

I was the wrong person to ask. “I don’t know.”

We glanced at Leona who flushed. “Perhaps smile?”

Remo’s mouth pulled into a smile.

“I have seen hyenas with less unsettling smiles,” Fabiano muttered, and Leona choked on her laughter and buried her face against his arm. The song ended, and Remo pulled free of my grip, heading for Kiara, who looked like a lamb facing off with a butcher.

Giulia surprised me when she asked for a dance. I was fairly sure that wasn’t how things were usually handled, but I led her toward the dance floor and pulled her against me. Her husband watched us from his spot beside Luca at the buffet. They were both tall and muscled and shared a similar disposition for brutal leadership ... if rumors were to be believed.

“I don’t know if you are even capable of such a thing, but I ask you to be kind to Kiara.”

I glanced down at Giulia. “You ask me?” I said with raised eyebrows.

She frowned. “If you have a heart, please don’t hurt her.”

“I was told there’s no way around hurting a woman in her first night.”

Her eyes filled with tears but her expression looked angry. “You know what I mean!”

“Kiara is my wife, a grown woman, and from this day on she’s part of the Camorra. She isn’t your concern,” I said in a warning tone.

Giulia tensed but didn't say anymore. The second the music was over I released her, and she returned to her husband while I went back to my brothers and Fabiano.

KIARA

Remo Falcone headed my way, and it took considerable effort not to run. His eyes were almost black like his hair. There was something in his face that spoke of unbridled violence, and that wasn't because of the scar trailing from his brow down his temple to his cheekbone. He held out his hand with a twisted pull of his mouth. It was reminiscent of how a lion regarded a gazelle.

His palm and fingers were littered with scars and burns.

"You are supposed to take my hand so we can dance," he said in what I assumed was annoyance.

Suppressing a shudder, I slipped my hand into his. I didn't look up into his face. It would have been my undoing. His fingers closed around my hand with less pressure than I had expected, and his other hand gently touched my back and pulled me against him. My body clenched, my breathing caught in my throat. I had to hold in a gasp. He led me along to the music, but my trembling didn't make it easy for him. He tightened his hold on me, bringing us closer, and I exhaled sharply at the feel of his hard body against mine.

My fingers on his bicep began slipping as I fought against the impending panic attack.

"Look at me," he ordered.

I couldn't.

"Look at me." A low murmur full of command, and I finally met his gaze. His expression wasn't angry, more assessing, as if he was sizing me up.

“This is dancing. Don’t make it into something more than that because you let your imagination run free.”

I was momentarily startled. He sounded a lot like Nino; maybe he hid his intelligence behind his layers of violence.

“Now pretend you are a happy bride. This is a day of celebration,” he said, and his own lips formed a scary smile.

I tried my best to relax in his hold, to make my face look pleasant, but I wasn’t sure if I succeeded. I counted the seconds till the end of the song, but when it finally ended, Uncle Durant appeared at our side and terror from the past took hold of me. I dug my nails into Remo, clinging to him, undoubtedly leaving marks with my fingernails.

“I would like to dance with my niece now,” Uncle Durant said to Remo, but his eyes were on me, full of knowledge and triumph as always.

He hadn’t touched me since those nights. I clutched Remo tightly, looking up at him. His dark eyes regarded me, narrowing ever so slightly. *Please don’t let me dance with him.* The words didn’t leave my mouth. Durant reached for me, but Remo angled us so he was between my uncle and me.

Remo turned his gaze to my uncle, but he didn’t let go of me. “I can’t allow that unfortunately. My brother wants her back at his side.”

“It’s tradition in the Famiglia,” Uncle Durant said. “Maybe you don’t care about traditions over in Vegas, but here we do.”

Remo’s lips pulled wider, and I realized then that his smiles for me had been genuine; he was being nice. This smile had a sinister feel to it. “We honor our traditions as well. In Vegas, it’s tradition that I cut out the tongues of people who annoy the fuck out of me. If you insist on your traditions, I will have to insist on mine. And your tongue will look good in my collection.”

Uncle Durant's face turned red. His angry gaze settled on me briefly, and I pressed into Remo, but then my uncle moved away.

"You can release me now," Remo muttered.

I unfastened my hold and stepped back, ashamed. Remo held onto my hand, not allowing me to go. His thumb pressed against my wrist in a similar way like Nino had.

"What was that?" Remo asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"Nothing. I don't like him."

"That was not dislike, Kiara," he said, still in that terrifying voice. His fingers pressed harder into my wrist. I risked a peek at him. His eyes were narrowed at me, as if he could see into the deepest, darkest corners of my soul. "Dislike wouldn't have made you seek protection in my arms, trust me."

"I didn't—"

"Don't lie to me. I am your Capo now."

Nothing would make me reveal my secret, not even Remo's terrifying scowl. "I didn't ask for your protection," I whispered.

He stepped closer, and I cringed. "You begged me for protection. Unlike Nino, I have no trouble reading your emotions."

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"You didn't have to protect me. I'm not your responsibility."

"You are a Falcone now. My brother's wife. You fall under my rule. That makes you mine to protect."

He tightened his grip on my wrist, ignoring my flinching, and dragged me off the dance floor toward Nino, who raised his eyebrows at his brother. Remo practically shoved me into Nino's arm. Despite my tension, Nino wrapped an arm around my waist and left it there. "That was her last dance with anyone but us," Remo ordered. "I don't give a fuck about their traditions. She is under our rule now."

Nino narrowed his eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Remo said. “But her family is starting to piss me off.”

Nino glanced between his brother and me but didn’t say anymore.
After that, I didn’t have to dance again.

CHAPTER 6



KIARA

“Bed her, bed her!” The chanting began before I’d managed to mentally prepare myself. Perhaps I was stupid for thinking I could prepare for it.

My husband’s brothers, Remo and Savio, shouted the loudest, but most of the other men were almost as loud. The youngest brother, Adamo, remained in his seat, lips pressed together in a firm line. He hadn’t talked to me or danced with me or anyone else.

“Bed her, bed her!” the cries grew louder.

I sought Nino’s gaze. He nodded at me, got up, and held out a hand. I took it because I could not refuse him with everyone watching us. Forcing down my fear, I stood and followed him past the rows of guests who had lined up to see us out. The men clapped Nino’s shoulders; the women caught my gaze with pity and sympathy in their eyes. Giulia was pressed up against her husband, worry filling her expression. I quickly looked away.

“On to uncharted grounds!”

“We want to see the sheets!”

There were more comments like that, and they turned my stomach into solid rock.

Nino’s face didn’t betray his reaction to the shouts. His fingers pressed against my wrist tightly, and I was glad because they grounded me, kept me from faltering, from drifting off to the past.

Remo and Savio were close by as we went down the long corridor—a corridor that held many childhood memories, few of them good and tonight

worse memories would be added to the list.

We arrived in front of the dark wooden door to the master bedroom, dozens of men behind us.

“No fucking your virgin bride up against the wall, remember?” Remo said with a laugh.

I jerked, my pulse doubling. Nino’s fingers tightened against my wrist.

“Remo,” he growled in a voice that sent fear into every fiber of my being.

“Have fun!” Savio shouted with a grin.

The Falcones were going to feel cheated. A sacrificial virgin was to be given to the monsters in Las Vegas for a promise of peace. I was never given the chance to be a virgin. That choice had been taken from me. *Painfully ripped from me.*

Fear, acute and raw, clawed at my chest as my husband led me into our room for the night and closed the door to the grinning faces of his brothers. Nino released me, and I quickly created distance between us, moving toward the bed.

Six years had passed, but the memories still woke me at night. I was scared of being close to a man, to any man, especially this man – my husband.

Standing a few steps in front of the bed, my eyes swept over the white sheets—sheets my family expected to see stained with my blood in the morning.

Blood that wouldn’t be there.

I crept closer to the bed. There had been blood the first time, the second time, and even the third time. Lots of blood, pain, terror, and begging. There had been no presentation of the sheets back then. Our maid, who had

never come to my aid, cleaned them.

I wouldn't beg tonight. It hadn't stopped my abuser many years ago.

It wouldn't stop my husband.

I knew the stories. I had seen him in the cage.

My only consolation was that I doubted he could break me more than I already had been all those years ago.

I couldn't take my eyes off those perfect white sheets—as white as my dress. A sign of purity, but I wasn't pure.

“They are your traditions, not ours,” Nino said calmly but loud enough to tear me from my thoughts.

I schooled my face into placidness. “Then why follow them?” I asked as I turned. My voice had betrayed me. Too hushed, laced with a terror that I hoped he mistook for virginal fear.

He wasn't as close as I'd expected. He wasn't even looking at me. Standing beside the desk, he read the note my aunt had written congratulating us on the nuptials. He put it back down then looked up at me. There was nothing on his face that gave me a sense of hope. No kindness, no pity. It was a blank canvas. Beautifully cold with empty gray eyes, an immaculate short beard, and combed back hair.

As he shook his head, he destroyed what little hope I'd had. “The Famiglia wants blood, they get it.”

He was right. It was what my family expected, what I was supposed to deliver, but they wouldn't get blood. And my husband would realize his prize was faulty. The Camorra would cancel the truce. My husband would rebuke the marriage, and I'd be left to live as a pariah.

It would be my ruin. My family would shun me. Nobody would ever want to marry me after that, and an unmarried woman in our world was doomed.

He began unbuttoning his shirt, calmly, precisely. Finally he shrugged it off, revealing scars and tattoos—so many, so disturbing—and steely muscles. I turned away, my pulse galloping in my veins. Terror, similar to that which I'd felt many years ago, clawed at my insides. I needed to rein it in, figure a way out of this mess. I needed to save myself, not from him claiming my body but from me losing my honor.

I reached into my purse, which dangled over my forearm, and freed a pill from the packet. My throat was tight, and I wasn't sure if I'd manage to swallow it without water, but walking into the bathroom seemed impossible in my current state. I wasn't sure I would make it without breaking down.

With shaking fingers, I brought the white pill to my lips. A hand curled around my wrist, stopping me. My eyes flew up to stare into Nino's narrowed eyes. I hadn't even heard him approach.

"What is that?" he asked forcefully.

I didn't say anything, too terrified for words. With his free hand, he reached into my purse and pulled out the packet. His eyes scanned the description. He threw it away before his gray eyes met mine, and he held out his hand. "Give me that pill."

"Please," I whispered.

Not a flicker of emotion on his beautiful, cold face. "Kiara, give me that pill."

I dropped it into his palm, and he threw it away as well. I could have cried. How was I supposed to rein in my terror, keep the memories at bay without something to calm myself?

His thumb brushed my wrist, and he murmured, "I won't have you drugged." He released me. I stepped back and turned around to face the bed, sucking in a deep breath. He was watching me.

I reached behind me for the buttons on the back of my dress. I would

be the one to open them. That would give me a sense of control, unlike last time when my clothes had been ripped from me against my will, my body too weak to fight against it.

I swallowed the bile. My fingers shook too much to close around the tiny buttons.

“Let me,” came the cool drawl from my husband who was close behind.

No! I wanted to scream, but I forced the sound down. “I want to do it myself,” I managed in an almost calm voice.

He didn’t say anything, and I didn’t dare look at his face. I fumbled with the buttons, and one after the other gave way. It took an excruciatingly long time. He waited silently. His calm breathing and my ragged breaths filled the room.

Then I remembered that the groom was supposed to cut the bride out of her gown with his knife. Nino must have forgotten—after all, that wasn’t his tradition either. I didn’t have the courage to remind him or to button my dress again so he could cut me out. I’d lose it completely.

I pulled my dress down and it pooled at my feet. Now only my strapless bra and panties remained. I discarded my bra but didn’t have the courage to remove my panties yet.

Nino’s cold gray eyes scanned the length of me. “Your hair ornaments need to be removed as well. They will be uncomfortable against your skull.”

I choked back a desperate laugh but tried to loosen the fine gold string from my hair. My shaking fingers didn’t allow it. Nino moved closer, and I recoiled. His gray eyes locked on mine. “I *will* remove it.”

Dropping my arms, I nodded.

His long fingers untangled the adornments from my curls quickly.

Then he stepped back again.

“Thank you,” I managed to say.

I forced myself toward the bed and lay down flat on my back, my fingers splayed out against the smooth fabric of the blankets.

Nino regarded me coolly. He stepped up to the bed. Tall and muscled and deadly cold, he didn't look like this affected him in any way. He reached for his belt and unbuckled it. Terror clogged my throat. I looked away, fighting weak tears. From the corner of my eye, I saw him remove his boxers, and then he climbed on the bed, naked and determined. I trembled. I couldn't stop myself.

His hand touched my waist then slid up slowly. The touch was light. I jerked away. “Don't touch me.”

His eyes were hard and cold as he looked down at me. “You know I can't. I won't give your family any cause to take Las Vegas as weak.” It wasn't said in a cruel way. He stated facts.

“I know,” I whispered. “Just don't touch me. Just do what you must.” If there was any leading up to what was to come, I wouldn't be able to contain my terror.

“If I don't prepare you, it will be very painful.” He sounded like he didn't care either way. “It would be better if we got you to relax.”

That wasn't going to happen. “Just do it,” I said. Pain was okay. I could deal with it.

He regarded me for a couple of moments more. Then he pulled back his hand from my ribcage and sat up. His fingers hooked under the hem of my panties, and he slid them down. A low whimper wedged itself in my throat.

He moved one knee between my legs, parting them, his gray eyes on me. He was moving slowly, and I wished he wouldn't, wished he would stop

looking at me. Panic began to claw its way out of my chest, and I tried to force it back. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block what was happening. When he knelt between my legs completely, I seized up with complete terror.

“If you don’t relax, you will tear.”

My eyes shot open, and a few tears slid out. He supported himself on one arm, hovering over me. Tall and strong. *No. No. No. No.*

“Try to relax.” He was so clinical about it. His gaze followed the trail my tears left on my cheeks and throat. They didn’t affect him. I tried to loosen up, but it was completely impossible. My muscles were frozen with fear. He gave a small shake of his head, almost disapproving. “This isn’t working,” he said. “I will have to use a lot of force to get past your tensed up muscles and all the way into you.”

I could taste the bitterness of bile in my throat as memories from long ago slithered through my mind.

And something in me just ... broke. Something dark and scared and deeply buried. There was no way for me to hold it in.

A bone-shattering sob ripped from my throat, and it hurt because of the memories that it brought up. I pressed my palms against my face hard then curled my hands to fists and pressed my knuckles against my closed eyes. Wanting the memories out of my head, I tried to claw them out like I’d clawed at my uncle many years ago, but just like in the past, there was no escaping.

I couldn’t breathe. Could. Not. Breathe.

And I wanted to die. I needed the hurt gone. I didn’t want to live through that horror again, and I didn’t want new nightmares.

Strong hands curled around my wrists, pulling, and I resisted, struggling, but they were relentless and kept pulling until my hands came away from my face. My eyes snapped open, my vision blurry with tears. And

through the fog, two intense gray eyes slowly came into focus, and then they were all I saw, all I could see, all that mattered.

So calm. Clinical. Cold.

Just what I needed. It was a cool flood against this terror-filled inferno. Blissfully emotionless. I stared into his eyes, stared for a long time, and he let me, until I brought the first breath of oxygen into my lungs.

I could breathe again, and the face of my husband came into focus, his narrowed eyes all too knowing.

Lowering my gaze to his chin, I tugged at his hold on my wrists. He released me, and I placed my hands into my lap. My naked lap. He, too, was completely naked, kneeling across from me. He must have pulled me into a sitting position some time during my panic attack.

This was it. He knew something was utterly wrong with me. I pulled my legs against my chest, swallowing.

I wished he'd kill me now. I'd often wished for death after my uncle had broken me.

"What happened to you?" His voice was emotionless.

I considered lying, but I had lied for too long. And I had a feeling he knew. "I was thirteen," I said, but then I couldn't say more. I began shaking again, and he put a hand on my shoulder. I didn't flinch this time. The touch was too clinical to elicit any terror.

"Someone raped you."

The word made me feel small and dirty and worthless. I gave a nod.

"Your father?"

I shook my head. He was already dead by then, and he would have never done that. He knew I would have been ruined. He hit me and screamed at me, but he never touched me like that. Maybe he would have later on if Luca hadn't killed him.

“Someone from your extended family, then. Girls like you are protected. It must have been someone you were related to.”

I nodded.

“Who was it?” he asked firmly. “Your uncle who raised you?”

I licked my lips. “My other uncle.”

“For how long?”

I lifted four fingers.

“Four years?”

I shook my head.

“Four times?”

Only four nights, yet every day since.

Ever since.

“I dream about it every night,” I choked out. That admittance felt good. I was doomed anyway. I had sealed my fate. Nothing mattered anymore.

I didn’t dare look up to see his disgust, his anger at having been given someone tainted. “You know,” I said quietly. “A kind man would spare me the humiliation of having to face my family, living in shame, and just kill me.”

“A kind man might,” he said in a low voice.

I raised my eyes, resigned.

A terrifying smile played across Nino’s face. It didn’t reach his eyes. “*But I* will find the man who did this to you and make him feel the same terror you did that night and pain unlike anything he thought possible. And eventually, when he has been begging for it for a long time and when he’s given up hope, I’ll grant him death.”

My breath caught in my throat. I stared. I could do nothing else. He was calm about it, but in the depth of his eyes there was something dark and

dangerous. Not directed at me. And I didn't dare hope that this could really be the truth.

"And what will you do to me? I'm not what was promised. I'm not a virgin."

He looked at me almost as if I'd said something stupid. "I don't care if you are a virgin. It's a small piece of flesh that's completely useless. But I'm aware of the importance it holds in the minds of so many people, even yours."

"Then why are you furious if it's not because someone stole what you wanted for yourself?"

"Because someone stole what you weren't willing to give," he murmured.

I looked away because stupid tears gathered in my eyes. I didn't understand his reaction or him for that matter. I'd heard the rumors about Vegas, about how they dealt with women who didn't pay their debts or displeased Remo Falcone in some other way.

I gestured at the sheets. "It's tradition. My family expects to see blood." I swallowed. "If you take me with force, will I bleed?"

He nodded, his expression impassive. "It's been years for you and you only had sex a few times, so if I use enough force, you will most definitely bleed. Your vaginal muscles are very tense from fear, and you will tear when I force myself into you all the way."

My stomach constricted. He sounded like a doctor explaining the physical effects of his actions. My lips fought to form the words that rationality wanted to say. "Then do it so my family and the Famiglia get the blood they expect."

He leaned forward, his beautiful, cold face so close I could see the dark specks in his gray eyes. "They will get blood, don't worry."

I nodded and moved to lay back, but he stood from the bed and put on his briefs. Confusion filled me. “I thought you would ...?”

He got into his pants and buckled his belt. He didn’t say anything until he was dressed in his black wedding suit again and had strapped on his knives. “I will find the man who raped you and slaughter him like a pig on these sheets. Do you think that will be enough blood for your family?”

I choked, sliding off the bed, clutching the blankets against my nakedness. “That means war. Luca will kill us all.”

Nino didn’t say anything, but he moved closer. I tensed but didn’t back off. He raised his hand, and I flinched. I hadn’t been hit in years, not since my father—and later Uncle Durant—but my body still expected it.

“I won’t hit you.” I opened my eyes and stared at his white shirt. He put a single finger under my chin and lifted my gaze. His cold face peered down at me, almost curiously as if I was something he needed to understand. “Do you want your uncle to live?”

“No,” I admitted.

And that sealed all our fates.

NINO

I dropped my hand and walked over to the desk to pick up my mobile then raised it to my ear.

Remo picked up after the second ring. “Shouldn’t you be busy?”

“I need you to come over.”

“I assume it’s not because you want me to help you fuck your wife.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Silence. “Two minutes. This better be good. I chose a waitress to fuck.”

He hung up, and as promised he knocked two minutes later. I opened the door, and his dark eyes went to something past me. I stepped back and he entered. Kiara backed away, the sheets still clutched to her naked body, her face tearstained.

Remo turned to me with raised eyebrows. “That was quick. You realize you can’t give her back once you’ve opened her, right?”

“I’m going to kill someone. And I wanted to give you fair warning.”

His twisted grin slipped right off his face. Remo tilted his head. “So you aren’t asking for my permission.”

“No, not this time. I will kill that man and nothing will stop me.”

Remo looked at Kiara, and she flushed, trying to make herself even smaller. Her shoulders rounded in, her arms wrapping the sheets tighter around her body.

“Someone got her before you could? You want to cancel everything?”

“Someone raped her when she was a *child*.” I paused, regarding my wife, who now stared at the ground, shaking. “And she will come to Las Vegas with me.”

She raised her widened eyes.

“Her rapist is among the guests. He’s the husband of Luca’s Aunt Criminella, Underboss of Pittsburgh,” I said. Remo needed to know the extent of our problems.

“I know.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You knew?”

He shrugged then cracked his neck, stretching out his hands. “Then I better sharpen my knives and load my guns.”

“We could prevent war if we gave Luca a warning.”

“Ask him for permission to deal out revenge on someone who attacked your property?” he snarled. “He gave us less than was promised and

you think we owe him anything?”

“Not ask but warn him,” I said. I turned to Kiara, who had pressed herself against the wall at Remo’s outburst. “Get dressed.”

Her gaze flickered between Remo and the bathroom door he stood beside.

Remo understood her expression before I did. He walked over to me, away from the bathroom door. Kiara grabbed her bag and quickly rushed into the bathroom.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“She was scared to walk past me,” Remo said with a shrug.

“She’s fearful.”

“Aren’t they all?” He pulled out his phone. “I’m going to call Fabiano. Savio better stay with Adamo before the kid gets himself killed.”

“Come on,” I said and led him out into the corridor. It was deserted.

Fabiano arrived a few minutes later, his eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you killed the girl.”

I raised one eyebrow. “I’m not prone to emotional outbursts like Remo.”

“Perhaps you faked your emotions too well,” Fabiano muttered.

“I didn’t. Kiara is alive and well, considering her circumstances.”

Fabiano threw a glance at Remo. “Nino wants to spill the blood of her uncle. Fucked her when she was a kid,” my brother said.

Fabiano grimaced in what I assumed was disgust. “Killing off Luca’s family won’t go over well.”

“Luca would kill him if he weren’t family. I saw the look he gave the old fucker. And the guy isn’t even Luca’s blood. He’s married to Luca’s aunt.”

“It’s one of his men. He will insist on dishing out punishment

himself.”

“No,” I said. “He punished Aria’s cousin for leering at her on Outfit territory. He will understand that I need to kill his uncle myself.”

Fabiano considered my words. “Maybe. But it’s not a good start to this union.” He regarded me. “But I see that you will do it no matter what I say, so I will go looking for Luca and attempt damage control. Maybe he hasn’t left for his own mansion yet.” Fabiano paused. “Where will you take the asshole?”

“I will tend to him on my wedding sheets,” I said, and my mouth pulled into a smile.

Fabiano sighed then turned on his heel and went in search of the Famiglia Capo.

“Ready to pick up your date for the night?” Remo said with a laugh.

I tried to figure out what he meant with it.

“I assume you are going to fuck him with your knife.” I stared down at the blade in my holster.

I nodded slowly. “I’m going to take my time breaking him, body and mind.”

“I hope you let me in on the fun.”

I inclined my head. It would be unreasonable to prevent Remo from participating. I knew every spot on a body that brought agony, but Remo knew how to break them with mind games. Both were more effective if applied in combination.

“Let’s go,” I said, and Remo let me lead the way because this was my crusade.

Keeping to the shadows, we found Durant in the gardens with his wife, laughing loudly and clutching a wine glass in his hand. “I hope he’s not drunk,” Remo muttered. “Don’t want him to miss the night of his life.”

“We will get him sober,” I said quietly as I regarded him. He was a tall man, wide shoulders but had a paunch that told me it had been a while since he’d really fought. Not that it mattered.

Remo sneered. “Fucking a kid. That gives even me the creeps. I hope he isn’t one of those that passes out quickly.”

“We will make sure he stays awake.” I wanted him to enjoy every second of his last hours.

Fabiano stood over to the side, beside the buffet, with Luca. It wasn’t difficult to read the Capo’s emotions. He was furious.

“Come on,” I said to Remo. “Let’s grab Durant.”

He didn’t need any further encouragement. I gripped my bowie knife, fingers curling around the smooth wood handle, as Remo and I moved along the fringes of the party. Most people still around were shit-faced. The moment Durant spotted me and my brother, his eyes widened. He dropped the glass and turned, fleeing the party and leaving his wife standing there with a dumbfounded expression.

Remo sighed. “Why do they always think they can escape?”

I began jogging and spotted Durant stumbling down the slope leading to the water. Maybe he hoped he could reach one of the boats and escape. When I reached a good spot, I stopped and flung my knife. The Damascus blade gleamed magnificently in the moonlight before it impaled itself in Durant’s calf. His ear-piercing scream was a good start to the night. No cries of pleasure tonight. Only agony.

Durant fell to his knees, clutching at his calf.

“Nice,” Remo acknowledged as he came to a stop beside me. We walked down the hill slowly as Durant pushed to his feet and tried to hobble toward the nearest boat, but he couldn’t put any pressure on his injured leg. He should have pulled the knife out; it either would have helped him move

faster or it would have made him bleed out quickly. Both would have been better outcomes than what awaited him under Remo's and my hands.

We reached him and Remo walked around to face him. "Why are you leaving? The fun is about to start."

Durant took a step back. I kicked away his legs so he fell to his knees. I reached for the knife and twisted it. He screamed, his eyes flying up to meet mine. "Whatever she said, the little whore lied."

"How do you know this is about Kiara?" Remo asked quietly. "Perhaps I can't stand your face. Nino and I have killed for less."

Durant's gaze flitted between my brother and me, his breathing picking up. Terror started to fill his veins like poison. I knew the telltale signs. This was only the beginning.

I leaned down, my mouth curling. "You will admit to it soon enough, and before the sun rises, you will beg Kiara for forgiveness, trust me."

Twisting the knife again, I left it in his leg. I gave Remo a sign, and we hoisted Durant to his feet, gripping his arms.

As we dragged him back toward the house, Luca and Fabiano stepped in our way. Luca regarded his uncle without any emotion. "This is my territory, and Durant is part of the Famiglia."

I met his gaze. "That's true, but I will be the one to tear him apart. Or are you telling me you would have acted differently if someone had dishonored Aria before her wedding night?"

Luca smirked. "I would have killed everyone who would have stopped me from dishing out punishment." Then his expression hardened. "I need to see Kiara before I can allow you to begin..." his eyes darted to the knife in Durant's calf "...or to continue."

"Luca," Durant began, but Remo jerked his arm, causing the words to die in a scream.

“We will continue, Luca, but of course you can have a quick word with my wife *if she agrees*.”

Luca’s mouth tightened, but he gave a sharp nod. He followed us as we dragged Durant toward the mansion. A few people caught sight of the scene and stared openly. Matteo jogged over to us, but Romero stayed back with the Scuderi sisters.

“I knew this day would end in a fucking bloody wedding,” Matteo muttered after Luca had filled him in on the details. “Of course, I’d hoped it would give me the chance to stick my knife into one of you fuckers.”

“Ditto,” Remo said with a dangerous grin.

We didn’t stop and as we passed the patio, Giulia caught sight of us. She ripped away from her husband Cassio and stormed toward us as we stepped into the foyer.

“You should leave,” Luca told her firmly.

She stepped in our way and glared at Durant. “Tonight you will finally get what you deserve for what you did to Kiara.” She met my gaze. “Make him pay.”

“Oh, I will.”

Cassio arrived and pulled his wife back. He looked at Luca, resting his hand on his gun. “Do you need help?”

“No,” Luca said. “This is a Camorra matter.”

I inclined my head, surprised by his answer. When we entered the master bedroom, Kiara stood in front of the window, dressed in pants and a thick sweater. She paled when she spotted her uncle and backed away, bumping against the wall.

Remo and I dropped her uncle on the floor.

“What did you tell them, you traitorous whore?” he snarled.

I yanked the knife out of his calf with a sharp twist as I bent over him

and rammed my fist into his throat to silence him. He sputtered and fell forward.

Kiara watched the scene with wide eyes.

Luca took a few steps toward Kiara, but she flinched, still crippled by her terror. I barred his way. “Unfortunately, I can’t allow you to go any closer to my wife.”

Luca frowned but nodded. “She is yours.” Then he spoke to Kiara. “I can only allow Nino to punish Durant if I know he deserves it.”

Kiara wrapped her arms around her chest, swallowing hard as she glanced at her uncle then looked away. For a while she didn’t say anything but she began shaking. “I was thirteen,” she whispered then released a broken sob. Her dark eyes met Luca’s, and whatever he saw on her face convinced him because his expression turned to stone as he leveled his gaze on Durant. “You are subject to the Camorra’s judgment, *Uncle*.” His lips pulled into a smile not unlike the ones Remo was notorious for. “I’d tell you to hope for mercy, but we know you won’t receive any from Nino and Remo.”

Mercy? No.

Durant coughed, still trying to get his voice back after my throat punch. “Luca, I’m your family.”

Luca sneered. “You are a child fucker. You aren’t family.” Luca looked from Kiara to Durant then to me. “Don’t get blood on the ceiling and the walls. It’s a pain in the ass to paint them.”

“Luca! You can’t do that!” Durant begged. He fell forward and clutched Luca’s feet. “I beg you.”

Luca narrowed his eyes. “Let me go.” When Durant didn’t, Luca grabbed him by the collar and threw him away from himself. Durant clambered to his feet with a wince, and I stepped in his way.

Matteo came in and held out rope for Remo, who took it with a

twisted smile. Then the Famiglia Consigliere left.

Luca walked out as well, but before he closed the door, he said, “Don’t disturb the neighbors with his screams and don’t feed him his dick. I want to present it with the sheets in the morning to get a message to my men.”

“There are enough other parts of his body we can feed him, don’t worry,” Remo said. “His balls might work well.”

Luca closed the door.

Durant glanced at Kiara, who sat frozen on the sofa beside the bed. “Please, Kiara.”

I smashed my fist into his mouth. He fell backwards, screaming hoarsely. “You won’t address her. You won’t look at her, unless she gives you permission.”

Durant cupped his bleeding mouth, moaning and crying.

“If this makes you cry already, the night won’t be easy for you,” Remo said, pulling his knife out. Then he laughed.

“Do you want my help?” Fabiano asked. He had already rolled up his sleeves and was always a useful asset when it came to torture, but tonight Remo and I would handle this.

“No. Ask the Famiglia doctor for transfusions. I don’t want him to die too soon,” I told him. Fabiano rushed off at once.

Durant scrambled backwards as I advanced. I grabbed him and shoved him toward the bed. He tried to climb off, but I pushed him down and thrust my fist into his balls. He screamed and I leaned over him, staring down at his pain-filled and terror-widened eyes as I wedged a sock into his mouth. “Your screams won’t be heard just like Kiara’s weren’t when you forced your cock into her.” I showed him my knife and murmured, “I will force my blade into every fucking inch of your body. I hope you enjoy it as much as I

will.”

I motioned at Remo, and he came forward with rope. We tied Durant down spread eagle.

Pushing off the bed, I began unbuttoning my shirt and shrugged it off. Remo took his shirt off as well. There was no sense ruining our white shirts.

“Do you want her to stay?”

I chanced a glance at Kiara, who hadn’t moved from the sofa, her eyes huge as they regarded her uncle.

“You can leave,” I told her.

“Go to my room,” Remo said. “You can sleep there. I will be too riled up after this to sleep.”

She blinked once then gave a small nod but still didn’t move. Maybe she needed to watch. I turned to her uncle. “First, I’m going to break each of your fingers,” I explained to him. “Fingers that touched without permission.”

I nodded at Remo. I grabbed Durant’s left hand and Remo grabbed his right. “This will be painful. But don’t worry, you’ll get used to the pain. When that happens, I’ll make sure to go a bit harder on you.”

CHAPTER 7



KIARA

I flinched every time my uncle's stifled cries rang out as Remo and Nino broke each of his fingers. My eyes weren't on my uncle, though, but instead on my husband's face. His expression was keen and attentive as he watched my uncle like he was conducting an interesting experiment.

Next, they began cutting his clothes off his body, slicing his skin over and over in the process. I jerked to my feet. I couldn't watch this, couldn't see him naked, couldn't listen to his muffled cries anymore.

Nino looked over to me and stopped his brother from removing my uncle's underpants. Nino walked toward me. "Do you want to hear what he has to say before you go?"

I wasn't sure but I gave a very small nod.

Nino went back and pulled the sock out of my uncle's mouth. "I'm sorry," Durant croaked. "Please forgive me." His eyes begged me.

Nino looked at me, cold gray eyes emotionless despite what he had been doing to my uncle. "Do you forgive him?"

Could I forgive him? Can you forgive having your childhood destroyed? Having your innocence ripped from you? Losing that childlike trust in your family in the worst way possible? "No," I said.

Nino stuffed the sock back into Durant's mouth.

I had to go when Nino brought the knife down onto my uncle's chest. I closed the door and took a shuddering breath then stiffened when I noticed Fabiano heading my way, carrying transfusion bags. I moved to the side so he

could enter, but he returned a moment later with empty arms. "I'm going to take you to Remo's room. Nino will join you later."

I didn't say anything, just watched the tall blond man. We walked in silence, and when I stepped into Remo's room, he left me alone. I walked over to the bed and crept under the blankets, staring into the darkness. The bed was too heavy with the memories of the past, even if it wasn't the same bed where it had happened.

Slipping out of the bed, I curled up in one of the armchairs, not bothering with a blanket. Much later, the door creaked open. As the light spilled in from the corridor, I could see Nino dressed in his wedding suit. Then he closed the door, bathing us in darkness. He stopped halfway to the bed. "You can sleep in the bed. Remo won't require it tonight. It's ours."

I swallowed. "I haven't slept in a bed in years."

"Why?" There was no judgment in his voice, only mild curiosity.

"Because that's where it happened," I choked.

"He begged for death in the end if it's any consolation."

I sucked in my breath. Was it? It shouldn't have been, but part of me felt consoled. "Thank you," I whispered.

"The power he still holds over you ... that's something you have to break."

I stood and slowly walked toward the bed. In the dim light I could only make out Nino's tall form, but I had a feeling he was watching me.

I lay down and covered myself with the blanket.

Nino's shadow shifted and I could hear clothes rustling. He was getting out of his wedding suit. The remnants of fear made my breathing change. Perhaps it would always be like that. Would he try again? I was his wife after all.

"You should try to sleep," he said in that calm drawl as he slipped

under the covers. He didn't come close enough so we would touch.

"I can't."

"The nightmares won't stop because he's dead," he said, and I knew he was right, but it was unsettling that he *knew*. They'd called him a genius, as twisted and dangerous as he was intelligent. And I realized he was all that and more. *Monstrous*.

Every cut he'd inflicted on Uncle Durant in my presence spoke of clinical precision, of years of practice, and I knew what came after I'd left had been worse.

He begged for death in the end.

"But he won't ever hurt you again, and nobody else will either," he said as if his words made it law.

Because of the bloody message he sent today. "What about you?" Silence. "Will you hurt me?"

He shifted and the bed moved under his weight. I sucked in a breath before I could stop myself. Even in the dark, I could see him turn to face me. "I won't hurt you either. Physically at least."

"But you will abuse me mentally?" I asked.

"No. Not intentionally." He paused. "But I don't feel."

"Feel what?"

Pity? Mercy?

"Feel."

I tried to understand what he meant. "You don't feel emotions?"

"Haven't since I was a child." He paused. "Not like people usually do. It's difficult to explain."

A sociopath. That was what people like him were called.

"I recognize them and I can simulate them in a satisfying manner if I want, but I don't feel them."

I wasn't sure what to say. Perhaps his admittance should have scared me. "So what does that mean for us?"

"That means that I will never act on anger or fear or sadness, but ..."

"But never on love or affection either," I finished. I wondered why he had slaughtered my uncle if it wasn't for anger. Was it habit? Because that was how things were handled in Vegas? Even in New York any Made Man would have killed the man who'd dishonored his bride.

"Indeed."

I didn't need love as long as I knew I was safe from him. Besides, I had gone without real affection for years now. I could live through more. "What about desire?"

"That isn't an emotion. It is animalistic drive. And basically humans are animals."

Not so safe after all. "So you act on desire." Fear was back in my voice, and my body clammed up with it.

In the dark I could see the slight movement of his face. "I do. And to be upfront, I desire your body."

There it was. My pulse sped up, and I could feel a new wave of panic begin to rise.

"But I won't act on it."

"You won't?"

"At some point it might be required that we produce offspring, but until then I can seek out other women to handle my needs ... if that's what you prefer?"

So clinical and emotionless. "Yes," I said, relieved that he'd suggested something like that. I could have cried from relief.

He didn't say anything. For him this was settled. I closed my eyes. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, and I could breathe freely

again.



I fought him, tried to push him off, but he was too strong. Gasping, I woke and panicked because something was holding me down. I struggled harder, terror clawing at my chest. Only one of my arms was free. I flailed.

A firm hand caught my wrist, and I let out a choked sound.

The lights came on, and I blinked against the brightness.

“Calm down, Kiara. You are tangled in the covers.”

It took me a moment to realize who was speaking, who was holding my wrist. Nino’s face came into focus above me, and I cringed into the pillow. I tugged at the wrist he was holding and he released me.

“Let me help you.” He reached for me and I stiffened, watching his hand. He grabbed the covers and yanked. They came loose and I was free. I sucked in a deep breath.

His hair was disheveled and with it not being combed back or in a short ponytail he looked more human, almost approachable. Of course, that changed the moment my eyes dipped below his throat, where his tattoos began. Almost every inch of his torso was covered in them. They barely touched his neck so they weren’t visible if he wore a shirt. The tattoos snaked over his shoulder on his back and down to his arms, reaching his wrists like sleeves. They didn’t hide the steely outline of muscles or the raised scars.

I swallowed and sat up. My skin was slick with perspiration, but I shivered. “I’m not used to that much space. The chaise longue I slept on didn’t allow for me to move enough to get entangled like that.”

Nino was still propped up on one arm. His gaze trailed over my face, and it made me acutely aware of our proximity and the rude way I woke him. He must have realized what kind of lousy deal he’d gotten by now. I was

nothing like the promised prize. He couldn't claim me, and I stole his sleep. "I'm a mess," I whispered. "At least, you don't have to worry about other men making a move on me."

"I'm not worried about that," he said in a low voice.

I tilted my head. "Have you discovered that you got a faulty prize?"

"Faulty?" he inquired.

I motioned at myself. "Broken. I'm not what was promised. You should give me back."

Nino pushed himself into a sitting position and brought us closer. I forced myself to remain still, but my body tensed. His eyes flickered over me, perhaps noticing my reaction, but he didn't pull back. "I was promised a Vitiello woman in marriage. A woman with beauty and grace. You fulfill my requirements."

I stared. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"*To think* it would suggest it's born of my imagination, but your beauty is fact. And the reason why I'm not worried about men making a move on you is because you are a Falcone now, my wife, and in Las Vegas nobody goes against us."

I swallowed harder.

"The dark holds power over you because he came at night for you?"

I nodded, followed by another hard swallow.

"Your nights are safe. You are safe now, Kiara. Even in the dark there's nothing you have to fear, no one, because I am there and they will have to go through me. And no one ever has won against me. I am the most dangerous thing in the dark, but you don't have to fear me."

I lowered my eyes, not understanding. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why don't I have to fear you? You are a Falcone."

“I am. And my brothers and I protect each other because we are family, and we protect Fabiano because we made him family, and now we will protect you because you are my wife and that makes you family as well. That’s what family is supposed to be, don’t you think?”

I looked up at him with a shaky smile. “Was that how your family raised you? How your father raised you? Because my father beat me and killed my mother in an attempt to save his own life. My Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix treated me like a burden and pariah because my father was a traitor, and my uncle Durant, he ... he ...” I still couldn’t say it.

“My father and mother were never family. They were blood, nothing more. My brothers and I are blood, but we also decided to be more, to be a unit. We are blood and chosen family. And we protect family.” His expression was more animated than I’d ever seen it, and I wondered if he realized it ... if he really was as emotionless as he claimed to be. “If you choose to be a Falcone, if you choose to be our family, if you choose to be mine not just on paper and because it is your duty, then we will protect you.”

“What do I have to do to be family? To be yours?”

“Be loyal. Be trustworthy. Forget your blood family and New York. Cut the bonds that tie you to them and become a Falcone. It’s us against the rest. It will always be like that.”

“I can do that.” Nothing in New York was holding me back. The only person I cared about and who cared about me was Giulia, and we had barely seen each other because she lived in Philadelphia and I lived in Baltimore with her parents. She also had Cassio’s children to take care of.

He gave a nod and reclined in bed. “Try to sleep now.”

I lay back down on my side, and Nino extinguished the lights. As always, my body seized with fear in the dark. I focused on Nino’s calm breathing. He was too far away for me to feel the warmth of his body, but I

heard him. He wasn't asleep. I don't know why I knew it, I just did. I closed my eyes and counted his breaths until sleep dragged me down.

Nino

Kiara's breathing remained tense for a long time after her nightmare. I knew she was trying to make me believe she had fallen asleep, and I allowed her to think she was succeeding. It was curious how often people forgot about the little details when it came to their body language. Breathing in sleep had a different quality than when awake, especially if your waking moments were filled with fear.

Other people's fear was something I was used to; people feared me because of my name and my Camorra tattoo. Even if they didn't know me, they feared me because they saw me in the cage or because they realized I didn't feel. It deeply unsettled most people once they realized that my blank expression wasn't forced. It came naturally.

Kiara shifted slightly. She was asleep now, but neither my mind nor my body craved sleep. Usually, I had no trouble finding sleep after torturing someone. It didn't raise my pulse up or make my blood boil, and yet this time there was an underlying restlessness in my limbs as I lay beside Kiara.

I wasn't sure why I had reacted so strongly. Maybe it was that as my wife I felt obligated to protect her.

I slipped out of bed eventually and left the room. It was quiet in the house and gardens at this hour. People had left the party while Remo and I had been busy with Durant. I assumed Luca had strongly advised them to take their leave. The dark had never harbored horrors for me like it did for Kiara. I enjoyed its peaceful quietness. I went downstairs and followed a slight breeze toward the French windows. As expected, Remo was awake as well. He stood on the crest of the knoll and stared out toward the ocean. He

hadn't bothered getting dressed in pants or a shirt after we were done with Durant. He stood only in his briefs.

His body tensed briefly at my approach, but then his muscles slackened. I stopped beside him, but he didn't turn to look at me. The scent of copper flooded my nose, and my eyes trailed down his body. Even in the dim moonlight it was obvious that he hadn't even bothered cleaning up yet.

"Why are you still covered in his blood?" I asked curiously.

"When has there ever been a day without blood in our lives?" He threw my earlier words back at me. I frowned. Remo was in a strange mood.

"Do you know what day today is?"

"April 25," I said, but I knew that wasn't where he was going with his words.

He turned his head, and his expression would have sent most people running. "It's her fucking birthday."

"I know."

"Right this moment she's fucking taking a breath, a breath she shouldn't be taking. She should burn in hell."

My chest became tight as it occasionally did when Remo felt compelled to mention our mother. "We can still kill her," I said.

Remo balled his hands to fists. "Yeah. We could." His eyes assessed me. "Fourteen fucking years and she's still breathing."

"We could ask Fabiano to do it. He would understand."

"No," Remo growled. "That day is between us. And if anyone kills our mother, it's going to be us. Together." He held out his hand, his Camorra tattoo on display.

I nodded and gripped his forearm as he gripped mine. "I would go through fucking fire for you."

"You already did, Remo," I said.

He released my arm and took a deep breath. “The smell of blood always reminds me of that day. Isn’t that kind of ironic considering how much blood we’ve spilled over the years? You’d think it would manage to drown out that one fucking day.”

“Some things stay with you,” I said.

Remo nodded. “You being here I assume you didn’t fuck your wife.”

“Her past stayed with her too. Killing her uncle didn’t change that.”

“Would killing our mother change things for us?” he asked quietly.

I considered that, but for once I didn’t know the answer. “I don’t know.”

CHAPTER 8



NINO

As always, I woke around six in the morning, on my back, staring at the ceiling. I had slept about two hours, which wasn't much worse than my average night. I turned my head toward the sound of soft breathing. Kiara was curled into herself, her face hidden under her wavy dark brown hair. After her nightmare, she had slept soundly, and once I'd returned to the bedroom from my conversation with Remo, I had quickly found sleep as well. I had no trouble sleeping beside her, even if it had been years since I'd shared a bed with anyone; back then it had been with my brothers because we only had two beds.

I sat up, wanting to prepare everything for the presentation of the sheets—and Durant.

Kiara jerked awake, eyes wide and terrified as they settled on me. Her body coiled tighter before she swallowed visibly and then finally relaxed. "Sorry."

"For what?" I asked. She said sorry a lot for her body's natural reactions. I wasn't sure why she thought her fear would offend me. After what she had been through, and considering who I was, it was natural for her to react the way she did. Killing her uncle and not laying claim on her body wouldn't change that.

She didn't say anything, and I couldn't read her expression. I swung my legs out of bed and stood.

Kiara gasped behind me. I glanced over my shoulder at her. I was

naked because I preferred to sleep without clothes. “I’m going to take a shower. Does my nakedness bother you?”

She moved her head in a twitchy mix of nodding and shaking, looking down at the blankets.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“You are my husband.”

“I am. But that doesn’t answer my question.” I turned, fully facing her, to try and coerce a stronger reaction.

She swallowed, her cheeks turning red. “It doesn’t bother me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Being trustworthy means no lies, Kiara.”

Her eyes snapped up to my face, and she pursed her lips in ... frustration? “Okay. I lied. It bothers me very much. You scare me when you are naked. Happy?”

“I can’t see how that would make me happy.”

She shook her head. Then her eyes darted to my groin area, and she tensed again and looked away.

