



An Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance

COLLATERAL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

NATASHA KNIGHT

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Gabriela

Stefan Sabbioni showed up uninvited in my bedroom on my sixteenth birthday. He stood in the shadows smelling of whiskey and death and wrapped a broken, blood-crusted necklace around my neck.

I thought he'd strangle me with it.

That night, he left a message for my father. He said he'd be back to take something precious.

I never delivered that message, though. I wonder if things would be different if I had because now, two years later, he's back. And he's not hiding in any shadows.

He's come to make good on his promise.
He's back to take that something precious.
Me.

Stefan

Marchese is the manipulator of my family's tragedy. I won't just bring him to his knees. I'll bury him for what he did.

Taking his daughter is only the beginning. I'll do it knowing I'm starting a war. I'll do it knowing my enemies will become his allies. They'll stop at nothing to destroy me and he'll stop at nothing to get her back.

I've never shied away from war, though. I'm not one to play nice and I don't share my toys. I'll demolish you if you touch what's mine.

And she is most definitely mine.

Collateral is Book 1 of the Collateral Damage Duet.



PROLOGUE

GABRIELA

Present Day

It's almost one in the morning when we drive up to the house in the posh Todt Hill neighborhood of Staten Island. The tall iron gates stand open, which surprises me. Security isn't something my father takes lightly.

As we slow to a stop, the guard greets the driver then shines his flashlight in through the open car window.

I turn away from the bright light when he flashes it in my face.

"You're to take her directly to her room. She's to stay there," he tells the driver.

Translation: lock her in.

"What's going on?" the driver asks.

I catch the guard's eye. "He's got company."

The driver nods then pushes the button to close the window and we drive toward the house. It's a beautiful mansion, one many people stop to look twice at, but I've always thought of it as more of a prison.

And tonight, I'm being brought back like an escaped convict.

Two SUVs I don't recognize are parked alongside the circular drive. I can see from here there's a driver sitting inside each one. Cigarette smoke wafts out of the open window of the first vehicle.

“Who’s here?” I ask.

Neither my driver nor John, the man my father sent to retrieve me, answer. Instead, we pull to a stop and John climbs out, opens my door.

I step out, grab my duffel bag.

He takes it from me in one hand and closes the other around my upper arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I tell him.

He neither lets me go nor bothers to reply. Why should he? He doesn’t answer to me. He answers to my father and he knows what happened to the other soldier who tried to help me. I’m sure they all know.

Tonight, an example was made to show what happens when someone crosses Gabriel Marchese.

Guilt makes me nauseous. He made me watch. Part of my punishment. Only the beginning of it, I’m sure. I’ll take what I have coming but Alex didn’t deserve what they did to him. That’s on me.

We climb the stairs to the wide portico, John’s grip harder than it needs to be as I walk along, my steps slower than his. I’m in no hurry to get inside.

The men stationed at the door open it, only sparing me a quick glance because I don’t matter, even if I am the daughter of the boss. I’m just a pawn and everyone knows it.

Once inside, I glance down the hall toward my father’s study. Two men I don’t recognize stand just outside the door. They don’t work for him. I know it just from the way they’re dressed.

When we near the stairs, the study door opens and my father’s attorney, Mark Waverly, steps into the hallway. He takes a few steps toward us, studies me for a long moment before turning to John.

“Bring her in here,” he says.

“I was told to take her upstairs.”

“Change of plans.” He gestures to the study with a quick sideways nod of his head.

My father doesn’t often call me into his study and certainly not when he’s doing business.

When I don’t move, John tugs at my arm.

“Gabriela,” Waverly says. “You’ll want to *walk* in.”

“Then tell my father’s goon to get his hands off me.”

Waverly gestures to John to let me go.

I brush my hair back, steel my spine. I try to ignore the splatters of red on my white T-shirt. My father ordered the beating, after all. I’m sure his business associates will neither be surprised nor offended by the evidence of such violence.

But as I near the study, I feel my heartbeat pick up. I force a bored expression on my face. I’ve worked on it for years and still, I don’t know if they see right through it.

When I’m a few feet from the door, I take a deep breath in, hoping it will calm me. It doesn’t.

I take two steps into the dimly lit study and stop. John and Waverly enter behind me and close the door.

There’s an older man I don’t recognize sitting in one of the armchairs. He’s dressed in a three-piece suit and I wonder how he’s not burning up even with the air-conditioning. But maybe it’s anxiety that has me sweating.

My father is seated behind his huge desk leaning back in his chair. If he’s trying to look relaxed, it’s not working. I see how the corner of his left eye is twitching. It’s his tell. I wonder who else has picked that up.

I watch as he scans my face, takes in my shorter hair. I cut about six inches off since he last saw me. I hated to do it, but I didn’t want to risk being found.

And still, I was found.

But disappearing when you're Gabriel Marchese's daughter is not an easy thing.

On the upside, I do like my new bangs, although they're a little too long and I keep having to tuck them behind my ear.

I shift my weight to one leg and look back at him.

He eyes my dirty T-shirt, shorts and army boots. It's not my usual attire, and I know he hates it. There are expectations for how his daughter should be seen, after all.

"Gabriela," he says, his voice elegant and rich. "How's Alex?"

"You know how he is."

His reply is a mean grin.

"I'm tired. If you don't mind, I'll go to bed. You can punish me tomorrow if that's why I'm here."

For as close as I was to my mother, so am I distant from my father.

Someone clears their throat and my head snaps to the far-right corner.

There's a man standing there, leaning against the wall. I hadn't realized there was anyone else in the room. I can't tell who it is. His arms are folded across his chest and his face is hidden in shadow.