“My nakedness doesn’t pose a risk to you. It doesn’t make me more dangerous nor would clothes offer you any kind of protection. It’s a matter of physical strength, not layers of clothing.”

My words didn’t have the intended effect. She slumped her shoulders, making herself smaller. Fear. I wasn’t sure how to handle her. My lack of emotions had never been much of a problem when dealing with my brothers or Fabiano; they weren’t offended easily, and even harder to scare. With others, my lack of emotions had been a useful asset.

“Kiara,” I softened my voice, something I had never done. Her hazel eyes flickered up to my face. “I’m stronger than you. That is fact. If I wanted to hurt you, nothing would stop me. That is also fact. But as I told you, I have no intention of hurting you. My being naked doesn’t change that in any way.

Nor would you being naked around me change it. I'm more than capable of controlling my urges just as any other man would."

"My uncle," she murmured.

"Your uncle didn't want to control his urges, and he paid for it with his life." For me the topic was settled, so I turned and headed for the shower.



When we were both dressed, I checked the time. It was only seven-thirty. Still early. "Why don't we head for breakfast before the presentation of the sheets?"

Kiara's eyes widened. "What sheets?"

"The sheets your uncle bled out on," I told her.

"Everyone will realize what happened to me," she whispered, her face scrunching up.

"Are you ashamed?" I asked, because I still had trouble reading her face and eyes. It would take me a while to link her facial expressions to the appropriate emotions.

She gasped out a laugh and swallowed hard. "Of course I am."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of. You did nothing wrong. Don't turn yourself into the aggressor when you were the victim."

She shook her head at me, eyes wide. "You don't understand. It doesn't matter that he did this to me. They will blame me. Somehow the victims always end up being treated like accomplices. You are a man. You don't understand."

Her voice and words made me realize that the emotion her face displayed was anger. "It's not a matter of being a man. It is fact that you did nothing wrong. He forced you."

"Don't you understand? I'm a woman. I'm guilty by default. It's

always like that. They will say I asked for it. A smile means I'm flirting. A nice word means I'm asking for it. Revealing clothes mean I'm inviting touch. *That is fact*, Nino."

I regarded her, surprised by her vehemence. The women my brothers and I dealt with weren't prone to wordy comebacks, but Kiara was eloquent and intelligent, and she could hold her own if she got past her fear of me and men in general.

"If you feel ashamed, if you allow them to make you feel that way, you cement their ignorance. Fight it."

"I fought once in my life, and it only made him hurt me worse!" she screamed. She swallowed again. I assumed it was her attempt to control her emotions, to stop her tears, but they had gathered in her eyes anyway. Maybe I should have prolonged her uncle's torture over a few days, but we were supposed to return to Vegas today.

Her eyes flickered over my face, and she stiffened. "I'm sorry."

I tilted my head. "What for?"

"For screaming at you. I shouldn't do that, shouldn't provoke you."

"Provoke me?"

She frowned up at me. My words seemed to make as little sense to her just as her words made little sense to me. She wrapped her arms around her chest in a protective gesture.

Was she scared of my reaction?

"Voicing your opinion doesn't provoke me, Kiara. And as I said, I don't act on anger. You don't have to be submissive. I won't feel attacked if you stand up to me. I'm aware of my status and power and don't need your submission or flattery."

The frown deepened, but she dropped her arms. Her breasts settled nicely against her top as she did so, but I moved my gaze to her face. Another

thought crossed my mind, something I hadn't considered before. "When he came for you, there must have been blood on the sheets."

She blanched. "It was. Every time."

"Why didn't the maids who cleaned your sheets alert your guardians? Your uncle Felix would have acted if Durant dishonored you under his roof. It's what honor dictates."

She was visibly fighting with herself, and I allowed her a few moments to form an answer. "He paid one of the maids to clean me and the sheets after ... after he was done with me."

Without conscious decision, I touched her shoulder, knowing many people found comfort in physical closeness. Her body was pleasing to look at and felt good to the touch. She didn't flinch away. She swallowed again and gave me a small smile.

"What's her name?"

"The maid's?"

I nodded.

Kiara hesitated, her eyes searching my face, but whatever she wanted to see, it wasn't there.

"Why do you want to know?"

"What is her name?" I repeated the question but made my voice more dominant.

As expected, she yielded to dominance. She'd been brought up to comply. "Dorma. She works for Uncle Felix and Aunt Egidia." Her eyes widened. "What are you going to do to her?"

"I'm not going to do anything," I said truthfully, and she relaxed. Remo would.

I held out my hand. "Come on. Let's grab something to eat." After a moment of hesitation, she slipped her hand into mine. My brothers, Kiara and

I, and Fabiano and Leona were the only ones who stayed overnight in the mansion, but people were supposed to arrive for brunch and the presentation of the sheets in a couple of hours.

Kiara followed me quietly through the house.

“This belonged to your parents before they were killed.”

“Yes, now it belongs to my brothers.”

“Luca killed your father.”

“He did,” she said simply.

“You don’t miss him?”

She met my gaze briefly. “Do you miss your father?”

I inclined my head. “No.” We stepped into the kitchen. A few maids from the Rizzo and Vitiello households were busy preparing everything for the brunch.

My brothers were already at the kitchen table, having breakfast. Fabiano and Leona were still upstairs, probably busy fucking.

The maids turned around when we entered, and as they spotted me, they quickly ducked their heads. One of them, a woman in her thirties with short brown hair, moved her gaze over to Kiara, whose pulse sped up under my thumb. That must be Dorma.

I tugged her toward the table and sank down on the chair beside Remo. He was in sweatpants, nothing else. Probably Savio’s clothes since Remo hadn’t returned to the bedroom to grab his own. Kiara sat down next to me with a hesitant smile. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Adamo said. “How did you sleep?” His eyes darted to me, and he flushed. Remo leaned over the table and tapped his forehead with a smirk. “She didn’t. What do you think?”

Kiara gave me an uncertain look as if she wasn’t sure how to react. She would have to learn not to look for my approval. I released her wrist and

grabbed an apple and bit into it.

“It would have been a better morning if you’d let me be part of the fun,” Savio said to me.

Adamo glanced at Kiara again. “Las Vegas is really kind of cool. There’s a lot you can do.”

“I’m sure I’ll like it there,” Kiara said softly.

Remo cocked one eyebrow at me as I leaned over to him and whispered in his ear, “After her uncle raped her, one of the maids of the household helped him keep it a secret. She cleaned Kiara of the blood.”

Remo drew back, his mouth pulling into a smile. “Where do I find her?”

My eyes went to the woman with the short hair. Remo followed my gaze then he looked back at me, an excited gleam in his eyes. “I will take care of her after the presentation of the sheets. I don’t want to miss that.”

“Should I tell our pilot that we’ll leave later?”

Remo considered that. “I won’t take too long.”

Dorma walked over with a massive pan. “I made some eggs and bacon as you asked,” she said to Remo.

He smirked. “Yes. I need to replenish my reserves.” She put some eggs and bacon down on his place.

She looked at me. “Do you want some? I’m sure you’ll need some after your wedding night.” Her eyes moved to Kiara, who sank deeper into her chair.

“That’s true,” I said in a low voice. My gaze rested on the expensive necklace around her neck. “An exquisite piece of jewelry you got there. Do the Rizzos pay you that well?”

She blinked and touched the necklace, her eyes going to Kiara once more. “It ... it was a gift,” she said indignantly.

I smiled coldly. “Are you sure? Or did someone else pay the price for it, *Dorma*?”

She blanched and took a step back. Remo watched her like a cat would a mouse. She turned and put the pan down on the stove then stepped closer to the other maids. Now and then she sent a glare at Kiara, who continued to flinch every time.

“She’s seriously starting to piss me off,” Remo murmured. He got up and stretched. All the maids looked at him. This was his show. His sweatpants hung low on his hips, and they stared at his scarred chest. Remo, like me, was ripped from years of fighting. You could tell our muscles weren’t just from lifting weights. We had bled for them. He picked up his knife holster and put it on over his naked chest. Kiara’s eyes widened. Then she quickly looked away. The maids were caught up somewhere between open-mouthed shock, fear, and fascination.

Savio rolled his eyes and muttered. “Show-off.”

Remo strode over to the maids and stopped right behind Dorma.

“That looks delicious,” he said darkly as he glanced over her shoulder at whatever she and another maid were preparing. Of course he wasn’t referring to food. Dorma edged closer to the countertop, but Remo leaned in closer. “I can’t wait to get a taste. I’m *starving*.”

Adamo shook his head and scowled down at his plate.

Dorma shook her head. “It’s for later. You can’t have it now.”

Remo brought his mouth close to her ear. “I can wait. Don’t worry. It will be worth it.”

She shuddered visibly, but Remo retreated, snatching another piece of bacon from the pan before he returned to the table.



Kiara remained in the kitchen with Leona, Adamo, and Fabiano as Savio, Remo, and I led Luca and Matteo upstairs to the master bedroom.

I opened the door so Luca could step in. He and his brother took in the bed and its surroundings.

“Didn’t I tell you not to get blood on the walls?” Luca said in annoyance, but there was a flicker of something else in his eyes. “The only way this room can be cleaned is by hosing it down.”

“Better yet, burn it,” Matteo suggested. He shook his head and exchanged a look with his brother.

Remo offered him a shrug and one corner of his mouth tipped upwards. “Things got a little out of hand in the end.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Luca said dryly, sizing up the other Capo.

Savio walked around the bed, regarding Durant. “Man, next time call me when you’re having fun. Why did I have to babysit Adamo while you went all-out?”

Luca shook his head. “Fuck, you Falcones are all bat-shit crazy.”

I gestured at the scene. “I assume the room will suffice to send the message you intended?”

Matteo snorted. “*Suffice*, my ass. It is kind of ironical that you were the ones to deliver a message against rape.”

I regarded the other man calmly then looked at Luca. “You disapprove of our ways.”

“I do,” Matteo said, showing teeth.

“How do you punish women in your territory?”

“If possible, we don’t.”

“What do you do with female drug dealers who steal money or betray you and sell out to the Bratva? How do you deal with whores who don’t pay for hitting your streets or women who borrow money and don’t pay it back?”

Remo stepped up to Matteo. “You deal with them as you deal with men, I assume. Or have you found a way to torture them in a female-friendly way? Have you found a way to make death less final for them?”

Matteo’s hand twitched closer to his knife, and I rested my hand on my gun, but Remo could hold his own, and he had seen the movement of Vitiello. He grinned. “We give them a choice. And what do you think do they all choose?”

Matteo sneered. “Then you should reconsider your methods.”

Remo chuckled. “Don’t worry about my methods. I am Las Vegas. I own every club and whore and drug dealer. And soon I will have banished every fucking Bratva fucker from my whole territory, and after that, I will deal with the fucking Mexicans and then I will be the West.”

It wouldn’t be as easy as that. Las Vegas and Reno were under our complete control, but we still had to share many of the other cities in the West with the Russians and the Cartel. To banish them from every city would take considerable effort and forces. Forces that we were currently utilizing for our revenge on the Outfit.

“We have guests who need to see this,” Luca said firmly. “But I think we will exclude the women from the spectacle. I don’t think most of them have the ability to stomach *this*.”

“Perhaps you should stop coddling them like fragile porcelain dolls,” Remo muttered.

Luca smiled coldly. “I do as I please in my territory and you can do as you please in yours.”

We headed back downstairs. In the living room, Luca’s Underbosses and Captains had gathered, as well as their wives and a few low-ranking Famiglia soldiers. They regarded us with open curiosity. Fabiano, Leona, Kiara, and Adamo came over to us.

“There’s a slight change of plans,” Luca said. “We’ll hold the presentation of the sheets in the master bedroom.”

A murmur went through the guests.

“I’d strongly advise people sensitive to large amounts of blood to stay here,” Luca said. Some people laughed hesitantly but fell silent when they realized he wasn’t making a joke.

Every man in the room followed. Of course, they would never admit to having a problem with blood, but a few women followed along as well. Among them were Kiara’s aunt Egidia and Giulia, despite her husband’s obvious aversion to the idea. Durant’s wife Criminella wasn’t there. She had returned home after Luca had told her what her husband had done. She knew what the penalty for that kind of thing was. Everyone knew.

As expected, the sight of Durant caused the desired shock effect. Egidia rushed away toward the bathroom and didn’t return, and Giulia staggered into her husband, burying her face in his chest. He regarded the scene with the same mild surprise as Luca and Matteo had before.

“Tell your soldiers, tell everyone that this is what happens to child fuckers in my territory,” Luca said. When the guests had filed out and returned downstairs for brunch, only Felix remained with Luca, Matteo, Remo, and myself.

“I didn’t know,” he said quietly, pointedly not looking at Durant.

“I find it difficult to imagine that you wouldn’t have noticed a change in Kiara’s behavior after the rape. She’s still horrified of male closeness. I reckon that couldn’t have been much better when she was thirteen,” I said sharply.

Luca cocked an eyebrow. “That’s true, Felix. You know that I would have expected to be informed of such a crime so I could dish out the suitable punishment.”

Felix paled. “I didn’t know. Kiara isn’t my daughter, and she has always been peculiar. If she ever acted in an odd fashion, I put it down to what happened to her father.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Even someone with mediocre perception would have noticed something was off if they paid attention. But Kiara, being a traitor’s daughter, probably lived most of her life in the shadows. She was a Falcone now. She’d learn to hold her head high.

CHAPTER 9



KIARA

After saying goodbye to Giulia, I was shaken. It felt like more than just a temporary goodbye. We'd always lived in separate cities, but this was different. I was part of the Camorra now. If the truce didn't hold, and from what I'd heard it wouldn't last for very long, I'd never see her again.

But that wasn't the only thing that turned my stomach into a pit of snakes. So far Nino had been kinder than expected. What if this was part of the plan? What if his pleasant mask slipped the moment we were in Las Vegas? That was their territory. That was where they could do as they pleased. It wasn't like I could return to Baltimore if things didn't work out—much less now that everyone knew what Durant had done to me.

The pitiful stares had been almost too much to bear, but the occasional assessing looks were even worse. It was as if people wondered if I had been the one who'd brought this down upon myself.

Leona and I walked ahead with the men behind us. She gave me a hesitant glance. We hadn't talked much so far, but she seemed nice, and I couldn't see any judgment in her eyes, even now that she knew about my past.

We stepped into the private jet, and I paused, unsure of where to sit. Leona smiled. "Why don't you sit with me so we can get to know each other? I think the men have some things to discuss."

Relieved about her offer, I followed her toward the back, and we sat across from each other. Nino, his brothers, and Fabiano settled on seats close

to each other on the other end of the plane.

Nino didn't seem to mind that I hadn't chosen to sit beside him. This marriage was a necessary evil for him. Means to an end.

"So you're married to Fabiano?" I asked Leona.

She flushed and it made her freckles stand out even more. Her eyes darted to the blond man. "Oh ... no ... we aren't married. We haven't been together for very long."

"And your family allows you to be with him before marriage?"

Leona let out a laugh. "I'm not Italian. I'm an outsider."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Oh. I wasn't sure because of your name. They allow that in Vegas?"

Leona pursed her lips. "I'm not sure it's something that's allowed, but Remo allowed it for Fabiano."

I knew at once that Leona was as wary of the Camorra Capo as I was. Everyone except his brothers was probably wary of him.

"So you grew up in a normal family?" I hadn't had contact with outsiders often, so I found their company exciting.

Leona grimaced. "Well, I wouldn't call my family normal by average standards. My parents are addicts. I mean were ... my mother still is." She took a deep breath.

"What about your father?"

"Fabiano killed him."

I froze, my eyes moving to her boyfriend. As if he could feel my gaze, his blue eyes settled on me before they moved over to Leona and warmed. Trying to suppress my first reaction, I asked, "Why are you with him if he killed your father?"

Leona turned to face me. A hint of guilt flickered across her face before it disappeared, and she gave a small shrug. "My father wasn't a good

man.”

“And Fabiano is a good man?”

“God no,” Leona said with a laugh. “These men over there ... they aren’t good.” She nodded toward the Falcones and Fabiano.

I nodded. “But is he good to you?”

Leona smiled. “He is.” Her blue eyes searched my face. “I don’t know what happened between Nino and you last night, but he killed the man who hurt you, so I think he wants to be good to you.”

I regarded Nino. He leaned back in the seat, looking relaxed, his lips pulling into an almost smile. I wondered if it was something he had to force or if his facial muscles did it on their own when his body registered a certain level of satisfaction. He met my gaze. I wasn’t sure if he wanted to be good to me or if he even knew what he wanted with me at all. I averted my eyes because his scrutiny made me feel self-conscious, even if I was the one who had begun staring.

“He doesn’t feel emotions, right?”

Leona shrugged. “He doesn’t show emotion. I don’t know what’s going on in his head. To be honest, I don’t want to know. He and Remo...” she shook her head then caught herself “...sorry. Nino is your husband now.”

“No,” I said, waving her off. “I understand. I feel the same way.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of my husband yet. He wasn’t what I’d expected. I had expected cruelty, and I knew it was in his nature considering what he and Remo had done to Durant. Even if my uncle had deserved to die, from Giulia’s shaken state, I could only guess how bad it had been. Would his cruel side eventually emerge when he was around me?

The thought of lowering my guard and then being hit with cruelty I no longer expected was something I’d once endured, and I didn’t want to go through again.



The mansion was a sprawling white estate with several wings, each of which belonged to one of the Falcone brothers. Still, I would have preferred to have more distance between Remo and me. Savio didn't scare me as much, and Adamo was still a kid, even if he was already taller than me. Remo, Savio, and Adamo headed to their respective parts of the house when we arrived, leaving me alone with Nino. I was still unsure how to act around him. I was still scared of him, but not as much as before.

"Come on, I'll show you around the house," he said, gripping my wrist again. I didn't even flinch this time because I'd expected it. He did it frequently, and I wondered why. Was holding hands too personal? Was it about dominance when he held my wrist like that?

From the foyer we moved into a massive high-ceilinged open space with French windows taking up an entire wall. I supposed this had been the living room once. Now it looked like a massive game room with a pool table, pinball machine, and bar with shelves full of liquor. A boxing bag hung from the ceiling and two huge sofas sat in front of a television screen that took up most of the wall. But the strangest thing was the boxing ring on the right side of the room.

"Before our father died, this was the living room and the dining room. We tore down the walls. This is where my brothers and I spend most evenings unless we are out." Nino's brows pulled together as he regarded me. Maybe he realized now this wasn't an all-boys house anymore. I was the intruder who ruined it all.

"I won't bother you during your family time," I said, sparing him the trouble of trying to let me down easily. I'd spent most of my life on the fringes. It wouldn't break me.

“You are family now.”

I doubted Remo and Savio agreed with him. Adamo seemed nice enough, but he was probably only trying to be polite, and I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to spend excessive time with the Falcone brothers.

“I’ll show you the kitchen, but we almost never use it. We only keep a few things for breakfast. We order takeout for dinner every day.”

“Don’t you have maids or something like that?” I asked, following him to the back of the house toward the kitchen. It was all stainless steel and large enough to prepare dinner for many people.

“No. We have two cleaning people who come over twice a week to take care of the worst of it, but we don’t really like people around.”

“Oh.” I never attempted to cook because our maids had always done it, but I wouldn’t mind giving it a try. Without any maids breathing down my neck, now it was an option.

We continued our tour into Nino’s part of the house. It consisted of a smaller, sparse living room with nothing but a couch and a TV. On the ground floor was a guest bathroom and another room, which was stuffed with old furniture. On the first floor were three more bedrooms and a master bedroom—the room Nino’s and I would now share.

I stepped into the large bedroom with a massive four-poster bed on the left, which faced the door way. High windows framed both sides of it. Dark red drapes partially covered the windows.

Nino tightened his fingers around my wrist. “I told you there’s no reason for fear.”

I gave him a confused look, but he didn’t elaborate. To our right, I noticed two doors. One of them was ajar, exposing a black marble floor. The door next to it was closed. Nino followed my gaze. “That’s the walk-in closet. There’s enough room for your clothes. I don’t need much space.”

He released me, and I moved into the adjoining bath and found a floor-level shower, a Jacuzzi tub, and double sinks set in a black marble countertop. A window behind the tub looked out onto the vast gardens.

Nino waited in the bedroom for me, next to the bed. Taking a deep breath, I walked closer. He looked relaxed, calm, in control. “We will share a bed.”

“Of course,” I said quickly.

“Have you changed your mind about me seeking satisfaction elsewhere?” he asked neutrally, but I wondered what his thoughts were about it.

My stomach tightened. His eyes traced my face with a hint of curiosity. For some reason it took me a second longer to give him an answer. “No,” I finally said.

He nodded. “I won’t bring women here with me, so you don’t have to be worried.”

“Thanks.” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Let’s go back downstairs. I haven’t shown you the library or the gardens yet.”

My excitement spiked. “You have a library?”

Nino’s mouth twitched. “I do, yes. It’s in the main wing, though, but my brothers don’t really read.”

I followed Nino back downstairs, but then I paused in the living area. There was still so much room, and I hadn’t seen a piano anywhere. I hadn’t even considered not having a piano at my disposal. Music had always been a part of my life. I couldn’t imagine living without it. “Do you have a piano somewhere in the house?”

Nino shook his head. “No. Do you play?”

“Yes. Well, I would if I had a piano.”

“Where would you put a piano?”

I looked around the room. It was minimally furnished. I didn’t think Nino spent a lot of time here. The Falcone brothers seemed to prefer spending time in the main wing during the day, if the amount of empty glasses and plates in the gaming room had been any indication. I motioned toward a spot close to the French windows. It would allow me to watch the sky while playing the piano. “This would be a good place, I think.”

Nino nodded but didn’t say anything.

“To the library?” I prompted, and he motioned me to follow him. As I walked beside Nino, I risked the occasional peek up at him. His expression was relaxed, at ease, but I supposed that was his default expression given his lack of emotions. The long-sleeved shirt hid his tattoos, and I realized his clothes always covered them. I wondered why he kept them hidden under layers of fabric. Weren’t most people proud of their body art? And it wasn’t like he had to cover his tattoos because of a straight-laced job. Even without the disturbing tattoos on display, Nino managed to carry a vibe of otherness, a subtle violent energy. It wasn’t as blatant as Remo’s, but it was there. Everyone who looked at Nino knew he was a man you shouldn’t cross. Not because of the muscles or his movements that screamed strength but because of a certain air of self-assurance, a confidence that said he knew he was deadly.

Nino’s gray eyes met mine, and I flushed. How long had I been staring? I quickly ducked my head and felt a rush of relief when he opened the door to a library. It made the one I’d had access to in Baltimore look like a measly broom closet. Situated in the back of the main wing, it was two stories high, and the shelves reached all the way to the top. A ladder on small wheels leaned against every row and reached the books at the very top. My heart skipped a beat as I tried to guess the number of books.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“I should give you fair warning: our selection of fiction titles is limited. Most of them are old classics or horrid bodice-rippers my mother used to read when she still lived here. I don’t read fiction and have switched over to buying books in ebook format since it simplifies storage and accessibility.”

I only half-listened as I walked through the nearest aisle, my eyes gliding over the spines. There were books about history and science, medicine and warfare. Classics like *1984* and *Animal Farm*, *Jane Eyre* and every play written by Shakespeare. Then I spotted the entire Harry Potter series, the spines cracked as if the books had been read too often. I touched the first book. I’d read it in the darkest time of my life and finding refuge in the world of those books had been the only light for me. I stopped, drawing in a deep breath. Books and music had always been my salvation. The scent of old leather and dusty paper was pure comfort. I could spend a lifetime in this room and die happy.

When I finally turned away from the books, I caught Nino watching me with a small frown. I flushed. I must have looked like a lunatic, inhaling the library scent and smiling to myself.

I cleared my throat. “Are there any parts off limits for me?”

Nino raised his dark eyebrows. “Like the Dark Arts area?”

I froze, speechless, frozen, and utterly shocked. I swallowed. “Did you ... did you just make a Harry Potter reference?” He must have noticed me touching the books.

“I did,” he said dryly, and I had to stifle laughter.

“Don’t tell me you read the books.”

“I didn’t read them for my own enjoyment. I read them to Adamo when we were on the run. He was obsessed with them, and Remo didn’t have

the necessary patience to read bedtime stories. Besides, he had a habit of letting the Death Eaters and Voldemort win, and that upset Adamo when he was little.”

I laughed then fell silent, confused and overwhelmed by everything that I’d found out about Nino in these past few days. He was a man of many layers, and I didn’t think I’d ever manage to fully grasp the top layer. I walked over to him. “It must have been hard to protect your little brother when you were fighting for your territory.”

Nino shrugged. “It was difficult, but Remo and I killed anyone who posed the slightest risk to Savio or Adamo. We couldn’t bother asking too many questions. The motto we lived by was kill first. Once we had established a stronghold on the territory, we made sure to torture people for information before we killed them.”

I looked up at him, trying to imagine what it must have been like back then. During the day Nino and Remo slaughtered their enemies and at night they came together in whatever dingy place they were hiding in at the time and read bedtime stories to Adamo and Savio.

“You confuse me,” I admitted quietly.

Nino nodded thoughtfully. “That’s a compliment I can return.”

“Thanks,” I said then cleared my throat.

“I’ll show you the gardens now. You can roam the premises as you please but stay out of Remo’s and Savio’s wing, especially Remo’s. He won’t take it kindly if he finds you in his domain.” I nodded. I had absolutely no intention of going anywhere near Remo if I could avoid it. “Adamo probably won’t mind you being in his space, but he’s a pig and a teenager, so you will see and smell things not intended for females.”

I laughed again, and Nino regarded me curiously. My cheeks heated under his scrutiny. He reached out and brushed a fingertip over my burning

skin, almost as if he was trying to make sense of my reaction. I didn't pull back, growing more and more confused by the second.

"You wanted to show me the gardens?" I croaked, clearing my throat again.

He dropped his hand and turned. I followed a step behind him, trying to understand my husband, but he was an enigma.

There was something I noticed on our way through the gaming room heading toward the garden. "I don't see guards anywhere."

"We don't need them. Even Adamo is capable of defending himself," Nino said as he led me toward a square swimming pool. "I swim laps in this pool every morning. My brothers occasionally use it for the same purpose, but they prefer more hands-on workouts."

"I'm not capable of defending myself," I pointed out after a moment.

He frowned, his eyes trailing over my body. "That's true. You are an easy target. As I said, we don't want people in the mansion. Remo and I will have to figure it out. It'll be for the best if one of my brothers or Fabiano is always around when I'm not here. They can accompany you wherever you go."

"So they are my babysitters?"

"As you pointed out, you can't protect yourself, and while people in Vegas fear us, there are outside forces that might risk an attack and could target you," he said and motioned me to follow him around the house toward another pool area. This space was definitely created for recreational purposes and not working out. It was a meandering pool landscape with small waterfalls and fountains. A ginormous inflatable sofa floated gently on the water. "You better not touch it. That's Savio's, and he uses it for female company."

I grimaced. "Thanks for the warning." Nino nodded.

“Have you told your brothers yet that they are supposed to play babysitter?” As hard as I tried, I couldn’t imagine Remo guarding me. I would probably manage to set him off with something I’d say and he’d end up killing me.

“They will protect you because you are a Falcone.”

Kiara Falcone. It was still difficult to believe that I was really someone’s wife. The wife of Nino Falcone of all people. My eyes traced his cold, perfectly sculpted face, wondering again why he hadn’t claimed me on our wedding night, why he was being nice. Though, nice wasn’t the right term for Nino’s behavior. I wasn’t sure what to call it. It seemed as if he wasn’t sure what to do with me. Marriage must not have ever been part of his life plan.

I couldn’t believe that my panic had warmed his heart. After all, he wasn’t capable of emotions, but I wasn’t brave enough to question his motives lest he begin to question them as well.

“But it’s crucial that you become capable of defending yourself. I don’t understand why the Famiglia keeps their women unable to defend themselves. It’s an unnecessary risk.”

I frowned. “You want me to learn how to fight?”

Nino shook his head, his mouth twitching as if I’d said something amusing. “I don’t think that makes much sense at the moment, given your fear of physical contact. Maybe later. But you will have to learn how to shoot a gun. That’s the first step and will give you a sense of security.”

“You will allow me to run around with a gun?” I asked, shocked.

His brows drew together. “Of course.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. I thought he’d be wary about having me armed, but maybe he was so sure of his own fighting abilities that he didn’t worry about it.

“I think it’s best to make something clear from the start,” Nino began, and I stiffened, worried what he was about to say. “If something my brothers and I do bothers you or if you want something, you have to say it outright. No subtle hints or secretive expressions. Neither my brothers nor I are good at female subtlety, and we lack the patience to figure it out. So speak your mind if you want to make it easy on all of us.”

“I can do that,” I said, but it would be a new experience for me. My family had raised me to be careful with words and not speak my mind. Voicing my opinions to men like my husband and his brothers seemed like an even bigger challenge. He was right. If I wanted to stand a chance surviving with the Falcone men, I’d have to get over my fears. But there were so many of them, some of them so deeply burnt into my very being, I wasn’t sure I had any chance of fighting them.

CHAPTER 10



NINO

Kiara kept throwing poorly veiled glances my way as we walked into our gaming room. Remo was already there doing some recreational kicks against the punching bag. He paused when we stepped in, his gaze narrowing on Kiara briefly before starting to kick again. “I’m starving. Let’s order pizza.”

Upon seeing Remo, Kiara had stiffened beside me and her breathing turned erratic. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was only in his fight shorts or because he was beating the shit out of an inanimate object, but her fear of him was obvious. I snatched the delivery menu to one of our favorite pizza places from the bar. It was stuck to something that had spilled. I turned to her. “You will have to get used to Remo’s presence.”

She jumped, tearing her eyes away from my brother. “I don’t know if I can. I heard what he does, what he likes doing,” she whispered.

I regarded my brother, who watched us from across the room as he landed another kick against the punching bag. Remo did a lot of things, which were unsettling to someone like Kiara, and he enjoyed them all. “He isn’t a danger to you.”

She raised her eyes to mine, shivering, goose bumps rising along her smooth skin. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in the word. I knew with absolute certainty that Remo wouldn’t lay a hand on Kiara because she was mine.

She nodded slowly, her eyes filled with unease. She was reluctant to believe me. She didn’t know Remo like I did. Very few people in this world

were safe around my brother, there was no denying it, but the same could be said for me.

“Why don’t you take a look at the menu and see what kind of pizza you want?” I held it out to her.

She took it from me, eyeing it warily. The stained paper looked like it had seen better days.

I made my way over to my brother, who stopped kicking and raised his eyebrows at me. “That look means I won’t like what you have to say.”

“You scare her.”

Remo gave me an amused smirk. There were very few people who weren’t terrified of my brother.

“I’d appreciate it if you try not to scare her quite so much.”

Remo chuckled, ramming his knee into the bag a few more times before he said, “I didn’t do anything.”

“I know,” I said. “We don’t do well with sensitive women, but Kiara lives under our roof now. She is part of our family, and we should make sure she feels as comfortable as possible given her past and our disposition.”

He tilted his head. “You want us to treat her well?” I followed his gaze toward Kiara, who was assessing the bar area, which was piled with dirty glasses, beer bottles, and plates. The cleaning people were coming in the morning.

“Yes. I want her to be treated like family. I want her protected. I want her safe from any threat. She is a Falcone now. She is mine.”

Remo nodded, not taking his eyes off my wife. She placed the menu down on the bar then glanced up and noticed our gazes. She blinked, stiffening, and then swallowed, quickly picked up the menu again, and fumbled nervously with it. *Fear.*

“She is safe, Nino.” Remo turned to face me, gripping my forearm.

“You are my brother and she is yours. I will make sure everyone in this city, and beyond, realizes she’s under our protection.”

Remo didn’t have many redeeming qualities, much like me, but one of them was his loyalty. If he decided someone fell under his protection, he would stop at nothing to make sure that person was safe.

He let go of my forearm. “And? Have you finally fucked her?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “No. And I won’t until she wants me to. She is too scared because of the rape.”

Remo’s eyes moved back to Kiara. She was still staring intently at the menu. She must have memorized every pizza they offered by now.

“Kiara isn’t capable of protecting herself. We need to make sure she is safe wherever she is,” I said.

“I don’t want our soldiers in the mansion. This is our home.”

“I agree. That’s why you or Savio, or even Adamo, should guard her when I’m not around to do it.”

Remo smirked. “Are you sure Kiara wants me to guard her? She might die from fear if I’m alone with her.”

“She will get used to you.”

“I doubt it,” Remo said with a grin.

“It won’t be easy, but eventually she’ll come around if you don’t lose your shit around her.”

“I’ll do my best.”

We both knew what that meant. I returned to Kiara’s side. She was biting her lip, and her body was tense. “So did you find a pizza you want?”

“I’m not very hungry,” she said softly. “Is it okay if I only order a salad with mozzarella and olives?”

“You can eat whatever you like. And if you’re still hungry, you can have a piece of one of our pizzas,” I told her.

She smiled. "Okay. Thanks."

Remo stalked toward us and stopped beside me and Kiara.

"Ready to order?" he asked.

"I will place the order. Will Fabiano be coming over?"

"Yes. Leona spends the evenings with her crack-whore of a mother."

Kiara's eyes widened. I wasn't sure if it was the insult or because another man was joining us tonight.

I picked up my phone and gave our favorite Italian restaurant a ring. Their pizzas were the best in town. We all got our usual orders, so the addition of a salad caused a bit of a stunned silence on the other end.

"Why don't you sit down? You can turn on the TV if you want. The food will be here in thirty minutes," I told Kiara, who stood frozen beside Remo and me.

She nodded and moved to the sofa where she sank down in the middle.

"I hope she loses that submissive behavior soon. It's fucking annoying," Remo muttered.

"This is new for her. She wasn't as tense when I was alone with her."

Five minutes later, Fabiano sauntered in. He had a spare key and never bothered ringing the bell. "I need a scotch," was the first thing out of his mouth. "Leona's mother is a fucking nightmare. That woman smokes and shoots up more crystal than most people and manages to survive."

"That's because you offer her a free supply. Her tolerance to the substance grows," I explained.

Fabiano glared. "I know. But if I don't give it to her, the stupid whore will hit the streets again, and it fucking kills Leona to see her mother sucking ugly dicks."

Kiara sucked in a soft breath on the sofa, and we all turned to her. She

flushed. Fabiano reached over the bar counter and grabbed a bottle of scotch from the shelf then poured himself a generous glass. “Anyone else?”

“I’ll have one,” Savio said as he walked in, clapping Fabiano’s shoulder. “I hear you’re being pussy-whipped.”

Fabiano shoved him. “I can still wipe the floor with your ugly face, Savio, don’t forget that.”

Savio smiled cockily. “Not much longer. I’m a fucking natural when it comes to fighting.”

I opened the fridge under the bar and took two bottles of beer out, one for Remo and one for me, then glanced over at Kiara, who was focused on the TV. The local news was reporting about a fire that had burned down one of our soldier’s restaurants.

“Turn that off,” Savio shouted. “The fucking news grates on my nerves. They always get it wrong. “

Kiara jumped and quickly turned the TV off. “Mind your tone,” I said to Savio, who raised his eyebrows at me. I turned to Kiara. “What would you like to drink?”

Her eyes darted from me to my brothers and then Fabiano. “Something non-alcoholic, please.”

“Alcohol adds to the fun,” Savio said with a grin.

Kiara flinched. Adamo skidded down the stairs in that moment. “Get Kiara one of your Cokes from the kitchen,” I ordered.

He groaned but turned on his heel and went off. The pizza arrived shortly after. Fabiano and I carried it over to where Kiara sat and spread the boxes out on the wide table. I sat down beside her, and Remo took up her other side; it was his usual spot. Kiara’s shoulder stiffened, but she didn’t react any other way. I handed her the salad. “That’s yours.”

“I really don’t get why girls always eat salad. It annoys the fuck out of

me,” Savio said as he grabbed a piece of his pizza.

Adamo threw himself down on the sofa between Fabiano and Savio, causing them to scowl at him. He handed a bottle of Coke to Kiara. She who took it, mumbling a thanks, and poured herself a glass.

“What’s on?” Adamo asked between bites.

“We tested a race in Kansas. It was a huge success,” Remo said eagerly, turning on the TV and opening the recording of the illegal street race.

“Cool,” Adamo said, eyes keen when the camera zoomed in on the line of cars.

Kiara ate quietly among us. If I closed my eyes, I wouldn’t have even known she was there at all, except when I got the whiff of her flowery perfume. It was obvious that she was uncomfortable surrounded by so many men, and the alcohol seemed to bother her additionally. She’d have to get used to it. This was how it always was in our home.

“Maybe we can convince Vitiello to extend the races into his territory,” Savio suggested.

“I don’t think Luca wants to cooperate with us any longer than he has to. We all know that this truce won’t last forever. Then all bets are off.”

Kiara shifted. I inclined my head toward her, but she was focused on the salad.

Fabiano cocked an eyebrow at me as if I knew what was going on in her head.

“It would do Luca good to remember that he’s lucky having us on his side,” Remo said, reaching for a piece of my pizza; we usually all shared pizzas. He leaned over Kiara’s legs to reach the box, brushing up against her leg. She gasped, jerked back, and dropped her salad. Pressed up against the backrest, chest heaving, she regarded Remo as if he was going to jump her.

His eyes narrowed, and I knew this wasn't going to go over well. "What the fuck is wrong with you, woman?" he growled. "I was going to grab a fucking piece of pizza, not grope you. I have no intention of fucking you, not now, not ever. For one, there's no fun in breaking someone broken, and secondly you are Nino's, so he's the only one who's going to get your pussy. Nobody else is going to touch you like that, got it?"

Tears welled in Kiara's eyes.

"Oh fuck," Savio muttered.

"Remo," I said in a warning voice.

He scowled, grabbed the piece he'd wanted in the first place, and leaned back. "Shut up, Nino. I'm fucking sick of her flinching. It's fucking annoying, especially because I didn't even give her reason to flinch. This is my home, and I'm not going to walk on eggshells because she can't get a grip on herself."

Kiara swallowed audibly and picked up the few pieces of lettuce she had dropped on her jeans with shaking fingers. Then she rose slowly. "Do you have a mop so I can clean this?" she asked quietly.

"Leave it. The cleaning people are coming tomorrow."

"I don't want them to find cheese and salad on the floor," she said.

"Trust me, they've seen much worse on these floors," Fabiano said.

She gave a jerky nod. "I'll go clean up and then go to bed." She pressed herself past my legs. To my confusion, she didn't move toward the guest bathroom, instead she walked toward the French windows and slipped outside into the gardens.

"Why's she going outside?"

Fabiano shook his head. "For fuck's sake, she's going outside because she's going to cry in peace."

I regarded him, and he narrowed his eyes. "You are a fucking genius,

but you're still a stupid asshole when it comes to women."

"You should probably go after her," Adamo suggested.

I frowned. "If she wants to cry in peace, she probably doesn't want my company."

"Women," Remo muttered, shoving another piece of pizza into his mouth.

"Listen to the kid," Fabiano said. "Go to her and console her or whatever it is you are capable of doing."

"I've never consoled a woman."

Fabiano sighed. "Then improvise, simulate emotions or whatever. I don't give a fuck."

"Since you are the one who has a girlfriend and who has experience dealing with female emotions, it seems logical that you should go outside and console her."

Fabiano snorted. "I knew this marriage was a fucking bad idea." He leaned back. "I'm not the one she wants to see, trust me. She'll probably scream bloody murder if I go after her in the dark. You are her husband so act like one."

I stood.

"Good luck," Savio said, stifling his laughter.

It didn't take me long to find Kiara. She was perched on a sun chair. The bluish glow of the pool highlighted her face, and I could see tears running down her cheeks. She quickly ran the back of her hand over her skin, but it was too late. I sat down beside her, ignoring her body tensing. "I'm sorry for ruining your dinner."

"You didn't ruin anything. We've had far worse incidents, and most of them involved broken bones, so this is nothing."

I reached for her and brushed another tear away. She became very still

and stopped breathing. I grabbed her shoulders and brought our faces closer. She sucked in a breath, but I needed to get through to her. “If something bothers you, say it. If you don’t want Remo to trample all over you, you will have to stand up to him. I can protect you, but it won’t bring you the respect of my brothers. If you want to be a part of this family, you need to gain their respect. Being submissive and shying away like that doesn’t cut it, okay?”

She averted her eyes.

“No,” I ordered.

Her gaze flew back to meet mine. I tightened my hold on her shoulders, and she winced.

“I’m not sure if I can do it. My fear is too strong.”

“Your fear is useless. It cripples you. Don’t let it.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It’s not that easy.”

“It’s not as hard as you make it out to be either. It’s your choice to face your fears or to let them rule over you.”

“Let me go,” she said with a shaky.

I nodded and released my hold on her shoulders. “That’s a start.”

Standing up, I held my hand out to her. “Now come. We’ll return. You can have pizza.”

She hesitated but then she took my hand and straightened. Her pulse was still racing under my thumb, but she looked less shaky. “I can’t eat your pizza.”

“We always share our pizzas. Nobody will mind.”

“I’m vegetarian. Your pizzas all have some kind of meat on them,” she said.

I hadn’t noticed that she hadn’t eaten meat at the wedding. “Next time we’ll order a vegetarian pizza for you.”

She became tense as we stepped back into the gaming room, and her

skin reddened in embarrassment. I led her back to the sofas and sat down beside Remo so Kiara didn't have to. Remo pretended he didn't notice and kept watching the race on the screen. Kiara squeezed my hand briefly before she released me and took a gulp from her Coke.

Fabiano gave me a look that probably conveyed recognition, though I wasn't sure why. Nobody mentioned Kiara's exit or her puffy eyes, and eventually she became more relaxed and watched the race with us.

Her eyes started drooping but she didn't get up; she probably wasn't sure if she was allowed to leave. I decided to make it easy for her. "Let's go to bed," I suggested and stood.

That was obviously the wrong thing to say because the tension in her body returned full force. I sent Fabiano a questioning look. After all, he was the woman whisperer. He only shrugged.

"Good night," Kiara said before she followed me silently into our wing. I tried to figure out the reason for her tension. I thought I was doing her a favor when I suggested we go to bed. I wasn't even tired.

When we arrived in our bedroom and her gaze lingered on the bed, she swallowed thickly and it dawned on me. "Are you worried because you think I want sex?"

She bit her lip. "I'm a horrible wife."

"I'm not a good husband either. It is what it is." I pointed at the bed. "As I said before, you don't have to fear me. I won't touch you unless you desire it. We discussed this. I assumed you understood that our bedroom doesn't pose a threat to you."

"I guess it's difficult to believe," she said.

"I keep my word."

I wasn't sure if it finally sank in or if it needed more time. When I joined her in bed later, she had her back turned to me and was half hidden

beneath the covers. I couldn't see if she had tensed but her breathing definitely changed. I waited for her to fall asleep before I got up. This was going to be one of those nights where I wouldn't get any sleep. With a last glance at my sleeping wife, I walked out into the corridor. I was never going to be a good husband; my disposition would always prevent that.

KIARA

When I woke, it took me several moments to realize where I was. Once I did, my pulse quickened. I sat up, looking around. Nino was gone, and I didn't hear any sounds coming from the bathroom either. I got out of bed and headed into the bathroom. As I'd noticed yesterday, there wasn't a lock on the door. It was a bit unsettling since Nino could walk in at any point. For that very reason, I hurried through my shower and quickly got dressed in a maxi dress with a high neckline. Even if I preferred to keep most of my body covered, it was too warm outside to wear something long sleeved. My eyes were drawn to the window behind the Jacuzzi tub and the blue sky outside. From the looks of it, it was going to be another hot day in Las Vegas. The sprinklers in the gardens were spewing water. I supposed there was no other way to keep the grass this beautifully green.

After that, I busied myself by putting away my clothes into the drawers that Nino must have cleared for me in the walk-in closet. When I was done, I hesitated, not sure how to proceed. I was hungry and I couldn't very well stay in the bedroom all day, but the mansion didn't feel like home yet. I wasn't sure if it ever would, so walking around on my own felt like I was intruding.

Eventually, my hunger drove me outside. It was quiet in this part of the house, which wasn't surprising considering its size. Nino was probably in

the main wing with his brothers. I wasn't really sad that he didn't wake me when he left the bedroom this morning. I was used to being alone most of the time and preferred solitude over the company of people.

I moved downstairs into the smaller living area in Nino's wing and froze on the last step. There, beside the French windows, stood a beautiful Steinway D piano. I couldn't do anything but stare. I took the last step down then approached the instrument almost fearfully. How did Nino manage to get it over here so quickly? But this was Las Vegas and he was a Falcone, so he probably had his ways. The more important question was why did he buy this for me?

Of course I told him I loved to play, but it wasn't as if he needed to put in an effort to win me over. We were already married, and I was bound to him forever. If anyone was required to please someone, then it was me as the wife. And so far, I'd failed miserably.

I sank down on the black leather bench, letting my fingers glide reverently over the smooth black and white keys, and then I began to play, but to my surprise it wasn't the song I'd been working on these past few months. It was something new entirely, a melody I hadn't even known was in me, but as my fingers moved over the keys, it took shape. Slowly, the knot around my chest loosened, and I realized the notes were my emotions shaped into music.

The sound was haunted and frightful, the notes chasing each other, quick and erratic then slowing almost abruptly. Tumult and fear, resignation and defiance, and beneath it all an underlying pain I could not shake.

I couldn't stop playing, even as I began the melody anew, reformed it, but the emotion remained, and it filled the room and me. For a moment, I felt at home, felt almost at peace.

"I see you discovered your piano," Nino drawled, and my fingers dug

into the keys, making the beautiful instrument cry out almost angrily.

CHAPTER 11



KIARA

My eyes darted to my left, where Nino stood, watching me with mild curiosity. He was dressed in black pants and a tight black T-shirt that exposed his tattooed arms. His hair was pulled back in a very short ponytail.

I flushed and quickly stood. “I’m sorry. I should have asked before I started to play. I don’t even know if I’m allowed to.”

Nino frowned and moved closer and didn’t stop despite my growing tension. He leaned against the piano, close but still more than an arm’s length away. His eyes scanned me from head to toe, and I forced myself to stand still, allowing him his appraisal. It was his privilege. Finally, his eyes met mine. “Why wouldn’t you be allowed to play the piano?” he asked. “I got it for you and it’s meant to be played.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “You didn’t have to do this. It’s too expensive.”

Nino’s mouth twisted in dark amusement. “I didn’t, but I wanted to, and money isn’t an issue, Kiara. We have more than we could ever spend.”

I glanced back down at the keys and brushed them with my fingertips.

“Play that song again,” Nino said.

“I only started working on it today. It’s not ready yet.” I didn’t mention that I’d never been happy with a song I’d created and avoided playing in front of others if possible. Music was emotional for me. Laying myself bare to other people like that had never seemed wise.

“Play it,” Nino ordered.

My eyes flew up to his face. His expression was commanding but not cruel. I sank back down on the bench, taking a deep breath, and rested my fingers against the first notes.

I closed my eyes because with Nino's intense gaze on me, I couldn't focus. Then I began to play, and the melody came to life, flowed around me, *evolved* as I added a few more notes.

The last note had long died off when I dared to open my eyes. Nino regarded me, and heat rose into my cheeks. "It's not good, I told you, but—"

Nino leaned in, and I held my breath. "Don't put yourself down. You are a Falcone now."

I blinked and gave a nod. I'd been put down all my life by others and by myself. Giulia had said the same thing to me before, but none of her words had ever had an effect. Upon looking into Nino's beautifully cold face and seeing the dominance in his eyes, it seemed impossible not to take his words to heart.

When it became clear that Nino expected an answer, I said, "Okay."

He gave a small shake of his head, but I wasn't sure what it meant. He straightened. "I have to leave to meet with the owner of our fight club, Roger's Arena, now. You can spend the day as you please. You are free to walk around the premises and the mansion, but as I said, don't go into Remo's wing." Remo probably had a poor woman locked into a dungeon there. I shivered.

"I will here be alone?" I asked.

Nino shook his head. "Savio will stay with you."

Relief flooded me when I realized the Camorra Capo wasn't on babysitting duty, even if the younger Falcone made me nervous as well. After the embarrassing incident yesterday, I really wasn't looking forward to meeting either Falcone brother.

“If you want to leave the house, tell Savio and he will drive you wherever you want to go. Tomorrow, I will have time to show you around Vegas.” He waited for a response, so I nodded.

He returned a curt nod before he left.

I stared at his back, dumbfounded.

For a moment, I wavered between sitting back down at the piano and going to find something to eat, but then my rumbling stomach won that struggle. I headed down the connecting corridor into the main part of the house. It was still quiet, but when I moved closer to the kitchen, I could hear a male voice. When I stopped in front of the door, I recognized Savio’s voice. “I’m stuck here babysitting. I’ll come over when Adamo takes over when he gets out of school.”

I was about to turn around and return to Nino’s wing despite my hunger, when the door swung open. I tried to stumble back but still managed to get hit in the shoulder, landing on my butt. I gasped from the sharp twinge then flushed with embarrassment when I found Savio staring down at me with narrowed eyes.

From my position on the floor, he looked even taller, which didn’t help with my anxiety.

“Did you eavesdrop? Never heard about privacy?” he muttered. He stuffed his phone into his pocket then bent over me, and I flinched. He froze, his eyes widening a moment before he controlled his expression. He was almost as good as Nino. “Jeez, I wasn’t going to grope you, *woman*.” He held out his hand. “Stop the cowering and take my hand.”

I did, and he pulled me to my feet then released me. I quickly straightened my dress, flustered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, and I’m sorry that you have to play babysitter when you have obviously better things to do.”

Savio shrugged. "Nino asked me to do it, and you are defenseless."

Defenseless. He sounded almost disgusted as he said it. I wasn't sure how to react, so I said, "I was going to make breakfast. Do you want something too?"

Savio snorted. "Good luck. There's no food in the fridge, only beer. Nino is pretty much the only one who remembers to buy food, and he's been busy these last few days."

"Oh," I said.

Savio sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. It was shorter than Nino's and a bit darker. "Let's grab something to eat. We can do a quick detour so I can check in with one of our soldiers who's having trouble with vandals."

My eyes widened. Like Nino, Savio told me about business. It was mostly frowned upon to involve women in any kind of business, to even mention it around them, in the Famiglia.

"We don't have to go out," he said, assessing my expression. "But then you'll have to go without food."

"That's not why I was shocked. I'm not used to hearing about business."

Savio shrugged. "It's what my brothers and I are doing all day, so it's a constant topic around here. Except for Adamo, whose main activity is sulking."

I laughed. Savio looked at me like he was trying to figure me out.

"You can go outside and wait in the driveway. I'll grab a few more guns and then we can head out."

A few more guns? He already had a holster strapped around his chest, which held a gun and a knife, but it wasn't my place to comment, so I headed outside. It was warm and sunny. Several cars were parked in the driveway;

one of them was a Ferrari in a metallic copper tone, which glowed in the sunlight. My eyes were drawn toward what must have been a marble fountain once. Now the broken down remains of a statue lay in a heap in its middle.

Savio jogged outside. He tossed on a black leather jacket, probably to hide his guns, and nodded toward the metallic Ferrari. Of course. I followed him toward the car and got in. I jumped when the engine roared to life like a beast risen from Tartarus. Savio steered the car down the long driveway and through the gate. “Why is the fountain broken?”

“It was our father’s pride and joy. He had it made in Italy and shipped here. When my brothers and I returned, after we came into power, Remo smashed it with a sledgehammer.”

I could picture it in my mind, Remo wielding that sledgehammer like a madman. “You didn’t try to stop him?”

“There’s no stopping Remo when he’s murderous,” Savio said as he steered us down a wide road with casinos and smaller hotels on either side. “We hated our father. We were busy burning the painting of him and our mother.”

His voice held a tension, and I decided to change the topic. “You aren’t trying to blend in, are you?” I asked, motioning to his car.

Savio rolled his eyes. “With a name like Falcone and with this tattoo...” he moved his arm so I got a peek at his forearm tattooed with an eye and blade “...there’s no way in hell I could blend in around here. And why would I want to? My brothers and I have brought honor back to the Camorra. I’m proud of who I am, of what I am, why would I want to hide it?”

I nodded. It was a foreign concept for me. Most of my life I’d tried to blend in, tried to hide.

“It’s a bit strange that you are my babysitter even though I’m two years older than you, don’t you think?”

Savio's expression hardened. "Age doesn't matter. I have been a Camorrista for close to four years. I have fought in the cage. I have killed and tortured. I am capable of defending you and myself, and I have no qualms doing it."

"Four years?" I asked incredulously. "But that means you were only thirteen back then."

He nodded. "I wanted to become a Camorrista, and my brothers needed me."

"What about Adamo? Has he been inducted yet?"

Savio's mouth thinned. "No. Remo thinks it's better to wait until he is fourteen so he has some time to pull his head out of his ass."

Savio pulled the car up at the curb in front of a café then got out without another word. I quickly got out as well and immediately realized that the Savio in the mansion or in the car wasn't the Savio that the outside world got to see. His expression had hardened, not as cruel as Remo's and not as cold as Nino's but enough to send a shiver down my back. He no longer appeared like a teenager. He looked a man.

He surprised me when stepped closer. I gave him a curious look. "I'm supposed to protect you. I'm not going to be the one who gets his ass handed to him by Nino because something happened to you."

I doubted Nino would care. Maybe he'd be displeased because his possession had been damaged or maybe even worried that it would endanger the truce with the Famiglia. "I thought Las Vegas was safe."

"It is," Savio said, his eyes scanning the sidewalk and street. The few passersby looked like tourists, even though we weren't near the Strip. "But since the Outfit attacked, we are more careful."

It made sense. Being attacked in your own territory must have been a hard blow. Savio motioned for me to follow him toward the café, and I tried

to stay close to him. He didn't make me quite as nervous as Remo, which was a relief. He held the door open for me, and I stepped in. The barista behind the counter gave me a smile, but it dropped the second Savio entered.

He strode toward the counter. After we'd ordered coffee to go and a few donuts, we moved over to wait for our order. The barista's hands shook so much she kept spilling the milk. Her eyes kept flitting toward Savio and occasionally me. I couldn't help but feel bad.

"Is everyone around here this scared of you and your brothers?" I asked when we were on our way back to the car. I took a sip from my coffee, watching Savio.

"Not everyone, no. Her brother owes us money. He got a visit from Fabiano recently. That's why she's like that."

The moment I buckled up, Savio pulled the car away from the curb. He awkwardly steered the car with his cup wedged between his legs because there was no cup holder.

I took a sip then lifted the box with the donuts. "Is eating in your car off limits?"

"No. Hand me one with lemon glaze. The cleaning people can get rid of the crumbs."

I handed him one of the donuts and took a plain one out for myself. I took a bite, and we settled into silence. I glanced at him again.

"What?" he muttered.

"You changed when we were outside."

Savio narrowed his gaze at me. "We Falcones need to display a certain image outside. Even Adamo knows it. You should remember it too."

"Me?" I asked, surprised.

"You are a Falcone now, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah. You're right." A Falcone. It would take a long time

to come to terms with the fact that I was a part of the most notorious family in the US.

Savio parked. “I have to handle some business, but you have to come along.”

I quickly emptied my coffee then followed Savio. We were in front of an Italian restaurant called Capri. “As I said, this restaurant belongs to one of our soldiers. His son is a friend and also a soldier.”

This time, when we stepped inside the gloomy restaurant, the reactions were quite different. No fear or hands shaking. The restaurant hadn’t opened yet. Two guys around Savio’s age and two older men sat around a table and were arguing about something. They all looked our way the moment we entered. They nodded at Savio, but then their eyes were glued to me. Uncomfortable under their scrutiny, I had to fight the urge to lower my gaze, remembering Savio’s words.

He walked toward the men, and I followed a couple of steps behind, not sure if I was supposed to stay at his side when he’d soon have to discuss business. The younger guys got up. Both hugged Savio and clapped his shoulder. Then the tall, bulky one let out a low whistle. “Nice catch, Savio. New girl for the week?”

Savio glanced toward me, and I could feel my cheeks heat. When he turned back to the men, his smile had thinned. “She’s Nino’s wife.”

An awkward silence followed, and the bulky guy flushed, which seemed to amuse Savio if the twitch of his mouth was any indication. One of the older men shot to his feet and hit the teenage boy over the back of the head. “Apologize now, Diego!”

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” Diego mumbled.

“Good thing Nino isn’t here,” Savio said with a shrug. “He’s a possessive bastard.”

Was Nino? Or was that part of the outward appearance the Falcones wanted to present. I wasn't sure. I didn't know Nino.

"Why don't you join us? I'm sure our cook can prepare a quick meal for you?" the older man said. He and Diego shared the same sharp facial features, father and son I assumed.

Savio tilted his head in agreement and sank down on one of the chairs then pushed back the one beside him for me to sit. I sat down, glad that the men were now purposely trying to avoid looking at me, though that, too, felt weird.

"Go into the kitchen and tell them we have guests, Diego," the father said.

When Diego returned, he didn't look quite so shaken anymore and eventually got over his initial shock. "So you are the Vice's cousin?"

Now their full attention was back on me.

"I am, but Luca has many cousins."

"How is he?" Diego asked.

His father gave him a look, and Savio rolled his eyes.

"He's a strong Capo. Merciless and well respected."

"Nobody's stronger than our Capo," Diego said, and all the men nodded. Savio's eyes lit up with pride.

I nodded because it was expected of me. I wasn't sure who was stronger, Remo or Luca. Remo had the advantage of having three brothers at his side, even if Adamo wasn't inducted yet.

"I'm here to discuss the attack on your other restaurant, Daniele. Do you have any clues as to who did it?"

"I don't know. A few years back I would have said the Bratva, but since you chased them out of the city, that seems unlikely."

"Maybe they're thinking about returning," Diego suggested.

“Let them try,” Savio said fiercely. “We will slaughter them all.”

The door to the kitchen opened again. A plump woman and a girl around thirteen or fourteen with long dark hair and startling olive eyes came through it, each carrying a tray with pastries, bread, and cheese. The girl was a bit of a tomboy, and her eyes narrowed when she spotted me. She set down the tray in the center of the table.

“Who’s this?” she asked curiously, nodding in my direction.

The woman made a shush noise.

“I’m Kiara, Nino’s wife,” I said, and she relaxed. Her eyes darted to Savio, and I knew why she’d been wary of me. “So, Savio,” she said. “When are you going to fight me as you promised?”

“I never promised anything,” Savio said with a smirk.

“Gemma, stop bothering him. Savio doesn’t have time to play around with annoying little girls,” Diego muttered.

She reached over the table and punched his shoulder. He tried to grab her, but she dashed away before he could, poking her tongue out at him. Then with a last smile at Savio, she slipped through the kitchen door. I was relieved to see that not everyone in Vegas was terrified of the Falcones.

When we returned to the mansion in the early afternoon, I was more relaxed than I’d been in weeks.

“Thank you for spending the day with me,” I said as we entered the living area.

Savio gave me a strange look. “It’s not like it was my choice, but you are far less bothersome than most women.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Umm, thanks?”

He nodded toward Adamo, who was slouched on the sofa, headphones in his ears, playing a video game. “It’s his turn now.”

With that he walked off, leaving me standing there. I felt like the

bothersome little sister who was handed from one older brother to the next, which was idiotic since they were both younger than me.

Adamo lifted one of his earphones. "Wanna join me?"

I glanced at the screen. He was playing a race game. I'd never played a video game because my uncle and aunt didn't own any consoles, and I didn't think that it was anything I'd enjoy. I nodded anyway and sat down across from Adamo. So far, I had barely spoken to the youngest Falcone. He was the most approachable of the lot, almost normal, except for the fact that a gun rested beside him on the sofa.

He put down the earphones. His curly brown hair was a hopeless mess. I didn't think he bothered brushing it after getting up this morning. "I hope Savio wasn't an asshole. If he was, don't worry. It's his go-to mode."

"He was nice," I said.

Adamo gave me a doubtful look, his brown eyes so much kinder than those of his brothers. "Have you ever played this game?"

"I have never played any kind of game."

His eyes grew wide. "Shit. Really?"

I smiled. "I suppose it's something I shouldn't miss."

"Better sit beside me so I can explain the controller to you."

I got up and Adamo put the gun on the table in front of him so I had room to sit down. For a moment, I hesitated. Adamo grimaced. "You don't have to be scared of me."

I plopped down closer than I would have with any of his brothers. Adamo was a kid, even if he was taller than me.

He held out the controller. I grabbed it with an honest smile. "I fear you'll have to start with the basics. I'm completely clueless."

"It's easy," he promised with a grin of his own. He pointed at the buttons and patiently explained them.

It didn't come as a big surprise that I was absolutely horrible. I constantly crashed my car against the wall.

When Nino came home later that afternoon, Adamo's face was red from laughing at my lack of video game skills.

Nino's cool gaze flitted between his brother and me. "Having fun?"

I nodded, but soon my smile diminished. Nino still made me nervous with his cold aloofness. I had no way of guessing what was going on in his head. He surprised me when he came toward us and sat down beside me. He regarded me for a moment longer before saying, "If you want, I can take over."

I held the controller out to him, and he took it, his fingertips brushing my skin. I shivered slightly at the contact. Nino leaned back, controller in hand, but he narrowed his eyes at me for the briefest moment. It wasn't out of anger, I knew that now. He was trying to make sense of me.

Adamo didn't look too pleased about having to play with Nino. It didn't take long for them to be in a serious battle, including snarky comments from Nino and fervent cursing from Adamo.

A small smile tugged at my lips. My siblings and I had never been close. It was good to see that despite everything, the Falcone brothers had managed to stay a family. I only wished I'd figure out a way to feel like part of it.

CHAPTER 12



NINO

Just like I had every day, I got up at six in the morning and grabbed my swim trunks. Kiara stirred behind me, so I moved into the bathroom to change. I was wearing briefs at night for her benefit, and it seemed to have decreased her anxiety around me. She was still wary in bed with me. I wasn't sure why she thought the bed was a particularly dangerous place. If I wanted to fuck her, I could just as well do it in the living room or any other room in the house.

Upon returning to the bedroom, Kiara was propped up against the headboard, the covers gathered around her waist, her dark hair sticking out all over the place. Her slender shoulders and arms were on display, and her thin nightgown did little to hide the outline of her nipples. My body definitely wanted to lay claim on her, but it would have given me little satisfaction having her terror-stricken, crying body under mine.

"Good morning," she said in a slightly deeper voice, which added to her sexual appeal. I could feel a traitorous stirring in my cock but suppressed it quickly.

"I'm heading out for my morning swim. Once I'm done, we can leave. I want to show you the city as promised, and early in the morning it's less crowded."

She nodded. "I'll get ready." My eyes lingered on the swell of her breasts. Then I turned and left. The cold water would do me good.



She was quiet beside me as I drove us down the Strip. It was where every Las Vegas tour should start, but my favorite places were on the fringes, especially the canyons and creeks. Kiara's eyes were drawn to the spectacular hotels lining the street on both sides, but she didn't look that impressed. "You don't enjoy the tour?" I asked.

She shook her head quickly. "It's fascinating, but I'm not the city type. I prefer landscapes and tranquility."

"Then we'll change our plans." I turned the car and headed out of the city boundaries and toward the Red Rock Canyon.

Kiara's eyes grew wide when the glowing red rock formations rose up around us.

"This is a place I like to visit when I'm in the mood for rock climbing."

"You climb?" she asked.

"Climb and hike. It's a good workout with the added bonus of being in nature." I steered us along the scenic loop drive but eventually stopped at a high point lookout. Kiara and I got out and sat down on one of the benches there. She was silent as she regarded the multi-colored mountains around us. Her expression was as peaceful as it had been when she'd played the piano. No fear or tension or worry.

"Beautiful," she whispered.

"It is," I agreed, looking directly at her.

She turned to me and smiled. "Thanks for taking me here. I prefer it to the city."

"I come as often as I can, which isn't very often. Now that we're about to attack the Outfit, there will be even less time. There's always a fight to win, an enemy to hunt down, or a city to win over or defend."

She pursed her lips. “Isn’t it tiring to fight all the time? You fought for years to win your territory back, right?”

“We did. After our half-brother killed our father, Las Vegas was in shambles. Without a strong Capo, every Underboss in the West decided to do as he pleased. They didn’t follow Vegas’ lead because there was a new Capo in the city every few months.”

“How long have you been in power?”

“Almost five years, but Remo is in power. I’m his Consigliere.”

Kiara shook her head, playing with the thin fabric of her dress absentmindedly. “You rule together. You do everything together.”

“Remo is still Capo, and that’s good. He’s meant to rule.”

She worried her bottom lip again. I reached for the hand resting on her thigh and pressed my thumb against her wrist. Her pulse wasn’t fast enough for fear.

Her brows formed a V as she peered at my finger against her wrist then up at my face. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to have someone run the Camorra who doesn’t let emotions overrule logic?”

“No. Our soldiers look up to Remo. His fierce brutality, his uncontrolled anger and passionate loyalty ... that’s something they seek in a leader. Not logic. Humans don’t want logic. They want feelings.”

“I suppose.”

KIARA

I jerked awake from a nightmare and realized I was alone in bed. My fingers searched my nightstand for my phone until finally the screen lit up under my touch. It was two in the morning. Confused, I sat up. Nino always went to bed with me so where was he? Since our tour through the Red Rock Canyon

two days ago, I had only seen him at dinner every evening, where we ordered either pizza or pasta. Aside from eating together, I spent my days alone in the library while my babysitters, Savio or Adamo, stayed somewhere in the house.

Now wide awake, I decided to go into the kitchen to grab something to drink and perhaps an apple. I doubted the kitchen had ever been used before. All these evenings ordering takeout had seriously reduced my fruit and vegetable intake, and I was hungry despite the late hour. I put on a bathrobe and slipped out of our bedroom then continued downstairs. The door to the connecting corridor was closed, which was strange, but I opened it quietly, careful not to wake anyone. I headed through the connecting corridor and into the kitchen, where I grabbed a glass of water and an apple. Then I started to make my way back to our bedroom.

A strange noise made me pause briefly. I couldn't place it. Through the dark, I slowly crept in the direction of the sound. A dim light from the gaming room filtered into the hallway. Maybe Adamo was playing a game. He seemed to be doing nothing else when he was home.

I stepped out of the dark corridor and froze, my body seizing up with shock. It took my brain a second to comprehend what was going on. Remo had a woman bent over the pool table, holding her down by the neck, as he slammed into her from behind. She moaned loudly despite her cheek being pressed against the table. At the other end of the room, a woman was on her knees in front of Savio, his hand fisting her blond hair, guiding her movements.

The glass slipped from my hand and shattered at my feet as panic filled my body. Savio and Remo's eyes zeroed in on me. I tried to whirl around and run, but my feet slipped on the spilled water, and I landed on my butt. Pain sliced through my thigh, a sharp burn that stopped my breath but

not my body.

Scrambling to my feet, I stormed off, my bare feet slipping as I fought for balance. My breaths came in short gasps, my vision turning black at the corners. I could hardly breathe from fear as I rushed into the master bedroom and locked the door. Then I stumbled into the bathroom. For a moment I was sure I'd throw up, but after I'd splashed water in my face, my nausea ceased. I couldn't shake the feeling of being dirty. I knew it was just in my mind, which summoned the memories that haunted my nights.

A sharp twinge in my inner thigh caught my attention momentarily, and I stared down. Blood trickled down my leg. Red rivulets slithered down my skin.

I started shaking, more horrible memories resurfacing and clawing out of my chest.

Slowly, I lifted my nightgown to find a piece of glass in my upper thigh. I clutched the sink. Blood covered my legs like it had so many years ago. I kept picturing Remo and Savio with these women.

Shaking, unable to stand, I sank to the ground.

The sound of the bedroom door being busted open registered in my foggy mind, and then two strong male legs came into focus. Nino came in, dressed only in briefs.

"Kiara?"

NINO

Savio barged into the guestroom without knocking, pulling up his pants in the process. I stopped and the whore on her knees before me threw a look over her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

“Your girl walked in on us fucking the whores. She freaked.”

“Fuck. Didn’t I tell you to take your fucking into a room?”

“We were in a room. And why should we hide in our own home?”

Savio muttered.

I pulled out of the whore’s ass, grabbed my briefs, and put them on before I followed Savio back into the living area.

Remo stopped fucking his whore when he spotted me. “You stay like this. I’m not done with you,” he growled as he released the woman’s neck, pulling out of her and coming toward me, not bothering to cover himself.

Shards and water as well as blood covered the ground. There wasn’t much blood, though, to have been anything serious. “What happened here?”

“She panicked, fell, and cut herself,” Remo said. “You need to get a handle on her.”

I left him standing there and headed for the master bedroom but found the door locked. “Kiara?”

No answer. I wasn’t sure how badly she’d injured herself. A glass shard could cause serious injuries depending on where it cut. The amount of blood on the ground hadn’t given me cause for worry, but if she’d removed the glass without checking its position, she could bleed out within minutes.

When she didn’t reply after another louder knock, I kicked the door in and stepped inside. The bedroom was empty, so I continued into the bathroom. Blood stains covered the cream-colored marble, and Kiara was sitting on the ground, staring down at herself.

I moved closer. “Kiara?”

I’d seen a similar look on her face on our wedding night. Her past held her in its unrelenting grip once more. Blood covered the inside of her leg, but her nightgown hid the source from my view. I knew she wouldn’t handle my touch well, but I couldn’t be bothered to take that into

consideration when she had a wound that needed to be treated.

I bent over her and picked her up. She tensed and made a small sound in the back of her throat but didn't react otherwise. I hoisted her up on the marble surface of the sink.

"Kiara, look at me," I ordered firmly, and she raised her eyes to meet mine. She wasn't as far gone as on our wedding night, but I wasn't sure what had caused her episode. The sight of my brothers banging their whores, the blood on her legs, or a combination of the two.

"I need to take a look at your wound."

She blinked at me then gave a small nod, but I wasn't sure if she'd really registered what I said. Her dark curls stuck to her sweaty forehead. I reached into the drawer and took out a first-aid kit then grabbed a washcloth, soaked it with cold water, and wiped Kiara's face with it. She shuddered, but her gaze became more focused. I dropped the washcloth and reached for the hem of her nightgown. She seized up and her breathing changed. *Fear*.

I searched her face. She was watching me with wide eyes, her chest rising and falling fast. She didn't stop me, however. I pushed the fabric up until it bunched around her pelvis. I could see the top of a glass shard, but with her legs closed together, I couldn't get a good look. I put my hands on her knees and pressed. She resisted. I could have parted them, but that seemed an unwise choice given her past.

"Kiara," I said firmly, "I need to take a look at this."

Her leg muscles softened under my palms, and I could finally push her legs apart, revealing white lace panties and a shard protruding from the sensitive skin on her upper inner thigh. "Lean back a bit." She did and I propped her injured leg to the side, opening her up.

She sucked in her breath.

"Relax. I'll take care of your wound, that's all, Kiara."

“I know,” she whispered.

I disinfected my hands. The shard wasn't in very deep from the look of it, but I'd have to feel it to make sure. “This might hurt a bit,” I warned before I felt the area around the shard with my fingertips. She flinched violently, whimpering. I glanced up and saw tears welling in her eyes.

She was very sensitive to pain. I mostly dealt with my brothers or Fabiano when treating wounds, so I hadn't taken her reaction into consideration. We didn't have any numbing spray, and Tylenol wouldn't help with the immediate pain.

“Kiara, I need to remove the shard. It will be painful. I'll do it quickly.” I didn't tell her yet that I would still have to stitch up the wound. More bad news after the initial injury.

She swallowed then gave a small nod. I grabbed the edge of the shard with my fingers and curled my free hand around Kiara's hip to steady her, pressing between her legs so she wouldn't be able to jerk them closed. Her breathing hitched, but I didn't give her time to worry. I wrenched the shard out in one sharp movement.

She cried out, jerking violently in my hold. She dipped forward and rested her forehead against my chest, panting, still trembling. I brushed my thumb over her side. “This was the worst,” I said. She didn't react. “Kiara, you need to lean back so I can take a look at your wound now.”

Slowly, she straightened. Her face was pale and tears trailed down her cheeks. I dropped the shard in the sink and crouched down before Kiara to get a better look at the cut. It had started bleeding again because the shard was removed. As expected, it wasn't very deep. I cleaned it carefully, ignoring Kiara's flinching. I wasn't sure if it was from pain or from fear because my fingers had to work close to where she felt most vulnerable. When I reached for the needle to stitch her up, she exhaled sharply.

I looked up at her. “Have you ever been stitched up?”

She shook her head.

It was going to be very uncomfortable for her. There really was no preventing it. The wound needed stitches, and I couldn’t take her to a hospital or call one of the Camorra’s doctors. The former because we didn’t involve outsiders and the latter because I didn’t trust these men to do a better job than I could. I considered her wound again. Five stitches would do and I’d be quick.

Kiara whimpered but otherwise didn’t make a sound when I worked the needle into her flesh. Her thigh muscles quaked under the needle, and I pressed my palm over them so the motion wouldn’t ruin my stitch work.

“Done,” I said eventually and straightened out before washing my hands. Then I took a new washcloth and wiped the excess blood off Kiara’s legs.

Kiara was still very quiet. I nudged her chin up so she had to meet my gaze. “What happened?”

Her eyes flitted away.

“You walked in on my brothers having sex.” Especially Remo. Kiara didn’t need to see him in action.

She exhaled.

“It brought back memories?”

“Yeah,” she murmured.

“I will have a talk with them to keep their activities to their parts of the house from now on,” I told her. Remo wouldn’t like that one fucking bit, nor would Savio, but Remo was the one I needed to convince.

“Where were you?” she asked in a soft voice.

I evaluated her expression, but her eyes were downcast and it was obvious she was trying to keep her face impassive. “We agreed that I seek

pleasure elsewhere, Kiara. Or did you change your mind?" She didn't appear like she'd be ready to submit to me in bed yet.

"No," she said quietly, but I noticed the hesitation.

"But?"

"No but," she said more firmly.

"Okay." It was obvious something was still bothering her, but she wasn't willing to share. I handed her two Tylenol, which she popped into her mouth. "Why don't you go back to bed?"

I lifted her down from the counter and led her into the bedroom. She was still a bit unsteady on her legs. She climbed under the covers and lay down. "Won't you join me?"

I paused. I'd intended to return to the whore I'd fucked before Savio had interrupted me, but something in Kiara's eyes made me slip under the covers with her. The whore would eventually realize I wasn't going to return. Maybe Savio or Remo had use for her. I couldn't grasp Kiara's reasons for wanting me to stay. She lay on her back but with her head tilted toward me. I shut off the lights.

"Can you tell me something about yourself I don't know yet?" came her soft voice out of the dark.

"What *do* you know about me?"

There was silence for a moment. "I know your father was Capo before Remo took over. I know you and your brothers lived in England for a while but returned to the States to get your territory back after your father was killed by his Enforcer, Growl. I know you are a genius."

Those were the basics. It was difficult to decide what kind of information to divulge at this point. "I speak five languages fluently. Russian, Italian, English, Spanish, and French."

"Let me guess," she said. "Russian and Spanish so you can better deal

with the Bratva and the Cartel.”

“That’s true. It makes little sense to torture someone for information if you don’t understand what they’re saying. That negates the purpose.”

Kiara let out a small noise, but I couldn’t tell if it was a stifled laugh or a huff.

“Why French?”

“Because of the Corsican Union in Canada. They haven’t been involved in our business so far, but it’s good to be prepared. Their territory is close to Dante’s. He might seek their support.”

“Is there anything you do that doesn’t serve a purpose or is illogical? Something you do because you enjoy it?”

“There are plenty of things. Sex, for one.” I didn’t have to see Kiara to know she’d stiffened again. “Though one might argue it serves the purpose of relaxing me. Maybe hiking and climbing.”

“I’d like to go hiking one day,” she said.

“There are a few smaller canyons around Vegas that are good for hikes, and the Red Rock canyon offers a few trails that are more advanced. I could take you to one some time. Or you could go rock climbing with me.”

“I’m not very fit, so take it easy on me,” she said then yawned.

“Sleep now,” I told her.

“Okay,” she whispered, her voice already heavy with sleep. “And, Nino, thank you for everything so far.”

I frowned into the dark. I didn’t know what she had to thank me for.



The next morning Kiara was still in a deep sleep when I got up and headed down to the pool to swim my laps. Afterward, I went into our gaming room where I found Remo stretched out on the couch, a cup of coffee in his hand.

He was on the phone, looking annoyed. Nobody had cleaned up the shards and blood yet, and if I didn't do it, nobody would until the cleaning people arrived tomorrow.

"Don't worry. That delivery will go through. We always keep our word. You just make sure you keep yours," Remo muttered before hanging up.

"Famiglia?"

"Matteo fucking Vitiello. That motherfucker sets my nerves on edge."

"Because you have a similar temperament," I said.

Remo narrowed his eyes. "So, how's your wife doing? Has she gotten over her shock of seeing how fucking is done right."

"I had to stitch her up because she got cut by some glass. I think it would be wise to keep your sexual activities in your own wing. Now that Kiara lives under the same roof, the risk is too high that she walks in on you again."

"This is my home. We don't have any maids because we didn't want to feel like we were being watched in our home, and now you want me to hide in my own wing when I want to fuck a whore?"

I sank down across from him. "Don't turn this into a bigger deal than it is. You have more than enough places to go about your fucking, Remo. When Adamo was younger, we were more careful as well, and you could deal with it."

"Your wife is a grown woman. Shouldn't she be able to handle it?"

"You know why she doesn't. She's too scarred from her past, and even if she weren't, I don't want her to see you or Savio fucking around. She doesn't need to see your dick."

Remo chuckled. "She doesn't see yours either. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe you can fuck the messed-up past out of her."

Remo was trying to piss me off, and despite my lack of emotions, I was growing tired of this discussion. “I never ask you for favors, Remo, but this I ask of you.”

Remo’s expression turned serious. “Why do you give a fuck about her?”

“As I told you before, she is now part of the family. Just like we protected Adamo and Savio, we should protect Kiara now. She is innocent and at our mercy, and we should treat her as she deserves, as my wife and as a Falcone.”

Remo shook his head and set down his coffee cup with an audible clang, spilling some of the liquid on the table. “Fuck. Did you come up with that speech just now? But if you ask me to do it, I will. Savio will be a pain in the ass because of it, I’m sure.”

The sound of movement made us both fall silent. I knew from the soft footfall that it could only be Kiara. Adamo trampled through the house to annoy us, and Savio’s steps were more confident. Her steps were slow and hesitant, as if she worried about what she would find in the living area this morning.

“The coast is clear,” Remo shouted. “No fucking about happening here ever again.”

I shot him a look, but he gave me a twisted smile.

Kiara emerged from the connecting corridor. Her eyes landed on the shards and her spilled blood on the ground. A pink color filled her cheeks. She glanced toward Remo then quickly to me. “Where do you have a mop so I can clean this up?”

I got up. “Let me do it.” I moved into the small cleaning closet that none of my brothers had ever set foot in. They didn’t mind if the house was dirty until the cleaning personnel showed up again, but I preferred things neat

and clean. Living under the same roof with those pigs, it was a losing battle to keep everything clean.

Kiara followed close behind. “I should do it. After all, I caused the mess.”

“Following that logic, Remo and Savio should clean up,” I said.

“That’s not going to happen,” Remo shouted.

“Is he angry?” Kiara asked quietly.

“Remo is always angry. You have to be more specific than that.”

“Because I disturbed him and his ... woman.”

“You didn’t disturb him. Trust me. Remo is used to a lot of shit. You freaking out on him won’t stop him from fucking a whore.”

Kiara tensed. “Do you call all women whores?”

“No, but that’s what they were. They work in the Sugar Trap for us.”

Her nose wrinkled. “So you always use whores?”

“No. But if things are busy, it’s the easiest way to get sex. Finding a regular woman requires we go out and charm them. That’s considerably more work.”

Kiara sighed. “You and your brothers are messed up.”

Remo got up from the sofa. “Is there any food in the fridge? I’m starving.”

“I bought eggs and bacon yesterday.” I took the mop, a dustpan, and a small broom out of the closet as Remo disappeared from view. Kiara took the broom and dustpan from me and walked somewhat stiffly back to the remains of the broken glass on the floor. I filled a bucket with water before I followed her.

“How’s your wound?” I asked.

“It stings, but your stitches seemed to hold,” she said, her expression softening. “You’re really good at playing doctor.”

“I have years of practice stitching up my brothers and myself, though Remo has provided me the most practice.”

“You all have a lot of scars,” she said, her eyes tracing my upper body. I had trouble reading her expression. She didn’t seem unsettled by my half-dressed state.

“Everyone has scars. Some are skin deep, others reach beyond that.”

“Soul deep,” she whispered.

“Are you referring to yourself?”

She watched me mop up the blood and brushed the shards into the dustpan then smiled strangely up at me. “I don’t think my scars will ever fade.”

“They don’t need to fade.” I grabbed her hand and touched it to the scar above my bellybutton. Her fingertips fluttered over my skin, her eyes wide with shock. “A knife went in there. Dirty blade. The wound wouldn’t heal for a long time. For a moment, I was sure it wouldn’t heal at all. How does it feel?”

She frowned. “The skin is a bit harder, but your tattoos cover up everything.”

“The skin is harder there because of the thick scar tissue. It’s less sensitive to pain and cold and heat. It’s stronger.”

Her brown eyes held my gaze. “I don’t understand.”

I moved my face closer. “The scars he left, your body can heal them if you let it, and the result will be stronger than what was there before.”

CHAPTER 13



KIARA

I got up when Nino disappeared in the bathroom to change into his swim trunks. Every morning since I'd moved in three weeks ago, he followed the same ritual. I had occasionally watched him from the window in the beginning until I'd found the courage to follow him outside one day a week ago. Now he always waited for me.

He raised his eyebrows when he saw me putting on my bathrobe and grabbing a book. "Ready?"

"Ready."

I followed him downstairs, my eyes darting to his body. He looked good in his swim trunks. In the last few days, I'd often caught myself staring at him. His body fascinated me, I could admit that, and touching his scar hadn't summoned past demons as I'd feared. His scars and tattoos made me want to find out the story behind each of them. Nino's story.

Stretching out on one of the sun chairs, I watched as Nino made his way toward the edge of the pool and jumped in elegantly. He always followed the same routine. Two rounds of the butterfly stroke, two rounds of the backstroke, and two rounds of the crawl. Then he repeated everything from the start. He never faltered in his movements throughout the thirty minutes that he swam, and I didn't read a single word. I couldn't take my eyes off him, off the muscles in his arms and back as they flexed. It was mesmerizing and beautiful, graceful.

May mornings in Las Vegas were surprisingly warm, and I relished

the feel of the sun on my skin as my eyes rested on my husband.

My husband. It didn't feel real yet. He had kept his word, had never made a move to touch me, and sometimes I caught myself wondering how it would be if he did touch me ... if we were closer. I knew it wasn't a possibility I should bother entertaining.

When he swam toward the ladder, I quickly lifted my book and returned my gaze to the page, but above the edge of the book, I watched Nino getting out and a small shiver trailed up my spine.

After a moment of Nino soaking in the sun—a sight that always halted my breath in my throat and sent spears of heat through my body—he headed my way, dripping water. I handed him the towel he'd put down on the sun chair beside mine and tried not to act like I had been secretly watching him the entire time.

“Thanks,” he said and began drying himself. “You can use the pool as well, you know.”

“I haven't swam in many years, and I was never very good,” I admitted, having a hard time focusing on his face. For some reason, Nino's presence was even more overwhelming when he stood right in front of me, soaking wet.

“I can teach you if you want,” Nino drawled.

“Maybe in a few weeks or so,” I said quickly because I wasn't sure if I was ready to be in only swimwear around Nino, even if he had already seen me naked on our wedding night. That day seemed like a lifetime ago.

“I have to take out your stitches today. If I hadn't been busy these last few days gathering information on Outfit buildings, I would have done it before. Why don't we do it right away and have breakfast afterward?”

I smiled. “That sounds good.” Then added quickly, “Not the part about the stitches but the breakfast part.”

He held out his hand. My stomach flopped strangely when his warm fingers closed over my skin and he tugged me to my feet. His brows pulled together when his finger brushed my wrist, but then he released me.

“What kind of information did you gather?” I asked as we walked back to the house.

“Remo is planning an attack on Chicago. We assume Fabiano’s father was the driving force behind the attack on our territory. He has powerful supporters in the Outfit, one of them is Fiore Cavallaro, and as long as the old man lives, Dante probably won’t get rid of Scuderi.”

“But Scuderi is Fabiano’s father. Why would he try to kill his own son?”

“He tried to kill him before when Fabiano was a kid. Remo found him shortly after, and Fabiano’s been part of our family ever since. Scuderi holds a grudge against his children. I’m sure you know the story of why war broke out between the Outfit and the Famiglia.”

“Of course. Fabiano’s sister Liliana killed her husband with the help of a Famiglia soldier and ran off.”

“Scuderi wants to salvage his honor, if Fabiano is to be believed.”

I frowned. “But what does that have to do with you gathering information?”

“As I said, we intend to run an attack in summer. It’s our goal to extract Scuderi so Fabiano can kill him and we can send his remains back to Cavallaro as a present.”

That sounded like an insane plan. Kidnapping the Outfit’s Consigliere was an impossible task. Men like that were always surrounded by soldiers and guards. We arrived in our bathroom, and I stood awkwardly beside the sink as Nino took out the instruments he needed to pull out my stitches.

“Where do I sit?”

“I’ll lift you onto the counter. That way I don’t have to bend too low.”

Nino stepped up close and his clean, manly scent flooded my nose. My cheeks heated, and I jumped when his strong hands touched my waist as he lifted me up onto the wash table as if I weighed nothing. I opened my bathrobe and waited nervously.

Nino touched my knees, and I became very still. His touch was light, purposeful—not at all sexual but a mix of fear and excitement shot through me anyway. The latter caught me by surprise, but Nino didn’t give me much time to consider this because he nudged my legs apart. My body’s natural reaction to clamp shut lasted only a moment. Then I allowed him to part my thighs so he could take a look at my wound.

My cheeks turned hot when he crouched before me and pushed my nightgown up, giving him a clear view of my panties. It was a vulnerable position, but despite the nerves coursing through me, my fear was only a distant voice in the back of my mind, where I’d buried my most hurtful memories.

Nino’s fingers were gentle and clinical as he felt my wound. “Does it still hurt?”

I shook my head, startled by the light tingling his touch caused. I hoped Nino didn’t realize how my body reacted to him.

He was very careful when he pulled out the stitches, so it only stung the slightest bit. When Nino had pulled the last stitch, his eyes took in the small scar, and he brushed his thumb over it. My breath got stuck in my throat from the sensation that traveled all the way to my center. I’d never experienced anything like it.

Nino straightened. “All done. The small scar will fade.”

“It’s not like anyone but you will ever see it,” I said, and his expression became strangely intent.

“That’s true.”

He gripped my waist again and set me down. This time his hands lingered on my waist a moment longer, and I swallowed, my stomach fluttering again. But Nino dropped his hands. He motioned toward the shower. “I’m going to shower now. After that, we can make breakfast.”

I left but listened to the sound of the running water, confused by my reaction to Nino’s body and his close proximity to me. He was still intimidating because of his strength, coldness, and reputation, but part of me had come to trust him a little. Nino had never done anything that had unsettled me.

When he emerged with only a towel wrapped around his waist, the overwhelming feeling of his mere presence resurfaced. “While you take a shower, I’ll head into the kitchen and see what I can do.”

I nodded silently and quickly disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.



When I walked into the kitchen thirty minutes later, Nino was chopping onions and occasionally checking his iPad, which was propped up on the counter.

“You can cook?” I asked in surprise.

“I wouldn’t say I can cook. But it’s not very difficult as long as you follow instructions.”

I stopped beside him. A recipe for a cheese omelet was open on his iPad and hash browns were cooking in a pan on the stove. It smelled delicious and the onions were chopped with the precision of a chef. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Why don’t you make another pot of coffee. My brothers will

probably be coming down soon like hungry wolves. The smell of bacon will draw them out of their hibernation.”

As if on cue, the door swung open and Savio stumbled in, yawning, wearing only sweatpants. He didn’t greet us. Instead he sank down in a chair, rubbing the back of his head. He glanced between Nino and me. “You two cook together now? Nino’s been the only cook around here.”

“I’m not a good cook,” I said.

The door opened again, and Remo entered, dressed in only briefs, revealing those steely muscles and unsettling scars. He had an erratic air about him, which set alarms off in my body. “I need to have a talk with you two,” he said to Nino and Savio, grinning in a way that didn’t bode well.

My interactions with the scary Capo had been limited to dinners and the occasional breakfast.

“About what?” Nino asked as he flipped the omelet.

“Nothing I’m supposed to discuss in front of Kiara if I remember your lecture,” he bit out, dark eyes settling on me.

“I can go,” I said.

Nino shook his head. “It can wait until after breakfast.”

Remo’s expression made it clear that he disagreed, but as usual, he held back when I was around. I quickly ate my omelet before I excused myself to tinker with a new song.

NINO

Remo was unusually excited, even by his standards. He leaned back in his chair, lips pulling wide in a very dangerous way.

Savio raised an eyebrow, but I shook my head. I didn’t know what was going on.

“Kiara is gone. You can talk now,” I said.

Remo glanced down at his phone. “Wait a sec.”

Sometimes my brother drove me up the wall with his antics. Steps sounded in the corridor. A man. Adamo was in school, but given Remo’s relaxed stance, it could only be Fabiano.

The blond man shoved open the door and strode in, looking less than pleased about being here. “I have a full schedule of kicking debtors’ asses, Remo.” He nodded at us before he took the chair beside Savio. “What’s going on?” His eyes moved over to me.

I shook my head. “Remo hasn’t revealed anything yet.”

“I changed my mind about our plans,” Remo said.

“Regarding the Outfit attack?” I asked. I’d spend days trying to gather useful information about Scuderi’s weekly habits, upcoming social events he might have to attend. Now Remo decided to change our plans.

Fabiano propped himself up on his forearms, frowning.

Remo nodded with a wide grin. “Dante is a man of logic, like you Nino. He will expect us to target him, or Scuderi, or one of the other men in his family. But I won’t do it because history has proven that there’s no better way to demoralize your enemy than to target the people they are supposed to protect.” He paused, excitement flashing across his face. “Their women.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Dante will have put every possible protection in place to make sure we don’t get anywhere near his wife or their children.”

He made a dismissive gesture and took out his phone then showed it to us.

On the screen was a young woman with blond hair and blue eyes, standing beside Dante Cavallaro. She had the same aloof expression on her face.

“Do you know her?”

“That’s Serafina,” Fabiano said slowly. “She’s Cavallaro’s niece.”

“You met her?”

“I used to play with her and her twin brother when we were little,” he said, his expression turning wary. “What’s your plan?”

Remo looked down on the screen with a twisted grin. “Her wedding to the Underboss of Indianapolis is scheduled for August first. I’ve always wanted to crash a wedding.”

Fabiano shook his head. “You want to waltz into Chicago and attack a wedding celebration? All the Captains and Underbosses will be there. Maybe we get in, but we won’t get out. Trust me on that, Remo.”

Remo chuckled. “No, we will attack the day before. The future bride will spend the night before her wedding in a hotel in Indianapolis with the women of her family. The men of the family will be at stag night. There will be only the usual guards.”