He's tall, and built. I can see the thickness of his arms, his wide shoulders. He's dressed in a dark suit and from here, I can see his shoes are expensive.

He moves, unfolding his arms, checking his watch. When he drops his hand to his side and I see the ring on his finger, I gasp.

I know this man.

"The McKinney deal is off," my father says, forcing me to turn my attention to him.

"What?" I ask, my gaze shifting back to the stranger.

To his hand.

To that ring on his finger.

What's he doing here? In my father's study in the middle of the night?

“McKinney. The contract with the boy. It’s off,” my father says.

I face my father, confused. By contract, he means my forced marriage because to my father, everything is business, even his daughter’s life.

Not that I’m surprised.

And that *contract* he’s referring to is why I’d run.

I’ve had to do a lot of things in my life that I didn’t want to do, but I won’t marry someone just because my father deems it good for business.

“Waverly has drawn up a new contract.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask. I can’t seem to process what he’s saying.

There’s a sound behind me and I turn to find the man stepping out of the shadows. He’s adjusting the cuff of his shirt and a gold cufflink glints in the lamplight.

I can’t seem to drag my eyes away from his hands. From that ring.

And I don’t want to look up. I don’t want to see his face.

“The marriage will take place in one month’s time,” my father’s words are slow to sink into my brain because I have to do it, have to look up at this man’s face. “In the meantime, you’ll be taken to the Sabbioni estate in Sicily for safe-keeping.”

Still, the words, they’re like physical things. Like they’re lining up, waiting just outside my ears for when I’m ready to hear. To process. Because he can’t be saying what he’s saying.

“Mr. Sabbioni,” Waverly says, his tone neutral.

Mr. Sabbioni.

Stefan Sabbioni.

“We’ll need your initials on this modification,” Waverly continues. He must have moved around the desk when I wasn’t paying attention.

The man—Stefan Sabbioni—takes a step forward and I have to look at him now. I have to meet his strange hazel eyes. And when I do, I think

they're darker than they were that night. Or less bloodshot. Maybe it's just that tonight, he's not drunk. Not raging.

"What's happening?" I ask. I don't know who I'm asking as I can't drag my gaze from Stefan Sabbioni.

He gives me a smirk and when he moves past me, I don't know if it's on purpose that his arm brushes my shoulder. I smell his cologne and I remember how he smelled that night.

God, I don't think I'll ever get that smell out of my head.

He stands taller than all the men here and I watch him lean down, pick up my father's favorite fountain pen. I see my father's jaw tighten and I know Stefan did it on purpose, choosing that particular pen.

Before signing, he reads the text, nods, then quickly puts his initials down.

"Dad?" I ask, because I'm starting to understand what my father meant when I watch Waverly turn the page and Stefan puts his signature in the designated spot.

He hands the pen to my father and I take a step backward.

"*Dad*," Stefan says, his tone mocking me or my father or both of us.

My father takes the pen and turns the document around to sign it.

When I move backward toward the door, John grips my arm. Maybe he knows that I'm about to bolt, even though I know there's nowhere for me to go.

"Gabriela," my father says, holding his pen out for me to take it.

I shake my head as all the men turn to me and my eyes are drawn to Stefan's. He's watching me with such intense curiosity I feel like he can see right inside me, see the chaos, the panicked beating of my heart.

"We need your signature, Gabriela," Waverly says.

Sweat collects under my arms and beads on my forehead. "I'm not—"

"Bring her over here," my father orders John.

John begins to drag me to the desk, and I know it's useless, but I dig my heels in and try to pull him off.

"Get off me!"

Waverly and my father watch, expressionless. I can't see the other, older man's face. Stefan's blocking him. But Stefan's eyes narrow as they zero in on where John's hand is digging into my skin.

"Let go!" My voice is higher, thinner than usual, and I hate that they must hear the panic in it.

Stefan steps forward almost too quickly for me to process and an instant later, he clamps his hand over John's wrist. At first, all I can do is look at that ring and remember that night. Remember him the night of my sixteenth birthday.

"Let. Her. Go." He pauses between each word as if each is its own command.

"How chivalrous," my father's words are pierced with a strange sort of laugh, but I can't drag my eyes from Stefan to look at him now. I can't look away from Stefan's face as he cows my father's soldier.

Stefan squeezes his fist and John's grip on me loosens. Then it's gone, and he's got a pained expression on his face as Stefan twists his arm.

"You don't touch her again, am I clear?"

"John," my father interjects.

But Stefan doesn't relent. "Am I clear, *John*?"

"Fuck. Yes."

Stefan shoves him backward, releasing him, then shifts his gaze to me.

I watch his eyes drop to my blood-splattered T-shirt then back to my face. I touch my cheek, wondering if there are specks of blood there too.

I can't read him. He's completely closed.

He steps to the side, making a path for me to move toward the desk.

"Your signature is required," he says, tone level, the words cold.

I turn to Waverly, to my father.

“Don’t be fooled, Gabriela,” my father starts. “He’s not going to save you. He’s the beast in whose bed you’ll sleep.”

An icy chill runs down my spine.

I don’t know if my father means to insult Stefan with his comment but if that’s his point, then he fails. Stefan just smiles, checks his watch for the second time that night, then looks at me.

“Sign,” he says, like maybe I’m keeping him. Like maybe he has somewhere else to be.

I turn to my father and for a moment, I see something I have never seen before. It’s fleeting and I know no one else sees it, but for the first time in my life, and for as awful as he is, I’m scared.

Because that look on his face, in his eyes, it’s defeat.

“Daddy?”