“Are you sure there won’t be additional safety measures in place?” I asked.

Remo raised his eyebrows at Fabiano, who shrugged.

“They won’t expect an attack like that. It’s never been done before. To disturb a wedding is regarded as somewhat sacrilegious by most members of the Outfit.”

Remo snorted. “Sacrilegious,” he said. “Dante attacked my territory. I will show them my version of sacrilegious. Don’t worry.”

“I told you before, it was my father’s doing,” Fabiano muttered. “We should try to get our hands on him and not a woman.”

Remo’s grin turned dangerous. “You will get him. I’m sure Dante will see reason and exchange him for his niece ... *eventually*. I will show him just how sacrilegious we are in Las Vegas.”

Fabiano grimaced. It was obvious that he didn’t like the idea, but he

knew better than to argue with Remo when my brother was this excited about an idea.

“This is genius or insanity,” Savio said with a laugh. “Given that it’s your plan, Remo, it’s probably insanity.”

“I think I have a better plan,” I began. “It’ll send a more symbolic message. The bride will probably be taken to church from the hotel in a limousine. There will be even less people around. She will have her mother in the car with her, a bodyguard, and the driver, and perhaps one or two cars as a convoy. We can attack then. It would be absolutely dishonorable to do so, but we have always had our own interpretation of honor.”

Remo laughed darkly. “Nino, you are a fucking genius. The girl will already be in her wedding dress. We will steal a bride from under their noses, right before her wedding night. No better symbol than that.”

Fabiano shot me a look, but if he thought I had the power to stop Remo at this point, he hadn’t seen the way Remo looked at Cavallaro’s niece. Remo got up, obviously unable to sit still any longer.

“I’d prefer if we could keep that plan from my wife. It might trigger some images from her past that I don’t want to resurface.”

Remo waved me off, pacing the room like a caged tiger. His eyes focused on the image on his phone screen.

“If we attack Dante’s family, he will take war to a new level,” Fabiano said.

“I hope he does,” Remo murmured.



Two hours later, I found Kiara at the piano, her eyes closed, head tilted to the side as she played a melody she had been working on since she moved here. She never talked about her music, but I had a good ear. “I made time for gun

training today,” I said.

She jerked upright, her dazed eyes zeroing in on me. Slowly, she stood. She wore one of her modest dresses that reached her knees, but even those clothes did nothing to hide the enticing swell of her breasts, her narrow waist, or soft curve of her hips.

“Where?” she asked curiously as she padded toward me on bare feet. To my surprise, her toes were painted red. It was a color I’d favor in her clothes as well.

“I set up a target in the garden.” I gestured at my gun holster. “And you have a selection of these guns or we could go down into the basement to our weapon room.”

She laughed then bit her lip. “I think one of your guns will do.”

I led her outside to the west side of the gardens, and we stopped close to the target. “Have you ever held a gun?”

“No,” she admitted.

I shook my head. Growing up in the mafia, girls should learn how to handle guns from a young age. They were smaller and less muscular than men. Why add the disadvantage of being inept at using a gun? I handed Kiara my semi-automatic. It was easy to handle. She took it carefully, but her grip was all wrong. I moved around her and positioned myself behind her back. Her sweet perfume wafted into my nose. I’d never thought I’d like it, but Kiara obviously used a brand my senses favored. She glanced over her shoulder with a hint of shyness. I was glad that her facial expressions were slowly becoming less of a mystery to me. It made my life and her life indefinitely easier.

“Lift your arms and aim at the target.”

She did, but we had work to do. “I will adjust your hold and stance,” I explained. I touched her hips, and she stiffened, but I angled her the way I

wanted her then moved on to her arms and pushed them down a couple of inches. I faced her again and corrected her fingers on the gun. “I’m not sure if it’s a good idea for you to stand in front of the barrel. What if I shoot you by accident?”

“You’d have to release the safety first. That would give me time to get out of the way.”

She drew her lower lip between her teeth again. It was awfully distracting. “I’m so clueless.”

“That’s why I’m here, to teach you all you need to know.” A delicate blush spread on her cheeks, but I couldn’t link an emotion to it.

I guided her hand for her first few shots to let her get accustomed to the recoil. She jumped every time the shot sounded, but eventually she seemed to enjoy herself and even laughed when she managed to hit the target without my help. It was satisfying to see her gain confidence.

CHAPTER 14



KIARA

Fabiano dropped Leona off at the mansion on his way to work. It was only the second time she was over in the four weeks since I'd moved to Las Vegas. Occasionally, we exchanged texts, though. I waited in the doorway as she kissed Fabiano in his Mercedes before she got out, and he drove off with a short wave at me.

Leona was dressed in jean shorts and a tank top. It was already uncomfortably warm outside. "Beautiful dress," she said with a smile as she hugged me. It was one of my many maxi dresses. I wasn't sure why I still hesitated to walk around in shorts. None of the Falcone men had made a move toward me, not even Nino.

"Thanks. I love your shorts."

She glanced behind me. "Who's on guard duty?"

I huffed. "Adamo. It's the weekend, after all."

"Mafia men are protective."

"I hope one day I'll be able to protect myself. I've had another gun lesson with Nino. I'm improving."

"Fabiano has been trying to improve my self-defense skills for months now, but it's such a slow process. And most of the time we end up making out ..." She trailed off, her skin turning red. "Sorry. TMI."

I smiled. "Don't worry. I don't mind." I led her onto the patio. A large umbrella shaded the lounge furniture so we didn't suffer a heat stroke in the midday sun. "I thought we could order sushi?"

“Oh yes.” She lifted her bag. “I brought a bikini. It’s going to be really hot. I thought we could take a swim in the pool later.”

Thirty minutes later, we were settled on the lounge chairs, plates of sushi spread out on the table in front of us. “When did you know that you wanted to be with Fabiano?” I asked, picking up a piece of avocado maki.

Leona considered the question, chewing thoughtfully. “You mean in a physical sense or in a relationship?”

“Both, I guess.”

“It was a gradual process. I was attracted to him from the start but also worried about getting close to him. Eventually, my heart and body won over my rationality.” She laughed.

“Sometimes I wonder how it would feel to be with Nino,” I blurted.

Leona put down the piece of sushi she was about to push into her mouth and blinked. “You haven’t been with Nino yet?”

I flushed. Should I have kept it a secret? Maybe Nino didn’t want others to know that he wasn’t the monster—no, didn’t *act* like the monster he was. But I needed to talk to someone about it, and Giulia was no longer an option because I was now part of the Camorra and she was part of the Famiglia. Truce or not, the families were enemies. Our phone calls had been a difficult task, telling her about my daily life without revealing any important information to her, and I could tell it was the same for her.

“No, I freaked out on him on our wedding night, and he hasn’t tried anything since then.”

Leona blinked at me. “Wow. Really?”

“Really. I told him to seek out other women if he needed to satisfy his needs.”

Leona shook her head with wide eyes. “And it doesn’t bother you? The mere thought that Fabiano could touch another woman makes me sick.”

“It didn’t in the beginning.”

“But now it does?”

I tried not to think about it, but when I did, it bothered me a lot. “Yes, it does. I actually enjoy spending time with Nino. He is calm and incredibly intelligent. He makes me feel like I’m safe around him. Is that weird?”

Leona frowned. “Well. I feel safe around Fabiano and most people are terrified of him, so I’m not the right person to ask.”

I dipped a piece of sushi into the soy sauce and put it in my mouth, chewing slowly to gather my thoughts. “I don’t know if I should even consider changing our relationship.”

“Talk to him. Tell him you would like to be with him. He probably won’t say no.”

He wouldn’t. “What if I can’t go through with it? What if the memories stop me again? Or what if Nino wants all or nothing. I’m not sure how far I can go just yet.”

“You won’t find out if you don’t talk to him. If he hasn’t pushed you yet, do you think he would do it after you ask him for more?”

I wasn’t sure. But if I got close to Nino, I needed him to stop seeking out other women, and I wasn’t sure if he’d agree to that as long as I wasn’t giving him what he needed. Why should he do this on my terms?



I was nervous all day because of my conversation with Leona, and even music hardly managed to set me at ease this time. My fingers kept stumbling over the notes, so I had to keep starting from scratch.

When Nino came home late in the afternoon, looking as beautifully cold as ever—dressed all in black, tall and muscled—and leaned against the piano to listen to me play, I finally gathered my courage. “I’d like to go out

for dinner.”

His brows drew together. “Of course.”

“Just the two of us,” I blurted.

He regarded me calmly, his eyes searching my face. I wondered how much of my feelings he could guess and how much of them would always remain a secret to him. Sometimes it came as a relief that he had trouble reading emotions. “Tonight?”

My fingers stopped on the keys. “That would be lovely. But can you get a table that quickly?”

He chuckled, and I let out a small laugh, remembering who I was talking to. “Never mind.”

“What would you like to eat? Asian? European?”

“Asian. I haven’t eaten much of it yet except for sushi.”

“Then I’ll book a table at the best Szechuan restaurant in town.”

“What do I have to wear? Is there a dress code?”

Nino’s eyes trailed over me. “Something red.”

I blinked. That wasn’t the answer I had expected. “Why red?” I couldn’t imagine guests were required to wear a certain color, but this was Las Vegas and anything was possible.

“Because I think it will go well with your dark hair and honey skin. I want you to stand out, not blend in.”

I stared down at my arm. Nobody had ever described my skin as honey colored. A pleasing warmth settled in my chest. “I don’t have anything in red. Most of my clothes are meant to make me blend in,” I said.

Nino nodded. “I got that.” He glanced down at his watch. “If we head out now, we can buy you something and still have enough time to return home and get ready, if I book the table at eight.” He didn’t wait for my reply. Instead, he picked up his phone, dialed a number, and two minutes later we

had a table. Another customer would hear some kind of excuse why they wouldn't be dining at Chengdu tonight.

"Come now," Nino said, holding out his hand. I had to admit that I enjoyed his small touches. My hand in his didn't feel as if it was caging me in or anything close to it. It made me feel safe.

I put my palm in his and followed him to his Bugatti Veyron. "Where are we going?" I asked as we pulled down the driveway.

"It's a boutique where Fabiano occasionally buys dresses for Leona. From what he tells me, they have extravagant pieces. I've never been there. They don't sell men's clothing."

I laughed nervously. "How much attention am I supposed to draw to us?"

"As much attention as you deserve, Kiara. You are too beautiful to lurk in the shadows. And as my wife, you will have to get used to the spotlight."

My insides warmed at his compliment. He'd told me that he found me beautiful before, but it still felt wonderful to hear him say it again.

The store offered an overwhelming selection of dresses in all colors, and from the moment we entered, the saleswoman hovered around us like a mother hen. She kept throwing Nino nervous glances, obviously eager to please him, but, of course, his face gave nothing away.

"We're looking for dresses in red," he said, his palm still pressed lightly against my back.

"Oh, we have a few beautiful pieces in that color. Let me show you. Your wife will look absolutely stunning in them."

Nino looked at me with a glint in his eyes. "That she will."

I shivered, and again it wasn't in fear. I wasn't sure what was going on, but my body reacted to Nino in a way that was unsettling and exhilarating

at once. We followed the woman back toward a secluded part of the boutique where the changing rooms were. "I'll be back in a moment. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you," I said with a smile.

Nino nodded his agreement. Then the woman dashed off. He lowered his hand from my back. The saleswoman returned with three dresses thrown over her arm. I slipped into the changing room, and she handed me the first dress. It was like a second skin and went to my knees, accentuating every curve with a high collar and no sleeves. People would be staring if I wore this, especially men.

Nerves fluttered in my stomach as I stepped out. Nino leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking every bit like a runway model. He straightened the moment he saw me, his gray eyes sliding over my body.

"It's too sexy, don't you think?" I whispered.

Nino moved closer. "It's perfect." He tilted his head. "Don't you want people to see how beautiful you are?"

I shifted. "I'm not used to it."

"You will grow used to it. Don't worry."

I tried on a long dress with a high slit and another one with a low neckline and even lower back, and they, too, would definitely not help me go unnoticed, but the way Nino regarded me in them gave me a strange shiver of delight. In the end, we bought all three dresses and even a red jumpsuit. When we were back in the car, I couldn't help but laugh. "You are really into red."

Nino didn't look away from the street, but the corners of his mouth tipped up in the ghost of a smile. "I don't favor one color over the other, in general, but red is your color, and I like its symbolic value as well."

"Red like blood," I said.

“Yes. It’s always good to unsettle people.”

I didn’t say that he didn’t need me at his side wearing a blood red dress to unsettle people. Nino was unsettling on his own, and he knew it.

Two hours later, I was dressed in the knee-length skin tight dress and matching blood red heels. I wore my hair down because it made me feel less exposed, and I preferred to have my neck covered.

Nino was waiting for me downstairs, leaning against my piano, dressed in all black, as usual. The fitted dress shirt and tight pants fit him like a glove. He wore his hair down for once, but it was slicked back. His eyes followed me as I descended the stairs. I took his outstretched hand, and his thumb found my wrist as he leaned close.

For a heartbeat, I was sure he’d kiss me, and my lips parted in a mix of anticipation and nerves, but he leaned toward my ear and whispered, “Tonight people will start talking about another Falcone. The lady in red.”

I shivered, my eyelashes fluttering at the feel of his warm breath on my ear and his scent filling my nose. Then he pulled back but didn’t release my wrist.

“Ready?” he asked in a low voice, and for some reason he made it sound as if he wasn’t referring to going to dinner.

I gave a mute nod, trying to gather my wits about me. Nino led me into the main part of the mansion. Remo was sitting on the sofa, his laptop in front of him. His eyes moved up when we entered, and they locked on me. I didn’t move.

Nino’s grip on my wrist tightened, and his thumb brushed my skin lightly. “We’ll be going for dinner now.”

Remo nodded, his lips pulling wide. “Blood red. Good choice.” They exchanged a look. “You look good enough to devour,” he said to me, and my heart rate quadrupled.

“Thanks,” I barely got out.

Nino pulled me outside toward his car. “Remo is no danger for you, Kiara. Trust me on that. His words are meant to unsettle. It’s how he is. But you are mine and that makes you off-limits. Remo would never lay a hand on you. Never.”

“You trust him?” I asked as I settled into the passenger seat.

“I trust him absolutely. With my life. With yours.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to share his confidence that Remo would protect me. He had protected me from Durant on my wedding day, but with Remo there really was no telling what he’d do.

Every table in the restaurant was occupied when we arrived, but the manager greeted us personally. He shook Nino’s hand and bowed his head slightly before turning to me. I held my hand out with a smile. He hesitated briefly, but after Nino inclined his head, he took it and kissed the back of my hand. “Your wife is stunning, Mr. Falcone.”

“She is,” Nino drawled.

People at the surrounding tables were throwing veiled glances at us, and as the manager led us to our table with a stunning view over the Strip, they began whispering.

My cheeks felt hot when I sank down into the chair the manager held out for me. Nino seemed completely unfazed by the force of attention. He regarded me over the menu. “You look flustered.”

I laughed. “I am. Everyone’s talking about us.”

Nino shrugged. “Let them talk. I’d be more worried if they didn’t.”

“Do you never wish to blend in, to walk the streets unnoticed?”

Nino lowered the menu, a hard look on his face. “My brothers and I were in hiding for a while when our family was hunting us down. We fought to get back what was ours. We killed and we bled for our birthright. We tore

Las Vegas from the bleeding hands of unworthy men. We fought for the spotlight. We are done hiding.”

The waiter brought us our wine at that moment. A blood red Shiraz. Nino raised his glass with a strange smile. It was so very difficult to read him. “To a place in the spotlight. No hiding ever again, Kiara.”

I clanged my glass against his and took a deep gulp. “No hiding ever again.”

The waiter arrived with the appetizers a second later. Everything was delicious, spicy, and extravagant. Nino was easy to talk to. I could have listened to him answering my questions about Las Vegas history all night.

He knew everything. Eventually, more personal questions crossed my mind. “Why did your father send you to boarding school in England? Most Made Men keep their sons close because they want to teach them everything they need to know to become Made Men themselves.”

The mentioning of Benedetto Falcone brought an immediate change to Nino’s body language. When before he had been relaxed, his shoulders now tensed considerably and his expression turned colder. “Our father didn’t want Remo and me under his roof, and he knew he didn’t have to prepare us for becoming Camorrista anymore.”

“But you were twelve and fourteen at the time, and your brothers were even younger.”

Nino smiled, and I took another deeper gulp of wine because his expression gave me the chills. “Our father knew Remo and I would have killed him if we stayed. Remo killed his first man three years before at eleven, and shortly before our father sent us away, I had killed my first man together with Remo. Our father knew he had no way of controlling us, so he sent us away. He knew we wouldn’t leave without our brothers, so he sent Adamo and Savio away as well.”

“That’s horrible,” I whispered.

Nino took a swig of his own wine. “It made us stronger, brought us closer. Regret over the past is wasted time.”

I could feel the effects of the wine by now. Red wine was definitely stronger than the occasional glass of champagne or white wine I’d had in the past.

Nino tilted his head. “I think you’ve had enough wine.”

I smiled. “You think?” For some reason, I took another gulp of the red liquid, and Nino shook his head, his mouth twitching.

“You will regret this tomorrow morning.”

“I thought regret is wasted time,” I said.

His mouth twitched again. “It is, but right now you still have the chance to prevent yourself from regretting anything.”

“I think it’s too late for that,” I said. I felt hot and fuzzy. I’d probably have the headache of my lifetime in the morning.

Nino waved over the waiter and paid for our dinner. I got up and immediately realized that I was a bit tipsier than I thought, but I straightened my spine, not wanting to appear drunk in public. Nino wrapped an arm around my waist, and I was too grateful for its steadying effect to tense up at the contact. He led me out of the restaurant.

“Thank you for the lovely evening,” I whispered before I plopped down in the car seat with less grace than intended.

“It was surprisingly pleasant,” Nino agreed, and I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. The wine had loosened my control.

Nino raised his eyebrows and closed the door. I leaned against the window, closing my eyes.



I woke with my head against something hot and hard. My body stiffened when I realized I was in someone's arms, being carried.

"Shh, Kiara. You are safe."

I peered up at Nino's calm face and forced my body to relax in his hold. "Where are we?" I asked groggily. My brain felt foggy.

"At home."

It took me an embarrassingly long time to figure out what he meant. Then I recognized our bedroom. He set me down in the center of the room. "Why don't you get ready for bed?"

I nodded and immediately regretted the motion. Nino gripped my hip to steady me. "Can you do this?"

"Yes," I said quickly because I didn't want Nino to undress me.

I wasn't sure how long it took me to get out of my dress and go through my evening routine, but it felt like forever before I finally lay down in bed.

Nino joined me shortly after. "Tell me if you're going to be sick." He touched my forehead with his palm, and I leaned in to the touch, but then he dropped his arm. He stretched out on his back beside me, and I scooted closer, reaching for his arm. My fingertips curiously traced the tattoo of a shadowy figure amidst surging flames. When my eyes managed to focus, I realized a name was written in the flames. It was small and you had to take a closer look to distinguish it from the fire. Remo.

"You have Remo's name tattooed on your arm."

Nino regarded me without a flicker of emotion. "I have Savio's and Adamo's name tattooed on my other arm."

"Why is he burning?"

"Because he burned for me," Nino said quietly.

I searched his face but could tell he wasn't going to tell me more. My

fingertips followed the flames down to his wrist. I frowned when I felt something rigid under my fingertips. I turned his arm slightly so I could see his forearm. Under his Camorra tattoo, which was surrounded my flames as well, a long thin scar ran along his vein. I looked up at him, and he stared right back. I didn't dare ask because for once his eyes didn't appear emotionless at all.

I stroked the scar lightly. "Does it bother you if I touch you like this?" I asked in the barest of whispers.

"Your touch doesn't bother me, Kiara."

I wished he could touch me like that without my body wrenching me back into the past, without my fears taking control. "I wish ... I wish I could be touched without fear."

"Eventually you will. You will kill the part of your uncle I couldn't kill for you."

He sounded absolutely sure as if it wasn't a matter of if but when. And because this was Nino Falcone, and maybe because I was drunk, I believed him.

CHAPTER 15



KIARA

Nino stirred beside me, and my eyes peeled open. Just like I had the last few mornings since our dinner, I was snuggled up to him at night and wedged myself under his arm, my head in the crook of his neck, my knees pressed up against his side. His warmth and comforting scent wrapped around me and managed to banish the nightmares.

“Sorry,” I murmured like I did every morning because I was fairly sure that the position couldn’t be comfortable for Nino, but he never pushed me away. I sat up, freeing his arm.

“Your subconscious seeks protection at night, and I can provide it,” he said with a shrug as he stood. The tight briefs did nothing to hide the outline of him.

I forced my eyes away from it, my heart thudding faster. He grabbed his swim trunks and went into the bathroom to change, but he didn’t close the door. It was only for my benefit that he didn’t undress in the bedroom. I had considered telling him that I could deal with his nakedness, but every time I was on the verge of saying those words, my courage left me.

Getting up as well, I grabbed my satin dressing gown. It wasn’t because it was cold but because I felt uncomfortable walking around the house in only my nightgown.

Nino returned and opened the door for me. Grabbing my book from the nightstand, I followed him in silence down the stairs and out through the French doors. It was already warm outside. I settled on the lounge chair close

to the pool and opened my book, but my eyes weren't drawn to the letters on the page. Instead, I watched as Nino stepped up to the edge of the pool and dove in, his muscles flexing as he did.

He swam his laps in the pool, and I observed him over my book from my spot on the chair. Eventually, I had to remove my robe because the sun relentlessly beat down on me despite the early hour.

Sometimes I felt ridiculous for even bringing a book with me. I hardly ever read a word. My gaze was drawn to the man in the water. The book was like my safety shield because I was too cowardly to admit that I enjoyed seeing Nino—and definitely too terrified of him finding out that I did.

After thirty minutes, he swam over to the ladder and climbed out. Water dripped off him and down his sculpted body. My eyes trailed from his muscled shoulders, down to his eight-pack and his narrow hips to his muscled thighs. His tight swim trunks hardly hid his body, and I could see the outline of him beneath the wet fabric again. The horrid tattoos, with their flames, agonizing faces, and words of pain and blood that ran from his forearms up over his shoulders down to his pecs and around to his shoulder blades didn't scare me any more like they had done in the beginning. Nino was a piece of art.

His movements were unhurried and exact as he rubbed himself dry. I couldn't take my eyes off him. His cool, gray eyes met mine, and I sucked in a sharp breath and quickly looked back down on my book. When his shadow fell over me, I had no choice but to stop pretending I was reading. I hadn't paid attention to my book in a while.

"You pretend to read but you watch me every morning," he said. There was no judgment in his voice.

I wasn't sure what to say. Embarrassment crawled up my neck. "I—I didn't..." I began to protest but upon raising my head, his expression silenced

me. He knew I'd been watching him. Of course he'd noticed. This was a man who had been raised to watch his surroundings. Denying it would have been ridiculous.

"You can watch. You are my wife," he said. He tilted his head down, his eyes searching my face, and it felt like he could read my every thought. A few distracting droplets of water trailed down his beautiful face. What millions of male models probably had to practice for years, that cool, otherworldly expression, came naturally to him. "But I wonder why you do it. I thought my body scared you."

It still did. Nino oozed strength. But fear had become a very small part of what I felt when I watched him. There was also that flicker of curiosity in the pit of my stomach and the burst of warmth deep inside of me when he moved in a way that accentuated his muscles.

I put down my book on the small side table, not sure how to say what I wanted to say and not sure I should even consider saying it. Some doors should stay closed. But what was holding me back—and would perhaps always hold me back *if I let it*—was something forced upon me in the past, something I wanted to be freed of.

"Sometimes I wonder how it would be to be more like husband and wife," I admitted despite the heat in my cheeks, despite the spike of fear and worry about Nino's reaction. Falcone or not, he had never given me reason to be truly fearful of him.

"You mean in a physical sense?" Nino asked in a low voice. There was the hint of something in his tone that I couldn't place, but as usual, his face didn't reveal anything.

I nodded, releasing a tense breath. I hadn't thought I'd dare admit it, but Nino was always in control. I didn't have to fear an emotional outburst from him. Sometimes I felt like I didn't have to fear him at all.

He put down the towel, allowing me to view the length of him. I followed the invitation and slowly trailed my gaze over every inch of him. He didn't move, but his stare was an insistent presence on my skin. "We could explore the physical options of our relationship, if you like. To be honest, I want you."

He'd told me so before, but it still scared me. I glanced down at my hands, fumbling with the hem of my nightgown. Only one man had ever wanted me, and he'd taken what he wanted without asking. Nino wasn't like that. He could have had me on our wedding night and every night since. There was certainly nobody who could have stopped him, least of all me.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

I sighed. "I'm scared."

"Did I give you reason to be scared?"

I looked back up at his attentive face. "No, but I'm scared because you want me, and because I want you, but I don't know if I can do it."

"We can set limits, and we can go step by step." He paused, his expression becoming contemplative. "If my physical strength unsettles you, we could try to have me restrained. I don't mind."

My mouth opened in shock. "You mean have you tied up?" Images of Nino with silk ties bound to the headboard entered my mind and almost had me laughing out loud. It seemed impossible that a man like him would suggest something like that.

Nino nodded. "That way you'd be free to explore without having to fear me."

"But then I would have to lead."

"Isn't that what you'd prefer, given your past experiences? I have no trouble being dominant, but I doubt you'd react well to it."

I wasn't sure what to do. It seemed like the perfect solution, but it still

terrified me, only now for a different reason.

“Have you ever reached climax?” he asked quietly, still staring at me with his quiet scrutiny.

My eyes widened, and I gave a jerky shake of my head. My stomach plunged into an abyss as I remembered how it had felt to have *him* in me. “All I felt was pain ... and shame.”

He lightly grazed my shoulder, the touch warm and gentle. How could he always be so warm when his face was so beautifully cold? “I didn’t mean when you were raped. I mean later. Did you ever touch yourself and feel good?”

I bit my lip, trying to shake off the memories and focus on the present. “Not really. I tried to touch myself a few times, but it felt wrong.”

Nino surprised me when he perched on the edge of the lounge chair, his bare back brushing my naked calves. I didn’t pull away, and I had a feeling it was an attempt for him to see if I could stand his closeness. “It would be good if you explored your body and figured out what you like and conditioned your brain to realize that sexual touch can be very pleasurable.”

My face became impossibly hot, even when Nino looked as if we were talking about what we’d have for dinner tonight.

“I’m not sure my body is capable of finding anything *pleasurable*,” I whispered.

Nino angled his body to the side and slowly reached for my ankle. I tensed briefly, more out of confusion than anything else. He paused, his eyes narrowing, and when I relaxed, his fingers brushed my ankle before he cupped my heel. He began to apply light pressure with his fingers as he stroked the underside of my calf and looked into my eyes. His fingers never reached higher than my calf, but the touch seemed to send tingles up my knee, my thigh, and straight to my core.

My eyes wandered over to Nino as he stroked me, over his strong arms, his muscled chest, and his ripped stomach. After a while, my breathing picked up, and the tingling increased until I could feel wetness gather between my legs. Startled, I rocked my hips lightly.

Nino let go of my calf, his mouth curling at the corner. "I think your body will adjust well to pleasure."

My cheeks heated even more, but more than embarrassment, I felt relief. Nino swallowed once before he murmured, "Now that your body is already aroused, it would make sense for you to explore yourself."

"You want me to touch myself?"

"Yes," he rasped. "Not here. Somewhere private, where you feel relaxed. I would recommend you focus on your clit at first. Try to rub it lightly with two fingers, and if you feel close to release, you can try to dip a bit lower and give your labia some attention. That's a spot many women are very sensitive, some even favor it over their clit. I don't think you will feel comfortable with a finger inside you yet, but it would add to the overall pleasure."

My center had become warmer and even wetter, hearing his deep voice.

"It would also help if you imagine something that arouses you."

"You," I burst out, feeling suddenly emboldened.

Nino heaved a deep breath and something in his eyes shifted. "If that helps, yes. Imagine me." His voice had dropped lower than ever before, and a slight stiffness had taken hold of his upper body. Confused, I was about to ask if I had offended him somehow when I registered the way his swim trunks tented.

I sucked in a breath. A flicker of fear coursed through me, but I was far more curious than afraid.

“I told you I desire you,” he murmured. “And if you want to explore physical options, you’ll have to get over your fear of my erection.”

“I’m not scared,” I said then amended my words because of his no lying rule. “Mostly.”

He rose to his feet, and again, my eyes were drawn to his groin area. “Why don’t you go into our bedroom and do what I suggested and find some relief?”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to seek relief as well,” he said matter-of-factly.

Would you prefer if I sated my sexual drive somewhere else? I’d said yes on our wedding night.

“Where?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything, only watched me with cold intensity.

I stood as well because it made me feel stronger, even if Nino still towered a head over me. “I don’t want you to seek out other women anymore.”

There. I said it. And relief washed over me. It had bothered me for a while, ever since I realized I wanted this marriage to be more than about necessity. I wasn’t sure how they handled things here in Las Vegas, if maybe he never meant to be faithful, if he expected to keep sleeping around simply because he could, but it wasn’t something I could ever accept if we really moved our relationship to a physical level.

Nino regarded me. “So you want me to seek you out to satisfy my sexual needs?” His voice held a strange note, and he took a step toward me.

There was the hint of curiosity in his eyes. This was him conducting an experiment, I realized. I’d learned to read him much better. I stood my ground and didn’t back away. He moved even closer until I could almost feel the heat radiating off his body. He wasn’t touching me.

“Eventually, yes,” I said quietly. “Obviously I’m not able to do it yet.” To be honest, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to do it, but I wanted to.

“So until you feel ready, you suggest I get myself off with my own hands?”

I frowned. Was he mocking me? Or being serious? It was so hard to tell because he’s said it dryly, without the hint of emotion. Suddenly, I felt foolish for having brought up the matter. This was Las Vegas, he was a Falcone, and despite his consideration toward me so far, he was still a man used to having women, money, and power at his disposal. Why should he give up one for me? I meant nothing to him. I was a pawn in this game for power.

I looked away, unable to bear his cold beauty. Turning around, I was about to leave when he stepped in my way. My eyes flew back up to him.

“Answer me, Kiara. Is that what you suggest?”

Sighing, I nodded. “I know how things are. I know your clubs are filled with willing women, but yes, I want you to be faithful to me. I can’t explore physical closeness with you as long as you see other women.”

“You realize that you can’t explore your sexuality with anyone but me.”

“Is that so?” I wasn’t sure why I said that.

And for once, Nino let his expression become the one most people knew, one of dominance and suppressed violence. “It is. I won’t ever push you past your boundaries, but just because I haven’t claimed your body with my cock yet doesn’t mean I haven’t laid claim on you. You are mine. Mine alone. And for as long as I live, no one will touch you but me.”

It was the least restrained I’d ever seen him, and it reminded me of the man he really was. I felt overwhelmed and on the verge of taking flight.

Nino let out a harsh breath and took a step back from me then sank

down on the chair.

I blinked. Was he making himself small on purpose? He was watching me closely.

“Better?” he asked quietly, in control again.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Didn’t we agree on no lies?” I asked teasingly.

Nino’s mouth twitched. “We did. And you are right to some extent. I knew you’d yield to my view of things if I exerted dominance, and given your history, I could foresee how it would make you feel. But it wasn’t a conscious decision to scare you.”

“Okay.”

His brows pulled together. “When I first suggested satisfying my sexual drive elsewhere, you were relieved.”

Back to the topic at hand. Nino never let himself be distracted.

“I was, but I don’t want that anymore. I want us to have a real marriage.”

“Isn’t this a real marriage? It’s official, after all.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I mean. I want a normal marriage. For me that means being faithful and being intimate only with your partner. It means taking care of each other, showing affection, trying to love each other.” The last slipped out because it was something I wanted deep down inside.

Nino pushed to his feet again and moved closer. “I can be faithful and I can show you affection ...”

“But you can’t love, I know.”

Nino startled me by cupping my cheeks, his eyes warmer, his expression softer than ever before. “I can simulate emotions very well, Kiara.

If it helps you feel more comfortable, I can fake affection and even love.”

I peered up at him. Without his words, I would have believed the tenderness on his face to be real. I swallowed hard. “Don’t pretend to care for me. Don’t lie.”

His expression became one of cold beauty again, and my heart clenched tightly. “I want to take care of you, and even if I can’t feel emotions, seeing them on your face, particularly happiness and joy, give me a certain level of satisfaction. I can’t give you more than that.”

“Okay,” I whispered, because there was nothing else to say. It had to be enough. I’d expected so much less out of this union, and so much worse. I couldn’t hold it against Nino that he couldn’t feel.

“Would you like to go inside now?”

“I don’t think I’m in the mood for exploring anymore,” I said quietly.

He tilted his head. “I understand.”

“Maybe later?” I asked quietly.

“Of course,” he said. “How about I get dressed and we practice your shooting skills some more.”

For him it was always easy to move on because no topic ever moved him so much his brain couldn’t proceed, but I didn’t want to make a bigger deal out of this than it was so I nodded.

He returned thirty minutes later in black pants and a black shirt, his go-to clothes. I had seen him in similar clothes so often before, and yet the sight got to me today. He looked tall and strong and graceful, and the tattoos on his arms created just the right contrast to his perfectly beautiful face.

Two guns hung from the holster strapped to his chest, but I knew he hid more weapons on his body. I had become a better shot over the course of our last few lessons, but today my concentration was frayed.



A few hours later, I sat in our living room and played the song I'd started working on almost six weeks ago. It was a song that helped me deal with my marriage with Nino, helped me understand my feelings toward the man. The breeze streamed in through the windows, and I breathed deeply. I missed the scent of ocean in the air, but Las Vegas' warmth felt good. I didn't feel constantly cold anymore.

"What song is that?"

My fingers jerked against the keys and the piano released a low whine in response.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," Adamo said as he stepped into the room through the open French doors.

I relaxed and smiled. "It's okay. I startle too easily."

He shoved his hands into his pockets and nodded toward the piano. "You can keep playing. I like to listen."

Had he listened to me play before? I settled my fingers lightly on the keys and began where I'd left off when he'd startled me. He moved closer and propped up his elbows on the wing. A bruise bloomed on his left cheekbone, and his lip was busted. I didn't think I'd ever seen him without a busted lip.

"What happened to your face?"

"My brothers practice fighting with me."

"When will you be inducted?"

He looked down at his bloody knuckles. "In two months. August. On my fourteenth birthday."

"But you don't want to?"

Adamo shrugged. "I'm a Falcone. The Camorra is my destiny." His brows drew together. "But I don't want to do most of the things expected of

me.”

“Kill people.”

“That,” he agreed, a dark look passing over his face. “I already did. Kill someone. Shot him. I’m a good shot.”

I nodded and stopped playing again.

“I don’t enjoy killing, and I don’t want to torture people or hurt women,” he whispered.

“Then don’t,” I said and realized how stupid I was. Adamo couldn’t choose his path, not as others could.

He pressed out a laugh. “I have to.”

“What would you rather do?”

His eyes lit up. “Race cars.”

“You can drive a car?”

“Remo let me drive his car when I was eleven, and I managed to sneak into a few races since then. I crashed two of his cars. He was majorly pissed, and now he keeps a closer eye on me so I can’t do it anymore.”

“Is that why you are sulking around the gardens and listening to me play?” I asked with a smile.

“I’m supposed to watch you.”

I burst out laughing then quieted at the indignant look on his face. I still found it funny that the youngest Falcone was supposed to be my bodyguard. “Sorry.”

“I’m a good shot and a decent fighter, and it’s not like someone is going to attack our mansion. It’s the safest place in Vegas.”

“Because people are terrified of Remo.”

“And Nino,” Adamo added then curled his lips in disgust. “Since he fought his first official cage fight, Savio’s even cockier than before. He thinks he’s as scary as them, but he’s not. Not even close.”

“Agreed. Nobody does scary as well as Remo and Nino,” I said. Luca had been terrifying, but maybe because I’d known him from a young age, I could deal with his brand of scary better than that of the Falcones.

“Yeah,” Adamo murmured and then became serious, his brown eyes hesitant. “Is Nino nice to you?”

I pursed my lips. Nice wasn’t really a term I’d use for Nino. “He is ...”

“Present,” Nino drawled, making me jump and Adamo as well.

I turned toward his voice. He was leaning in the doorway, tall and cold, muscled arms crossed over his chest. For once he wore a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing his tattoos.

“You should be doing homework or work on your knife skills,” Nino said, pushing off the wall and striding toward us.

Adamo jutted his chin out, but he didn’t protest. “Bye, Kiara,” he muttered before he walked out of the French doors.

Nino propped his hip up against the piano as he always did, and my eyes took in the way his pants accentuated his muscled legs, the way his shirt clung to his torso. “And am I being *nice* to you?”

I nodded, but I couldn’t stop looking at him and remembering his suggestion from this morning.

“Would you like to go to our bedroom and explore?” he asked calmly.

Despite the heat in my cheeks, I nodded. Nino straightened and held out his hand for me to take, and I did as always. His fingers curled lightly around me but in a way that suggested I could pull away any time. With a deep breath, I got up from the bench, startling slightly as his thumb pressed against my wrist. Why did he always do that?

My eyes trailed over his muscular, inked forearm as I followed him upstairs. The moment we stepped into our bedroom and my eyes landed on

our bed, my pulse began racing in my veins.

Nino peered down at me. "Fear or arousal ... or both?"

"What?" I asked confused.

He pressed his thumb against my wrist. "Your pulse picked up."

"That's why you always touch me there?"

"It's a good indicator of your mood and helps me figure out your emotions combined with your expression and breathing."

I laughed then quieted when he led me closer to the bed. Nino raised one eyebrow.

"Both," I admitted.

He sank down on the bed, tugging me along so I'd stand before him. "It would be good if we could manage to reduce one and increase the other."

"Which one would you like to increase?" I said in the same scientific tone as he had used.

His mouth twitched. "Well," he began in a low voice. "Fear would be easier to increase than arousal with you being you and me being me, but I prefer difficult tasks. Which do you prefer?" He raised my hand to his lips very slowly, his eyes never leaving my face, and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my pulse-point then trailed his tongue over it.

A small shiver passed down my spine. How was it possible I could feel that all the way between my legs?

He regarded me intently. "Fear?"

I shook my head, my tongue heavy.

"Both?"

I considered that and gave a hesitant shake of my head.

Nino's eyes became even more intent. "Are you sure?"

I wasn't because he evoked sensations in my body I'd never felt, but the tingling between my legs had increased, and I felt hot and wet down

there. “No.”

Nino nodded. “Let’s try to change that. Okay?”

Good Lord, he sounded so sure of himself, as if he just knew he would make it good for me.

NINO

Kiara’s pulse rate spiked again. “Okay.”

Releasing her hand, I reached for the top drawer of my nightstand and pulled out the handcuffs I’d stored there.

Kiara released a choked laugh. A quick scan of her face told me she was nervous.

“I don’t usually have cuffs in my drawer,” I said before she could draw conclusions that would unsettle her. I’d never seen the appeal to restrain myself like that and preferred to dominate in bed, so I never allowed a woman to do it, and the other way around would have made as little sense because I didn’t need cuffs to restrain anyone. “I put them there after we talked this morning.”

Kiara bit her lip, but she didn’t react in any other way.

“I can cuff one of my hands to the headboard. What do you say? That would give you a sense of safety, don’t you think?”

“I think so,” she said hesitantly.

“Would you like me to undress?”

She shook her head quickly. “No.”

I regarded her closely. “Kiara. We don’t have to do this.”

“I want to. I’m just a bit overwhelmed by the situation that’s all.”

I nodded and moved back on the bed until my back rested against the headboard and then cuffed my left hand to it.

Kiara hadn't moved from her spot.

"What would you like to do first?"

She flushed, tugging a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't know. What would you suggest?"

She was sending out mixed signals. On one hand she was scared of losing control, but on the other hand she needed me to take control. "How about we start with kissing?"

Her eyes darted to my lips, the blush on her cheeks darkening as she nodded. She climbed on the bed. I tried to sit as relaxed as possible, my legs crossed at the ankles and my unrestrained arm lying in my lap while I watched her. Her eyes on my face, she moved closer until she was kneeling beside me, her knees pressing up against my hip.

I didn't move.

She exhaled softly. "I've never kissed before."

"It's not difficult, Kiara, trust me."

She gave me a look I couldn't place. "Easy for you to say. How many women have you kissed?"

I couldn't see how that was of any relevance. "One hundred and twelve. I don't kiss every woman I fuck."

She choked. "You've slept with more than one hundred women?"

"Yes. I was a late bloomer in comparison to Remo and Savio. Had my first woman at almost fifteen."

"Then I had my first time before you," she said bitterly, swallowing hard and staring down at the bed.

I lifted my hand and nudged her chin up to see her expression. "You haven't had your first time yet. What you had doesn't count. What we are going to do has absolutely nothing to do with what you experienced."

Her eyes watered, and I dropped my hand, unsure if my words had

upset her, but she scooted closer and hesitantly brought one hand up to my shoulder. “How can you say things that make me feel better when you don’t even understand what I feel?”

“I’m stating facts. That’s all.”

She laughed. “*Facts.*” Then her eyes lowered to my mouth, and she licked her lips. I doubted she noticed, but the sight had an immediate effect on my cock.

“Are you going to kiss me?” I asked her.

She nodded but didn’t move.

“Kiara, if you want to be in control, you actually have to take control.” She was a woman I’d have pegged as the submissive type in bed, and under normal circumstances I’d have naturally taken the lead, but as long as she was caught in the memories of her rape that would have ended badly.

She finally leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine, eyes closing. I would have preferred for her to keep them open so I had a chance of reading her, yet as it was I had no choice but to trust she’d pull back if something unsettled her.

Her lips were very soft and the pressure was light, almost nonexistent like our kiss on our wedding day. Resisting the urge to pull her closer and show her how good kissing could feel, I let her be in control. After a moment, she pulled back with a frown, her skin reddening. “This feels odd because you aren’t moving.”

“I wanted to let you be in control.”

“It’s okay if you take the initiative and lead because you know what to do and I don’t, and it’s making me nervous.”

I regarded her, not exactly sure what she needed me to do. “We had me restrained so you’d feel in control.”

“Yes, and that’s okay, but I want you to kiss me as you normally

would.”

“Normally, I lead.”

She bit her lip again. Nerves. I reached for her wrist and pressed my thumb against it. She huffed out laughter. “You can lead ... I mean, you can lead without being all dominant and rough.”

“I won’t be rough with you, Kiara. And if you ever feel like I’m being too dominant, you tell me and I will adapt my behavior, all right?”

She smiled slightly, but her pulse spiked up anyway. She was very difficult to read. “Can we try again?”

“Of course. I’m going to touch your back.”

Again a spike in her pulse rate. I released her wrist and put my hand on her lower back and began rubbing it lightly with my thumb. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was soft under my touch. She leaned slightly forward until her lips almost touched mine.

Deciding to see if me taking lead would work, I caught her lips with mine, applying more pressure than she had and nudged her lips with my tongue. She parted them without hesitation and I dove in. Her taste and the soft warmth of her mouth went straight to my cock. She submitted to the kiss without hesitation, following my lead.

She yielded so easily to my demands, so readily, I knew she would continue to do so if we moved further, and it made me want to do just that, but I reined myself in.

I widened my strokes on her back, brushing over her spine. She made a small sound in the back of her throat, tightening her hold on my shoulder. Her other hand pressed up against my chest, grazing my nipple, and I kissed her a bit harder.

Moving my free hand up her back, I wanted to cup her head, but the moment I touched her neck and my fingers slid into her dark waves, she

jerked back. “No,” she whispered quickly.

I pulled my hand away, seeing the remnants of panic on her face. It wasn't a touch I'd considered problematic, so her reaction surprised me.

“Your hair?”

She gave a quick nod. “And my neck.” She swallowed. “My uncle ... he held me there ... He held me down when he forced me to ...” She looked at me with despair. I had no trouble reading it on her face, and I didn't have to touch her wrist to know her pulse was racing because she remembered how her bastard of an uncle had forced her to suck his cock when she was only a child. And once again, I wished I had prolonged his torture. He had suffered thoroughly under mine and Remo's hands, and yet it didn't seem enough.

“I understand,” I said.

She shivered helplessly, and then she just fell forward, catching me by surprise as she pressed her face into the crook of my neck and began shaking. I touched her back and her shaking got worse. Then something wet hit my skin. She was crying.

“Kiara?”

She clung to my shoulders and I wrapped my free arm around her. She pressed even harder into me. I let her cry herself out. Maybe it would help her. Pulling back, she kissed me softly, her eyes probing as if she was searching for something. I returned the kiss, tasting her tears.

“I'm sorry,” she said after a moment.

“For what?”

“For becoming emotional.” She sighed and closed her eyes briefly. Then she opened them again and nodded toward the cuff. “Where's the key?”

“Drawer.”

She leaned over me and gave me a look at her round, firm butt. My body definitely reacted strongly to her assets. She unlocked the handcuff. “I

think I'm going to take a bath." I didn't stop her as she retreated into the bathroom.

Instead, I walked out and headed for our gaming room. Remo was there, sprawled out on the sofa, watching the latest cage fights in Roger's Arena.

He glanced toward me as I sank down on the armchair, reached for the bottle of bourbon on the table, and poured a glass.

Remo nodded toward my wrist, which had red marks from the metal cuffs. "What happened there? Already getting kinky with your wife?"

"Kiara's scared of my physical strength, so I cuffed myself to the bed."

Remo leaned back, eyebrows raised. "As if that would stop you."

"It wouldn't, but she feels safer, and that's what this is about. She needs to feel comfortable around me."

Remo narrowed his eyes. "So you still haven't fucked her?"

I took a sip of the bourbon. "We didn't progress beyond kissing, so no."

Remo was quiet for a moment, and that was usually never a good sign. "You have the patience of a saint. Do you want me to call some entertainment over?"

"I agreed to not seek out other women anymore."

Remo laughed. "Right." And then sobered. "You are being serious?"

"I am."

"Are you trying to become a straight-laced citizen?"

"I have no ambitions in that regard, no."

Remo shook his head. "First Fabiano, now you. Why's everyone becoming pussy-whipped?"

"Since I'm not getting any pussy, your term is misleading."

“Oh, fuck you, Nino. Don’t be a fucking smartass. Do you really think you can make a marriage work? Even if you don’t fuck other women, you won’t be a caring husband and you know it.”

I shrugged. “I know, but for now I’m going to give this a try and see where it takes me.”

“So this is some kind of scientific experiment for you?”

“Maybe.” It was something new, something I had no experience with and couldn’t say how I’d deal with it long-term, but I was curious and Kiara wanted this marriage to be real.

CHAPTER 16



KIARA

I couldn't sleep after the kiss. My mind replayed it. Nino's mouth had been so warm and gentle. It was nothing like I'd imagined, nothing like I'd feared. He managed to surprise me every day and had done so since our wedding night.

The door creaked open and someone stepped in. Opening my eyes, I peered through the gap in the blankets. I had them pulled up to my ears because it made me feel safer that way. I left on the light in the bathroom because the dark still held power over me. I could see Nino's tall form in the warm glow.

My cheeks heated when his eyes settled on me. I'd fled into the bathroom after our kiss, not because of it, though. I had been embarrassed about breaking down and crying in Nino's arms. I needed time to get a grip on myself. For a man as controlled and emotionless as Nino, being married to me must be a particular difficult task for him. In the beginning, I was sure my marriage to Nino was punishment for my father's actions, but now I was fairly sure he was the one that could have made a better deal.

"It's late," he murmured.

"I can't sleep."

He nodded before he moved into the bathroom and closed the door. Barely any light spilled into the bedroom through the narrow gap beneath the door, but I focused my eyes on it and listened to the sound of running water.

After a few minutes, Nino came back out, dressed in briefs. I knew he

preferred to sleep naked and now only wore clothes at night to set me at ease. Even in his own bed, he had to hold back on my account. He turned off the light in the bathroom and approached me in the dark.

My pulse quickened when the mattress dipped under his weight—but for much different reasons than it had in the past. What would it be like if I just leaned over and kissed him? No warnings, no handcuffs. Only my lips touching his, my body pressed against him. How would it feel to be free and act on my desires? How would it be not to be shackled by the past?

“Are you alright?” Nino drawled.

How could he know? He hadn’t touched my wrist, so my pulse couldn’t have given me away. “Why do you ask?”

“Because your breathing changed. That’s usually a sign that you’re unsettled by something. Is it because of our kiss?”

I hesitated, wondering what to say, but opted for the truth. “Yes.”

“You changed your mind about the physical aspects of our marriage?”

I wished I knew what he was thinking. He said he wanted me, but maybe my kiss and the teary outburst afterward made him change his mind.

“No, I enjoyed our kiss,” I admitted.

“Good.”

That wasn’t quite the answer I’d hoped for. Had he enjoyed it as well? Did he want to kiss me again?

“Would you like to kiss again?”

It was sometimes scary how easily he could read me, even in the dark, even without understanding my emotions. The inner workings of Nino’s brain were completely inexplicable to me. “What do you want?”

He was quiet. “In terms of kissing or in general?”

“In general,” I whispered, my stomach tightening with nerves.

“Give me your wrist,” he said, and I complied. His thumb pressed

against my pulse point, and I had to stifle laughter. It quickly died down when he started to speak in that low, deep voice.

“I want *you* in every regard. I want to kiss you, of course. I want to show you pleasure, Kiara.” My pulse galloped with every word. “I want to give you an orgasm with my mouth and my fingers. I want to taste you everywhere, and I want to ... sleep with you.”

I could tell he had wanted to use a different term, but he chose to soften his words for my benefit. My chest warmed at his consideration. Despite who he was, Nino would always represent safety for me.

“I know every spot on your body that will increase your arousal. If you let me, I’ll make you come again and again.”

I swallowed audibly. My core seemed to liquefy, throbbing with a need I hardly understood.

He tapped my wrist. “Fear?”

I laughed nervously because right now fear was only a small flicker in the corners of my consciousness. “No,” I admitted in the softest whisper.

Nino waited patiently for me to say more. As my eyes grew used to the dark, I could make out the outline of his strong shoulders. He was facing me, breathing calmly, relaxed. Those words ... didn’t they affect him?

“Arousal?”

I gave a nod, not sure if he could see it.

“Good,” came his low voice.

I shivered. “And you?”

“Are you asking if I’m aroused?”

I nodded.

“I am,” he said.

My pulse really started racing. “Kiara?”

“Both,” I said quickly, because I was equally scared and aroused by

his admittance.

“What can I do to banish your fear?”

“Nothing,” I said, because deep down I knew it was a battle I had to fight on my own. “But I want to try something.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“Can we kiss without you being restrained?”

“Of course. Now?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly and scooted a bit closer to him until his warm breath fanned over my face and the sheer volume of heat radiating from his body told me how big he was, how much taller and stronger.

I caught the hint of alcohol on his breath, something smoky and spicy. “You smell like ... bourbon?”

“I had a glass,” he said. “But you don’t have to be concerned. It’s not enough to lower my inhibitions. Not even close.”

“I’m not concerned about that.” I leaned closer until his face hovered right in front of me, and then I bridged the remaining distance between us and pressed my lips to his. He waited a couple of seconds before he increased the pressure, and his tongue slipped between my lips, exploring my mouth. His fingertips moved up from my wrist, stroking the soft skin of my forearm, the crook of my elbow, then a little higher before trailing back down. Finally, his thumb pressed against my wrist again.

He did it because he needed it to read me better, to make sure he noticed when I felt overwhelmed or scared. That realization did a strange thing to my heart.

We kissed for a long time, and I started to feel hot between my legs. Nino’s kisses were incredible, overwhelming; he led easily without making me feel like I was under his control. His breathing deepened ever so slightly as his mouth slid over mine, and the friction sent a new surge of heat through

my core. I squirmed, pressing my thighs together. If Nino noticed, he didn't react, but his grip on my wrist tightened the slightest bit.

I put my free hand up against his naked chest and felt his muscles flex beneath my fingertips. His skin was covered with scars, and I began tracing them curiously until I accidentally grazed over his nipple. He groaned into my mouth, jerking slightly, and the motion caused something hard dig into my thigh.

I froze against him. Fear and my own arousal battled within my body. He had told me he was aroused, but feeling it made things more real.

He stopped kissing me and took a deep breath. "Tell me how you feel."

"I'm okay."

"That's not a feeling."

"I'm feeling okay," I said again with more force. "Only startled."

"Maybe we should stop, then."

I didn't want to stop, but maybe Nino was right. Even if my body screamed for more, I wasn't sure if I could actually handle it. I felt ... overwhelmed again. "You're right."

He released my wrist and rolled over onto his back, farther away from me. A gaping hole opened in my stomach. I swallowed hard once then a second time. I knew I told Nino I didn't need him to fake affection, but maybe I was wrong.

Nino's head shifted toward me. "You are upset again."

I wasn't sure how he'd noticed this time. Maybe my breathing had changed again.

"I ... I changed my mind about the simulated affection." I was treading across a dangerous path. Living a lie wasn't something I wanted to do, but with Nino it was all I could have. Maybe simulated affection was

better than nothing.

“Okay,” he said quietly. He angled his body toward me. “Would you like to fall asleep in my arms?”

My throat tightened. I didn’t say anything and moved closer to him. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and pulled me against him. His touch was light, never like a cage, always considerate. Stupid tears gathered in my eyes as I rested my cheek against his strong chest. His heart beat a calm rhythm. Did it ever speed up? Did it ever clench when he looked at me like mine sometimes did when I looked at him or like it had when I realized he always touched my wrist to make sure I was all right.



When I woke the next morning, Nino was gone. It was already past nine, so I missed watching him do laps in the pool. I went through my morning routine, put on shorts and a simple top, and headed downstairs. I walked through the main part of the house and into the kitchen. After making myself a quick breakfast of porridge, I decided to eat it outside so I could enjoy the beautiful weather. As I headed outside, the sound of a video game drew me into the gaming room. Adamo was in there again, focusing on a car race on the ginormous screen on the wall.

“Hey, Kiara,” he said without looking away from the game. “Fabiano brought over Leona this morning. She’s sunbathing in the garden.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

He gave me a strange look.

I smiled at him. “Never mind. Enjoy your game.” I hurried out of the French doors and down the small path to the swimming pool and lounge chairs. Just as Adamo had said, Leona was stretched out on one of them, reading a book. Something about the history of the Supreme Court. She

glanced up as I approached, smiling, and put the book down on the table beside her.

“That doesn’t look like light reading,” I said, taking a seat on the chair across from her, my bowl of porridge wedged between my thighs.

“It’s not, but I want to prepare for college. I’m starting in a few months, and I don’t want to be completely clueless. What about you? Have you considered going to college?”

I frowned. I was raised to become a wife and mother. “To be honest, I’ve always only wanted to be a mother,” I said quietly. “I want a family to take care of. Boisterous kids that fill the house with life and laughter.” Maybe it was something I longed for because I never had a family like that. Unconditional love was something only children could offer in our world.

“That’s okay,” Leona said with a smile. Then her brows dipped in thought.

“What?”

“I’m trying to imagine Nino as a father and Remo as an uncle...” she shook her head “...but I just can’t. They aren’t really the family type. I mean they are close as brothers, but otherwise ... no.”

I knew what she meant. Nino and his brothers were more than close. They were a unit. *It’s us against the world*. He’d probably want to keep living with them even if we had kids. Boisterous, loud-mouthed kids around Remo? That was definitely something that made me wary. I shrugged.

“It’s not like we’ll have kids any time soon.” I pointed at my porridge. “Would you like some as well? I made more than I can eat.”

“I already had breakfast with Fabiano.”

I nodded and ate a spoonful. For some reason I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“How are things between you and Nino going?”

My cheeks heated as I tried to form a reply. “Better than I thought they would. He is being very considerate.”

Leona’s eyes widened. “Really?”

I giggled at her expression. “Really. I mean, it’s obviously not easy for him to understand my emotions, but he does his best and that’s all I can ask for.”

“I admire your strength. To be honest, Nino scares me shitless, almost as much as Remo.”

I smiled because I understood her so well. “I know. And Remo still does. I don’t think that will ever change. There’s something so ... unhinged about him.”

“Unhinged is a bit of an understatement,” Leona said. “The way he rules over Vegas ...” She sighed.

“I’m not married to him. That’s a blessing, I suppose.”

“I really hope he never finds a poor woman he wants to marry.”

I couldn’t imagine Remo settling down for a woman. Perhaps it would just be for the thrill of the conquest or that satisfaction of breaking her. I shuddered and pushed any thought of him aside. “Your Fabiano isn’t any less scary than Nino. You haven’t even grown up around men like him, yet you are with him. He is the *Enforcer*.”

Leona sat up, her expression thoughtful. “I know what he does is, what they all do is wrong, but I love him. I can’t help it. No one has ever been good to me, but he is. Maybe I’m selfish.”

I put down my bowl of porridge and reached for her hand, squeezing it. “You don’t have to justify your love. It’s something pure and beautiful, and I’m sure everything happens for a reason. Sometimes we just don’t understand why.”

Her blue eyes searched mine. “What do you feel for Nino?”

I wasn't sure. Gratefulness. Affection. And sometimes something warmer and deeper that scared me. "Falling in love with Nino would be foolish. He can't return my feelings no matter what they are."

"Love tends to turn us into fools," Leona said quietly, but she dropped the subject and reclined on the lounge chair.

I decided to stretch out as well, even if I wasn't wearing a bathing suit like Leona. Thinking about my situation, I had no intention of becoming that kind of fool. Falling in love with someone without emotions would be a horrible mistake.



In the early evening, I was back at the piano, tinkering with my song, when Nino walked in. My fingers stumbled over the next few notes. He was dressed in only fight boxers, his skin covered in a fine sheen of sweat that made his tattoos stand out even more. My eyes trailed down his ripped stomach then followed over to his muscled arms and his strong hands wrapped in white tape. They were red in places. I quickly tore my eyes away, too late of course, because Nino regarded me with a knowing expression. Thankfully, he didn't say anything.

"Remo's ordering pizza for us now. I'm taking a quick shower then we can head over."

"Sure," I said slowly. "I'm not sure Remo likes to have me around all the time when you have dinner." In the past few weeks, they had been increasingly busy planning their attack on the Outfit, so I often had dinner with Leona in our wing or even ate with Adamo, who wasn't involved in the Camorra's dealings yet. Nino had also taken me out to dinner twice. Thankfully, spending evenings with all of the Falcone brothers had been a rare event.

Nino tilted his head. "You are my wife. You are family. He can deal."

My eyes lowered to his chest again, wondering how it would feel to explore every inch of his skin with my fingertips. I'd only briefly touched his chest.

Something in Nino's expression shifted, and he prowled over to me. There really was no other way to describe his movements. He lowered himself to his haunches beside me so we were almost at eye level as I sat on the piano bench. My breath caught in my throat when his mouth curled into a smile and his eyes reflected warmth.

My God, he was so good at faking affection. Too good. This was going to be my downfall, I knew it, but I could not tell him to stop. The scent of him washed over me, manly sweat and something that was only Nino.

My breathing quickened and so did my pulse. Nino reached for my hand, which lay limply on my thigh, and pressed his thumb to my wrist. Then he brought it up to his face and pressed a kiss to my palm, his gray eyes on my face the entire time. And I stared at his face in turn. That beautiful face, always perfectly cold but now filled with consciously created warmth. Even though I knew this was a lie, a lie that could break me in the end, I leaned forward and kissed him because with him giving me that tender look, I needed to be closer.

He returned the kiss and touched my cheek with his calloused hand. Not wanting him to read what this did to me, I closed my eyes. If I wanted this to work, I needed to either make peace with the truth that Nino was faking emotions for me or I would have to try to pretend they weren't faked. I knew the latter would be easier because Nino was so scarily good at simulating.

Pushing any thought out of my mind, I allowed myself to drown in Nino's kiss, in his closeness and scent, and my body sprang to life. When

Nino pulled away eventually, my cheeks were flushed, and I was panting. His thumb was stroking my pulse point lightly, and the small touch traveled through every part of my body. He wasn't only good at simulating emotions, he was good at this as well. Genius and monster.

"We can do some more exploring after dinner if you like?" His voice was deep and raspy.

I gave a small nod, not trusting my voice to come out as more than a squeak. Nino kissed my palm again before he stood, giving me a view of the bulge in his fight shorts, before he turned and headed upstairs to shower. My eyes followed his muscled, inked back, his narrow hips, and his firm butt.

I pressed shaking fingers to the piano keys. Where had I left of? I couldn't remember. Instead, I turned my current emotional state into music. It was fast and erratic, but eventually the melody mellowed out, and my heartbeat calmed. I found my way back to the song I'd been working on before Nino had arrived. With every passing minute, I relaxed further.

"You have been working on it for a while now," he commented. I jumped. As usual, he moved so quietly that I didn't hear him approach. Now he leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets. He was wearing a tight white T-shirt that accentuated his muscles and showed the dark outlines of his tattoos beneath.

"You recognize the melody?" I asked, surprised.

"I have good hearing and a good memory."

"Is there anything you're not good at?" I stood and moved over to him. His own eyes lingered on my bare legs, then moved higher, pausing briefly on my chest before they stopped on my face. Warmth flooded my body. It wasn't the first time I noticed him looking at me like that.

"A couple of things," he said quietly, holding out his hand. I slipped mine into his grasp without a second thought. "Come on. Remo will be

intolerable if the pizza gets cold.”

“Isn’t he always?”

Nino’s mouth twitched. “He’ll be even more intolerable.”

“We don’t want that. One of these days, he’ll make a widower out of you.”

Nino’s hand tightened around mine. “You are the safest woman in the city. Trust me.”

As we headed into the main part of the mansion, I risked the occasional glance at his face. He didn’t exactly look emotionless, more relaxed.

He glanced at me. “Everything okay?”

I nodded quickly, glad that we’d arrived in the gaming room where Savio and Remo were already waiting on us. As usual, dinner wouldn’t take place in the dining room at a proper table but on the sofa with pizza cartons strewn haphazardly around the living room table.

A fight was playing on the big TV screen. Remo sat on one sofa and Savio on the other. Neither wore shirts. It was hot outside, but I really wished they had chosen to wear more than sweatpants. Unlike Nino, they didn’t have any tattoos on their torsos, only the marking of the Camorra on their forearms and Remo’s angel on his back.

They hadn’t begun eating yet.

“Where’s the kid? He’s driving me up the wall,” Remo muttered then shouted, “Adamo, get your fucking ass down here. Pizza’s getting cold.”

I had eaten more pizza in my marriage to Nino than in my entire life before him. Nino led me toward Remo’s sofa, but thankfully he sank down beside his brother. The sofas were huge, so we didn’t even have to sit very close, and yet sitting beside Remo would have been too much. Nino released my hand and grabbed a beer from the selection on the table.

I regarded the five extra-large pizzas. It was pretty clear which one was mine. Spinach, feta, tomatoes—the only one without any kind of meat.

Steps thundered down the stairs, and a moment later Adamo appeared in the living room. Without a greeting, he grabbed a piece of pizza, dropped down beside Savio, and began eating.

Remo shook his head but reached for a piece as well. They all shared pizzas, of course none of them touched mine. I gingerly picked up a slice then looked around for napkins that the delivery service usually packed but found none. “Do you have napkins?” I asked but got empty looks back.

“We have some in the bar, I believe,” Nino said. He was about to get up, but I beat him to it. I turned to head for the bar.

“She’s got a nice ass if she doesn’t hide it under her clothes,” Savio commented.

I stiffened but kept moving.

“Careful,” Nino murmured in a voice that made the little hairs in my neck rise.

“She isn’t one of our whores, Savio. She is Nino’s, and you better remember it the next time you open your fucking mouth,” Remo muttered.

“Fuck. Don’t get your panties in a bunch,” Savio said.

Relaxing, I found a handful of napkins next to a few dirty whisky glasses, picked them up, and headed back, hoping my cheeks weren’t red. Nino’s intent gaze traced my face as I sank down beside him. I put the napkins on the table then placed one on my lap before I grabbed my piece of pizza.

“Savio is sorry, you know? He’s just a stupid idiot,” Adamo said, catching my gaze across the table with a grin. I smiled back.

“Oh, shut up,” Savio said.

I met his gaze. His dark eyes held wariness but also curiosity. He still

regarded me as an intruder. I understood it. And other than Remo, he showed it openly. It was one of the few things that reminded me that he was two years younger than me.

Taking another bite of pizza, I was glad when the attention shifted back to the cage fight on the television screen, which I was trying to ignore. I knew Leona had worked there for a while, and I wondered how she could stand the violence.

“Where’s Fabiano?” Adamo asked with a full mouth.

“With Leona,” Nino said simply.

Savio rolled his eyes. “Pussy-whipped.”

After my third piece, I was stuffed. More than half my pizza was left. The men had wolfed down every last morsel of their food, of course. “You can eat my pizza if you are still hungry,” I suggested.

Four heads turned my way.

“There’s nothing dead on it,” Savio said.

“We can change that in a heartbeat,” Nino said dryly.

“I’m sure there are a couple of limbs you don’t need,” Remo added, exchanging a smirk with Nino.

Savio snorted. “If anything’s going on that pizza, it’s Adamo’s dick. He’s not using it anyway.”

Adamo flushed, glancing at me before scowling at his brother. They probably would have started fighting if I wasn’t there.

“It’s delicious. You don’t need to add limbs or other body parts, believe me,” I said before it got out of hand.

Nino shrugged and grabbed a piece then took a huge bite and gave a satisfied nod. “It’s edible.”

I huffed. Leaning back against the headrest, I curled my legs under me. Nino put his arm on the rest behind me. I scooted a bit closer to him until

I was tucked against his side. His gray eyes paused on my face for a moment before he lowered his arm and put his hand on my hip.

“Why don’t you eat meat?” Remo asked, reclining against the backrest, on his second piece of my vegetarian pizza. He looked fairly relaxed.

“I like animals,” I said. I didn’t want to argue with them about animal cruelty in meat factories because I doubted they would understand; they tortured humans on a daily basis, after all.

“I like them too. Better than most humans,” Remo said with a shrug. “Doesn’t mean I don’t eat them.”

“I prefer them in sausage form,” Savio said with a grin, but he, too, ate a piece of my pizza and stretched out on the sofa, putting his bare feet on Adamo’s legs, who in turn wrinkled his nose.

“Great, now I have to smell your feet all evening.”

I couldn’t help laughing. Nino gave me a look, but I couldn’t read his expression. Remo, too, had his eyes on me, and for once he didn’t look pissed or furious, but he, too, made it difficult for me to gauge his emotions.

“How about we watch this fight now?” Remo said after a moment and turned up the volume.

I risked a look at the screen, where a massive man with arms as thick as my thighs was beating up his opponent before throwing him into the cage. I shivered at the rattling of the cage and the drunken cheers of the crowd.

Nino reached for my wrist, never taking his eyes off the screen, and I stifled a smile, which died when the giant grabbed his opponent and smashed him down on his knee. The man’s back gave a sickening crunch, and he fell to the ground motionless.

I flinched violently against Nino, and his arm tightened around me. “Is he ... is he ...?” I swallowed, my pulse racing. Nino brows drew together.

“Dead,” Remo said with a shrug.

My stomach turned violently.

“That was a spectacular move,” Savio commented, stuffing his face with another slice of pizza. How could he eat while a man died?

Nino tapped my wrist, drawing my attention to his face. “We can switch to one of the street races.”

I caught the look Remo sent Nino. He disagreed, and he was right.

“No. If I want to be part of this family, I better get used to watching this.”

Savio leaned back, a challenge in his eyes. “Then you should come to Roger’s Arena in two weeks. That’s when Nino’s got his next fight.”

“What?” I leveled my widened eyes at Nino.

“I haven’t fought in a while. It’s time.”

“That’s why we are watching this,” Remo added. “The huge fucker is his opponent.”

I stared at Nino in disbelief. “You can’t be serious. He broke someone’s back.”

“I will break his neck. That’s easier and has the same effect,” Nino drawled.

I reached for the beer bottle he still held in the hand that wasn’t busy checking my pulse and took a deep gulp. Then I began coughing from the horrible taste.

Nino gently pried the bottle from my hand, emptied it with one long sip, and set it back on the table.

“Women,” Savio muttered under his breath.

I put my head down on Nino’s shoulder and focused on his chest as the next fight played out on the screen. When I felt Nino’s hand on my ankle, I peered up at him, but his full attention was on the fight. All I could focus on

were the small strokes of his fingers against my skin. The brothers began discussing strategies for Nino's next fight as they watched the giant's previous fights. Nino's hand shifted again, sliding up to my outer thigh. I stilled, my breathing hitching in my throat. His warm, rough palm felt surprisingly good despite its proximity to more problematic areas, areas that held painful memories.

He didn't move his hand, only rested it there, and I wasn't even sure if he'd realized it or not because he was in an argument with Remo about whether it was best to kill fast or let the fight play out for a while to entertain the audience. Eventually, he must have noticed my stillness and lowered his gaze to me. He moved his thumb lightly over my skin, his eyes remaining on my face. Goose bumps flashed across my skin. He leaned down to my ear, whispering. "Fear?"

I considered it for a moment then shook my head. Nervous, definitely yes, but not scared.

He nodded, obviously pleased.

"If this is turning into a fucking session, warn us, all right?" Savio muttered.

Nino narrowed his eyes, expression hardening. "Savio, watch it."

"What? Now I can't say fucking because *she* is here?" He sat back up, scowling at me. "No strippers, no whores, and now you don't want me to say fucking?" He looked at Remo. "Tell him he needs to stop acting like a fucking pussy and show Kiara who's boss."

"I think she knows who's boss," Remo said with a twisted smile. "And you stop bitching. Take a whore into your room if you are eager for pussy."

Savio leaned back with a challenging glint aimed at Nino. "What no 'watch it' when Remo says pussy?"

Nino rolled his eyes and relaxed again. “With you there is still hope. Remo is a lost cause.”

Savio chuckled. “Yeah, that’s a given.”

“I don’t care if you say fuck,” I said. “This is your house and you can talk however you like.”

“It is *our* house,” Nino said firmly. “And he can say fuck and whatever else he wants as long as he doesn’t insult you. You are mine, and I won’t have him insult you.”

“Geez, I didn’t insult her. I asked if you were about to fuck. That’s a valid question, don’t you think?”

Adamo gave me a look, which made me laugh again.

“We aren’t about to fuck, satisfied?” Nino asked.

Savio grinned. “More satisfied than you, obviously.”



Luckily, the conversation returned to fight strategies after that, but Savio’s words kept replaying in my mind. Would I ever be able to satisfy Nino? I wasn’t even sure I would ever be able to touch him *there*.

When Nino stepped out of the bathroom in only his briefs, I realized how stupid my concerns were. My eyes never seemed to get enough of watching him, but my fingers now itched to touch as well.

“What do you want?” he asked as he walked toward the bed.

“Touch you,” I admitted.

He stopped right in front of the bed, allowing me to see him in all his muscled glory. I swallowed, getting overwhelmed again.

“Do you want me to keep my briefs on?”

I nodded quickly because if he got naked, I’d lose my courage.

“Of course.” He nodded toward the nightstand. “Cuffs?”

“Yes.”

He grabbed the handcuffs from the nightstand, cuffed his left hand to the bedpost, and stretched out on the bed.

I knelt beside him. Nino looked completely at ease as he lay sprawled out on the bed. His eyes trailed over me, taking in every inch.

“You can touch me wherever you want.”

“Where do you want me to touch you?” I knew the answer to that question, of course.

“This is about you, Kiara. Touch me where you want.”

Gathering my courage, I ran my hands over his chest then down his abs until my fingertips grazed his waistband. Then I quickly backed up. I kept my eyes on my hands as I explored his muscled chest, but his eyes were on me the entire time. I ran my fingernails lightly over his chest, scraping across his nipples, and he exhaled deeply.

I stifled a smile and repeated the motion then moved lower. Avoiding his briefs, I moved on to his legs, massaging his strong thighs, before I returned to his torso once more. A while after my ministrations, he grew hard under his briefs. My hands paused on his abs.

“You are in control,” he assured me. His voice was deeper than ever before. My uncle had guided my hand last time, forced it down onto his erection, forced me to rub him. I’d hated the feel of him. Swallowing the growing lump in my throat, I pushed any thought of the past aside.

I ran my hands back up to his chest then down again, over his hips and down his thighs, and then on the way up, I brushed over him with my thumbs, barely touching him. He grew harder immediately, and I repeated the motion then moved back up to his chest. Nino’s eyes were keen as he watched me, his breathing deeper and his body taut like a bowstring. His hand came up to stroke my upper arm, a whisper of a touch that sent tingles

into every nerve ending. “I can touch you like that as well if you want.”

“But won’t you need both your hands?”

He tilted his head. “It would add to your enjoyment, but if you feel threatened we should keep me restrained.

“No, let’s try it without the cuffs.” I leaned over and opened them for him. He lifted up, bringing our faces close. I pressed my mouth against his, and he took the lead as he always did. My eyes fluttered shut as warmth settled in my core from the skillful way his lips and tongue worked me. I moaned softly into his mouth, and he pulled back. I peered up at him questioningly.

“I think we can move on now,” I said.

His mouth twitched in an almost smile and a hint of warmth reflected in his eyes. Simulated affection but so good.

“What should I do?” I asked uncertainly.

“You could lie on your back, and I’ll start massaging your legs and arms and see how you like it.”

I scooted lower and lay back. Nino knelt beside my legs, giving me a perfect view up his strong body. The overwhelming sense of losing control, or worse fear, never set in. He reached for my left foot and began massaging my sole with just the right amount of pressure. Then he moved on to my ankle. His touch switched between featherlight and more pressure as he worked his fingers up my calf.

My core throbbed, and I could feel myself growing wetter under his touch. His gaze followed the trail of his hands. “Can I remove your shorts?”

“Sure,” I said quietly.

He unbuttoned them slowly and pulled them down my legs, his fingers grazing my skin. My heart felt ready to burst out of my ribcage. Nino raised my foot up onto his thighs and stroked my knee then applied gentle

pressure on the skin just above it. I released a soft breath. Watching my face, he grabbed my ankle again and raised it as he bent forward. He pressed a kiss to the inside of my ankle before his tongue tasted the same spot, hot and wet and inexplicably perfect.

I shivered and could feel myself grow even more aroused. How could this feel so good? He shifted my leg again and pressed a light kiss to my calf. Finally his eyes lowered from my face and darted lower. It took me a moment to realize what he was looking at. The way he held my leg, he could see up to my panties that clung to my throbbing, drenched center.

He released a long breath and his expression became more strained. Embarrassment and insecurity filled me, accompanied by a hint of wariness because of my exposed state.

Nino met my gaze, and his eyes sent another pleasant shudder down to my core. He looked immensely pleased.

“Your body responds perfectly to stimulation,” he murmured. “This is very good. It will make our explorations very pleasurable for you.”

“So confident,” I said with a small, nervous laugh.

Nino smirked and kissed my calf again before he sucked the skin into his mouth and nibbled lightly while his other hand trailed up my arm. I shuddered again. This felt impossibly good.

He released my skin. “I would like to give your chest some attention.”

I paused. My nipples were already painfully straining against my clothes, but I wasn’t sure if I was ready to get out of my shirt and bra yet. Nino had seen me like that before, but for some reason I still had trouble baring myself to him.

“You can keep your shirt on, and I’ll just push it up a bit. The skin over your ribs and on your belly is very sensitive. If I give it some attention, you might come close to climax without any friction between your legs,

which I know you aren't ready for yet."

It was so very scary how easily he could read me.

"Okay," I said breathlessly.

His strong hands reached for the hem of my shirt and slowly pushed it up. I shivered when his thumbs lightly grazed my skin as he did it. His eyes locked with mine as he lowered himself to his side, his head level with my ribcage. My stomach twisted with nerves but I wanted this. Nino put his palm against my belly, and my muscles constricted under his touch.

"You tell me when you want me to stop."

I nodded. He began moving his thumb, brushing my skin and raising goose bumps all over my body. His eyes trailed from my stomach, down to my black lace panties, then over the length of my legs before they focused on my eyes. "You have a beautiful body," he said appreciatively.

I flushed. "Thank you."

He moved his hand over my belly and dipped his fingertips under the waistband of my panties. When I tensed, he pulled back. He didn't go near my panties after that and instead stroked my belly. I held my breath when he lowered his head and pressed a kiss to the skin. How could he be this good at gentleness?

Nino was a patient man. Whenever I flinched, he stopped, only to try something else. Soft kisses and touches. His lips took a long time on the sensitive skin over my ribs, kissing and nibbling. My nipples strained against the fabric of my bra, and Nino regarded them as he kissed the spot where the fabric was bunched. His gray eyes rose to meet mine.

"Would you like to have me restrained again?"

For a moment, I was so caught up in the sensations he had summoned that I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I nodded anyway. He got off the bed and came back with the handcuffs. Then he cuffed one of his hands to

the headboard as he leaned his back against it. I pulled my shirt over my head before my brain could get in the way.

“If you lean over, I can kiss your breasts if you like.”

So calm, controlled, and clinical but with an underlying tension in his silky voice that betrayed his arousal.

I flushed and reached behind myself to unhook my bra. My hands shook too much.

Nino regarded me calmly. “I can use my free hand to unclasp it. It’s my left, so I may take a bit longer.”

I moved closer and he reached up and unclasped my bra after a couple of seconds. Then he dropped his hand again and rested it on his ripped stomach. I lowered my bra. He had seen me naked on our wedding night, but I was still uncomfortable with his calm scrutiny. I had no way of knowing if he approved of what he saw.

“Scoot up,” he said.

I did and knelt beside him. He reached up slowly and touched my shoulder, his palm warm against my skin. He applied the lightest pressure until I leaned down, bringing my breast toward his face. He parted his lips and closed them around my nipple in a delicious cocoon of heat and wetness. I gasped from the sensation and had to support myself against his chest, bringing my breast closer to his face. His eyes seemed to see right through me and knew exactly what I desired as his tongue began to circle my nipple.

It was incredible, overwhelming, and so good.

He settled back and began to leisurely suck at my nipple, tugging, swirling, nibbling until I was sopping wet. I had never been aroused like this, but Nino’s mouth and his intense gaze caused unexpected sensations. I pressed my legs together, feeling like I was going to implode if I didn’t find some relief soon.

Nino eyes were drawn to the movement, but he kept up his ministrations. I couldn't look away from his face, from the desire in his eyes and the way he lavished my breast.

He released my nipple with a wet sound and exhaled. My cheeks burned. He lifted his hand off his stomach and moved it to my leg then rested it lightly on my knee. I stilled, but my core sprang to life, needy and desperate. I didn't know it could be like this.

He lay still too, gray eyes tracing my face. "You can lead my hand if you want."

"What?" I whispered, my brain barely functioning.

"If you would like to have me touch you and give you pleasure, you can lead my hand."

"But I wouldn't even know what to do. You are the one who does."

"I do, and my touch will be very pleasurable, but you are still tense."

My brows drew together at his confidence. "You are a bit full of yourself."

He tilted his head with the hint of amusement. "I'm only good at estimating my own talents, and I'm good at giving pleasure."

"And inflicting pain," I added.

"That too, but that's not something you have to worry about." His thumb stroked my knee lightly. "Why don't you let me suck your nipple again. You seemed to enjoy that."

I nodded and leaned forward. He latched onto my nipple, and I instantly moaned. "Now your other breast," he murmured when I could barely hold myself up above him. I shifted and he circled his tongue over my nipple then sucked it into his mouth while his hand came up to knead my other breast. My center began to pulsate, lightly at first, and then a shudder passed over me, spreading out from between my legs.

Nino sucked my nipple a bit harder. I gasped and felt more wetness pool between my legs as my center throbbed. I froze above Nino, and he released my nipple.

“What happened?” I asked, stunned.

“I think you might have had an orgasm. It wasn’t a strong one, but my sucking of your nipple was enough to stimulate your pussy without friction.”

Heat rose into my cheeks. “Oh, wow.”

Nino’s eyes were intent as they trailed over my chest then lower. “If I touch your pussy, it will intensify tenfold, trust me.”

I regarded him and my gaze darted down to the hard outline of him beneath his briefs. Not giving myself a moment to worry, I reached for him and cupped him through the material. He let out a sharp exhale and twitched against my palm. I scooted down, despite my racing pulse.

Nino was handcuffed to the headboard. It was safe for me.

I was done allowing the past to hold me down. I was done being a prisoner of Durant’s. He was dead. Nino had tortured and killed him for me. Now it was my turn to kill the man’s memory.

Fingers shaking, I hooked them under Nino’s waistband and pulled his briefs down. His stomach rippled with tension, but he made no sound. I didn’t dare look up at his face for fear of losing my courage.

I had seen Nino naked before, but I’d never risked more than fleeting glances. This time I allowed myself to watch his erection as I brought my palms down on his thighs. There was no reason for me to be afraid of Nino’s nakedness. And I wasn’t disgusted by his body, not even his erection, like I had been of Durant’s. Nino was beautiful all over, even with the scars and the tattoos—or maybe because of them. They were part of him, and I couldn’t imagine how he would look without them.

My eyes lingered on his erection. He was long and thick and

circumcised. A brief moment of panic burst through me at the idea of having him inside of me, remembering the pain from long ago, but I pushed it aside. I curled my fingers around the base, and Nino released a low breath, but he kept very still. I was in control of this. Nobody forced me to do this. I wanted it. *My choice.*

I began moving my hand slowly, up and down, focusing on the present, on my breathing, on Nino's low exhales, on the silkiness of him in my palm. He was tense under my touch, and when I finally dared to look up, his eyes burned into me with desire.

I shuddered, my movements faltering for a moment, but then I tightened my grip and sped up. This time I kept my eyes on his face, needing to see him, needing to see what I did to him. Nino never looked away as I rubbed him harder and faster, his breathing turning into pants. My own breathing turned labored as I watched him, watched his beautiful face. His free hand gripped the edge of the mattress as his expression twisted and his thigh muscles contorted under my hand. "If you keep it up, I'm going to come," he rasped.

I didn't stop. I needed to continue. My lips parted when Nino's eyes closed. His hips thrust upwards, and he came with a shudder. Nothing was more beautiful than Nino's perfectly cold face alight with passion. My gaze flitted down to my hand as he came over my fingers.

Stilling, my breathing lodged in my chest. He twitched twice, and then Nino, too, stilled. It became very quiet around us except for the pounding of my heart in my ears.

NINO

Kiara stared down at her hand wrapped around my softening cock with my

cum all over it. She was tense and her expression was impossible for me to read. I sat up, unlocked the handcuff, and gently pried her hand off me. Then I stood and tugged her along. She followed me without a word into the bathroom, where I turned the water on in the sink on and held her hand under it, washing my cum off. I could only assume it had triggered memories from the past.

Her brows drew together, and finally she raised her eyes to mine. “Why did you do that?”

I regarded her, trying to read her expression, but it was only puzzled not upset. I dried her hand then curled my fingers around her wrist. Her pulse was fast but not as fast as it was when she was scared. “I assumed you were upset because I came over your hand.”

“I wasn’t,” she said quietly.

I tilted my head. “Then why did you tense? You looked upset.”

“I was stunned and relieved,” she said slowly. “Because I was worried I couldn’t do it. That it would remind me too much of what he did, but it didn’t. I wasn’t disgusted.”

“That’s good,” I murmured. I hadn’t expected her to touch me today, but she must have felt safe with me being restrained. She smiled up at me, and I returned the smile. Her expression softened further. She pressed up against me, and my hands automatically wrapped around her hips. “Let me touch your pussy, Kiara. I want to make you feel good. I want to make you come hard.”

A blush spread on her cheeks. There was still uncertainty on her face.

“My fingers won’t bring pain, only pleasure. Trust me.”

“I do,” she said quietly.

I led her back into the bedroom, and Kiara lay down on the bed, watching me with a small, tense smile. I knelt beside her. “I will massage

your legs and work my way up. For now, you'll keep your panties on, okay?"

She nodded.

As I put my palms on her thighs, her skin tightened under the touch. "You just say 'stop' when you want me to stop," I told her firmly, meeting her gaze.

"Okay," she said.

I began kneading her outer thigh, and after a moment she relaxed, but I didn't move on. Eventually, I widened my movements, my fingertips stroking the soft inner side of her thighs where the small scar was. Kiara's breathing deepened. I brushed my palm higher, finally reaching her panty-covered mound. She sucked in a breath, and I glanced up at her and found her watching me.

"Do you want me to stop?"

She gave a quick shake of her head, and I smiled. "Good."

I ran my palm over her panties again, and she rocked her hips lightly. This time as I brushed my hand over her, I slid my middle finger over the little dip, brushing her folds and clit. She arched up with a surprised little moan, and I repeated the motion. Her panties stuck to her wet flesh, giving me a perfect view of her slit. Slowing my hand as I ran it over her, I made sure the pad of my finger rested against her nub. I kept my palm pressed against her pussy. Her heat and wetness was tantalizing against my skin. Her heady scent teased my nose and made me want to bury my face in her lap and lick up her arousal.

I moved my fingertip lightly over her clit, and Kiara moaned then flushed, biting her lip. I repeated the motion. "Don't quiet yourself. Let me hear you. That way I know you enjoy what I'm doing." Though, her soaked panties were a fucking good indicator as well.

Lightly rocking the heel of my palm against her, my finger brushed

her clit. Eventually, she moved her hips against me, her hands fisting the sheets.

Her eyes lowered to my groin area. I knew she'd find me hard.

"Come for me, Kiara," I ordered.

She moaned again, almost helplessly, her body beginning to shake under my touch. I sped up my finger. "Nino," she gasped. "I ... I ... oh God." Her eyes widened and then her hips bucked, and she cried out as she shuddered violently. I slowed my strokes, enjoying the way her panties clung to her with arousal.

My cock ached for another release, for her pussy, her taste and warmth. She was so fucking wet. It would have been so very pleasurable if I'd fucked her now, but her fear still prevented it.

Lifting my finger, I kept up the pressure of my palm against her center, knowing it would prolong her orgasm.

She watched me with parted lips, her curls a wild mess around her head. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For giving you an orgasm?" I asked with a hint of amusement.

I climbed back up to her and stretched out beside her. She moved closer, and I wrapped my arm around her. "For never going beyond what I can take," she said quietly. "For showing me that being touched there doesn't have to be painful."

She put her head down on my chest, and my body relaxed at the feel of her warmth.

CHAPTER 17



KIARA

I was a nervous wreck. This was the first time I'd be returning to Baltimore since marrying Nino, after the bloody sheets scandal. Giulia's description of the aftermath of that day was probably softened for my sake.

I'd be the center of attention. People would whisper behind my back. They would judge me for actions that weren't even my own.

Nino stepped up to me. "We should head out now. The plane ride takes almost five hours, and we need to be at your uncle's house around seven p.m."

I nodded and my stomach tightened even more.

"Where's your dress?" he asked.

I pointed toward the dark blue modest dress hanging on the door. It was one of the dresses Aunt Egidia had bought for me a couple of years back. It was the safe choice.

Nino shook his head once. He walked into our walk-in closet and emerged a few minutes later with the long red silk dress I bought a few weeks ago.

My eyes widened. "If I wear that, people will be staring even more."

Nino tilted his head. "You are a Falcone, my wife, and you won't try to hide. You will hold your head high and show them that they are beneath you. Show them how beautiful you are. Let them stare."

I blinked and nodded mutely. He made it sound so easy.

Remo, Nino, and I took the private jet to Baltimore. Savio, Adamo,

and Fabiano stayed in Vegas since this was more of a family matter, it being my uncle's seventieth birthday. Remo, as the Capo of the Camorra, was invited as a guest of honor, though I assumed that my aunt and uncle weren't too enthused about having him under their roof.

We would be staying in a hotel this time because Giulia and Cassio, as well as my other step-siblings, were already spending the night at my aunt and uncle's house. And of course because pretty much every member of the Famiglia had grown even more wary of Nino and Remo since they killed Durant on my wedding night.

Sometimes I wondered if something was wrong with me because I didn't feel guilty for what happened to him. I didn't see his corpse, but from the reactions of everyone who had, I knew it was bad.

I regarded Nino and Remo over the top of my book. They were discussing an upcoming meeting with Luca.

We arrived later than expected at our hotel, so I had to hurry getting ready. When I was dressed in the red dress with a slit going all the way up to my upper thigh, combined with the low-cut neckline, I couldn't tear my eyes from the mirror. My dark hair fell in waves down my back and shoulders, and I put on lipstick in the same blood red color as my dress. Lady in red.

Nino came up behind me with a pleased look. "You will be the center of attention, Kiara, as you should be. You are a sight to behold. Blood red is your color."

I huffed out a laugh. "People will think of the bloody sheets, no doubt."

Nino put his hands on my hips, and without thinking about it, I leaned back against him, relishing in the feel of his strong body pressed up against my back. "Let them remember the sheets. It's what will happen to anyone who dares to touch you."

I shivered at the expression on his face. So cold and cruel. So beautiful. Nino in his black tux and blood red bowtie was a breathtaking sight on his own, but together we looked perfect, like we were meant to be together. It was a ridiculous thought, a romantic notion I would never utter aloud because Nino wouldn't understand.

"Come now, we don't want to be late," he murmured, but his eyes traveled over my neckline once more, and the desire in his expression tightened my core.

Remo was already waiting in the lobby of the hotel when Nino and I arrived. Remo, too, was dressed in a tuxedo, but he wore a black bowtie. I'd never seen him this dressed up, not even at my wedding.

His eyes took their time assessing me. Then he smirked. "I bet a few people will be hit with unpleasant memories when they see your dress."

I wrung my hands as the rented limousine dropped us off in front of my old home. Nino wrapped his arm around my waist, his hand resting possessively on my hip.

I took a deep breath.

"Hold your head high," Nino reminded me quietly.

Remo looked at us curiously. "Don't let any of those fuckers put you down because your father was a traitor. Don't let them put you down for any other shit either. You are a Falcone now. If one of them doesn't show respect, tell me or Nino and we'll handle them."

"Thanks," I said with a small smile.

Remo gave a quick nod. I wasn't quite as terrified of him as I had been before, and he tried not to scare me too much. Maybe we'd come to an understanding eventually.

The door to the mansion swung open. Aunt Egidia and Uncle Felix came into view. Their eyes widened when they settled on me.

Nino squeezed my hip, and I raised my head, forcing a smile.

Kiara Falcone. Someone new. Not the girl who hid in the corners.

When we arrived in front of them, there was a moment of awkward silence, then I said quickly, “Happy birthday, Uncle Felix.” I kissed his cheek and his expression softened.

“Thank you, Kiara. You look incredible.”

“You do,” Aunt Egidia agreed. “What a strong color.”

I gave her a quick hug as well then stepped back so Nino and Remo could greet her and my uncle. Nino handed the expensive limited-edition scotch to my uncle, who visibly relaxed. It became apparent very quickly that neither Egidia nor Felix enjoyed being around Nino and Remo.

We followed them inside. The house had been decorated with fresh flowers, and the living room was filled with guests and so was the garden. A buffet had been set up in the adjoining dining room, and waiters walked around with trays loaded with champagne and appetizers. The moment Nino and I entered the room, all eyes turned to us, and most people didn’t manage to hide their surprise seeing me dressed like this.

Giulia motioned for me to join her and Cassio. I glanced at Nino, who released my waist. “Remo and I will go talk to Luca. Why don’t you head over to your stepsister?”