He blinks and it’s gone, and I don’t remember the last time I called him daddy when I wasn’t being sarcastic. Maybe when I was five.

Before I can think, Stefan’s back at my side and his grip, I think it’s harder than John’s. Or it can be, at least. Maybe he’s letting me know it can be.

He takes me by my wrist and walks me to the desk. Snatching the pen out of my father’s hand and pushing it into mine, he closes his fist over my fingers, forcing my signature on the contract and I feel that rage inside him again, like I did that first night I met him in the shadows of my bedroom. I feel that terrifying, deep hate.

“Dad?” I ask.

But it’s done.

Whatever this is, it’s done.

And my father with all his power can’t save me now. I know it. I’m sure of it.

Because Stefan Sabbioni is more powerful.

Stefan drops my hand and I have moments to look at the scratchy signature, at the blob of a teardrop that lands on it before he collects the pages and the other stranger in the too-heavy suit stands.

“I’ll be back for you early in the morning. Be ready,” Stefan tells me.

Then, without another word, the two of them are gone and all I can do is watch the empty space. I listen to the sound of their retreating footsteps and remember his whispered promise from two years ago.

“Tell your father I’ll be back to take something precious too.”

Tonight, Stefan Sabbioni made good on his promise.

STEFAN

Rome, Italy
Past

I've been inside morgues. Several times, in fact. Still, I never will get used to the smell.

This is Rafa's first time and he's gagging.

"Put your shirt over your nose and breathe through your mouth," I tell him.

"How the fuck do you stand it?"

I don't look at him as I follow the kid to the last room in the dark corridor. This building must be a hundred years old. I wonder if they've ever renovated. I guess the dead don't care, but fuck, you've got to have a stomach of steel to be able to stand it.

"He's in here," the kid says.

I look at him. He's barely twenty. And if it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't fucking know.

"I hid his things in door seven. I was told to destroy them."

“You did the right thing. Thank you,” I say, reaching for my wallet and taking out two hundred-dollar-bills. I fold them and discreetly hold them out to him.

“It’s my duty, sir,” he says, bowing his head a little, hesitant to take the money I know he needs.

“Take it,” I tell him.

He does.

“Don’t let anyone into the building until I’m finished, understood?”

He nods and I hear his footsteps on the stairs. I wait until the door’s closed to turn to Rafa, my first-cousin, and one of the few men I trust.

“You don’t have to be down here,” I tell him.

“I want to see him,” he says, determined.

“It’s going to be bad, Rafa.”

He glances over my shoulder at the door that separates us from my brother’s body. He nods. “I’m ready.”

I pat his shoulder and turn the doorknob, then push the door open.

The smell is stronger in here and it makes me sick to think about it, about my brother in this place.

My brother, the traitor.

But still, my brother.

My eyes narrow as I take in the figure covered with a cloth on the table. I hear Rafa gag behind me.

It takes all I have to keep my shit together and walk toward what’s left of Antonio under there.

Rafa follows close behind and all I can think is I’m going to have to burn this suit because I know I won’t be able to get the smell out.

Without letting myself think about it, I look straight ahead at the wall of lockers and lift the sheet. This time Rafa’s gag tells me he’s about to puke.

I don’t turn when he runs from the room. I’d rather be alone anyway.

The door closes and when I look down, I see why he gagged.

My stomach heaves but rage settles it as I look at my brother's brutalized, headless body. Headless and handless.

Whoever did this didn't want him identified.

My jaw tightens.

Did they know it would bring me here even with the threat of arrest upon leaving Sicily?

I push the sheet to the floor and make myself look, really look.

Of the six bullets in his body, it was the one to the gut that killed him, and it killed him slow.

At least his head and hands were cut off after the fact.

If some sick fuck is keeping them as fucking trophies, I will decapitate him slowly and I won't give him the mercy of a bullet first.

In fact, the only reason the kid here knew to contact the Sabbioni family was the tattoo over Antonio's heart. Our family crest.

I walk around the table to look at it and I remember the day he'd gotten it. Every man in our family gets this particular tattoo on his sixteenth birthday. Even me and I fucking hate tattoos.

I remember when he came home. He'd been drunk off his ass. My brother did not like needles. I'd told him he was a pussy, but I'd kept his secret.

That night we'd gone out to the cemetery. He wanted to talk to mom. He did that a lot. And the family cemetery was about a fifteen-minute walk from the house in Palermo, so it was easy enough to do.

I remember when we got there, Antonio stumbling the whole way, how he'd opened his shirt to show her. Well, show her tombstone.

And as I look down at the tattoo on the man on the table, I remember that night.

I peer closer.

The door opens. "I'm sorry, man," Rafa starts, interrupting me.

I straighten, shift my gaze to his.

He's got his eyes turned up to the ceiling.

"I can't do it, Stefan," he says.

"It's all right. Go wait for me outside."

I wait until the door's closed before returning my attention to the tattoo, study it, and momentarily close my eyes. I guess I was hoping.

The night at the cemetery, I'd had to laugh when I'd seen the tattoo because it was wrong. The numerals on the clock, the IX for nine, the artist had reversed them. He'd tattooed XI on Antonio's chest. A small detail no one noticed, but a detail nonetheless. And I'm looking at that same detail now.

I straighten. Bow my head. Turn away from the brutalized body.

He didn't deserve this. No matter what, he didn't deserve this.

I look up at the doors of the lockers, storage for bodies, I guess, and locate number seven. Walking around the table, I go to it, open it. Inside, I find a trash bag and I lift it out and that, too, makes my blood boil.