I nodded and quickly made my way over to her. She wrapped me in a tight embrace then pulled back and scanned my outfit, a proud expression on her face. “Finally, you’re showing off your curves. You look absolutely stunning.”

I smiled then nodded at Cassio. He made no move to touch me. He had always been careful not to do so unless absolutely necessary. Giulia and I had never discussed this, but I was fairly sure she had talked to him about what happened to me years ago. He was her husband, so it was only natural

to share intimate details.

“How are things in Las Vegas?” he asked, but from the tension in his expression, I could tell that Giulia must have given him a hard time because she’d been worrying about me.

I gripped my stepsister’s hand and squeezed. “I’m doing well. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Her eyes darted over to Nino, who was listening to something Luca had to say. “You can tell me if something’s wrong, Kiara. We can help you.”

I laughed. “Giulia, I don’t need your help. I’m now a Falcone. I’m well protected.”

She regarded me with surprise then exchanged a look with her husband. “Wow. What did they do to you?”

I glanced toward Nino, and as if he could feel my eyes on him, he turned, meeting my gaze. My lips pulled into a smile. “He taught me my worth.”

Giulia touched my bare shoulder, her lips parting. “You like him?”

I couldn’t look away from Nino. “I like him,” I said quietly, and my body warmed at my admittance. Deep down, I realized that perhaps I did more than just like him.

Giulia grabbed my hand and led me outside into a secluded part of the garden. “Kiara, how is this possible?”

“What? I thought you’d be happy that I feel home in Las Vegas, that my marriage to Nino isn’t hell as I’d originally feared.”

“I am happy for you, it’s just so hard to believe that the Falcones treat you right.”

I shrugged. “It is like you said: some men don’t bring violence home with them. Nino is one of them. He knows how strong he is, how powerful. He doesn’t have to humiliate me to feel powerful.”

The first real smile spread over Giulia's face, and she hugged me again. "I'm so happy for you."

People kept staring when we returned to the party, but they kept their distance. In the past it had been because they didn't want to be associated with a traitor; now it seemed as if they were scared. Eventually, I found myself back at Nino's side, his hand a reassuring presence on my hip.

"You're doing good," he murmured. His praise filled me with pride.

I felt relieved when we returned to our hotel later that night. Even after less than two months, Las Vegas already felt more like a home than Baltimore ever had, and I longed to be back where people didn't judge me for my past.



A couple of days later, I woke with Nino when he got up for his swim. I decided to stay in bed for once and grab a couple of hours of additional sleep. Nino surprised me when he sat down and leaned in close, mouth near my ear. "Tonight, I want to explore every inch of your body with my mouth," he said, and heat rose to my cheeks. "It'll be more intense than anything we've done so far. I'm very good at it."

All I could do in response was nod, stunned into silence, but my body exploded with heat. Nino got up, his swim trunks tenting, and turned to leave.

I closed my eyes, trying to imagine his mouth between my legs, wondering how it would feel. Restless and hot, I clamped my thighs together. My fingers found their way between my legs, and I stroked myself the way Nino had told me to, imagining his deep, low voice, his hands, his mouth ... and I came with a small shudder, but it wasn't enough. Not even close.

Slipping out of bed, I opted for a long shower to clear my mind.



That evening I prepared dinner for the first time. I wasn't sure if the men would appreciate it, considering it was meatless, but the three-cheese lasagna sounded delicious and as it cooked in the oven, its enticing scent gave me hope that I actually managed to create something edible.

I went in search of the men but found only one, Remo, who was kicking the punching bag as if it had personally insulted him. It was his favorite pastime.

He tossed a look my way but didn't immediately stop his assault.

"Where's Nino?"

"Shower." Kick. "He worked out with Adamo today." Kick. Punch. Punch. Kick.

"I cooked for us."

Remo paused, his dark eyes narrowing. "For you and Nino?"

"For all of us," I said quietly, shifting nervously under his harsh glare.

He moved closer despite my rising tension. Grabbing a towel thrown over the sofa, he stopped in front of me. "No running or flinching today?"

I pursed my lips. "I never ran from you."

"You did when I fucked the whore on the pool table."

Steps sounded a moment later, and Nino appeared at my side, lightly touching my back. "That is an unsettling sight."

"Your wife cooked for us," Remo said.

Nino glanced down at me. He smelled of his spicy shower gel. A few wet strands hung down his forehead and temples.

"Adamo took me grocery shopping today. I thought it would be nice to have a home-cooked meal for once."

My eyes darted to his mouth, trying to imagine how it would feel, but I came up short. My imagination wasn't very good.

“I assume no animal was harmed,” Remo muttered.

Nino sent his brother a warning look.

“It is vegetarian, yes, but your cholesterol levels will get their fill. Don’t worry. It’s layered with mozzarella, pecorino, and taleggio cheese.”

“About three pounds of cheese,” Adamo added as he sauntered down the steps, his wet hair tousled.

“Do you need my help?” Nino asked.

“You could carry it over here. The pan is heavy.”

Nino followed me into the kitchen, his warm palm pressed up against my back.

“It needs five more minutes,” I told him after another peek inside the oven, avoiding looking at his face because that led to me looking at his mouth and that led to more distracting thoughts. Nino regarded me quietly. He cupped my face and brushed his thumb over my cheekbone.

“You are nervous.”

I licked my lips, my eyes drawn up to his mouth then a bit higher. He moved closer and kissed me, slow and hot and with a promise of more. His tongue was almost playful as it circled mine, teasing but still dominant. Flustered, I pulled back. It was the first time Nino had initiated a kiss, the first time we’d been intimate outside of our bedroom.

“That’s what I’ll do tonight,” he murmured then added in an even lower voice, “Between your legs.”

I shivered. Nino was less careful around me; it was exciting and terrifying, and I didn’t want it any other way.

He pulled back, gray eyes evaluating my face. He reached for my wrist, brushing his thumb across the sensitive skin before he kissed it. “Remember, there’s nothing for you to fear when you are in bed with me.”

I nodded. My dry throat made swallowing difficult. “I think the

lasagna is done.”

Nino took out the large pan and carried it into the gaming room. I carried plates, napkins, and cutlery. Savio, Adamo, and Remo had already taken their usual seat. For a moment, I considered asking them to have dinner in the dining room but then decided against it.

“That smells good,” Adamo said as he leaned over the lasagna the moment Nino set it down on a wooden trivet.

“Are you sure she didn’t poison the food?” Savio asked with a grin, but he was already loading up his plate with lasagna.

Nino put his hand on my knee as he sat down beside me. “Kiara and I have plans for tonight, so I don’t think she will poison me just yet. Am I right?”

Heat blasted my cheeks.

“TMI, Nino,” Adamo muttered.

“TLI if you ask me,” Savio said with a grin. “It was more fun when you still shared your fuck adventures with us, Nino. Now I only get to hear Remo’s twisted shit.”

I was sure my head would explode with embarrassment any minute.

“If you don’t want to hear my twisted shit, I’ll share it with only Nino and Fabiano in the future.”

“I don’t think anyone wants to hear it,” I said.

Remo leaned back, regarding me with a sinister smile on his face. “Not everyone’s cut out for shitty vanilla sex, so sue me. And if I remember right, Nino and Fabiano enjoyed the rougher side of things too before your women castrated you.”

I chanced a look at Nino, but his face didn’t give anything away. The lasagna was delicious, and the men dug in as if it were their last meal. As usual, they taunted each other and argued. It always gave me a strange sense

of belonging when they acted like family around me.



After dinner, Nino and I retreated to our wing. When Nino closed the door to our bedroom, I peered up at him curiously. “What did Remo mean with the rougher side of things?”

Nino shook his head. “It doesn’t mean what you think it means.”

“You don’t know what I think,” I said quietly. “Maybe you are a genius, but you aren’t a mind reader.”

Nino wrapped his fingers around my wrist and tugged me closer. Then he leaned down. “I don’t have to be a mind reader to recognize the look on your face, Kiara.”

I sighed. “So you never ...?” My voice shook.

“Never,” he said firmly and relief filled me. His thumb stroked my wrist. “How about we explore some more now?”

I gave a mute nod, excitement coursing through my body. Nino led me toward the bed. “If you want me to go down on you, it would be wise not to have me restrained ... unless you feel comfortable sitting on my face.”

My eyes flew open in shock. “No,” I finally managed. “Definitely not.”

Nino’s lips twitched at the corners. “That’s what I thought.”

My cheeks were hot as I rolled my eyes. Stepping closer, I stood on my tiptoes and curled my hand around Nino’s neck. He lowered his head at once, claiming my mouth and wrapping an arm around my back. I lost myself in his kiss until he began to lower us to the bed. I felt the soft mattress beneath me as Nino hovered over me.

He pulled away, his eyes tracing my face. “Fear?” he asked quietly, holding his body above me.

It was ridiculous to be scared because it was Nino, but how Durant had felt hovering over me always returned to my mind, even if I didn't want the memories to hold me back.

Nino lowered himself to the bed beside me, and I quickly returned kissing him. He complied without hesitation and as usual took lead. I surrendered to his expert tongue, feeling my center heat. His hand stroked my side then slipped below my shirt, touching skin and creating goose bumps. His fingers reached higher then brushed over my lace bra. My nipples puckered under the touch, and I moaned into Nino's mouth. His hand cupped my breasts and kneaded lightly at first then his touch grew firmer. Gathering my courage, I reached for Nino, needing to feel him. My hands slid over his muscled chest, down to his ripped stomach until I reached the hem of his shirt. I tugged at it.

Nino pulled away from my mouth, sat up, and yanked his shirt over his head. My eyes took in his torso, the muscles, the scars, the tattoos, and as usual, my body filled with thousands of butterflies. Before he had even lain back down, my hands were already roaming over his chest. He propped himself up to allow me to explore. His eyes were on my face, but my eyes remained on my fingers as they stroked his pecs then grazed his nipples.

He exhaled, and I repeated the motion, loving that I could break through Nino's cold demeanor with such a small touch. It felt empowering. Exhilarating.

"How about we get rid of your shirt as well?" Nino murmured, hands reaching for the hem of my shirt. I raised myself up so he could pull it over my head.

His eyes traveled over my body, lingering on my breasts, and then his lips returned to mine as his fingers tugged at my nipple through the lace. He helped me out of my bra. Fingers and lips caressed my breasts, shoulders and

stomach, as he left a burning need in their wake. Despite my body's need, I froze when Nino reached for my panties. So far he'd touched me through the fabric. It gave me the illusion of safety.

I lifted my hips, and Nino took me up on my invitation, but his eyes remained on my face as he laid me bare to his eyes. His palm stroked my thigh then slowly up it, moving over the small patch of dark hair between my legs. I held my breath when his thumb touched my slick nub for the first time without a barrier. Arching up, I moaned.

His finger nimbly stroked my folds, but he never dipped between them. I wasn't sure how good he was at reading me ... if he understood that having his fingers so close to my entrance scratched the surface of painful memories. Nino moved to the end of bed and eased my ankles apart. I knew what he was about to do and tried to make my body relax.

He stretched out between my thighs, his tattooed biceps flexing as he parted me wide. My center clenched, followed by my thighs, when he lowered his gaze to my center.

"Fear?" he asked quietly, intently. I wasn't afraid of that. *He* had never done that to me.

"Nerves," I admitted.

"Of what?" His breath ghosted over my wet heat, and I trembled with anticipation, nerves, and need.

It was hard to explain. "I don't know."

He leaned forward. "This is going to be good for you, Kiara. Try to focus on my tongue and my lips. Don't think about anything else."

His breath fanned over my clit, and then his tongue slid over me lightly, dipping between my folds before it fluttered over my nub. I whimpered from the sensation.

"Good?" Nino asked against me, his voice deep and calm.

I nodded, my fingers digging into the bedsheets. Nino's tongue did a small flutter again, and my muscles finally loosened. He eased my thighs farther apart with his shoulders and dragged his tongue down to my opening. I tensed briefly, and he moved back up quickly. Again, his tongue fluttered over my clit then over my folds before he dipped lower and repeated the same motion over my entrance. Intense pleasure coursed through me, and this time my body didn't tense. Nino's tongue flicked lightly over my opening then he twirled it around and increased the pressure, easing the tip into me. I released a surprised gasp.

He let out a low hum, which sounded like approval, and my eyes darted down to watch him. His gaze rested on my folds as he circled my opening with his tongue. He seemed to enjoy it, and that realization banished the last of my nerves. He flicked his tongue over my clit again, with light nudges and twirls, and then I could feel something building; tension tightened deep in my core, mounting with every lick and flick, until I shattered. I cried out, shuddering through my release.

Nino groaned against me, moving lower, and lapped at my entrance with slow strokes. My eyes widened as my walls clenched again under his ministrations.

"Ride it out," he ordered in a low voice.

He began to use firm licks to heighten my pleasure again. It was incredible, *impossible*. This felt better than anything ever had.

"Nino," I whimpered as he worked me with gentle care. "This feels so good."

"Good," he rasped against my folds, and I trembled at the sound. "I want you to come again for me, Kiara. Can you do this for me?"

"Yes," I gasped out, and he flicked his tongue along my clit before he focused his attention on my entrance. He pressed his mouth firmly against me

and his tongue entered me again. His tongue felt so good inside of me as he moved it slowly. His thumb found my clit, and he rubbed the same soft circles.

I bucked my hips restlessly, overwhelmed with the wondrous sensations. It was building even quicker this time, my flesh oversensitive but still eager for more. My hand flew down to Nino's head, gripping his hair, and then I came even harder.

Nino's fingers stroked my folds. "I'd like to put my finger in you."

I met his gaze. His expression was calm, self-assured. I swallowed.

He dipped one finger between my lips. "Say something. Tell me to stop if you don't want this."

"I ... I'm worried it'll hurt like last time."

"It won't," Nino said firmly with certainty. The tip of his finger moved a bit lower. I tensed, remembering the pain from long ago, the feeling of breaking, of helplessness.

Nino regarded me, his finger lightly tracing my opening, but he didn't push in. He reached up with his other hand and stroked my lower belly. "Try to loosen up, Kiara. You are very wet, and my finger will be very pleasurable against your sensitive walls if you allow it."

I tried to relax, but my body clamped down with fear from the past. Nino kept stroking my opening and folds. "Let me help you," he murmured.

He startled me when his hand fluttered up from my stomach to the ticklish spot over my ribs. I gasped out in laughter and twitched. Then Nino slipped his finger into me. He immediately stopped the tickling.

"Oh," I breathed out and stilled. It didn't hurt at all. Slowly, his eyes found my face. He began moving his finger, and I moaned at the sensation.

"Why did you tickle me?" I asked thickly as Nino kept thrusting inside me with his finger. He rubbed my clit lightly.

“I distracted your body. Your brain had assumed my finger against your opening was a threat because you expected pain, so I went and posed another threat your synapses had to focus on. Usually it works best with actual pain, but tickling is effective too because the body reacts in a similar way.”

I shook my head. “You are good at this.”

His lips twitched, and his gray eyes questioned me. “I’ve studied the workings of the body for a long time, especially its reactions to pleasure and pain.”

I didn’t doubt it. I moaned as he did something with his finger inside of me, a light rotation.

He repeated the motion and rubbed his thumb lightly over my clit. “Do you like this?”

How could he even ask? “Yes,” I managed to get out. His lips took the place of his thumb over my clit as his finger slid in and out slowly.

“Come again for me,” he said in that silky, dominant tone, and I fell apart under the combined sensation of his finger and his mouth.

My entire body burst with waves of pleasure. I trembled for a long time, trying to catch my breath. Nino pulled his finger out and then shocked me by lifting it to his lips and putting it into his mouth.

“I enjoy your taste, Kiara,” he said in a more textured voice as he knelt between my legs. My eyes were drawn to his pants. He was hard, aroused because he’d had his mouth on me.

I sat up, reached for his briefs. “I want to give back.”

Nino slipped out them then knelt on the bed again. I was in front of him and reached for him. He groaned. I moved slowly then leaned forward, and he met me halfway. His lips claimed mine and tasted like me. We kissed as I pumped my hands up and down, his eyes boring into me with more than

cold scrutiny. Our kiss turned desperate, uncoordinated. Nino tensed in my grip. I watched the small twitches of his muscles, the sharp pull of his mouth, listened to his quick pants, and it felt right.

CHAPTER 18



KIARA

Leona gave me a look. “Are you nervous too?”

I laughed. “Nervous doesn’t even begin to cover it. I don’t think I’ll be any good at fighting.” I paused. “But why are you nervous? I thought you’ve practiced with Fabiano before.”

“A few times, yes, but we’ve always been alone. Now there will be people watching.”

I nodded. I wished Nino had chosen to practice alone with me, but I knew he had a lot on his plate because of his upcoming fight against that giant man.

When we stepped out into the training hall, my eyes had trouble taking it all in. The chandelier dangling from the ceiling, the red and gold wallpaper, the broken roulette tables, the beautiful dirty, seashell-shaped windows ... It was so typically Falcone to choose something as flashy as an abandoned casino building for their fighting gym.

The men had already gathered around the boxing ring. They were only in fight shorts, and my heart thundered faster at the sight of all that muscle and scars. Even Adamo was muscular for an almost fourteen-year-old.

“Thank God, not the cage,” Leona muttered, and I gave her a questioning look. She smiled. “Fabiano always insists we work out in the cage, and it honestly gives me the creeps.”

My eyes wandered over to the cage, and I had to agree. I was already

nervous as it was.

Nino touched my hip when I arrived beside him. “Leona will go first because she already has some practice.”

Trying to hide my relief, I nodded.

Fabiano parted the ropes for Leona, who climbed in with a nervous look toward the Falcone brothers. “Are you all going to watch?”

“No,” Nino said. “I’m going to attack you.”

Leona’s eyes widened. “What? I thought Fabiano would train with me?”

Fabiano shook his head. “Not this time. Being faced with an opponent that makes you nervous is closer to reality.”

Nino swung himself over the rope and faced Leona, his arms hanging down at his side in a relaxed way. “Watch closely, Kiara,” he said.

I nodded.

Nino lunged at Leona, and I noticed Fabiano’s body rocking forward slightly. Leona let out a surprised cry when Nino’s hand clamped down her wrist. He jerked her toward him, and then she was already on her back. He knelt between her legs.

“Leona,” Fabiano hissed. “Remember what I taught you.”

Leona began struggling, but Nino pressed her wrists into the ground above her head, lowering himself, parting her legs further with his muscular thighs.

Remo made a buzzer noise. “There’s no way for you to escape now. You acted too late. Now he’s got you exactly where he wants you.”

I shivered.

“He would have to open his pants. That might give her an opening to attack him with her free hand,” I said.

Everyone looked at me, and I swallowed but stood my ground.

Nino grabbed both of Leona's wrists in one of his despite her wriggling and showed me his free hand. "Free to open my pants."

Nino straightened and pulled Leona to her feet.

"Why did you act so late?" Fabiano asked with a frown.

"I was startled, and to be honest ... Nino scares me," she said indignantly.

"Then let's hope your assailant announces his attack ahead of time and doesn't scare you," Remo muttered.

Obviously losing interest, Savio and Adamo moved into the cage and began sparing with each other, but Savio definitely had the upper hand and didn't take it easy on his younger brother, judging by the force of his kicks and punches. No wonder Adamo was always beat-up.

"Again," Fabiano said.

Nino grabbed Leona's arm, but this time she acted instantaneously. She brought her hand up to claw at his face, but he blocked it with his elbow, at the same time dodging her kick aimed at his groin with his hip. Then he threw her down. They ended in the same position as before, and Leona huffed.

"Better," Nino said with a nod, pushing off her and pulling her to her feet.

"I still ended up on the ground."

"Your attacker won't be Nino," Fabiano said. "He probably won't be half as fast or strong or skilled."

They did two more drills until Leona's face was bright red and covered in sweat. Nino looked like he'd just finished a nice, slow morning walk.

I stifled a smile and when he met my eyes and the corners of his mouth twitched. My body filled with warmth as it so often did in Nino's

presence.

“Your turn,” he said and parted the ropes for me.

Gulping, I climbed inside the ring, and Leona quickly scrambled out, whispering, “Good luck.”

Fabiano immediately wrapped his arm around her waist possessively. Remo shook his head and jumped up on the edge of the ring then swung himself inside.

I stared at Nino, my pulse hammering in my veins. “You will train with me, right?” My voice trembled.

Nino regarded my face then shook his head. “I want you to face your fears. They might immobilize you during a real fight.”

I started shaking as I looked at Remo, who stood with his arms crossed over his chest, watching me with dark amusement.

I shook my head. “No. I can’t.” I backed into the rope. “Please, Nino.”

Nino exchanged a look with his brother, who rolled his eyes.

“I can take over,” Fabiano suggested.

My head swiveled toward him. He terrified me too, but not nearly as much as Remo.

“Then do it,” Remo growled, but he walked toward me, his dark eyes hard. “As long as you don’t face your fears, you will be weak. He will keep power over you as long as you let him. If you ever stop being a coward, come to me and I will show you how to fight an opponent set on hurting you.”

He jumped over the rope and walked toward Adamo and Savio to join them in the cage.

Nino touched my waist, his eyebrows pulled together. “Don’t mind him.”

“Do you agree with him?” I asked quietly.

Nino nodded. “Remo would be the best option if you wanted to simulate an attack.”

“I can be as scary as Remo if you want me to be,” Fabiano said with a shrug.

“No,” I said quickly. “Thanks.”

Fabiano was scary enough with his assessing blue eyes.

“You saw what Leona did,” Nino began. “Of course her past doesn’t harbor the same demons, so you will have to fight two enemies: Fabiano and your memories. I can tell you how to do the first, but the latter is your fight.” He motioned for me to get closer to Fabiano. “You are smaller and weaker, so you will have to make every hit count. Aim where it hurts the most. His balls.” Nino pointed at Fabiano’s groin area, who cocked an eyebrow. “Solar plexus.” He pointed at the area below the ribs. “Under his chin. Eyes. Nose.” He gestured toward Fabiano’s face.

“Here, let me show you,” Nino said and positioned himself in front of Fabiano, whose lips widened into a smile.

Nino brought his knee up sideways toward Fabiano’s groin without making contact. Then he curled his hand into a fist and pretended to punch Fabiano’s stomach twice. Then he pushed the heel of his hand up toward Fabiano’s nose. “You can also scratch or bite, but don’t waste too much time. You will tire eventually.”

Nino stepped back and gave Fabiano a nod.

Fabiano came at me at once, and I seized. Everything happened so fast, and suddenly I was on my back and he was between my legs. Panic choked me. I let out a terrified sob, clenching my eyes shut, and began to shake.

“Fuck,” someone said. Then another cold and compelling voice spoke above me. This voice had brought me back before.

“Kiara, open your eyes.” And I did, looking up into cool, gray eyes. Nino. “Don’t allow the past to control you. You are safe. Nothing will happen to you. I am here.”

I swallowed and gave a small nod. Fabiano had sat back on his haunches, regarding me with a deep frown. I closed my legs, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” he said with a shrug, but his eyes were a bit softer than before.

Nino helped me to my feet. “Again?” His eyes held mine, and I gave a small nod. He turned to Fabiano. “This time straddle her legs only.”

Fabiano nodded. “Ready?”

“Yes,” I said, and he reached for my arm, and again, I found myself on my back with Fabiano straddling my thighs. Panic clawed its way out of my chest, and I tried to fight it, but I couldn’t. My vision turned black. Fabiano shoved off me, and I sucked in a deep breath. Nino knelt beside me, touching my shoulder.

“I don’t think it’s working,” Fabiano said. “She is too scared.”

Nino nodded but he kept his eyes on me and his warm palm on my shoulder. “You can leave. I will take it from here.”

Fabiano gave me a tight smile. Then he climbed out of the ring.

“I’m sorry,” I said, embarrassed that I’d broken down like this even though this had been fake, even though Fabiano hadn’t meant to hurt me.

“I underestimated your fear of men. With me, you’ve been relaxed.”

“That’s because I trust you,” I whispered.

His brows pulled together, and he didn’t say anything. “That’s why I wanted you to fight Remo or Fabiano. You are wary of them. It would make the fight more real.”

“I know, but it’s too much right now. Can’t you train with me?”

“Of course, but I will go hard on you, Kiara. It makes no sense to stay within your comfort zone. You won’t improve if you feel safe.”

My stomach clenched with nerves as Nino pulled me to my feet. Nino had a point, and I wanted to show him that I wasn’t weak, and more than that, I wanted to show myself that I could beat my past once and for all. I’d allowed it control my life for too long.

“Step closer.” As I did, he grabbed my wrists, and I tensed in preparation for his attack, but he put my palms up on his shoulders. “Use this to gain momentum and now jerk your knee up as hard as you can.”

I hesitated.

“Do it,” he ordered, and I did. Nino blocked my knee with his thigh so I wouldn’t connect with his groin. I jumped from the impact, a dull pain spreading through my knee and upper thigh. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You are supposed to hurt me. Again, and harder this time.”

I jerked my knee up again and rammed his thigh. He gave a curt nod. “Better. Still too hesitant. Now make a fist.”

I lowered my hands and curled them into fists.

“Hit my stomach.”

I punched him, but even I could tell that I was holding back. Nino grabbed my hand and curled my fist even tighter. Then he touched it to the spot where he wanted me to aim. “Here. And hard.”

I punched him again, and his mouth tightened. I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d actually managed to hurt him or if he was still not satisfied with my performance. Probably the latter. “Now open your hand and bring the heel of your hand up to my nose.”

I did as he instructed, and he changed the angle of my hand slightly. “Like this. If you use enough force, you can break your opponent’s nose.”

“You perhaps.”

He shook his head. “You can. Trust me. If I use that move with full force, I can kill my opponent by shoving his bones up into his brain, not just break his nose.”

My face scrunched up in disgust.

“Now let’s move on to actual defense. I will attack you, throw you on the ground, and force myself between your legs, and you will try to stop me with everything you have. Don’t hold back, Kiara. You can’t hurt me.”

“Okay,” I said. I wiped my hands of my pants because they were sweaty from nerves.

Nino regarded me calmly, but then something in his expression shifted, becoming calculating and predatory, and I knew he was about to pounce. Despite that knowledge, I yelped when he grabbed me by the hips. After a second of freezing, I brought my knee up, but he dodged it with his thigh and pressed me to the ground with his body. Then he was over me, kneeling between my legs, his pelvis pressed to mine. My wrists were pinned above my head and no amount of struggling made him budge. My breathing turned ragged as panic swirled in the pit of my stomach, not as bad as before, but it was definitely there.

“Fight it,” Nino ordered sharply.

I knew what he meant, but it was so very hard to fight my own mind. I focused on his cool, gray eyes. They had now freed me from my panic twice, and they did again. Slowly, my terror waned and my breathing slowed.

Nino shook his head as he released my wrist, but he stayed on top of me. “It’s good that you find comfort in my eyes, Kiara, but it won’t help you if you ever get attacked.”

I closed my eyes. “Maybe we just have to accept that I will never be able to defend myself and that the next time someone like my uncle comes

around, he can take whatever he wants from me.”

Nino’s lips brushed my ear, making my eyes shoot open in surprise. “You will learn to defend yourself, and I swear nobody will ever hurt you again. Nobody will ever get close.”

He pulled back and his expression set my heart aflame with silly emotions. For a moment neither of us moved, and I touched my palms to his muscled chest. My breathing quickened for another reason. For the first time in my life, I was comfortable with a man being on top of me, with him between my legs. Nino finally broke the moment, pushing himself off me, and held a hand out for me. I took it and let him pull me to my feet, but my body still tingled from his closeness.

“Again,” he said and the tension in his voice overpowered the fluttering in my belly.

NINO

After working out and we came home, Kiara kept throwing glances my way, but the moment I returned them, she looked away. I couldn’t read her mood. She seemed nervous. I went into the shower after she was done but kept the door open as usual. Kiara never came in. My nakedness still made her nervous and it wasn’t only from fear.

Remo had been right. She needed to learn to fight someone who scared her, and that person wasn’t me. Kiara had come to trust me, and I hadn’t expected it. Of course, I had treated her in a way that made me hope for her to be able to relax in my presence. Her cowering fear wasn’t something I could tolerate in a wife. I needed someone who could stand up to me, and Kiara was getting there. We still had a ways to go, but unlike my brother, I was patient.

Leaning back against the shower stall, I turned the water to cold so my cock didn't get any ideas. I had a feeling Kiara wouldn't be ready for more exploring today. The fight with Fabiano had unsettled her. And if I was being honest, it had been difficult for me to stand back and watch him touch her, hold her, kneel between her legs. It was something I had never experienced before. I couldn't place an emotion on what I was feeling.

When I entered the bedroom after my shower, Kiara was propped up against the headboard, wearing a thin, silk nightgown that did little to hide her nipples. Her lean legs were crossed at the ankles, a place where Kiara was beautifully sensitive. Her eyes darted up from the book she was holding and did a quick scan over my naked chest, lingering on my briefs, before she returned her gaze to the book, but she wasn't able to focus on what she was reading.

Drying my hair, I walked over to where she pretended to read. "What is wrong? Did I do something to make you nervous? Is it because of the training today? I have to make sure you learn to defend yourself. Going easy on you won't have the desired effect."

I thought we had settled into some sort of understanding. I wouldn't budge on the subject of self-defense. Kiara was well protected. As a Falcone, her last name carried fear through the streets in Las Vegas. Everyone knew she was mine. Everyone knew Falcone protected what was ours and our revenge was cruel and merciless. She was as safe as a woman in our world could be, however, I couldn't see why we shouldn't guarantee the highest level of safety by making Kiara a difficult target. Her gun skills had improved, but she needed to learn to defend herself without the aid of weapons.

She blushed and set down her book then finally looked up at me. Her eyes trailed over my torso and down to my briefs then quickly back up to my

face. I narrowed my eyes, trying to gauge her mood. She was nervous. I dropped the towel I'd used to rub my hair dry and sank down on the bed beside her.

“If you don't tell me what bothers you, I can't change my behavior.”

“You did nothing,” she said quietly. Again, her eyes did a quick scan of my upper body, dipping lower, then jerked back up to my face. This wasn't her being upset over today's events, I realized. I was fairly sure she was aroused, but as usual, I allowed her to make the first move.

“I—I want to sleep with you.”

My body reacted at once, blood shooting straight into my cock, but I didn't act on the impulse. I turned toward Kiara, angled my body closer, my arm supporting myself beside her leg, and she scooted forward, dropping her book on the ground. Her lips pressed against mine, and her tongue slipped in. I fought the urge to press her down into the mattress, to cover her with my body and grind myself against her pliable body. I wanted to sink myself into her fucking tight channel, wanted to feel her around my cock and lose myself. There was no denying it.

“Would you like me restrained?” I asked between kisses.

Her brown eyes held mine, and she gave a small shake of her head. “I trust you. I'm not scared of your strength anymore.”

I ran my knuckles down her arm. Trust, it was a fragile thing. I knew. I'd only ever trusted my brothers, but I was starting to trust her too. “I will make this good for you, Kiara.”

She exhaled and a hint of anxiety tightened her lips. “It won't be like last time, right?” Her voice shook and her eyes looked at me as if she knew I'd keep the past at bay. And fuck, I wanted to do this for her, wanted to show her that what she had gone through wasn't something she would ever relive again.

I traced her breasts through her top. “It will be nothing like that.” I kissed her chin down to her throat and collarbone, breathing in her sweet scent, relishing the feel of her silk-soft skin against my lips. “There won’t be pain or fear. You will be in control.”

Her fingers found the back of my head, and she pushed me down. I complied, brushing her strap off her shoulder and laying her breast bare. I closed my mouth around her erect nipple, and sucked it into my mouth, enjoying the way it puckered under my ministrations.

She gasped, goose bumps rippling over her skin. My hand cupped her other breast, massaging gently before my thumb found her nipple and swiped over it, eliciting a moan from her. I swiped again as I circled her other nipple with my tongue. She began shifting restlessly beside me as she knelt on the bed.

“Nino,” she whispered. “Please.”

“Please what?” I asked in a raspy voice. I was painfully hard in my briefs, but I tried to shove my need to the back burner.

“I need to come.”

“Do you want my mouth?”

She gave a jerky nod.

“Then lie down.”

She scooted back and lay down. I climbed on the bed then hooked my fingers in her panties, and when she didn’t tense, I pulled them down. She lifted her butt to make it easier for me. Slowly, I eased a knee between her legs, watching her face. There was a second of resistance before she opened up for me. Putting my second knee between her legs, I brushed her thighs lightly and eased her legs farther apart. The sight of her glistening folds sent a ripple of desire through my body, straight into my cock.

Patience was a virtue, but at this moment, being patient felt like an

insurmountable task. Taking a deep breath, I stretched out between her thighs as she watched me with need, lips parted, eyes wide and trusting.

She was already very aroused from my ministrations to her nipples, aroused enough for sex, but I wanted her to be relaxed from several orgasms before I entered her. I kissed her thigh, working my way higher to where she wanted my mouth. I breathed over her folds, causing her legs to tremble with need. I kissed her pubic bone then her folds before I took a long lick, tasting her, not caring that it made my cock even harder. Her taste was like a fucking catalyst of my own lust.

Kiara breathed deeply, almost relieved. I established a rhythm of light flutters over her clit and slow circles over her opening until she was writhing and panting. When she was making small, desperate rocking motions with her hips, I pressed my tongue up against her clit firmly, and she fell apart with a cry. Her hand came down on my head, holding me in place, as I focused on her entrance, dipping my tongue in, burying my face all the way in her perfect lap.

I stroked her thigh then moved my hand closer to her pussy and brushed my fingers over her wet flesh. Tracing my index finger along her slit, I waited a few moments, but she didn't tense, and so I slipped one finger into her. My cock jerked, knowing that soon I'd be buried in her wet heat. I began fucking her with my finger slowly as I circled her clit. And that sight lit me on fire. I imagined this came close to feeling emotions, this burning, all-consuming need. Better than the feel of her arousal was the breathless moan falling from Kiara's mouth, the softness of her thighs telling me she enjoyed this without any reservations because she trusted me to be good to her.

I raised my eyes to watch her.

My finger was engulfed by her wetness, and she was fisting the bedsheets, making desperate little moans in her throat. I pulled back a couple

of inches.

“How is it, Kiara?” My voice was tight and deep—*on edge*—but Kiara didn’t seem bothered by it. A strange warmth settled in my chest, one I couldn’t place.

“Good,” she whispered then gasped as I curled my finger inside of her, pressing my pad lightly against her G-spot.

“Good?”

“So good, Nino. So good.” She sounded as if this was a fucking miracle, as if it was a revelation I had offered her, and something strangely possessive filled my chest.

Kiara was mine.

“Good,” I murmured against her wet flesh before I closed my mouth over her clit again and brushed her G-spot. She came again, arching up, clawing at the sheets, gasping and moaning, and I softened my ministrations, allowing her to ride this out. I knew I needed to test her readiness with another finger, but warning her about it posed the risk that she’d tense again. However, she needed to feel in control. “I want to put a second finger in you.”

A moment of hesitation. “Okay.”

“Try to relax or I will tickle you again,” I warned as I slid my finger in and out slowly.

She laughed, and I eased my second finger into her. She tightened in surprise and I didn’t move, letting her realize that no pain would follow. She was too wet for that. “Good?”

“Okay,” she said.

“Then let’s try to make it good.” I moved up her body, keeping my fingers inside of her and closed my mouth over her nipple. I teased it for a while before I began moving my fingers in a slow rhythm.

Kiara's walls hugged them tightly, and I couldn't wait to feel them around my cock. After a few seconds, Kiara met my thrusts with her pelvis as I sucked her nipple harder. I released her nub to ask how it was, but Kiara was faster.

"Good, Nino. Please don't stop."

I returned my mouth to her waiting nipple, lightly nibbling, and soon Kiara arched under me, crying out her release. I eased my fingers out of her, which were coated in her juices, and that sight almost undid me.

Her eyes fluttered open, her gaze unfocused, lips pulled into a small, satisfied smile.

"Your body is ready," I rasped, teetering on the edge of control. I'd rarely allowed myself to lose control, and tonight would definitely not be the day.

"I'm ready," she said softly, eyes searching my face. I smiled at her, knowing she needed it to be set at ease.

I pushed myself up and off Kiara. "I think it's best for you to be on top."

"I'm not sure I can do this. Can you be on top?"

I nodded but given her nerves as soon as she realized my physical power, being on top seemed a bad choice. In the boxing ring today, she had handled it well, but it was different than submitting to someone in a bed. I got out of my briefs. I was already painfully hard, but I knew I needed to go slow for Kiara. Never in my life did I have to hold back for someone. I took whatever pleasure women could offer me, and they could offer plenty, but Kiara was my wife and I wanted to treat her right, treat her like a wife was supposed to be treated.

Kiara wasn't a whore or debtor. She was my wife. A Falcone. My responsibility.

She watched me with nerves and trust. I wasn't sure why the realization that she trusted me pleased me as much as it did; only my brothers trusted me, and now Kiara—even though her past had taught her that the people she trusted ended up hurting her.

I climbed back on the bed, and Kiara smiled, but her lips trembled as she did so. I wanted to be in her.

“We don't have to do this,” I told her, even if the words flowed painfully from my lips.

“No,” she said immediately, touching my chest. Her fingers were shaking. I brought her palm to my mouth and kissed it. She relaxed slightly, reacting well to tenderness, as usual. I enjoyed being gentle with Kiara because the way she responded gave me a great deal of satisfaction. It was a new experience that I hadn't thought possible.

I moved over her slowly, and she opened her legs for me so I could kneel between them. Supporting myself on my arms, I looked down at my wife. I could already see that she was getting overwhelmed by my presence. Her breathing had quickened, and her lashes were fluttering nervously. I wished there was a way for her to realize that this had nothing to do with the rape of her past. Her being on top of me still seemed like the best solution to the problem.

I hovered over her, not moving. “You will feel even more out of control if I enter you. My weight will press you into the mattress, and you will have to yield to the pressure I apply. There really is no helping it,” I rasped, trying to ignore the way my cock jerked as I grazed the inside of her thigh. A slight shift of my hips and one thrust was all it would take to sate the burning desire in my veins.

“Why do you want this position?” I asked quietly.

“Because I want you to take lead ... and I want to be close to you

when we have sex with each other.”

“Even when you sit on top of me, I can hold you in my arms. I can easily lead even when you ride me.”

Her cheeks flushed at the word ride.

I pushed myself off her and sat back against the headrest. “Move on top,” I ordered, deciding to take the decision off her hands.

Kiara got to her knees, biting her lower lip in uncertainty. I softened my expression and brushed her unruly curls away from her face. She leaned into the touch at once. I stroked her cheek with my thumb then ran my fingers down her throat and over her arm. She let out a small breath.

“Ready?” I asked in a forced calm voice.

Kiara nodded and moved closer to me. I grabbed her waist and helped her settle on my lower abdomen. I exhaled when her arousal pressed up against my abs. Her body was so fucking ready. Wrapping my arm around her back, I pulled her toward me, my lips claiming hers in an unrestrained kiss.

Kiara returned the kiss eagerly and rubbed her wet pussy over my pelvis, unconsciously slipping down. I stifled a growl. I just wanted to bury myself in her, but I held back for her, let her feel comfortable on top of me.

When she finally leaned back and looked at me for help, I said, “Lift up a bit and scoot back.” She did until she straddled my thighs. I curled my hand around my shaft. She swallowed thickly. “It will be good. I will take care of you, Kiara.”

She nodded with a small smile as she gripped my shoulders and positioned herself above my cock. Slowly, her palms slid down until they pressed against my chest and her sopping wet entrance brushed my tip. I restrained a groan, not wanting to startle or scare her.

My balls tightened, my muscles clenching. Fuck. I couldn’t remember

the last time I'd wanted someone as much as I wanted Kiara right this moment.

"It might sting a little, but you are very aroused, Kiara." I knew I'd find no resistance if I plunged into her. Her body was ready for claiming, but her expression displayed apprehension. I was better at reading her emotions now.

"Help?" she whispered, her dark brown eyes trusting, and my heart picked up its pace for some inexplicable reason.

I pressed my heels into the mattress for leverage and grasped her hips to hold her in place. "I'm going to shift my hips now and enter you," I warned. "I will go very slow so your body can adapt. Tell me if you need me to stop."

Pushing up slightly, my tip slipped in and I suppressed a groan as her walls fisted me tightly. Her lips fell open, brows pulling together. She leaned forward, bringing our faces even closer so her sweet breath ghosted over my face. Her wide eyes held mine.

"Pain?" I asked, my voice harder, rougher than I wanted it to be. With how wet she was, I couldn't imagine she felt pain, but she was also very tight, a delicious combination for my cock and one that made me want to plunge hard and deep into her.

"No," she said. "Stretched."

I waited, even if my body screamed for me to buck my hips and impale her on my length. Her eyes held so many emotions, I had no way of grasping a single one. How must it feel to have that kind of chaos inside your body?

She moved her pelvis, and I took that as permission to lift my hips. I slid deeper into her, her tight heat encasing me perfectly, and she closed her eyes.

“Kiara,” I forced out. “I need to see your eyes.” I had trouble reading her facial expression without seeing the look in her eyes.

Her lids fluttered open. “Sorry.”

I stroked her sides, and she licked her lips. “You can go deeper.”

And I did. This time I didn’t stop. As I raised my hips, I helped her down until her pussy pressed against my pelvis. I lowered myself to the mattress and took her with me. She became still on top of me as I filled her completely. Fuck. This felt as close to perfection as I could imagine.

She breathed out, and her fingers flexed against my skin. I swallowed. Never before had someone felt as good around my cock. My body screamed to move, to seek the pleasure her tightness could offer. She clung to me, completely motionless.

“Okay?” I asked in a low voice.

Kiara exhaled again. “It feels ... good.” Tears filled her eyes, and I became as still as she was.

“Why the tears?”

She leaned forward to kiss me and shifted my cock inside of her. I moaned against her mouth, and she gave a small shudder. Her lips brushed mine, and I took her up on the invitation, tasting her mouth. Kissing had always seemed a necessary evil many women required during intercourse, but with Kiara it spiked my own arousal.

Slowly, she pulled back, eyes dark and teary. “I feel like I’m finally free of him.”

I stroked her back gently, trying to understand. I had killed him as brutally as I was capable of, and yet this act of tenderness finally destroyed the demons of her past, the memories of his actions. I tightened my hold on her, bringing our bodies flush together, my back pressed against the headboard. For once I didn’t know what to say, and it was an unsettling

experience.

I began moving, rotating my hips slowly, gently, and she gasped. She looked into my eyes and brushed her lips over mine. Trust. Tenderness. And so many more emotions I didn't understand. I'd never truly resented my incapability to feel, but in this moment I did.

"It feels so good, Nino."

I angled my hips the same way, and Kiara's lids fluttered, but she didn't close her eyes. It was as if she needed to see me, so I returned her gaze. Her lips parted for a soft moan. It was a perfect sound, more perfect than any melody Kiara had ever created on her piano and she had created some of the most beautiful melodies I'd ever heard.

Brushing my thumb over her clit, it moved easily over her heated flesh coated with her juices. My other hand cupped her breast, my thumb flicking over the hardened nub. She cried out and clenched around me.

My eyes rolled back as I fought for control. I wanted to go harder, faster. Fuck. I forced the urge down and focused on my wife as she rocked her hips almost helplessly, trying to find more pleasure but uncertain of her moves. I let her discover the motion she loved as I kept slowly thrusting upward. Every time her eyes widened or her lips parted, my fucking heart clenched. I wasn't sure what was wrong with me. It wasn't a physical response I'd ever encountered during sex.

I flicked my thumb over her clit faster and sped up my thrusts. Kiara's walls clamped tightly around my cock, her nails digging into my skin. She rocked faster, barely meeting my thrusts. It was uncoordinated and unpracticed and yet the best thing I'd ever watched. *The fucking best thing I'd ever felt.*

Her eyes grew wide, body tightening as she came with loud moan. And finally I let loose, slamming harder into her and hoping she could take it

but too far gone to ask, until my release hit me like a tidal wave. My head fell back against the headboard as I spent myself inside her. The fucking tightness in my chest remained.

She fell forward and clung to me, her face buried in my neck, her lips leaving kiss after kiss against my sweaty skin. I ran my hands over her back and arms but stayed away from her neck. That was still a spot she was nervous about. She softened under my touch, breathing deeply.

“I love you,” she whispered, and we both stiffened at the same time.

Her breathing hitched against my throat.

Love?

CHAPTER 19



KIARA

I love you.

Nino grew tense beneath me, and I stiffened in turn. I closed my eyes. I couldn't believe I uttered those words. I hadn't considered saying them because I knew Nino couldn't say them back. Love. For him it was something unfathomable, illogical, impossible. He simulated affection for me. Every act of tenderness, every smile and soft expression was a conscious effort.

I swallowed. The words had slipped out without my intention because I'd been so relieved and happy and grateful. I had never told someone I loved them, not even my mother, and no one had ever said it to me.

Nino had been nothing but patient and gentle with me, and it wasn't something I'd expected. Not in my wildest dreams, not from a man like him, and not from a Falcone. I felt safe with him. But saying the words I'd barely dared to admit to myself had been a mistake. I knew it deep down.

Gathering my courage, I pulled back and sat up. Nino was still inside of me, but he was starting to go soft. I was afraid of looking into his face and seeing him stare blankly at me. It was impossible for him to understand why I had said these three words.

When I raised my eyes, Nino looked like he was trying to comprehend what had just happened. His brows drew together, his gray eyes piercing me to the very core as if he was trying to see into my heart and soul, laying me bare when I had already bared myself to him by admitting to my

foolishness.

Embarrassment washed over me, and a deep longing that seemed to tear at the seams of my heart filled my chest. I began to pull away, but Nino wouldn't let me. His arms tightened around me. "No," he said firmly. "Don't run."