Someone wanted his things destroyed. Would they have buried him in an unmarked grave if they hadn't been interrupted?

I walk to the desk and dump the contents of the bag out. Inside are a pair of bloody jeans, a black T-shirt, underwear. The blood has dried to a crust. His shoes too, good shoes, Italian leather—Antonio only wore the best—are splattered with blood.

I pick up the shoes, turn them over and recognize the name of the designer etched into the barely scuffed soles. They're brand new and from his favorite designer with a single shop here in Rome. I wonder if he'd just bought them.

But the fact that he was in Italy at all baffles me. What was he doing back here? Didn't he know the danger? What had happened? Had someone recognized him?

It wouldn't be anyone from my family. They knew I wanted him alive. I'd told them I wanted to do the killing myself. It was only right.

I still wonder if I could have done it, but I guess that doesn't matter anymore.

Putting the shoes back into the bag, I pick up the T-shirt, touch the bullet holes in it. The crusty blood. I shove it back into the bag.

I pick up the jeans and check the pockets, not expecting to find anything. If he had a wallet, they'd have destroyed it. Leave no way to identify him if they went to the trouble of sawing off his head and hands.

My stomach turns again, and I remind myself that it happened after he was dead. It's a small blessing.

The first pocket turns up empty and I expect the same from the second but am surprised that it isn't when I slide my hand inside.

I pull out a thick gold chain. A man's chain. The clasp broken.

I hold it high and watch the heavy pendant swing. It's coated with dried blood. I guess he'd broken it off his killer's neck before he'd died. Maybe as he'd gone down. The bullets were at close range. Someone he knew?

I take the pendant in my hand and with my fingernail, scratch away the crust.

My eyes narrow because I recognize the symbol. It's one I'll never forget. Because it belongs to a man I know.

An untouchable man.

I fist my hand around it. My nails dig into my palms, but I don't feel pain. There's no room for pain when rage takes hold. When vengeance is all I see. The heat of hate all I feel.

And I make my vow.

I walk out the door and up the stairs. I know what my men see when they look at me. A man made of stone.

But I am not that.

I missed my brother these last few years. I'll mourn him now.

And as much as I know I should walk away, walk away like I wasn't ever here, I won't leave him behind.

“Bring him home.”

GABRIELA

Rome, Italy
Past

The house is brimming with my father's friends. It's almost overflowing.

The vast gardens are illuminated with beautiful, soft candlelight, the round tables covered in white cloth. Arrangements of roses in every hideous shade of pink decorate each one, their scent thick in the hot night.

His favorite. Not mine.

I wanted black callas. They're more fitting for a family like ours.

I'm standing on the veranda swallowing champagne from a crystal flute. I've had too much already, I feel it, but I have hours to go.

The soprano sings her solo. I watch her from my place in this corner and her song sends shivers along my spine.

Pain.

So much pain.

I chose this piece purposefully. My father won't be happy when he realizes I slipped it into the compilation, but I'll pay that price tomorrow.

A waiter passes and I halt him, down the remainder of my glass before taking another, daring him to say a word. To tell me no.

He won't. He wouldn't dare.

I'm Gabriela Marchese, Gabriel Marchese's daughter. And it's my party. Tonight is my birthday. Sweet Sixteen.

Not a single person would dare tell me no.

The waiter clears his throat. I think he actually blushes.

I turn back to the soprano and he hurries away.

The heat of the night feels good. Rome in the height of summer. I do love it here. I love this house much more than the almost clinically modern one in New York. I wish he'd let me stay here.

I hear my father's laughter and turn away from the sound. Slipping deeper into the shadows, I watch him pass in his white tuxedo, looking as handsome as ever, his slightly graying hair the only betrayal of his age.

A woman wearing a horrible fuchsia dress is hanging off his arm. Tonight's piece of ass, I guess. I bet she thinks she'll be *the one*.

If she only knew how unlucky she'd be if she were.

I think about my mother, how elegant she was, and wonder how he can do it. How he can be with women like this. Sluts and gold-diggers who will drop to their knees to worship at his feet at the snap of his fingers.

No, the real question isn't that. It's how did my mother ever fall for him. He's never hidden his true colors.

As if sensing me there, he turns his head and spots me. He eyes my glass.

"It's cider," I lie. "Don't worry."

The woman glances at me unpleasantly.

He lets her go to stalk toward me, takes the flute, sniffs it.

"Why do you lie, darling?" he asks.

A different waiter appears as if on cue and my father, without taking his eyes off me, sets the almost empty flute on his tray. He leans in and to

anyone looking at us, it looks like he's kissing my cheek, my doting father, but he's not.

"I won't have you embarrass me, Gabriela."

"It's just a glass of champagne. I'm celebrating my birthday after all."

He stands back and looks at me, studies my face, then my dress. "You look so much like her, you know that?" he asks, and if I were a fool, I'd think he seemed almost rueful. Almost sorrowful.

But he's neither of those things and I'm not a fool.

My father is a powerful, untouchable man. One not capable of human emotions.

"I don't remember how she looked. You know that." I feel my eyes fill up at the words, at how true they're becoming.

How can you forget someone who once meant so much to you? How can a face be erased? Memories vanish?

Fuck.

I won't cry. I will not.

I steel my spine and swallow my tears, letting them sit like rocks inside my belly to join the others, adding to the mountain there. I force myself to remember who I'm talking to and I dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands until I draw blood.

At least he has the decency to look down for the briefest of moments. "I miss her too," he says.

Lie.

Liar.

This is where I get it from. The thing I inherited from him. I'm a liar too.

I glance over his shoulder. "Clearly."