Had it been that obvious on my face that I wanted to run away, even if there was no way for me to run from my emotions?

He cupped my cheek and kissed me, his expression softening. "You are overwhelmed and relieved because we had sex. It's okay. Don't be embarrassed."

Deep down, I knew this act of kindness as well was a conscious effort. He made his facial muscles go soft because he knew I wanted it, because he knew I needed it.

"I meant what I said," I whispered because I was done running. Nino was right. All my life I'd run from memories, from my family, from men. I was done running, and even if Nino couldn't understand my feelings, that didn't change the fact that I had them.

Nino regarded me, his eyes almost ... expressive for once. "Kiara," he began in a low voice.

"I know," I said quickly, my throat tightening. "I know you can't return the emotion. I know you don't feel anything for me, and it's okay. You are trying to be a good man, even though it's not in your nature. You are treating me right, you are simulating affection for me, and that's all right. It's more than I expected when we married and it's enough."

His gaze became searching, and again, I got the feeling that he was trying to peer straight into my heart. Maybe he succeeded because he asked quietly, "Are you sure?"

No, it had been a big fat lie. The idea that Nino could never feel for

me what I felt for him filled me with despair, but he had been upfront about his disposition from the very start. I couldn't hold it against him. I wouldn't.

"Does it matter? You can't change who you are. You can't make yourself feel, so even if it bothered me, that wouldn't change a thing. I prefer not to fret over things I can't change."

"That is a logical choice, but you aren't the logical type, Kiara."

I kissed him fiercely, my lips lingering against his as I looked into his gray eyes. As soon as I did, they softened again. Simulated affection. He was so horrifyingly good at it.

"I can try to simulate love," he murmured, and my heart jerked violently. "It's not difficult. Humans have a certain way they act around each other when they are in love."

I was torn between wanting to agree ... because if Nino was as good at simulated love as he was at everything else, he could make me believe his emotions were real. I could allow myself to believe a lie. I knew it. But what happened in the moments when I realized the truth, when he forgot to show emotion? These moments would tear me apart if I allowed myself to believe his love could actually be real.

"Kiara," he said quietly, softly, and even that timbre in his voice was fake, and yet my heart surged with warmth upon hearing it.

I shook my head, my lips brushing against his because we were still so close. "Don't simulate love. Everything else, I can deal with, but not love. If you ever tell me you love me, it has to be because you really do love me."

Nino's arms tightened around me and a flicker of wariness filled his expression. He knew it was never going to happen. Nino loving me was an impossibility.

Could you love someone who didn't have emotions? Someone who analyzed love as if it were a mathematical problem?

It wasn't a question that needed answering.

I knew the answer.

I loved Nino, even if he could never love me back.



I had fallen asleep in Nino's arms. And as usual, when I woke the next morning, I was curled into him just like every morning, but today felt different. Light streamed in through the gap in the curtains, and I sighed, my fingers tracing along Nino's stomach.

"How do you feel?"

His voice startled me, even though I'd known he was awake. He always woke before me. I didn't lift my head and pressed my cheek tightly against his chest. "Good."

Nino's hand stroked my arm. "No lies."

"I'm not lying," I said and finally looked up into his calm face. It wasn't exactly cold. "Yesterday, I finally freed myself of him and you helped me do it. That's all that matters."

Nino's fingers moved to my spine then slowly trailed higher, brushing my neck, and I stilled, waiting for the flicker of panic; there was a moment of unease, more because I waited for the panic and memories to surface than because of Nino's touch. He eased his fingers into my curls, cupping the back of my head, and I smiled.

"See. I told the truth."

His eyes narrowed slightly, but I wasn't sure why. He looked almost confused, which was strange for Nino. I propped myself up on his chest and kissed him, and he readily returned the kiss and soon pulled me on top of him, his erection digging into my thigh. He pulled me down until his tip brushed against my opening, but he didn't slip in. Instead, he kissed me and

his hands massaged my ass cheeks. I allowed myself to drown in the taste of his lips, allowed the strokes of his rough fingertips to steal the last of my tiredness.

He pulled back slightly, his expression tense with desire. “I want you.”

I kissed him harder, answering him with my body and not with words. His fingers moved between my legs, slipping between my folds, and he exhaled.

“So wet,” he murmured.

I bit my lip when two of his fingers pushed into me. The sensations spread from my core into every nerve ending, and I arched up, allowing him to push deeper into me. How could I have ever thought this wouldn’t be good? Nino managed to make everything good for me.

He watched me with toe-curling intensity as I rocked my hips against his fingers. My pleasure was mounting, and I could feel myself getting closer. Nino pulled his fingers out before I could find my release, and I huffed in protest, squirming on top of him for some friction against his pelvis.

“You’ll get it,” he growled, and I shivered hearing his voice.

He gripped my hips and pulled me down until finally his tip slipped into me, and I moaned at the sensation. He pushed his hips up, sliding all the way in, and I shuddered through my release, desperately clinging to him as my walls clenched around his length.

I buried my face against his throat as he rocked his hips, driving himself into me again and again. No pain, no fear, no memories.

Only Nino’s warmth and the pleasure only he could bring me. Clinging to his shoulders, I looked into his eyes, and in my mind three words repeated themselves over and over again.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Neither of us broke eye contact as Nino slammed into me over and over again, and when his thumb flicked over my clit, I threw my head back as pleasure coursed through me. Nino growled against my throat, his tongue swiping over my pulse point. Then he bit down lightly as he released into me.

Listening to his pounding heart, I relaxed. Love: a game for fools. I wasn't sure where I'd read the phrase, but I knew it was true.



That night Nino had his first fight since we got married. I was more nervous than he was, which wasn't really all that difficult. But still, I was *really* nervous.

I put on the elegant red cocktail dress that I had bought with Nino. It wasn't as luxurious as the other dresses, but it accentuated my curves in a way I had never allowed before. I had always been worried that displaying my body would make people blame me for what happened, that it would make them see that I wasn't the epitome of purity I was supposed to be, but I wanted to be rid of that thinking as well.

Nino had already left an hour ago so he could prepare for his fight, and I was supposed to ride with Savio. In the last few weeks, he had avoided me, probably because he resented me for the whore-ban in the communal space in the house.

When I walked toward the main part of the house, I found Savio lounging on the sofa, texting someone on his phone. He had a strange smile on his face as he stared at his screen, but he quickly shoved his phone into his pocket when he noticed me and straightened. His dark eyes scanned me from head to toe, and despite him being two years younger than me at only seventeen, he managed to make me nervous with his attention.

"You look hot in red," he said, surprising me.

“Thanks?” I said hesitantly, not sure how to handle his compliment.

He nodded and came toward me. Savio was almost as tall as Nino and held himself with complete confidence.

I tensed when he stopped beside me.

“You don’t have to get all tense because I’m close,” he said. “You are family. I’m here to protect you.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So far you haven’t seemed too happy having me around.”

He shrugged. “It’s annoying that I can’t fuck girls where I want now that you’re here. I have to go to my part of the house. I really liked to fuck on the pool table.”

I grimaced. “Okay. I’m glad you and Remo both fancy the table.”

He smiled, and it transformed his face, making him more approachable. He was more controlled than Remo in some regards but nowhere near as calm as Nino, and he was way cockier than both of them.

“Come on. I don’t want to be late for the fight. Nino’s going to rip that asshole a new one.”

Savio led me toward his Ferrari. He drove like a madman, and I clutched the seat as if that would save me if he crashed the car. Apparently, Adamo wasn’t the only one who enjoyed racing. I definitely wasn’t a speed junky.

When Savio and I entered Roger’s Arena, a shiver passed through my spine. The place was crowded with people. Every table and booth was occupied, and many people stood against the wall. The scent of blood, beer, and sweat hung in the air, and the neon tubes attached to the mesh wire on the bare concrete walls emitted an eerie glow.

My eyes scanned the words they formed. Honor. Pain. Blood. Victory. Strength. The bar was cast in the same red glow, and the women

behind it worked in overdrive to serve the customers quickly. Looking down at myself, I realized how well the blood red of my dress fit the occasion.

Savio nodded toward a red leather booth close to the cage, where Fabiano and Leona were sitting. "Come on. Let's go over to them."

In passing, we greeted his friends and their fathers and a few people I didn't know but who obviously knew who I was.

Arriving at the booth, Leona gave me an encouraging smile. "It'll be okay. Nino is undefeated in the cage."

Fabiano nodded. "He's brain and muscle ... that's too much for most opponents."

I gave them both a grateful smile as I slipped into the booth across from them. "I know, but I'm really not looking forward to seeing Nino getting hurt."

Savio snorted. "Don't worry. My brother is invincible."

Nobody was, not even Nino, even if his emotionless mask made everyone believe it. Nino was human. He could fail. He could get hurt.

Leona regarded me curiously, and I wondered if my feelings for Nino were obvious to people around me. I hoped I could hide them, because how foolish would I appear if people realized I'd come to love someone incapable of emotion?

"I'll be back in a few minutes. I need to talk to Diego," he said. His friend was giving him signs. Savio walked off without another word, and a waitress with long black hair and pink lipstick appeared at our booth. She gave Leona a tense smile, ignoring Fabiano, and finally turned to me with a wary expression. "What would you like to drink, Mrs. Falcone?"

That name still made me pause. "Do you have wine?"

The waitress pursed her lips. "This is a fight bar. We have liquor or beer."

“Careful, Cheryl,” Fabiano said in a low voice that sent a shiver through my body. His blue eyes held a clear warning as he regarded the waitress. “You better remember who she is.”

Leona touched his arm, which was propped up on the table, but Fabiano didn’t take his eyes off the woman. Enforcer. It was easy to forget what that meant.

I felt bad for her and quickly said, “Then a beer.” I needed something alcoholic to calm my nerves and hard liquor was out of the question. I didn’t have the necessary tolerance for it.

“And one for me,” Remo said as he appeared close behind Cheryl. She tensed and stepped aside to let him pass.

“I’ll bring it over in a moment,” she said then rushed off.

To my surprise, Remo slipped into my booth. As usual, my body tightened with unease at his closeness. He gave me a challenging look but didn’t come close enough so we’d touch. “Still?” he asked with a twisted smile.

He didn’t have to elaborate. I knew what he meant, and I didn’t think I’d stop being wary of him anytime soon. He hadn’t given me reason to do so, but something about Remo just screamed danger, and I wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

Leona rolled her eyes when Remo turned to Fabiano.

“I saw that,” he said under his breath.

I stifled a laugh. Sometimes, very rarely, I managed to get past my fear of Remo. In those moments, I almost understood why Nino thought so highly of his brother.

Two men in fight shorts entered the cage. My brows furrowed. “I thought Nino’s fight was next?”

“The biggest fight is always last,” Fabiano explained. “There are two

fights before Nino's. Whoever wins might end up fighting me or perhaps Savio next."

"Why do you do this? Why do you keep fighting? It's not like people don't fear you enough."

"If you get comfortable, you get weak. That happens to many people in positions of power. It's good to prove to people and to yourself that you are still someone to fear," Remo said, his dark eyes passionate and fierce.

The referee gave the signal. At once, the two men barreled toward each other and collided with grunts. I winced as I watched their kicks and punches. Cheryl returned with our beers, and I took a deep gulp despite my aversion to the taste. One of the men flew against the cage and blood spurted out of his mouth.

I covered my own with my hand. "Oh God."

Remo cocked an eyebrow. "This is nothing."

"Maybe for you," I muttered.

"You'll get used to the sight." He nodded toward Leona. "She did."

"I still don't enjoy it," Leona said. "Especially if Fabiano's in the cage. It's horrible seeing him getting hurt." She shuddered.

"I'm not getting hurt," Fabiano said firmly. "I always win."

Savio returned and sank down beside Remo. "Because you've never fought against me."

"I've fought against you, and I kicked your ass," Fabiano muttered.

"That was more than a year ago."

The crowd burst into applause, and my eyes darted toward the cage where one man lay unmoving on the floor while the other stood above him with raised hands.

My heart beat in my throat when the referee finally announced Nino's fight. His opponent, a man the size of a giant, was already waiting in the cage

when Nino stepped out of the changing room.

The crowd regarded Nino with respect and fear as he walked through the aisle they'd made for him. His eyes were directed straight ahead at the cage with an expression of cold determination, yet something was different about him. For once the emotionless mask seemed almost forced, as if he had to make it appear that way. Or maybe my own nerves had me imagining things.

Nino climbed into the cage under the roaring applause of the crowd. In his fight shorts and with his gruesome tattoos, he was an intimidating sight. The moment Nino had entered the room, Remo, Savio, and Fabiano had changed their behavior. Their expressions showed no hint of doubt or worry, only pride and the grim knowledge that Nino would win.

I knew Nino was a good fighter, but his opponent was several inches taller and much wider than Nino. My husband didn't seem impressed by the man in front of him, and the moment the ref got out of the cage and closed the door, he switched into predator mode. His entire body became taut, his eyes cautious as they regarded their opponent.

The man was the first to attack. I tensed when he barreled toward Nino, who jumped to the side and landed a hard kick in the man's side. Remo cheered loudly, and Savio and Fabiano applauded, but I could not move.

Nino seemed off. I couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. His opponent got him good in the first few minutes of the fight. Nino was thrown against the cage and landed on the floor hard. I jerked violently, clamping my hand over my mouth to stop a scream as tears formed in my eyes. Remo tensed, leaning forward as if he was on the verge of jumping up.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying not to cry. Remo looked, scanning my expression and eyes. "Don't lose it. This is public."

I blinked. "What if he loses?" I whispered. "What if he dies?"

Remo narrowed his eyes in anger, but there was something else there. Worry. “Nino won’t lose, and he definitely won’t fucking die. Understood?”

I gave a nod, and to my relief, Nino was already back on his feet. For a moment, he didn’t move, only regarded the man who was taunting him. Then his eyes moved toward me for a second, and my body exploded with emotions.

He turned back to his opponent and as if a switch was turned, Nino dropped the analytic calm. I had never seen that look on his face. He lunged at the other man and attacked viciously. He looked unhinged, hungry for blood and death, and he kicked and punched his opponent over and over again, not stopping even as the man dropped to the ground.

It was a deeply unsettling sight.

“What’s gotten into him?” Savio muttered.

Remo didn’t take his eyes off the cage, but his mouth thinned. “I don’t know.”

Nino thrust his fist down on the unconscious man one more time. Then he staggered to his feet, covered in blood, gray eyes alight with fury. Even scarier was how quickly the emotion was replaced his usual calm. What had just happened?

Nino left the cage before the judge declared him the winner and stalked toward the changing rooms under the applause of the crowd.

I jumped to my feet. “Let me out,” I said.

Remo stood as well and gripped my arm. I tensed but didn’t pull away because people were watching, and I knew how to keep up appearances. “I don’t think this is a good time for you to go to Nino. I will handle him.”

“Nino won’t hurt me,” I said quietly.

Remo tilted his head. “Are you sure about that?” His voice held a challenge.

I gave a resolute nod. “Absolutely. Let me go to him.”

Remo smiled coldly and motioned for Savio to make room. They both stepped out of the booth so I could leave before sitting back down.

Remo held my gaze. “I’ve never seen Nino like this, but if you think you can handle him, be my guest.”

Straightening my spine, I moved through the crowd, who backed away from me as if I was contagious. Some people gave me pitying looks; others regarded me as if I was someone to be scared of. *Kiara Falcone*. I heard their hushed whispers.

I was glad when I reached the changing room and stepped inside.

Nino wasn’t in front of the lockers, but I heard the shower running and walked around the corner until I caught sight of him in the last stall. He was braced against the tiles, head hanging low as water poured down his body. His head turned and the look in his gray eyes sent a stab of worry through me.

“Are you all right?” I asked breathlessly.

Nino straightened in all his naked glory, covered in cuts and bruises. Magnificent. “Come closer,” he said in a strange voice.

I moved toward him but stopped in front of the shower. Nino stared down at me as if I was a problem he wanted to solve. His expression was intense, on the verge of angry, which didn’t make sense considering this was Nino. He didn’t feel anger. He didn’t feel anything.

He curled his fingers around my wrist and pulled me toward him, his eyes not once breaking their staring. “Nino,” I protested. “My clothes.”

But he didn’t hear me. His lips claimed my mouth, stopping me from saying any more. He pressed into me, his tall frame caging me in. His hand brushed my thigh, pushing up my dress, shoving aside my panties. He slipped a finger into me, his mouth still soft yet dominant, and I arched back against

the tiled wall. He followed, not allowing me to escape his overwhelming presence as his free hand cupped my breast through my wet dress. I wasn't sure what had gotten into him. His touch and kisses were overwhelming, but my body reacted with a tidal wave of arousal as he slid his finger in and out of me.

He nipped at my lower lip then licked water off it and claimed my mouth again, possessive, unrelenting, desperate ... but how was it possible?

His thumb swiped over my clit as he moved his finger faster. "Nino," I gasped out. "What—"

Again he interrupted me with an almost harsh kiss. I blinked up, confused and turned on, and a bit unsettled but not enough to stop. He added another finger, and I grasped his shoulders to steady me. He hooked one of my legs over his hip, opening me up so he could slam his fingers deeper into me. I rocked against his hand, clinging to him as his mouth ravaged mine, all the while his eyes never looking away from mine as if he was trying to devour me. As if he needed me. He flicked his thumb over my clit again, and I cried against his lips when my orgasm rocked through me. Stars burst in my vision, an almost blinding pleasure. My fingers dug deeper into Nino's skin.

I stared at him, openmouthed, panting. He slowed his thrusts then eased his fingers out.

He released me but moved even closer until he filled all of my vision and breathed harshly as he stared down at me. He was hard, digging into my stomach, but he made no move to take things further, and it confused me, like his expression confused me.

"Nino?" I reached for his chest, trailing my fingers over it then moving lower. He didn't take his eyes off me, but when I curled my fingers around his shaft, his hand came down on them, and he leaned forward, his mouth brushing my ear.

“If I fuck you now, it’s going to be against this wall. It’s going to be hard and fast, and nothing like last time. Nothing like you want. Nothing like you need.”

I shivered at the underlying threat in his voice. I gazed up into his eyes, and again they shifted between anger and absolute calm. I didn’t understand any of it. Had the fight unchained him that much? Remo and Savio had been stunned by his behavior, so it wasn’t something that happened with every fight.

“You won’t hurt me.”

He took a deep breath, chest heaving, and closed his eyes. My dress clung to my body and my feet swam in my heels, but I stayed where I was, close to Nino, as he battled whatever demons the fight had summoned. His breathing slowed and his hand around mine loosened until he finally released me completely.

I kept my fingers around his erection and lightly brushed my thumb over the silky tip. Nino’s eyes jerked open, but this time he didn’t stop me. I moved my hand slowly up and down, not hard and fast, trying to give him comfort and not let this be his outlet for the violence brooding in his body. He braced himself, placing his hands on both sides of my head, and regarded me through half-closed eyes.

He rocked his hips in rhythm with my pumps, and eventually some of the tension slipped away. His breathing deepened as I rubbed him, and when I used my second hand to cup his balls, he let out a low breath and pumped even faster. I wanted to comfort him, wanted to show him that I was there for him.

Nino lowered his head, and I tilted mine back to meet his mouth for a kiss. It was gentle, unhurried, and deliciously slow. No anger or violence, only beautiful sensuality. My own body responded to the kiss and the feel of

Nino coming undone under my touch. His moves became less controlled and his kiss more passionate, and then his body tightened, and he groaned against my mouth. He jerked in my hand, his eyes closing. I kept stroking, and for a long time he stayed still, his forehead lightly pressed up against mine, his chest heaving.

I released him and the water washed away every trace of our juices. Nino opened his eyes again, and his expression was back to the familiar calm. I was torn between missing the more unhinged version of him, the one he'd never shown before, and being relieved that Nino hadn't lost it completely.

He straightened, robbing me of his heat. He turned the water off, his eyes trailing the length of me. "You can't walk out of the changing room in wet clothes," he said matter-of-factly.

I searched his face for a hint of something, but he returned my gaze steadily, eerily. He stepped out of the shower and grabbed two towels. "It's probably for the best if you undress and dry yourself. I will get dressed and see if I can organize clothes for you."

Nodding mutely, I took the towel, wrapping it around my curls to stop them from dripping all over the place. I peeled my soaking dress off my body. Despite his words, Nino didn't leave or move to get dressed. Instead, he watched me remove my dress then my underwear. "Nino, are you all right? You've been off since the fight."

"I'm fine," he murmured then finally dried himself off and got dressed. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"What if someone comes in?" I asked, a hint of worry creeping into my voice.

Nino shook his head. "Nobody will dare to come in. Trust me. I won't be gone long."

He disappeared, and I wrapped another towel around myself, staring

down at the red heap at my feet. What had gotten into Nino?

As promised, he returned a few minutes later with jeans and a plain black T-shirt. “Roger’s waitresses keep spare clothes in case they spill something.”

I took the clothes and put them on. They were a bit too big on me, but at least they smelled clean and were dry. I cringed, thinking about what people would say if I came out in different clothes than before.

“Something is bothering you,” Nino said, coming a bit closer, his brows drawn together.

“I’m worried what people will think of me.”

He gripped my waist and pulled me toward him. “They will think that you gave your husband a prize for winning.”

My cheeks grew hot. “Yeah, that.”

“And?” he asked quietly, the strange look still in his eyes. He nibbled my throat, then my ear. “You are my wife.”

My lashes fluttered, and I released a strangled breath. I was already getting aroused again. He picked my dress up from the ground, wrung it out, and put it into his bag before taking my hand. I took my slippery heels in my free hand and followed Nino out of the changing room, barefoot.

Most people had left the bar by now, but everyone who was still there stared at us. It took all of my self-control not to duck my head under the force of their scrutiny. Nino’s presence helped. He appeared completely unfazed, of course. When we arrived at the booth with his brothers and Fabiano and Leona, they all regarded us strangely. My face heated, knowing what they were thinking.

Remo’s evaluating gaze was especially hard to bear. His eyes narrowed as they moved between his brother and me. “I take it you fucked his strange behavior right out of him?”

My mouth fell open. “I—I didn’t—”

Nino squeezed my hand. “Let’s go home. I’m done with this day.”

Remo nodded then exchanged another look with Fabiano and Savio. They were as puzzled by Nino’s strange behavior as I was.

CHAPTER 20



KIARA

Nino didn't say anything on our drive home. I kept glancing at him but his eyes were closed. There was a cut over his cheekbone, and the skin around it was swelling. At least it wasn't bleeding.

Remo watched us occasionally through the rearview mirror as he drove his car, but he didn't say anything.

When we walked into the mansion, Nino headed straight toward our wing. Remo gripped my wrist before I could follow.

I flinched, but he didn't release me. "Will you stop this shit?" he growled. I forced myself to meet his angry gaze. "Keep an eye on my brother. I don't know what's gotten into him. Usually he would analyze the fight like a fucking computer program right after. That he's like this is a fucking bad sign."

"Has he ever been like this?" I asked.

Something in Remo's eyes shifted as if he was remembering something. He loosened his grip. "Just keep a fucking eye on him."

I turned and continued toward our wing of the mansion then upstairs into the bedroom. Nino was perched on the edge of the bed, arms propped up on his legs as he stared down at the ground. He was completely naked.

I approached him, but he didn't move. Slowly, I raked my finger through his still damp hair, and finally he raised his eyes to meet mine. "I want you," he said quietly.

Leaning forward, I kissed him, my fingernails scratching his scalp,

making him shudder and release a low breath. He tugged at my jeans and pushed them down my legs. I wasn't wearing panties. He leaned forward and kissed my hipbones, biting down lightly and making me jump. Then he soothed the spot with his tongue. Slowly, he trailed his tongue down from my hipbones to my upper thigh and then between my legs.

I gasped when he slipped his tongue between my folds. I was already aroused, but the feel of his mouth against my heated flesh increased it even further. Nino hooked a palm under my knee and lifted my leg, propping it up on the bed and opening me for him.

Watched him through half-closed eyes, his lips moved over my folds and his tongue slid along my crease, tasting me. His eyes met mine, and I couldn't look away despite the embarrassment heating my cheeks. Never taking his gaze off me, he ran the tip of his tongue up and down before he circled my clit.

"Nino," I gasped, parting my legs wider, needing to feel more of his mouth on me. He buried his face in my lap, his mouth closing over my folds as his tongue worked me. His hands cupped my ass, and he massaged my cheeks, pushing me even harder against his face. I couldn't hold back anymore, starting to shake and rocking my hips almost desperately as I held on to Nino's shoulders. My moans spurred him on, and he licked and nibbled greedily until I was sure I'd come again, but then he pulled away, his face glistening with my arousal.

His eyes were alight with desire. I quickly pulled my shirt over my head then bit my lip. "How?" I asked quietly.

He curled a hand over my hip and tugged me toward the bed. I climbed on top of the mattress. "Lie down on your side," Nino instructed in a low voice.

Surprised, I stretched out, my back facing Nino. He lay down behind

me and pressed up against my body, his erection digging into my butt. I tensed. His mouth grazed my ear. “Trust me. I’m not going to do anal, Kiara.”

I felt foolish but nodded. Nino slid one arm under me then lifted my upper leg with his other and moved it slightly back so my foot rested on his strong calf. Then he pressed his pelvis against my butt, and I felt his tip nudge my opening. He changed the angle slightly and slowly slid in. I arched back against him.

He didn’t go as deep in this position, but I loved the feel of his chest against my back, his hot mouth against my shoulder and neck, his arms around me from behind. His movements were slow, but his tip seemed to rub my clit from the inside, and when he trailed his hand down between my legs, I released a low moan.

“This position okay for you?” he rasped against my ear as his next stroke hit me even deeper.

“Yes,” I gasped.

Nino’s closeness, his warm embrace, his soft kisses along my shoulder blade ... they made this perfect. Nino cupped my breast, fingers tweaking my nipple as his other hand worked nimbly between my legs. He slammed into me over and over again, slow, precise strokes that curled my toes and made my eyes roll back with pleasure.

It was beautiful and breathtaking, and I let myself fall completely. I trusted Nino without reservation to guide me over the edge, to take care of me, and he did.

I tightened as my release hit me, and I cried out Nino’s name. He rasped mine into my ear, the word almost desperate as he spilled inside me moments after my orgasm. He didn’t pull back, holding me closely against his body, still buried deep inside of me.

He eased out of me, and I turned in his embrace. I lightly traced the skin around the cut in his cheekbone then the blooming bruises over his ribs. He tensed under my touch.

“Sorry,” I breathed. “Are you in a lot of pain? Clearly, I have nothing better to do than to rub myself against you when you’re bruised.”

He tangled his hand in my curls, regarding me with an unreadable expression. “I was the one who initiated sex, Kiara. I wanted you. I...” He trailed off, brows pulling together “...I’ve survived many fights. I’ll be healed in a few days.”

I didn’t say anything, only snuggled against Nino’s chest, careful not to apply pressure to his ribs. I kissed his shoulder blade, and uttered in my head the words I’d never say aloud again. *I love you.*



A low noise I couldn’t place tore me from sleep. Even with Nino beside me, I was a light sleeper, quick to wake from the slightest noise. I stared into the dark and there it was again: a throaty sound full of dark despair. What was that?

A wave of fear shot through me when a familiar tone caught my attention.

Nino? Was that Nino?

The sound stirred memories within me, but I pushed them aside and rolled over. In the dark, I couldn’t make out more than the outline of Nino’s back, but the bed was shaking from the force of his body tremors.

“Nino?” I whispered, but my voice was so hesitant and quiet I could barely hear it.

My first instinct was that it had to be a seizure, something physical because it seemed impossible that emotions forced these sounds out of *Nino*.

These throaty inhales—not moans, not gasps, but something in between—were full of emotion. I didn’t understand. Slowly, I sat up, unsure if I should wake him, completely at loss what to do. Nino was always in control. He *was* control.

Reached over to my bedside, I turned on the light, needing to see him and at the same time terrified of it. Nino was lying on his side, shaking, one hand curled around the edge of the bed, clutching it tightly; his brows formed one hard line and his forehead was covered in sweat.

My fingers shook as I reached for him. My God, what was going on with him?

The second my fingertips brushed his shoulder, his eyes flew open and the look in them made me recoil. Nino lunged for the knife on his bedside table, clutching it in his hand as he staggered out of bed. His gaze pinged around the room then settled on me, the way I was pressed up against the headboard in confusion and fear. His legs gave out. Pressing the knife to his chest, he bent forward, braced against the ground with one arm, heaving deep breaths.

“Nino?” I whispered, crawling to the edge of the bed.

Nino said he wasn’t capable of emotions, that he couldn’t feel, but in his eyes and on his face was pure unbridled emotion. And he couldn’t handle it, didn’t know how. Maybe this was the first time in a long time that he was submitted to something like that.

His back was heaving, arms shaking, and somehow in the diffused glow of the bedside lamp, his tattoos seemed to come alive, the inked flames leaping up, the contorted faces mocking yet agonizing at the same time.

My throat clogged with emotion, helpless and terrified and worried that this was it, that something had snapped Nino’s sanity—whatever was left of it. My love for him didn’t make me blind to the truth: the Nino and Remo

both were messed up in a way that couldn't be resolved with a few pills and countless sessions with a shrink. Something awful had twisted them into what they were today, twisted Nino's emotions into a tight knot. Something had managed to untie it. Seeing him like this made me think that maybe there had been a good reason why his mind and body had tied that knot in the first place.

I slid out of bed and approached Nino hesitantly, but he jerked his head to the side. "Remo," he croaked. Then it got louder, more desperate. "Get Remo!"

Stumbling toward the door, I ripped it open and ran down the corridor. My heart beat in my throat and my bare feet smacked loudly against the cold granite. What was going on with Nino?

Fear, raw and unhinged, rushed through me. What if I lost Nino to whatever this was?

I crossed over into the east wing, Remo's domain. I'd never been there before and I knew I wasn't welcome, but Nino needed his brother, so no matter how scared I was of Remo, I would get him.

It took me a moment to get my bearings in the unfamiliar part of the house. I wasn't sure where Remo's bedroom was and with only minimal moonlight streaming in through the window at the end of the corridor, it was difficult to make out more than the hazy outlines of doors. Panicking, I ripped open the first door, and even in the dark I could make out the shape of a bed. An old smell hung in the air, something dusty and abandoned. Nobody had lived there in a while.

There were so many rooms in this house, I'd never find him in time. I felt the wall for a light switch, but my body shook and I couldn't get my bearings. The dark was beginning to close in on me, but I moved on to the next door, my finger curling around the handle. Then there was a warm

breath against my ear and a low murmur. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

I screamed and lashed out instinctively, my hand colliding with a stubble-covered chin a moment before I realized whom I’d just hit. A strong hand clamped down on my wrist. I stilled, suddenly glad for the dark because it hid Remo’s expression from me.

“Let me go,” I whispered, voice shaking.

He released me, and I stepped back. “I’m sorry for hitting you,” I got out. “You scared me.”

He remained silent for another moment, towering over me with that unsettling vibe of violence. “Answer my question,” he ordered.

“It’s Nino. I don’t know what’s happening with him. He’s upset.”

“Upset,” Remo said doubtfully.

“Remo, please, can you turn on the light.” I swallowed. “It’s making me nervous being in the dark with you.”

He shifted and his arm brushed mine, then light flooded the corridor. When my eyes grew accustomed to the blinding light, Remo came into focus, tall and naked except for briefs. His eyes slid down my body, dressed only in my thin nightgown, before they returned to my face. His chin was slightly red from when I’d hit him.

“I’m losing my patience here, Kiara.”

“Nino needs your help!” I said annoyed, because there was no way I could explain Nino’s situation to him. And finally something went through to him, and he turned around and began running. I had absolutely no chance to catch up with him with his long legs.

Panting, I arrived in our bedroom a couple of minutes later.

Remo was kneeling beside his brother, who was on the ground, his hand on Nino’s shoulder. They both looked like fallen angels with their

curved backs, their scars and tattoos, the muscles formed from years of fighting. Remo's fallen angel on his back with the broken wings had never made more sense than it did now.

"What's happening?" I croaked, and Remo looked up from where he knelt beside his brother. For a moment he looked as helpless, as terrified as I felt, and that sight undid me because this was Remo, this was a man always commanding, always hard and powerful and cruel and not afraid of anything. It came almost as a relief when he narrowed his eyes at me, his mouth pulling into a twisted smile, as if this was my fault, as if without realizing it, I had broken Nino even though I held nowhere close to the power over him to do so.

"Get out," Remo growled, but I didn't want to leave. "Get out!" he snarled, and I knew he'd make me if I didn't, so I rushed out and ran along the corridor, down the stairs, and into our living room, which wasn't really called that because most living room activities took place in the shared area of the mansion when all the brothers were together. This was my sanctuary and sometimes Nino's when he tried to simulate affection for me.

I sank down on the piano bench. My fingers instantly found the keys, needing to feel their cool smoothness. The first notes of the song I'd written for Nino rang out. Desperate, drawn-out, low notes in the beginning then hesitant, higher notes, lighter notes until the melody seemed almost excited in their staccato, followed by overwhelming, high-pitched notes until finally the melody became a gentle flow, a song of acceptance, but this ending seemed wrong now, and my fingers moved on, the notes reaching higher and higher, filling me up until my emotions created this melody.

I breathed harshly as Nino's despair became music, as my fear let the melody burst through me with hard, short notes. Emotion was everywhere and I could not stop and felt like this was the only way I could get through

this.

Heavy steps sounded and my fingers slid off the keys as Remo stalked into the room and toward me, still only in his briefs and a look of murder on his face. I stiffened but didn't follow my impulse to run. Instead, I lowered my shaking hands to my lap and returned Remo's gaze. He stopped halfway into the room as if he was torn between anger and despair, but then he bridged the remaining distance between us, dwarfing me with his height and sheer, brutal presence.

He leaned down, and I drew back but didn't look away. "What the fuck did you do?" he rasped.

"I didn't do anything," I said. What could I have possibly done to unhinge Nino like that? I was only a woman. I didn't have any power over him.

"Bullshit."

"Remo, leave her alone." It was Nino's voice, strangled, raw, and yet cool and controlled. I sagged with relief. Remo stepped back from me and turned to his brother, opening my view to Nino as well.

Like Remo, Nino was only in briefs, and yet there were layers over layers of barriers I could never bridge. His expression was the blank canvas I'd grown used to, but there was something haunted, *something hunted* in his gray eyes as he stared at Remo; a look passed between the brothers that spoke of horrors I could not grasp, a look that made me realize that one brother could never be without the other.

Whatever had shaped them into ice and fire, it had also forged them together in a way that couldn't be broken. Maybe Nino had become the cold flood against Remo's raging inferno. Perhaps Remo was the outlet for emotions Nino had locked behind impenetrable walls. I couldn't and would never be able to understand these two men.

Nino tore his eyes away from his brother and looked at me. My chest tightened with relief and warmth, and I wanted to go to him and hug him, wanted to soothe him with words, give him comfort with my touch, but Nino wasn't like that. He didn't need comfort, or tenderness, *or love...*

"Play that song again," he said quietly.

I touched my fingertips to the keys and began the song, a song that wasn't just a string of notes but a gaping hole in my heart. Nino approached me slowly, and as he did, Remo backed away a few steps but kept watching us.

Nino lowered himself beside me on the bench, but I didn't stop playing. I closed my eyes and let the music flow, wishing he could understand that this song encompassed everything I felt for him, everything I'd ever felt for him. Then new notes rang out, and my eyes jerked open, my fingers faltering as Nino began to play the song as well. *What?*

He added his own notes, and I realized it was on purpose. I joined in and played my melody, the two melodies seeming to flow around each other. It was more beautiful than anything I'd ever heard. Nino's eyes were on my face as he played the song from memory without faltering, but I had to return my gaze to the keys because I couldn't understand the look in his eyes.

Remo met my gaze briefly over the piano, and his expression was just as unreadable. Then he turned around and left. I didn't understand any of this, but hearing Nino's melody merge with mine, creating something inexplicably beautiful ... it felt like a gift.

Nino and I played until the sun rose over the mansion and filled the room with light. Our melody had evolved, a string of beautiful notes, and my heart seemed to burst with emotions when our fingers finally lifted off the keys. Nino looked exhausted, and my own body yearned for sleep too, but at the same time, I felt like screaming my feelings from the rooftops.

I stood and took Nino's hand. His cool gaze flitted up to me. "Let's go to bed," I whispered.

Something shifted in his eyes as if for once there was something that scared him, as if he didn't trust himself while asleep.

"We don't have to sleep, but you need to rest for a bit," I told him, and finally he got up from the piano bench and followed me upstairs.

Nino lay down, and I stretched out beside him, close but not touching. I wanted to press up against him, give him closeness. In the past he'd held me to comfort me, not because he required that kind of attention.

My gaze flickered across his face. His eyes were distant, and there was tightness to his mouth that suggested he was still fighting something within him.

I couldn't hold back anymore and reached out for him, laying one hand hesitantly on his arm. It was ridiculous for me to be worried about touching him. We'd been closer than that, but I didn't want to push something onto Nino if he didn't want it just because it would have helped me.

His eyes zeroed in on me, and he lifted his arm so I could move closer, and I snuggled up to him, my hand coming to rest on his hard abs. I wished I knew if this was something he wanted, something he needed, or if he did it for me as part of his simulated affection.

I didn't dare ask him what had caused this episode, or what he had seen in his mind to bring him to his knees like that, but the question burned on my tongue. Maybe one day he would tell me.

CHAPTER 21



KIARA

We stayed in bed until midday, and for once, I woke before Nino. I was wedged against his side as usual, and he looked peaceful sleeping, no sign of last night's episode visible on his face. His cheek bone was swollen with a bluish tint as expected, but it didn't make Nino less attractive. For some reason this small blemish on his perfect face made him even more beautiful.

He stirred and opened his eyes. I smiled at him. "How do you feel?"

He remained silent for a few heartbeats. "Different."

"Different?" I echoed, confused, but he didn't elaborate. He untangled himself from the blankets and sat up with a slight wince, his palm pressing up against his ribs.

"Do you need something for the pain?"

"No," he said. "It'll fade. And pain is a good motivator. Next time I'll have to be better so my opponent doesn't land hits like this."

I climbed out of bed as well and hovered beside him. "Will you go swimming?"

Nino nodded. "It'll help with the tiredness."

I grabbed my book and put on my bathrobe while Nino put on his swim trunks. He didn't bother going into the bathroom anymore. We were past that point. We headed outside in silence, and I took my usual place in the lounge chair while Nino dove into the water. His movements weren't as rhythmic or as smooth as usual. He drove himself harder than ever before, swimming fast and almost angrily. I wasn't sure how one could swim angrily,

but it sure looked like it.

I put my book down and stood to get a better view. Nino's breaths were short, less controlled, as he swam one round after the other. This was a much longer swimming session than his daily thirty minutes. Worry gnawed at me as I watched him overexert himself as if he was trying to swim away from something.

Finally, he stopped and held himself against the wall of the pool, his chest heaving, panting. He pushed himself out of the water, inked arms flexing, and staggered to his feet. I handed him his towel, and he pressed it against his face. When he lowered it to dry the rest of his body, the calm returned to his expression, but it looked wrong. Off. I couldn't even pinpoint why.

"Let's go inside. I'll make us something to eat."

Nino didn't bother changing out of his swim trunks, and he followed me into the kitchen. I began to gather everything needed to make pancakes. The sounds of the clanking pots had Remo joining us. He was dressed and looked surprisingly well rested despite my intrusion last night.

His eyes darted from me to Nino, who was reading the news on his phone without looking up. Remo moved to my side, as usual ignoring my personal space as his hip bumped against mine. He watched me whip together the batter.

"How's he doing?" he murmured, his dark eyes filled with worry.

I paused because that sight still got to me. "I don't know. He's still acting weird."

Remo moved to the kitchen table and sank down in a chair across from Nino. "So are you up for work today?"

Nino put down his phone and looked up. "What do you have in mind?"

“We caught two Outfit bastards. I thought we could get some information out of them. When we’re done, we can send them back to Cavallaro in a few nicely wrapped packages. What do you think? Will a nice round of torture lift your spirits?” Remo smiled twistedly.

Was he being serious? Did he really want to involve Nino in something this brutal when he wasn’t quite himself? “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Both Nino and Remo glanced my way. Nino furrowed his brows in an almost confused expression while Remo had murder on his face. I was growing used to it.

“You better remember your place,” Remo said harshly.

Nino met my gaze. “Your worry is unnecessary, Kiara.”

I doubted it, but I kept my mouth shut and prepared the pancakes, dividing them between three plates, and carried them over to the table.

Remo seemed surprised.

“I assumed you’d want to eat with us. Even if you threaten me, I won’t let you go hungry.”

His dark eyes assessed my face, and I returned his gaze. Didn’t he always insist I needed to learn to be a Falcone? Not cowering to him was a good step toward that goal. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw a flicker of respect in his eyes.

“I like you better now that you aren’t scared of your own fucking shadow anymore.”

I shrugged. “And I like you better when you’re not being scary and bossy.”

“Then you don’t like me very often,” Remo said, digging into his pancakes. I sat down beside Nino, and he surprised me by putting his hand down on my thigh and squeezing. When I chanced a glance at him, he was

focused on eating.

“When do we need to leave?” Nino asked his brother.

“The assholes are in the basement of the Sugar Trap. Savio and Fabiano are already there. I wanted to wait for you before we started.”

Nino nodded and finished his pancakes. “I’ll get dressed and then we can leave.” He turned to me and hesitated. “Is Adamo here?”

“He should be here, but the asshole snuck out this morning and took my Bugatti. If he gets back, I’ll kick his fucking ass. Until then, your girl will be alone here.”

Nino shook his head. “No. She can’t defend herself yet.”

I frowned. “The mansion is safe, and I’m good with a gun. Well ... decent, but that should be enough.”

“Decent is not good enough against most of our enemies. Cavallaro will soon realize we have his soldiers. I won’t leave you unguarded.”

“She can come with us,” Remo said with a shrug.

I knew the Sugar Trap was a strip club and whorehouse. But if the Camorra’s enemies were taken there, that probably wasn’t all it was used for.

Nino regarded me. “That is a difficult place for Kiara.”

“I can deal,” I said firmly.



The second we stepped into the Sugar Trap, everyone’s eyes swiveled toward us. A few scantily clad women were gathered around the bar, talking to a tall, black guy sorting bottles. He nodded at Remo and Nino but regarded me curiously. The women, however, only mumbled a few words of greeting before they returned to what they had been doing. Poles were spread around the room on small stages, and there were several doors branching off the main bar. I assumed they were for private sessions.

Remo's hard eyes only brushed over the women as if their mere presence annoyed him. Nino turned to me. "You can wait in our office while Remo and I are in the basement."

I shook my head. "No, I'll stay here and talk to the women."

Remo snorted. "They are whores. Talking isn't what they're good at."

I bit back a comeback and turned to Nino, trying to hide my worry. It must have showed because he brought my hand up to his lips and kissed my wrist. Several women gaped at us from their spot at the bar, and even Remo looked caught off guard. Public displays of affection weren't usually Nino's style.

Nino leaned forward, whispering in my ear. "I've survived every horror you can imagine, Kiara. Don't waste your worry on me. Torturing Outfit bastards won't do anything to me. I don't feel their fear. I don't care about their begging." He pulled back, and I released a breath. Without another word, Nino and Remo walked through the backdoor.

The moment they were gone, the five women dared to stare at me again, and the guy behind the bar watched me too. I walked toward them. "Hi," I said, trying to hide my embarrassment. "I'm Kiara Falcone."

The guy laughed. "Everyone knows who you are, Mrs. Falcone. I'm Jerry. What can I do for you?" His white teeth contrasted with his dark face, and I liked him at once.

The women whispered among themselves but didn't say anything directly to me. A few months ago this would have driven me away, but I'd learned to brave unsettling situations.

"What do you have?" I asked Jerry.

"Everything you want. Wine, beer, shots, cocktails. And even if we don't have it, I'd get it for you, Mrs. Falcone."

I couldn't help but laugh. "No need for that, please. Just give me a

Coke. It's too early for wine."

"If you ask me, every hour of the day is wine o'clock," the woman closest to me said as she raised a glass with red wine. She was very tall and had long blond hair, and was heavily made up like the other women. I supposed it was required in their field of work. I'd never before dealt with a sex worker. As my eyes took in the five women, I wondered how many of them had started working here of their own free will and how many had been dragged into this by a Romancer or to pay of their own debts. The other women, too, had wineglasses in front of them. I supposed alcohol made it easier to live a life like that.

"Give me a glass of white wine," I said. I couldn't help but wonder with how many of these women Nino had slept, but I decided not to ask.

Jerry chuckled. "Don't let their alcoholism rub off on you." Despite his words, he poured me a generous glass and slid it toward me.

"Free alcohol is one of the few perks of working here," another woman muttered.

I took a sip from my wine and regarded them, looking for signs of abuse. A few of them had small bruises on their arms or legs but nothing major.

"I'm C.J.," said a younger woman with long brown hair and a kind smile.

"She's a Falcone," the woman beside her hissed.

I took another sip. "I am," I confirmed. "I'm also a person and a woman. You don't have to fear me."

The tall woman shook her head. "You are not one of us, that's for sure."

"I'm not, you are right, but I understand more than you think. I'm not your enemy."

C.J. walked around and leaned against the bar counter beside me. “We heard what happened in New York, what the Falcones did to your uncle.”

Jerry shoved her shoulder lightly. “Why don’t you shut up?”

I swallowed, but then I forced a smile and nodded. “Nino and Remo killed him.”

“Slaughtered him,” the tall woman butted in.

“Got what he deserved, if you ask me,” C.J. muttered.

“Many men deserve the same,” the tall woman said.

I put down my glass and blurted, “Are you sex slaves?”