He straightens, angry. I don't know why I provoke him.

He snaps his fingers and the same waiter appears. My father turns to him. "Get my daughter a drink," he says to him before shifting his gaze

back to me. “Apple juice.”

I hate him.

I hate this man.

He grins at my embarrassment and leans in close again. “Tonight is important. If you’re going to be ugly, you can go to your room. But know that you will be punished tomorrow.”

“Won’t I already?” I ask, taking the glass the waiter returns with.

He straightens to his full height. Gabriel Marchese. The most powerful man on two continents. A ruthless one with a reputation that precedes him.

He grins. “I don’t enjoy punishing you, Gabriela. You know that.”

“I have the scars to prove otherwise, *daddy*.”

His eyes narrow and my heart is racing because I know I should shut up. I should thank him for the juice and for the party I didn’t ask for and kiss his cheek and shut the fuck up.

At that moment, we’re interrupted by two men. I know the older one, Abe McKinney, a business associate of my father’s. I know immediately the younger one is his son. He looks just like his father and even though he’s only in his early twenties, my guess is he’ll lose his hair before he hits thirty.

“There you are, Gabriel,” Mr. McKinney says with his slight Irish accent.

My father smiles and they shake hands. I remember the time he’d wanted this man dead.

I shift my gaze from son to father.

“And Gabriela,” Mr. McKinney says, looking me over, making my skin crawl. He reaches into his pocket to take out a cream-colored envelope with my name etched in gold lettering on the front. “Happy birthday, beautiful,” he says, handing it to me.

I take the envelope, force a smile. “Thank you, Mr. McKinney.”

“Gabriela,” my father says, his voice almost tender as he shifts one hand to my lower back. I cringe. “This is Charles McKinney. Abe’s son.”

My smile is so fake, you’d have to be an idiot not to see through it. But Charles might be that idiot.

“A pleasure to meet you,” he says, reaching for my unoffered hand and kissing the knuckles.

Not enough alcohol in the world to numb that creepy feeling away.

I swallow the contents of my glass then remember it’s apple juice.

My father’s gaze hardens when I meet it.

“Excuse me,” I say, stepping out of his grasp. “I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Charles steps aside and I walk hurriedly away, back into the house, past the soldier standing by the grand staircase and up toward my suite of rooms on the second floor, almost running by the time I reach the doors, wishing I could lock them, but I can’t because the lock is on the outside.

I open both doors and walk inside, closing them behind me and leaning against them to catch my breath.

It takes me one moment to realize something is off.

The room is dark, the only light filtering from the party outside. The balcony doors are closed but I still hear the sound of five-hundred of my father’s closest friends getting drunk on his dime. Well, my mother’s dime, really.

But it’s not that that’s off. There’s a smell that doesn’t belong here.

A look around tells me I’m alone. But the bedroom door, it’s open. I know I’d closed it when I’d left.

I walk toward it. I don’t make a sound.

No one should be up here. The soldier wouldn’t have let anyone up.

I push the door wider and step inside. The smell, it’s stronger in here and it’s making me nauseous.

The room is too dark for me to see and I'm about to flip the light switch when a figure moves. Standing with his back to the windows, the light creates a sort of halo around him and he has the advantage. I can't see his face, but he can see mine in that same light.

I swallow, try to speak. "You're not supposed to be here," I finally manage, sensing something dangerous. And I remember for all the friends my father has bought, the number of his enemies is double that.

"No, I'm not," the man says, his voice a deep, sure timbre that ices my spine.

He takes a step forward and I take one back, my hand closing over the doorknob behind me.

Danger.

It ripples off him.

"What's that smell?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"Morgue," he answers, his voice low and hard.

He walks toward me, no hesitation in his step, and before I can move, he's standing just a few inches from me.

The smell clings to him and it's making me sick. When I cringe back, he leans toward me and I open my mouth to scream just as something clicks.

For a moment, I think it's a gun.

But then the room is bathed in soft, golden light. He'd just reached to switch on the lamp on the table beside me.

I exhale but my relief is short-lived.

The man is taller than my father. He's more than a foot taller than me and I'm wearing four-inch heels.

His disheveled hair is dark, eyes hazel and I think he's drunk. He must be. Only a drunk man would enter Gabriel Marchese's daughter's bedroom.

Or one with a death wish.

"Who are you?" I ask.

He doesn't answer me but studies my face instead. His eyes narrow as he takes me in, his gaze lowering to the swell of my breasts lifted and pushed together by this ridiculous gown. It, like the roses, is pink. A soft, champagne pink. A color I don't detest.

"I came with a gift," he says.

He tucks his hand into his pocket and for a moment, I wonder if he's going to pull out a knife or a gun. If he's going to kill me after all. Because I know this man is not my father's friend. Not even a business associate. And for the first time in my life, I think about the protection I've always lived under. The protection that often felt more stifling than anything else.

"It's your birthday, isn't it?" he asks, cocking his head to the side, setting one hand on the door above my head. He's leaning so close that I can feel the heat coming off his body.

I swallow.

"How did you get up here?" There are guards everywhere.

He lets what he's holding dangle and my gaze shifts to it, to the pendant hanging off a gold chain. It's too dark to make out the details.

"You shouldn't be up here. The party—"

"I'm not here for the party. I'm here for you, Gabriela."

My blood runs cold at his words.

My father, as much as I hate to admit it, scares me. But this man is terrifying.

His lips curve into something wicked. A grin. A sneer. I wonder if he can feel my fear. Maybe smell it coming off me. Men like this can, can't they?

"Turn around."

"Why?" I ask weakly.

"So I can give you your birthday present."

"I don't want—"

"I said turn around."

I should scream. Alert a guard. There are plenty of them. But I just keep staring up into his hazel eyes and I think how strangely beautiful he is, even for as fucked up as he looks. As drunk as he obviously is. As crazed.

“Please just go,” I manage.

“Turn. Around.”

It’s an order.

I swallow. Turn.

He moves his hand from above me once my back is to him, so when he lifts the chain over my head and brings it down to set the pendant against the swell of my breasts, I smell that smell again. On the sleeves of his suit. On the skin of his hands.

I look down at the pendant, but he pulls it higher so I can’t see it. Instead, I notice the ring on his finger, a heavy, dark ring.

But then those fingers touch my skin and it’s like touching a live wire. I gasp, listen to the hammering of my heart, wonder if he hears it. If he feels that shock of electricity.

I don’t move as he pulls the chain tight, the pendant at my throat. He tugs and a new panic takes hold. I think he’s going to strangle me with it.

I make a sound, a pathetic whimper. I should scream but it’s like my throat has closed up.

“It’s broken,” he says. “That’s rude, isn’t it? To give you a broken gift?” His deep voice is low, his breath on my neck sending a strange sensation down my spine. “But that’s how I got it, too.”

I realize what he’s doing. He’s tying the chain. He must be.

I reach my hand to touch the pendant and when I do, something crusty flakes off.

A glance at my fingers shows a flake of dark red and I know it’s blood. I know it.

My stomach heaves and I tighten my muscles, trying to quell the urge to vomit.

“There,” he says. I smell whiskey on his breath now that he’s closer and hear him inhale as the scruff of his jaw scratches my bare shoulder and I shudder.

Undeterred, he tilts my head to the side and presses his lips to the curve of my neck. To my pulse.

My breath catches and I can’t move.

It’s not a kiss, this.

This man isn’t kissing me.

But his lips, they’re warm. And that disgusting smell of chemicals and death, it’s going to make me sick. He must feel my knees give out because he wraps one powerful, muscled arm around my middle, tightening his grip as he holds me against him.

He brings his mouth to my ear, breathes in a deep breath.

“Do you know who I am?” he asks in a whisper that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

I give a little shake of my head.

He turns me so I’m facing him, presses me against the door with one hand on my belly as the fingers of his other hand trail the line of my collarbone and touch the pendant.

When I finally meet his gaze, what I see in his eyes makes me go cold.

“Stefan Sabbioni,” he says. “Antonio’s brother.”

Those names mean nothing to me. Should they mean something?

“And I want you to give your father a message for me,” he starts, pausing for so long that it feels like the air is heavier for the unspoken words. For those that are still to come. “Tell him I’ll be back to take something precious too.”

An eternity passes before he steps backward.

My knees buckle, and I catch the doorknob to remain upright. It’s suddenly freezing in my room and I’m shivering.

“You won’t forget to give him my message, will you?”

I shake my head. It's all I can do.

He nods, eyes narrowing, a smile that's not a smile at all turning the corners of his mouth upward.

"Happy birthday, Gabriela," he says, and with that, he's gone.

Present Day

GABRIELA

My father barely acknowledges me after Stefan leaves. I walk out of the study and turn to the front doors as I listen to the sound of the SUVs pulling away. I wonder what just happened. I wonder how this man walked into our house and had my father sign a contract to give me up. How he made me sign the same contract that bound me to him.

Marriage.

I will be forced to marry him.

A shudder runs through me and I hurry up the stairs to my room. This one isn't nearly as nice as my suite of rooms in Rome. Just a large bedroom. Still luxurious, still beautiful, and still without a lock on the door. At least not on the inside.

But none of that matters anymore because I won't be here for much longer.

I stand for a full minute with my back against the door and listen to the pounding of my heart.

"I'll be back for you early in the morning. Be ready."

When this was happening with McKinney, it felt different. Not so real. Like I could somehow control it.

Although my running away to avoid being forced to marry McKinney's son lasted less than forty-eight hours so maybe I was fooling myself all along. I had no control then and I have no control now.

At that, my thoughts wander to Alex. I guess he's at the hospital now. I guess they would have taken him there.

I want to call, to check on him, but how? I don't have a cell phone—another means for my father to control me—and there's no phone in my room.

But I doubt his family wants to talk to me anyway.

I look down at myself. I should shower. I should throw away these clothes and pack. Is that what he meant by be ready?

This makes no sense. I can't wrap my brain around it.

I push away from the door and go to the dresser. I don't glance behind me before kneeling down to pull out the bottom drawer then reach my arm to the back until I feel the bundle and peel it off. The tape comes away easily and I look at the dusty little pocket of tissue paper that fits in the palm of my hand.

That night two years ago, he'd told me to give a message to my father. To warn him that he'd be back to take something precious.

I hadn't, though.

I hadn't gone to my father.

If I had, would he have been able to stop this?

What I did instead was look up Stefan Sabbioni and learn everything I could about him. But nothing I found gave me any clues as to why he'd come after me or my father.

The Sabbioni family is a mafia family from Sicily. From what I learned, they essentially owned the island and had some territory in the states, New York mostly.

But just as their power here was growing, Stefan's older brother, Antonio, had turned over evidence against his father about which I could

find nothing online. The father was extradited to the states and Antonio taken into protective custody. Stefan's father, also named Antonio, was killed shortly after in an American prison. He never even made it to trial.

The family was weakened considerably, and Stefan Sabbioni was on a sort of house-arrest. At least, he wasn't allowed to leave the island of Sicily under threat of arrest and extradition to the states.

So how was he able to get here tonight?