C.J. shrugged. “Not the kidnapped-in-the-middle-of-the-night kind, no. Most of us started this because we didn’t have a choice. We needed the money, we felt obligated, and most of us stay because once you’re in this, it’s hard to work a normal job again. Once the debts to the Camorra are paid off, we earn good money.”

The tall woman narrowed her eyes at me. “There are very few women in this business who do this because they enjoy it. Maybe johns want to believe most of us are nymphomaniacs who became hoes to get more dick. Fucking assholes. As if any of us enjoy sucking the dick of an old, hairy, unwashed bastard.”

“Here comes the prick responsible for fresh meat,” C.J. whispered, and the look in her eyes made it clear; he was the reason why she worked at the Sugar Trap.

I turned around and a tall, brown-haired man, maybe a couple of years older than me, entered the club. He was very handsome, and I understood why he had become the Camorra’s Romancer. It was his job to make women fall for him until they were in so deep that they would do anything for him; even sell their bodies. He didn’t give off the scary vibe so many Made Men

did. He knew how to hide it, which was probably crucial if you wanted to lure women into your trap. His eyes wandered over the women without a hint of guilt. Then they settled on me and his face was puzzled. I hadn't met him yet, or at least, I hadn't noticed him. Something in his behavior shifted ever so slightly, as if he wasn't sure where to put me, but then he strode toward me and recognition flashed across his face.

He ignored the women beside me, shook hands with Jerry, then turned to me. "I'm Stefano," he said in a silky voice. "It's a pleasure meeting you." His charming smile hit me full force.

Remo prowled through the backdoor, covered in blood, and tapped the counter. "Four scotches, Jerry." Then his dark eyes moved on to Stefano. He shook his head and narrowed his eyes before walking around to meet us. I couldn't take my eyes off his blood-spattered arms and throat. His shirt was black, but I was sure it was drenched in blood too.

He grabbed Stefano's shoulder. "That is a conquest you wouldn't survive, Stefano. I'd hate to lose my best Romancer, but I'd have to put you down, and you'd fucking thank me for it because Nino would fucking tear you into bite-sized pieces and feed them to you."

Stefano watched Remo's bloody hand on his white shirt, curling his lip. "I know who she is, Capo. I was only introducing myself."

"We know how it goes. You charm them and then they fall head over heels and lose their few remaining brain cells." Remo flashed a cruel smile at the gathered women.

I rolled my eyes. "First, I'm not going to fall for him. I'm Nino's. And second, I have more than a few brain cells." I didn't mention that no matter what Stefano did, he couldn't win my heart because my heart belonged to Nino.

Stefano's eyes widened, and he looked at Remo as if he expected his

Capo would strike me dead for the audacity.

“Indeed.” Remo smirked and released Stefano, leaving a bloody handprint on the man’s shirt. Jerry handed Remo a tray with four glasses of scotch. “We’re almost done,” he said to me, then to Stefano, “Hands off.” The women backed away as he passed them with the tray.

Stefano let out an Italian curse under his breath as he regarded his ruined shirt.

“I suppose you won’t charm your way into girls’ hearts with blood on your shirt.”

He shrugged. “If I told the right story, they’d believe I saved a man’s life and that’s why I have that handprint on my shirt. Women believe all kinds of shit if an attractive man makes them feel special and tells them how gorgeous they are, even if they’re average at most.”

I took a deep swig of my wine, not sure what to say to *that*.

But C.J. found my words. “You’re an asshole.”

Stefano grinned at her. “That’s not what you said when I fucked your brains out and you declared your love for me.”

She paled then whirled around and disappeared through the door behind the bar.

“That was very rude,” I said. “I don’t know why you think you can treat women like you do.”

“Because they allow me to treat them like that,” he said quietly, his brown eyes hard. “Everyone gets what they deserve.”

I shook my head at him and hopped off the barstool to find C.J. A corridor led to a staff-only door that was left ajar, and I stepped in, finding C.J. leaning against a sink, crying.

“Hey,” I said hesitantly, suddenly unsure if it was a good idea that I was here. I was the wife of the man who owned the Sugar Trap and even

more places like that. C.J. and the other women belonged to the Camorra, and basically Nino as well. He wasn't Capo, but none of Remo's decisions were made without consulting Nino first.

I handed her a tissue. "I'm sorry for what he said."

"Why? It's the truth. I fell for him because he said exactly what I wanted to hear, what no man had ever said to me. He seemed too good to be true, but I didn't want to see the signs pointing toward the truth."

"Sometimes it's easier to believe a lie," I said quietly, because I believed Nino's simulated affection too, much too eagerly.

She met my gaze. "I slept with Nino."

My body seized with shock. I had guessed that some of these women had slept with him, but hearing her say it still hurt.

"But it's been a while. I haven't seen him with any of us in weeks."

Some of the weight lifted off my chest—probably since I'd told him I wanted him to stop being with other women. So he had kept word. "He's slept with many women before me," I said with a small shrug.

"Yeah, they all do," she said bitterly.

"Did ... did he force you?"

She tilted her head. "I'm a whore."

"That doesn't mean you don't have the right to say no."

She smiled. "That's not how it works. But he never forced me. I never said no. Why would I? There are far worse men out there than Nino Falcone. He's good looking and not cruel during sex. That's a good thing."

I nodded quickly, glad when she stopped talking about having sex with Nino. "Why don't you leave? Or are you still paying off your debt?"

"Not anymore, no. It's been paid off for a year now, but I don't have anything to return to. I've grown used to this life. If you've been around here for a while, it's not like you can work a normal job. We've all seen too much.

We could work as waitresses in one of the Camorra's clubs or bars, but there aren't many other options once you're in this."

"So you are a prisoner of the Camorra."

C.J. touched my arm. "Aren't we all? Don't tell me your life has ever been yours?"

No. It wasn't. Born in blood. That was what every child, girl or boy, was in our world. I was no longer bound to the Famiglia. Now I was bound to the Camorra. But free? That wasn't something I would ever be. It wasn't something I'd ever considered an option. A bird born in captivity will never know the feeling of unbridled freedom the open sky can offer. How can you long for something you have never experienced?

"It's okay. Don't blame yourself. Some things just can't be changed."

"I know," I said, but it didn't change the fact that I wanted to change them.



Nino was clean when he emerged from the backdoor and so was Remo. I was back at the bar with C.J. sitting beside me, drinking our second glass of wine. "I should leave," she said quickly. "The first customers will arrive soon."

I nodded. I had every intention of making it my goal to visit the warehouses of the Camorra and get to know the women there. If I knew them, I'd feel even more obligated to help them—even if I knew it was a losing battle. Remo would never listen to me, and even Nino wouldn't let me meddle in their business.

I searched his face as he stepped up next to me, looking for signs that what he'd been doing had bothered him, but he looked calm, which should have terrified me, but I was only relieved. Nino's eyes followed C.J. as she walked off. Then he frowned at me.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing important,” I said with a smile.

Nino didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t press the matter, only curled his hand around my wrist and led me out of the club.

The moment we were back home, we gathered in the living area, and Remo ordered pizza.

“How can you be hungry after what you’ve been doing?” I asked curiously as I sank down on the sofa.

Nino gave me a blank look. “The body still requires a certain calorie intake to keep up its functions.”

Remo rolled his eyes. “One of these days, I’m going to lose my shit on you when you sound like a fucking text book.”

Nino cocked his brows at his brother. “You’ve said it countless time. It loses its power if you never act on it.”

Remo pulled out his knife and flung it at Nino. I jumped as the knife impaled itself in the armrest beside Nino’s leg. “You, Savio, and Adamo are fucking nuisances.”

I smiled. “Thanks,” I said. When Remo gave me a blank stare, I added, “For not including me.”

“She’s getting too daring,” Remo muttered, but he didn’t look angry.

Nino looked relaxed, back to his usual calm self. Maybe he’d overcome whatever had haunted him last night. “Where’s Adamo? Is he still gone?”

Remo’s face darkened. “Adamo!” he roared. “Get your ass down here.” There was silence. Remo picked up the phone, ordered pizza, then called again. “Adamo, I swear, if you’re upstairs and don’t get down here right this second, I’ll come and get you, and you will fucking regret it.”

Steps sounded from upstairs and then Adamo appeared on the stairs.

He hesitated in the middle of them, looking nervous as he regarded his older brothers.

“What did you do?” Nino asked.

Adamo glanced at Remo, who was snarling. “Don’t tell me you crashed my Bugatti.”

Adamo shook his head. “There’s only one dent in the back because someone bumped into me.”

Remo staggered toward his brother and gripped him by the collar. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I told you to stop racing. You’ll get yourself killed.”

“So what? In a few weeks, I’ll be initiated. I’d do everyone a favor if I got killed before becoming like you.”

I held my breath. Nino, too, tensed beside me.

Remo pulled Adamo even closer, glaring down at him. “You are a fucking child. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe I protected you for too long. Maybe I should have initiated you sooner like Savio.”

“When did you ever protect me?”

Remo released him with a hard smile. “I ordered pizza. Or are you *too good* to eat with us?”

Adamo hovered on the staircase then slowly skulked down and moved toward us. He flung himself down on the sofa across from us. He gave me a smile then nodded toward Nino.

“Where’s Savio?” he mumbled.

“Out with Diego,” Remo said.

“Maybe you should go out more often too,” Adamo muttered.

Remo sat down beside Nino. “Someone has to make sure the west stays in our hands. I fought too hard for this to lose it because of laziness.”

I realized Remo and Nino hardly ever went out. With Nino, I’d

thought it was because I was his wife now, but Remo, too, was mostly at home unless he was out doing business with his brothers or Fabiano. They lived in their own small world, a world I'd been allowed into. I was getting used to being a Falcone.

Nino and I returned to our bedroom after dinner and watching a few videos of past races with his brothers. We got ready for bed. I was sitting against the headboard when he joined me, looking almost wary. Was he worried about tonight?

"Did C.J. tell you I slept with her?" he asked quietly as he stretched out beside me.

"Yeah ... she did. But it's the past. I'm not holding your past against you. You didn't hold mine against me."

Nino frowned. "There was nothing I could have held against you because you didn't do anything wrong."

"I know," I said.

"Do you?"

I sighed. On a logical level, I did, but sometimes I still felt like I was to blame, which was stupid, but it was something deeply ingrained in me and difficult to shake. "Do you ever feel guilty for what you do? For what you did today?"

Nino considered that. "Not really. As I said, I don't really feel pity. And those Outfit bastards would have done the same if they got their hands on one of ours."

I yawned. He lifted his arm, and I snuggled up to him, propping myself up on his chest, and kissed him softly. We seldom kissed, mostly just during sex.

Nino gently touched the back of my head as his other hand brushed my arm. "What's that for?"

“I just wanted to kiss you,” I admitted. “Or does it bother you if I do? Outside of sex, I mean.”

Nino tilted his head, his thumb lightly rubbing my neck. “Why would that bother me, Kiara? I enjoy kissing you. Did I ever give you reason to believe otherwise?”

“No, but you never kiss me during the day. We only ever kiss when we’re about to have sex.”

“When would you want me to kiss you?”

I sighed. “I don’t want you to kiss me because I want it. I want you to kiss me because you want to do it, because you feel like it.” I realized how foolish I sounded. Nino would never feel like kissing me. Every act of tenderness was for my benefit.

Nino searched my face and pulled me toward him then kissed me, the brush of his lips soft, his gray eyes almost unsure.

I blinked at him. “Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly.

I lowered my head to his bare chest, my cheek pressed up to his warm skin, confused by his actions and words.

CHAPTER 22



KIARA

That night, familiar sounds of distress woke me. I sat up and fumbled for the light switch, blinking against the sudden brightness.

Nino jerked upright beside me, his hand reaching for the bedside table and grabbing his knife.

His wild eyes locked on me, chest heaving, his fingers clutching the handle.

“I’m getting Remo,” I murmured and slowly slid out of bed, worried about startling Nino. His free hand curled around my wrist, stopping me.

I gasped in surprise, my gaze searching his face. The wild despair was gone from his expression, replaced by a mix of confusion and the familiar blankness he had always displayed in the past. “Stay,” he said quietly.

Hesitating, I climbed back into bed, and Nino pulled me toward him. I settled on his chest. He put the knife back down on his nightstand, but the tension remained in his body. Tracing the tattoos on his torso, I tried to count his scars to distract myself, but it was difficult to determine where many of them ended and others began.

“All these tattoos ... why did you get them?”

Nino’s fingers trailed up my spine and continued to my neck, then higher up, tangling in my hair. His lips brushed my forehead, and I peered up at him. Was this simulated affection? Simulated tenderness?

“Pain and pleasure,” he said in a low voice. “I can feel those like anybody else, maybe even stronger.”

“But if you feel pain even stronger than others, why would you submit yourself to having a needle pierce your skin over and over again for many hours? Why do you go into the cage? Why do you seek out pain?”

His mouth twisted. “To remind myself that I’m alive.”

My brows drew together.

“To remember who I am, what I am.”

“I don’t understand,” I admitted. “What happened to you and Remo to make you the way you are?”

Nino tilted his head down to me and regarded me. I returned his gaze, even if I didn’t know what he was looking for. “Like you said, it’s not only my story but also Remo’s.”

“I won’t talk to him about it,” I promised at once. I would never think about talking to Remo about something that obviously affected both him and Nino like that. It would be suicidal.

“Our mother was insane,” Nino began in a distant voice. “Maybe she always was or maybe our father made her that way. I only remember her like that. She had better days when our father stuffed her full of pills, but on this particular day, she was heavily pregnant with Adamo. She couldn’t take the pills. Maybe she had wanted to kill herself for a while.”

Something tight coiled in my stomach, and I almost asked him to stop because I knew that day was when Nino’s childhood ended. Nino’s mother wasn’t the first wife of a Capo who ended her life. Being married to someone raised to be cruel could destroy anyone.

“Our father had sent us all to our cabin out in the Rockies because he wanted us gone from Vegas. We were a burden. One night, our mother pulled me out of bed and led me into her bedroom. Savio was already there, but he wasn’t moving. She’d given him her sleeping pills. I didn’t know what was going on, but she gripped my arms and slit both my wrists with a knife. She

wanted to kill us too. Maybe to punish our father.”

I sucked in my breath, fingers seizing on Nino’s stomach, but he was stock-still. Those scars on his wrists, they were remnants of that day.

“I was confused and scared.” His brows drew together as if he was trying to remember how being scared felt. “She left after that and came back with Remo a few minutes later. I think she took him last because she knew he’d be her biggest challenge. The house was filling with smoke by then. She’d set fire to the kitchen and living room. Remo rushed over to me, and she locked the door and shoved the key under the gap below the door. Then she moved to cut Remo’s wrists, but he fought her, unlike me. She managed to cut him over and over. That’s where he got the cut on his face. When she realized she couldn’t hold him down, she set the curtains on fire and then slit her own wrists. The room filled with smoke, and I sat in my own blood. Savio wasn’t move on the bed.”

Nino’s voice was mechanical, detached, cold. His eyes were as smooth and impenetrable as mercury, but each of his words burned into me, wedged itself like a knife into my heart. The horrors he described, they were incomprehensible. I had lived my own share of horrors, true, but somehow hearing him describe what he’d gone through as a young boy broke me. “How did you get out?”

“Remo threw a lamp through the window and got burned ripping the curtains off the ceiling. Part of his clothes began burning too, but he didn’t stop. My father’s men were trying to get inside the house and trying to extinguish the flames. Remo grabbed me and helped me out of the window. I jumped and broke my leg from the impact. Remo jumped out with Savio in his arms. He broke his elbow and shoulder because he tried to protect Savio. Our mother was saved by my father’s men later.”

I swallowed hard, unable to speak, and Nino fell silent as well.

“It seemed to take forever as I watched my own blood run down my arms. I felt the deep burn and it was almost soothing.” He lifted his arms, wrists up, showing me the long thin scars covered by dark ink. I leaned forward and kissed both of his wrists, my heart aching for Nino—and for Remo.

I tried to picture Nino as a child, kneeling in his blood, watching his mother cut Remo, smelling the smoke. I could picture how scared he must have been, how utterly broken and shocked that his own mother had tried to kill them in a barbaric way. It explained so much, explained why he had shut off his emotions and why Remo had turned toward them. Different ways to cope with the same horror.

“Where is she now? Did your father kill her after what she did to you?”

Nino shook his head. “After the doctors cut Adamo out of her, he sent her off to psychiatric hospital for a while, but eventually he moved her back home.”

“He forced you to live under a roof with the woman who tried to kill you?”

Nino’s eyes were focused on his fingers, which ran up and down my side. “For the first few years. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” The smile on his face felt like a bucket of ice. “But things were difficult. Remo became harder to control, and my lack of emotions eventually unsettled my father too much, so he sent us off to boarding school in England, up in the countryside north of Norwich.”

“But what about Savio and Adamo? Weren’t they too young?”

Nino nodded. “Adamo was four and Savio seven when we were shipped off. At the time, Remo had already been inducted and killed a few, but he wouldn’t let us be separated, so we went together to England. Of

course, that's what our father had intended. He wanted Remo and me gone. He was scared of us."

I couldn't imagine Remo in a posh boarding school. Nino could look like a sophisticated gentleman when he covered his tattoos and tried to form his expression into one of pleasantries, but Remo was far from restrained and posh.

"That didn't work out long," Nino said quietly. "Eventually, we ran off and returned to the States to kill our father."

"But you didn't. Luca's Enforcer, Growl, did."

"That's something Remo will never forgive our half-brother for. He robbed us of the chance to destroy our father, piece by piece."

I tended to forget that the Falcones and Growl were related. "I'm sorry," I whispered eventually, my insides churning and hoping that Nino couldn't see how much his story had affected me.

Nino made a low sound in his throat, a sound I'd only heard twice before, when he'd been on the verge of snapping, but his face was still unsettlingly void of emotion. His hand on my side dipped lower, over my hip and between my legs.

I jumped, surprised that he was looking for that kind of closeness in a situation like this. His fingers found my clit. He hovered over me and kissed me, harder than ever before, and his fingers strummed a fast rhythm between my legs. Despite the jumbled mess that was my emotions, my body responded to his kisses and touch.

Suddenly, he pushed himself up and moved on top of me, his strong arms on either side of my head. I stilled as he held himself over me, his eyes not emotionless at all. Instead, his expression twisted with something akin to despair. He'd never been on top of me during sex.

"Tell me this is okay for you, Kiara," he managed to say in a raw and

dark voice. “I’m not sure I can be as gentle as you need me to be. If you can’t do this, tell me and I’ll leave, but ...” He shook his head.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, because I wanted to console him in any way I could. If this was what he needed, I could give it to him. I wasn’t scared of Nino or his body.

NINO

Kiara looked up at me with trust that I had no trouble reading in her eyes. Her hands curled around my shoulders, holding on to me, and I grabbed my cock and guided it toward her pussy. She was wet and soft, even though she had been anxious about this position because it made her feel like she had no control, because my physical strength intimidated her. I lowered myself to my elbows. The closeness would calm her, not unsettle her, and I felt her body become even softer under me.

She tugged me down for a kiss, and I allowed her this small sliver of control, even if I was longing for something harder, darker. Even if I wanted to exert dominance and not gentleness.

But I needed to be inside her. Now. I slid in without pause, until her pussy touched my pelvis. I shuddered, needing more, needing it fast, needing to get rid of the sudden pressure on my chest that had never been there before.

I forced myself to wait a couple of heartbeats, allowed her body to adapt, forced down the raging flood of need in my body. I had never felt like this, like I needed to consume Kiara completely. Like she was the only thing that could satisfy a hunger unlike anything I’d ever felt.

My chest was tight, my stomach hollow, and I wasn’t sure what was going on. Why suddenly every look from Kiara made my insides explode

with fire, almost painfully but good too.

I pulled out and thrust back into Kiara, and her nails dug into my back, leaving scratches. It felt like relief, an outlet for the pressure. My lips found hers as I slammed into her, and she returned my gaze with a burning need of her own. Again, that same ache for something I didn't understand. I had always been in control, but I couldn't control this. I reached between us and rubbed Kiara's clit then latched onto her nipple, sucking and nibbling as I drove her into the bed with long, hard thrusts.

Even her smell opened the hole in my chest wider. Everything about her made my body react, made me long for something impossible, for something foreign and inexplicable.

Kiara started to shudder under me, but I kept thrusting even as her walls tightened from the force of her orgasm. I got on my knees for more leverage and kept thrusting, hoping it would fill that hole in my stomach, would satiate the deep hunger of my soul, but even as I came with a violent jerk and my cock softened, the longing remained wedged in my chest.

I sank down on top of Kiara and breathed harshly against her throat. Her fingers played with my hair, and she kissed my ear, then my temple, and for some reason those two meaningless gestures fulfilled some of my longing.

I twisted my face to look at her. Her skin was flushed, and she was breathing fast. She looked stunned, overwhelmed as she met my gaze.

"Did I hurt you?" I rasped.

Her brows pulled tight. "No. When you said you couldn't be gentle, I'd expected worse."

So had I. It had felt like I was on the verge of losing control, but somehow Kiara had held me fast through it all.

"Nino?" she asked quietly. "That look on your face, what does it

mean?”

If only I knew.

She kissed me. “I know our pasts hold horrors, but we can get beyond that, don’t you think?”

I stroked her cheek. I had gotten past the horrors. I’d seen and done so many horrible things, how could an event from long ago still hold any power over me?

CHAPTER 23



KIARA

The next morning I found Remo pummeling the life out of the punching bag, but all I could think of were Nino's words, and I knew I'd never see Remo the same way again. Christ, he still terrified me, but I almost understood him—part of him anyway. Remo was cruel and brutal, merciless and quick to snap, but it wasn't all there was to him.

"Why are you staring?" he panted as he sent the bag flying with another hard kick.

I wasn't even sure why I had come here. It was where Nino and his brothers hung out to play pool, watch fights and discuss business, or pummel a punching bag during the day. In the evening when we all had dinner together, my presence was tolerated, but I usually stayed away the rest of the time, giving them their space.

My eyes were drawn to Remo's back. I had never been close enough to him to notice that the tattooed fallen angel covered up burn scars. I hadn't realized the rough patches on his palms were burns and healed wounds from fending off his mother.

Remo turned to me fully, narrowing his eyes, and for a moment I wanted to go over and hug him, hug the young boy who saved Nino and Savio and even the unborn Adamo, who fought an insane mother and burned so they could all live, but Remo was a man now and not one you wanted to console. My eyes lingered on the scar crossing his eyebrow, and compassion for him filled me. Maybe Remo was beyond redemption in many people's

eyes, but he had saved his brothers, had saved Nino.

I wondered how he remembered that day, but I wasn't brave enough to ask him. Remo stalked toward me, and I looked up into his face when he stopped right in front of me. "Why are you giving me that fucked-up look?" he growled, but for once there wasn't only anger in his eyes ... there was apprehension.

I shook my head. "I wanted to thank you for saving Nino."

Remo stiffened and something hard and dangerous curled in the depth of his eyes.

"Two nights ago," I added, because self-preservation kicked in, but Remo knew that wasn't what I'd been referring to.

Yet he stepped back and gave a tense shrug. "Someone had to snap him out of it."

I took a step back as well.

"Oh, and Kiara, not a word about any of this to Savio and Adamo. They don't need to know."

About Nino's breakdown. About the past. They didn't remember, didn't know, and keeping that truth from them was probably another way Remo protected them.



My eyes were closed as I listened to the music, my fingers gliding over the keys. Nothing brought me more serenity than creating melodies. It was an outlet for the chaos of emotions inside of me.

"You're really good at it," Remo said.

I jumped, my eyes flying open and settling on Remo. He stood in the doorway for a moment then walked toward me. As usual, my body tensed in his presence.

“Still?” he asked with a wry smile. He leaned against the piano, looking down on me with these impossibly dark, dangerous eyes. “Still terrified of me.”

I laughed. “Remo, is there a woman in Las Vegas or anywhere else who isn’t scared of you?”

His smile pulled wider. “There’s no man either.”

I sighed. My gaze flickered to the scar on his face, remembering the story Nino had told me, wondering how a man capable of unspeakable acts could have risked his life to save his brothers. Remo Falcone was a complete mystery to me.

Remo’s eyes narrowed, and he moved closer, leaning over me, one hand braced on the keys, causing the piano to release a high-pitched whine. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he growled. “What did Nino tell you?”

I swallowed. “Don’t come so close,” I said firmly.

Remo’s lips tightened dangerously, but he straightened his body, giving me more space. “I told you before and I will tell you again: You are Nino’s. You are safe.”

“I know,” I said. “But I can’t help my body’s reaction to you. Maybe it’ll fade.”

He shrugged. “He told you about our mother, didn’t he?”

There was a tone to his voice that made the little hairs on my neck rise. “He did.”

Remo gave a sharp nod. Then he warned in a low voice, “Some things need to stay buried. She is one of them. And Nino’s emotions probably too. I don’t know what you want from him, but for his sake and yours, don’t push him.”



Early the next day, Nino and I set out for our first hike together. I wasn't overly fit, but having Nino to myself, surrounded by beautiful red stone formations, was too enticing. He took us back to the Red Canyon National park. He was quiet during the ride, focused on the street, but his eyes seemed to see beyond the road ahead.

He surprised me when he took my hand, resting both on my bare thigh. His warmth seeped into me, but that wasn't why my chest felt warmer.

We parked our car and set off for the circular trail. Nino was dressed in a tight, white T-shirt and gym shorts, his hair falling into his eyes. He also carried a massive backpack with provisions. I had opted for shorts and a top. It was only seven o'clock, but the day would be hot.

Nino lightly touched my back. "Ready for your first hike?"

I smiled. "With you at my side, I can do anything."

His expression softened. He nudged me closer and kissed me before he straightened and pointed at the trail. I was still taken aback by his show of affection. Not trying to analyze it, I fell into a stride beside Nino. He pointed out particularly beautiful stone formations. They glowed in different shades of red and orange.

Despite nature's beauty, my gaze kept returning to Nino. He had been different since I'd told him I loved him. Did he feel pressured to simulate emotions more often? Was that why he had been acting off? But I couldn't imagine that Nino yielded under pressure. Nino was strong, hardened. He was a Falcone.

Nino slowed his pace when he noticed I was having trouble keeping up. Eventually he chose a spot overlooking a valley of smaller stone formations, so we could take a break. We sat down on the ground, hip to hip, and Nino handed me a sandwich.

“And? Do you enjoy it?” he asked.

I tilted my head at him. “The hike or the sandwich?”

“Both would be optimum.”

I shook my head. “*Optimum...*” I put my chin down on his shoulder
“...I bet in school the other kids hated how clever and proper you were.”

Nino’s eyebrows shot up. “I was not proper. And the kids hated me for many reasons.”

“But I doubt they ever teased you.”

“When Remo and I first started boarding school in England, the kids didn’t know who we were. We were supposed to blend in. I was two years ahead, same year as Remo. Many of the boys in my classes were taller. They tried taunting me at first.”

“That didn’t go over well.”

“A few of them had unfortunate incidents leading to hospital stays,” Nino said. “Most of them were Remo’s doing, but I got a few of them as well.”

“And you weren’t thrown out of school?”

“The teachers knew who we were,” Nino said with a dark smile.

I searched his face, trying to imagine how he had been as a child. Nino met my gaze, and something softer, warmer filled his eyes. He leaned forward, touched my hip, and claimed my mouth for a kiss. I kissed him back, and eventually we stretched out on the warm stone, Nino leaning over me, kissing me, stroking my waist and ribcage. He rolled us over until I was lying on top of him. His hands roamed over my back, but the sound of a twig breaking tore us apart and Nino sat up with me still on top of him. His eyes scanned our surroundings. Then he relaxed again. His lips left a soft trail along my cheek down to my throat. His gentleness, his loving gestures, they made my heart throb with love and despair.

He simulated love for me. Sometimes, I managed to forget. But whenever I remembered, the pain was acute and heartbreaking. I shoved that thought aside. Nino cupped my cheek again, angled my head until our mouths connected. The kiss was all consuming, and I let it pull me down, let Nino's hands banish any logical thought. When he settled between my legs and claimed me, nothing else mattered but having Nino above me, inside of me, his mouth on mine, his gray eyes alight with desire and more ... I didn't care if it was simulated or not.

Afterward, we got dressed and continued our hike. His expression was calm and serene as it scanned the landscape around us, as long as he wasn't trying to simulate emotions. Was that how we would all be, calm and serene if we hadn't been burdened with the ability to feel at birth?

Calm and serene. I wished I could be like that, but my thoughts and emotions were a whirlwind in my body, confusing and terrifying and completely foolish.



A few days later, Nino had gone to train for a fight with Fabiano, and I was left alone with Remo. It was the first time he was the one to guard me. Nino had mentioned that Remo would be leaving soon for a mission in Outfit territory, which was why he was busy with last minute preparations at home.

I found him in his favorite spot on the sofa, checking something on his tablet. He didn't look up when I entered, and I watched him silently.

He raised his head, his expression hardening. "What now?" His voice was low, on the verge of angry.

"Why do you enjoy hurting women?" I whispered.

Remo narrowed his eyes. "I enjoy hurting *people*. I don't differentiate if it's a man or a woman."

“And yet you punish women differently than men,” I said.

“Do I?” he murmured, dark eyes burning into me. He put down his tablet and stood. “They get a choice. They can submit to torture or ...”

“Submit to another form of torture,” I said, growing angry. “You give them a choice between two forms of torture.”

He stalked toward me, but for once I didn’t back away. Almost three months in his presence gave me the necessary courage, that combined with the knowledge that Nino trusted Remo. “But one of them is far less painful than the other. It’s a choice. More than men get.”

I shuddered. “I can assure you that it was very painful for me.”

Remo regarded me a moment. He was close enough I could see the myriad of scars marring his upper body. He seldom wore shirts in the house. In the beginning, I thought it was to unsettle me even more—like Remo wasn’t unsettling enough on his own. “You were a child. Nobody touches children in my territory nor underage girls.”

“Don’t they bring more money?” I muttered.

“Of course. Most fuckers would pay a fortune to pop a girl’s cherry, but we don’t allow that kind of thing in our territory.”

“Why not? You allow sex slavery, don’t you? You have Romancers who seduce women, make them believe they are being loved and then turn them into whores.”

Remo sneered. Sometimes I wondered how a single person could harbor so much violence and hatred. “These women start working as whores because they want to please a man they should kill instead. If a woman allows a man to treat her like that, it’s as much her fault as it is his. They agree to sell their bodies because they think they are in love. That’s stupid, and they pay for their stupidity.”

“They want to help someone they love,” I said indignantly. “Your

Romancers make them believe they are indebted to the Camorra, and then the women take over the debt and have to work it off as whores. That's horrible."

Remo took another step closer to me, but I still didn't back off. "If women act as the weaker sex, they will be treated that way. Why don't these idiotic women tell my Romancers to go fuck themselves?"

"You will never understand because you've never loved someone."

Remo smiled wryly. "Loving someone who doesn't love you back is the biggest kind of stupidity I can imagine."

I flinched, because this hit too close to home, and because I knew he was right. Realization filled Remo's face and my insides twisted. Now he knew I loved Nino. I turned to leave, but he grasped my wrist.

"Let me go."

For once, he didn't. Instead, he drew me back so I had to face him. I glared up at his cruel, dark eyes. He shook his head, and I waited for him to taunt me. "He can't feel."

"I know," I muttered, tugging at his hold, but his fingers tightened around my wrist. Finally, my anger and despair bubbled over. "Do you think I don't know that? But I can't change how I feel! Don't you think I would change it if I could? But love doesn't work that way. You will never understand."

"You are right," he said in a low voice. "I can't and I won't. Why would I want to be a fucking fool?"

"I hope one day you will find someone you want so much it burns you up inside, and then we'll talk when she doesn't return your feelings."

Remo backed me against the wall, his expression hard and cruel. "That will never happen. And I've burned before, Kiara. I can brave flames and torture. I'm not weak like you."

"I'm not weak." I wrenched my wrist out of his grip and shoved him

hard. He took a deliberate step back, staring down at my hands still pressed against his chest. I dropped them quickly, shock filling me.

Remo raised his gaze, and I tensed, worried about his anger, but he was smirking. “Finally, you didn’t let your fucking fear win.”

I blinked at him, but he stepped back and turned around, heading toward the door, but before he reached it, he stopped and looked at me over his shoulder, his eyes hard. “Oh and, Kiara, you will never speak to me like that again. I am your Capo. Understood?”

I gave stunned nod and watched as he left.

NINO

Fabiano aimed a kick at my head. I dodged it a bit too late, and he lightly grazed my chin.

Surprise crossed over his face, which I used to land two hard punches against his lower back. He gasped but quickly recovered and got in a hit of his own.

He tilted his head. “What’s up with you?”

“What do you mean?” I asked carefully, grabbing the towel I’d thrown over the rope. I wiped my face and chest.

“You have been ... less focused today. And it was the same during your fight.”

I leaned against the post in the corner. My current state wasn’t something I wanted to discuss until I had a better handle on things and had a chance to thoroughly analyze my predicament. “You don’t like the idea with Cavallaro’s niece.”

Fabiano narrowed his eyes, obviously dissatisfied with the topic change. “Do you really think Remo’s plan is good?”

Remo's plan was emotional, fueled by revenge and hate. It was dangerous but it could prove to be effective. I regarded Fabiano. "You know the girl. You feel pity for her?"

He grimaced. "You know me, Nino. I will follow Remo through hellfire, but unlike you, I still have a couple of emotions."

"Before Leona, you convinced everyone that wasn't the case."

"Before Leona, I had convinced myself that I wasn't capable of emotions," he said, then narrowed his eyes as if catching himself.

"Remo's plan will create upheaval in the Outfit. Cavallaro's sister will be devastated that her daughter got caught by us, and Dante will feel responsible for his niece. His wife will be worried as well because of their own daughter. This might be one of the times Dante forgoes logic and acts. If that happens, we can beat him."

"Probably. Because no matter what, we can always count on you to be the voice of logic, Nino."

I gave a tense nod. Indifference and logical analyzing had guided me through my life, had saved mine and Remo's life on many occasions when his temper had gotten the better of him. But when I was around Kiara, logic was difficult to hold on to. Since the night she told me she loved me, something had shifted. It had started as a small crack but had continuously widened, and I had no way of stopping it. "Are you sure you will be able to do what must be done once you're in Chicago? You won't get distracted by thoughts of your father?"

Hate flashed across Fabiano's face. "I've waited a long time. I can wait a few more weeks or months. You don't have to worry. I will stand by Remo no matter how insane his plan is. I doubt it's only motivated by strategic motivations."

"Remo's plans never are. He wants to play with Dante, wants to tear

the Outfit apart from the inside. Remo is the best at mind games.”

“Yeah. Remo knows how to fuck with people’s brain,” Fabiano said with a dark laugh.

He did, and Cavallaro and Scuderi would soon realize their mistake of fucking with the Camorra.

CHAPTER 24



KIARA

Nothing brought me as much comfort as playing Nino's song, which was ironic considering it filled me with a crushing longing and wistfulness at the same time.

When my fingers got to the part where I came to the realization of my feelings, the melody turned low and dark, as if the piano was reluctant to play the notes, like I had been reluctant to admit my feelings to myself.

Nino stepped in and regarded me silently for a while. I didn't glance up from the piano keys, playing the song to the end, shivering as the low notes faded away.

"What does it mean?" Nino murmured. "Since you started the song, it has evolved more and more."

I raised my eyes to his. "It's the story of my feelings for you," I admitted. "How I came to accept that I love you and that you can never love me back." As usual, my throat tightened at my admittance.

Nino's expression softened ever so slightly and warmth filled his gray eyes, and today I could not take it. This simulated emotion, no matter how good he was at it, would never be enough. I knew it, deep down. "Stop it," I whispered harshly.

His eyes narrowed, and he moved closer, his motions graceful as always. And I resented even that. He could be so beautiful and intelligent and powerful, but he could never be the one thing I longed for: emotional.

I glared up into his beautifully cold face. "You are too good at this.

Too good at simulating affection, at pretending that you care for me. So good, sometimes, I almost believe you could really love me, Nino.” Tears welled in my eyes.

Weak. A fucking fool. What else had Remo called me? He had been right in every regard.

Nino braced himself on the piano, staring down at me. “Maybe I don’t have to simulate,” he said in that smooth voice. “Maybe I love you.”

This was the last straw. I could not take anymore. I jumped up from the bench, wishing he could understand how it tore me apart knowing that I loved someone who could never grasp what it meant to look at another and feel like you would shatter if that person was taken from you.

I gripped the front of his shirt, turning toward my anger. “Don’t lie to me. I told you not to say those words to me if you didn’t mean them. So just don’t.”

I released his shirt, stunned by the look in his eyes. It seemed as if they were burning with emotion. How good was he at faking this?

Swallowing thickly, I whirled around, needing to get away before I allowed myself to become trapped in this horrid simulation again. A clear, low note rang out when I was halfway up the stairs, and I froze, listening to the melody unfolding. It was a beautiful melody, every note complimenting the other. It was well composed but lacked emotion. It was a melody a computer might have created because it was just a bunch of notes strung together to please the average ear. You could listen to it over casual dinner with strangers because it never got your pulse rate up, never tore at your heartstrings or filled your body with sweet longing. Never made you want to cry from the sheer force of emotion it carried.

Then something shifted. At first it was subtle, a slight hiccup in the perfect composition. Darker notes begged for attention and were followed by

short, high notes until they battled each other and what appeared to be a perfect composition. Slowly, I turned, terrified of what I would see.

Nino sat at the piano, eyes closed, head tilted to the side, as his fingers flew over the keys. He was a sight to behold with his gruesome tattoos, countless scars, and that perfectly sculpted, emotionless face. I was sure no matter how long I'd live, I would never see anything more breathtaking than Nino forcing wondrous notes out of my piano.

The perfect composition battled with the unhinged notes, and then suddenly, inexplicably, they were no longer fighting for dominance. They wound around each other and it was more perfect together than any calculated symphony could ever be because it carried longing and hope, fear and resignation, love and hate. It carried it all, and I couldn't protect myself from it.

The tears I'd been holding back slipped out, and I wrapped my arms around my chest as if that could stop my heart from jumping out of my ribcage. When the last note died off, I stood there shaking.

Nino opened his eyes and looked at me. And I knew then that if what I saw in Nino's eyes, what I saw on his face, was simulated, then I could live with it because it filled my heart with so much warmth it burned me from the inside out.

"What is this?" he asked in a raw voice.

I took a step toward him. "What is what?"

"Tell me," he said as he rose. "What is this if not emotion?"

I stared, not able to comprehend what he was saying, not daring to hope. "The song ... that's what you feel?"

Nino walked toward me slowly and regarded me as if I had shattered everything he believed. He stopped right in front of me, standing two steps below me so we were on eyelevel, and I could barely breathe. "Before you,

there was calm. There was order and logic.”

I remembered the beginning of his song, that perfect composition. “And now?” I let out a hoarse exhale.

“Now,” he growled and his expression twisted, “now there’s chaos.”

I swallowed. What was I supposed to do with that kind of revelation? He startled me by cupping my cheeks, bringing our faces close, breathing harshly against my mouth, his eyes almost desperate.

“And you want the calm back,” I whispered.

His brows drew together as he regarded me. He dipped his head and kissed me, soft and slow, nothing like what I’d expected from the look in his eyes. “Yes and no. Perhaps. I don’t know,” he said quietly. “It takes some getting used to.”

And it lodged itself in my heart again, that stupid hope that perhaps one day Nino could ... Nino would love me.

NINO

Remo watched me warily as he put a few more guns into the trunk of his car. He’d be leaving for Chicago in a few hours with Fabiano. We were meeting in the Sugar Trap in thirty minutes for a few last-minute preparations. “I still think I should come with you,” I said firmly. “You and Fabiano are a volatile combination in Chicago.”

“Fabiano knows more about the Outfit than any of us, and you need to make sure nothing happens here. You can keep things in order if Fabiano and I don’t return.”

“Your chances of returning would increase if I came with you.”

“These last couple of weeks, you have been erratic, Nino. I think it’s best if you stay here.”

I frowned. I had a better handle on myself, and the nightmares had stopped. But I wasn't the same as I had been before. There was no denying it.

Remo touched my shoulder. "What is going on? Do I need to worry?"

"I'm not how I used to be," I began, not sure how I could describe to him what I could hardly understand myself. "I feel things. It's still a struggle, still not how normal people feel, I'm sure of it, but it is there."

Remo had become very still. "It is because of Kiara?"

I nodded. "Because of her. She fought the demons of her past and made me realize that I, too, was shackled by memories, controlled by something I thought I had put past me."

Remo looked away, fury contorting his expression. "Our mother should be dead. Father should have killed her after cutting Adamo out of her. I should have killed her when I took over, but she is still there. Still fucking alive."

I touched Remo's shoulder. "She's as good as dead. A shadow of a person. She is the past."

Remo gave a jerky nod and met my gaze, something dark and dangerous in his eyes. I knew that look and had seen it many times before. "Are you still at my side now that you have gone all soft because of Kiara?"

I gripped his forearm over the Camorra tattoo, and he mirrored the gesture. "We are brothers. Not just by birth, but by choice, and I will stand by your side until I take my last breath. Nothing will change that. Kiara knows it, and she accepts it. I have your back." I paused. "And I'm not going soft, don't worry. These new sensations ... I worried they would weaken me, that I couldn't be what you needed anymore, but they don't and they won't. I still don't feel a flicker of pity or guilt when I kill and torture for our cause, and that won't change."

Remo nodded and released me. For him, it was settled. He knew I was

still there for him. “Now that I know you can take care of Vegas while I’m gone, I’ll have to focus on kidnapping the lucky bride.”

I shook my head. Remo was obsessed. I should have been the voice of reason in this and made sure our plan actually worked. Emotions wouldn’t change the fact that I was the voice of logic between the two of us. That I would always be better at controlling my emotions, but Remo would follow his plan no matter what I said.

Kiara had freed me from the shackles of my past, and I wished the same for Remo. But Remo was Remo, and he would never allow a woman to see any side of him that didn’t evoke terror and fear.



When I returned home early in the evening, Kiara was outside in the garden and practicing how to shoot a gun. She had improved greatly since she’d first held a gun in her hand. Adamo was beside her, adjusting her arms every now and then. He’d be inducted in three weeks, on his fourteenth birthday, and now he’d pulled back even further from Remo, Savio, and myself. The only person he still spoke to on a daily basis was Kiara. She shot again, hitting bull’s-eye. Adamo smiled. Then he spotted me and stiffened. After saying something to Kiara, he walked off.

Kiara headed my way, the gun still in her hand. She was beaming, looking fucking proud, and my heart did that strange flip again. It always startled me.

“Did you see that?” she asked as she stopped in front of me.

“You’re a good shot.”

Her brows drew together. “Everything all right? You have a strange look on your face again.”

I took her hand and led her inside the mansion. She followed without

hesitation but chanced the occasional confused look at me. When we arrived in our bedroom, I took the gun from her and set it down on the nightstand. Then I pulled her against me and kissed her. Her hands came up to my chest, stroking and tugging, as her mouth moved against mine. She tasted like peppermint and chocolate, and I couldn't get enough of it.

Lifting her up, I laid her down on the bed then climbed on top of her, pressing my hard cock against her center. She moaned into my mouth and wrenched my shirt out of my pants. I sat up and quickly discarded my shirt before lowering myself back onto Kiara's soft body.

Her hands roamed over my back up to my neck, pulling me closer, and I kissed her harder and rocked my hips against her pelvis. She gasped. "Nino. I need you."

I pushed her shirt over her head then sucked her breast into my mouth through her lace bra as my hand traveled down to her shorts. I opened them and slipped my hand into her panties, over her soft hair and between her folds, finding her hot and wet and ready.

Fuck. I ripped her shorts down her legs then made quick work of her panties as well and pushed down my own pants and briefs before I moved back between her legs and thrust into her in one deep, hard move. We groaned and Kiara's nails raked over my back. I growled as my balls twitched. I guided one of her legs up then began fucking her in slow, hard thrusts. Her eyes remained on mine as I elicited from her lips one moan after another. There was trust and love in her eyes. I could see it now. I wasn't sure why I ever had trouble reading those emotions in her gaze. My own chest tightened, and my dead heart swelled with fucking emotion.

Fuck, it was painful, but it was the best pain I'd ever felt. I wrapped my arms around Kiara, bringing our bodies even closer, needing her fucking closer because only she filled the hole in my chest. Only she could look down

into the black abyss that was my soul and find something lovable in it.

My throat became tight, but I forced the words out that I'd wanted to say for days now. "I love you." My thrusts faltered when I heard those three words aloud, heard them spill from my lips.

Kiara tensed under me, her eyes widening, and I fucking pulled myself together and thrust into her again. "You do?" she whispered.

"I do, with my fucking dead heart. With every fucking fiber of my being."

She gasped as I angled my thrusts higher, and her eyes still showed incomprehension, like she couldn't believe it. I reached between us, touching her clit, and claimed her lips. She arched up, shuddering, and I let loose as well. I kept my eyes open, kept watching Kiara's gorgeous face contort with pleasure. I'd always enjoyed sex. It was the closest I could come to feel, but sex with emotion was something else entirely. It was fucking perfection.

I remained on top of Kiara even as I began to go soft and kissed her once more.

"You love me," she whispered. "For real?"

"I love you. For real. No simulated affection or love ever again, because with you, I don't need to simulate. You dragged that dead part of me out of the past and revived it. I didn't die fifteen years ago, but I didn't live either ... until you."

She held even tighter on to me. "I love you, Nino. A part of me died six years ago, but you helped me live again."

We had both been scarred by our past, but together we fought our demons and came out as the champions. Never had a victory felt better.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora Reilly is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. Before she found her passion in romance books, she was a traditionally published author of young adult literature.

Cora lives in Germany with 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.

Despite her law degree, Cora prefers to talk books to laws any day.