I know they'd been regaining their power over the last two years but it's not like the mafia posts their business on Google, so I don't know any details and have no clue how powerful he is or what he's capable of.

Well, I have one clue.

I mean, tonight is a pretty big clue.

I shake my head, still trying to wrap my brain around this. Around why and how.

Footsteps on the stairs have me up on my knees. I quickly put the drawer back in place and rush into the bathroom. It's the only room with a lock, so I lock it and switch on the shower before sitting down on the closed lid of the toilet.

I touch the dusty tissue paper for the first time in two years and unwrap it, tearing it a little where the tape is stuck.

I kept the broken necklace in a nest of paper, this *gift* Stefan gave me on my sixteenth birthday. I don't want to touch it. I never cleaned off the crusted blood. I didn't have to. I know what it is. I knew the moment after he left when I tore it off my neck to study it for all of two seconds.

The Marchese family crest.

Yes, we're that pretentious.

My father wasn't the one who built the shipping empire, but he did grow it to what it is today. The company isn't his technically, even though he took the Marchese family name when he married my mother. She's the blood Marchese.

The keeping of the Marchese name is a requirement of the inheritance that's always passed down to the first-born on his or her twenty-first birthday. My father is a sort of warden until I come of age, even though I'm not first-born. My brother, Gabe, is in no condition to run a company like this. To run much of anything.

I know how my father has grown it into the empire it has become. His hands are in no way clean.

What does that make me if I live off that money?

I think about that a lot and as much as I know how powerless I am, as many times as my father has proven he will drag me back kicking and screaming when I try to run, I'm still guilty.

"Gabriela?"

I startle at his voice. My father is just on the other side of the door.

"I'm having a shower," I call out.

"I'll wait."

"It'll be a while."

"I'll wait."

Fuck.

I get up, stash the necklace in the cabinet under the sink and strip off my clothes to shower. I don't hurry, hoping he'll get tired of waiting, but when I'm finished a full half-hour later, my hair towel dried and wearing a bathrobe, I find my father sitting on the chaise looking uncomfortable among the too-delicate, too-feminine furnishings, none of which I chose.

He gets to his feet and comes toward me. I try to read him but can't. I've never seen him like this.

"There's a full month before the wedding has to happen," he says.

To hear him say that word, it's almost surreal.

"I will find some way to stop it," he promises.

"Why is he doing this?"

He raises his head a little and his lips tighten. That's guilt. Well, not that he feels guilty. It's more acknowledgement that yes, he did something bad and whatever Stefan has on him, is bad.

"What happened to McKinney?" I ask because he's not going to answer that first question.

"Sabbioni owns the docks now."

"What?"

"He took over McKinney's territories."

Abe McKinney owns docks in several ports where my father's ships land. He and McKinney had reached an agreement several years ago that made him the powerhouse he is today.

"What do you mean took it over? Like bought McKinney out?"

"Don't worry yourself with the details. I came to give you something." He reaches into his pocket and takes out a small revolver.

I shake my head. "I don't want a gun."

"It's for your protection. Our soldiers won't be there."

"They're *your* soldiers. Not *ours*."

"They're your protection too."

My father has a very different perspective than I.

"So you're giving me that as protection against Stefan Sabbioni? What do you think, I'm going to shoot him?"

"If he forces himself on you, you'll be in your right."

"But you were okay with McKinney's son forcing himself on me?"

"He's not a dirty Sicilian mobster."

"No, he's a dirty Irish one." McKinney is as much a crook as Stefan Sabbioni. As my father. "I don't want it."

"Don't make this hard. You'll take it." He puts it on the bed and I notice my duffel bag that John had taken before is there too.

I look up at my father. "I want to see Gabe."

My father's expression tightens. He turns and walks to the window. The topic of my brother is never an easy one.

"Tomorrow's my day to visit. If I'm going to be gone for a month or more—"

"It's not possible."

"Why not?"

"Because it's the middle of the night and Sabbioni will be here first thing in the morning."

"And if I'm not here, he'll wait."

He turns to me and exhales, shakes his head with an almost amused little smile. "Things don't work that way and you know it."

I do.

"What does he have on you that you agreed?" I ask, not sure I want to know.

He shifts his gaze back to the window and just keeps looking out over the distance of our land, dark and wooded, the street too far to see.

"You have to tell me that at least," I press.

He turns, looks at me, studies me as if he's never going to see me again and for as little affection as I feel for this man, in that moment, he's my father.

"Every day you look more like her," he says.

It takes me a moment to process but when I do, that affection I felt a moment ago dissipates.

Mom.

He's talking about mom.

"I won't remarry, you know," he says. "Never."

My mother drowned when I was eight. She'd taken my brother and I camping, and she drowned in the lake. She was only twenty-nine years old. Ten years younger than my father.

I watch my father, study his face when he talks about her and every time he does, something inside me hardens.

He doesn't know what I saw that morning. Doesn't know I bore witness to it all.

"Maybe you should," I say, turning my back on him. "I'm tired."

He comes up behind me. When he puts his hands on my arms, I stiffen. It takes all I have not to pull out of his grasp.

"You're owed a punishment," he says, his voice different again.

At that, I pull out of his grasp and take several steps away before I face him.

"I don't belong to you anymore," I accuse, using language he understands, hating what I feel when I say it, hating how disgusting I feel.

I remind myself that I am only a thing to him. A possession. Something he can barter with and trade.

And tonight, someone beat him at his own game.

"Get out of my room," I tell him.

My father shifts his weight to one foot and cocks his head to the side, studying me. He gives me a sneer.

"Always the princess in the tower, aren't you? You're like your mother in that sense too. Ever the victim. You don't know what you have."

"Your thugs broke both of Alex's legs tonight."

"He tried to steal you from me."

"I went to him. He didn't steal me. Do you even hear how you sound?"

"Our family is different. You know that. You, Gabriela, should know it better than your mother or brother ever did."

My heart twists.

I wonder how he can have no idea of the pain he causes with his careless words.

Or maybe they're not careless.

Maybe he means to twist the knife lodged in my heart.

“Sabbioni is stealing from me now.”

“And you can’t break *his* legs. Why?” I spit. “What does Stefan Sabbioni have on you?” There’s only one way to deal with my father. He has no compassion. No empathy. I wonder sometimes if he isn’t a sociopath.

That twitch is back. Whatever Stefan has, it’s big.

He walks to the door but stops when he opens it. “Remember who you are. Remember where your loyalties lie.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and we stand like this, silent. I think my father is taking my measure, determining if I’m ally or foe.

What I want is to be neither and, in a way, Stefan taking me, it’s a sort of freedom, isn’t it? A sort of escape.

My father grins like he’s just read my mind.

“You take care, Gabriela. And don’t make the mistake of thinking he’s a white knight come to rescue you from your tower. He’s as much a monster as I.”

GABRIELA

It's still early when I wake the next morning. Well, I guess it's only a few hours later, not morning at all. The birds aren't singing yet, that's what gives away the time.

Because even before I open my eyes, I know I'm not alone.

I don't move and I know I should try to keep my breathing even, but I can't seem to breathe at all right now.

Aftershave.

My mind immediately goes to the night of my sixteenth birthday party. To the smell then.

Morgue.

At least it's not that smell.

But it *is* him. I recognize the scent of his cologne from when we were in the study earlier. Recognize my inability to breathe when he's in a room with me.

I turn my head to find him standing over my desk, finger holding my book open, reading in the little bit of moonlight that's coming through the windows. I hadn't closed my curtains before going to bed.

"Morning," he says, startling me that he knew I was awake without even having to turn around.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I sit up and switch on the lamp beside my bed.

He closes the book, turns to look at me, his gaze roaming from my face down.

I touch my hair, still damp from my late shower, and glance down at my nightie, a dark blue silk tank that leaves little to the imagination.

I draw the blanket up a little, refusing to acknowledge his advantage over me. He’s fully dressed in a suit, a different one than the one he was wearing a few hours ago, and me in my bed, barely dressed, having just woken up.

“Where are your bags?” he asks, making a show of looking around the room. “I told you to be ready.”

“Is this for fucking real?”

He raises his eyebrows. His perfect eyebrows. But the amused expression vanishes quickly.

“I prefer you don’t use that sort of language.”

“Offends your delicate ears?”

Now he smiles wide. It’s a smile that makes the corners of his eyes crease, and I see a dimple on his right cheek. It’s disarming. Like his eyes with their soft color.

He steps toward the bed and I find myself sitting up straighter. He comes right to my side and sits down on the edge, slowly allowing his gaze to slide over my face, lingering on my hair. I’m sure it’s huge around my head from sleep. Then his eyes trail down to the exposed part of my chest.

Heat flushes my cheeks and I look away, hugging the blanket tighter.

But he takes my jaw in his hand and turns my head so I’m looking at him again.

His eyes narrow but it’s not a malicious, calculated thing. I think he’s just really looking at me. And I’m hyper aware of what I must look like.

“Watch your mouth, understand?”

I want to say yes. I want to nod my head. Be agreeable. Because something about him scares me. Even now, even when he's calm, and when he smiles like this, almost kindly.

Because he's not kind. I know that.

"Do you understand, Gabriela?" he asks again.

I swallow, feel how his hold tightens just a little.

"This is where you answer yes. Or yes sir, if you prefer," he suggests.

"How about go fuck yourself instead?" I offer.

There's that smile again, and I force one corner of my mouth upward too. Inside my chest, my heart is racing.

"Ah, Gabriela," he says, showing all his teeth now. "You will make this interesting."

An instant later, his grip shifts to my hair and he shoves me face down onto the bed and smacks my ass so hard, I'm not sure what's worse, the sting or the fact that he just did that.

He draws me back up to a seat and this time, his hand in my hair is a fist. And I see the thin veneer of his composure as he tugs my head backward, so it hurts my neck to look at him.

"You're hurting—"

"Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes!" I cry out, tears filling my eyes from my hair being pulled so hard, from the humiliation of what he just did. From my stinging butt cheek.

"Good."

He releases me and stands.

I immediately massage my scalp with one hand while with the other, I wipe at a stray tear.

"Your bags?" he asks, all calm and collected again.

I shake my head because I can't speak. My throat has closed up with the effort of swallowing down my tears because yes, this is for fucking real.

And this man, he's not someone to be toyed with. He's not the pathetic boy Charles McKinney is. He's not even like that buffoon, John.

"What does that mean? You're unprepared? I told you to be ready early."

"It's still night." I sound like an idiot, but it's all I can think to say.

"I'll give you that. Five minutes then." He walks to the door. Opens it. "Car's waiting to take you to the airport."

"Where's my father?" God. Fuck. Is this so bad that I'm asking for my father? What is wrong with me?

He turns, cocks his head to the side. "Daddy can't help you now, Princess. Five minutes."

GABRIELA

I shove whatever I can into my duffel bag, feel for the cash and fake passport sewn into the lining. At least they're still there. John didn't find those. But maybe he didn't bother to look considering this impromptu change of plans.

Just before I walk out of my room, I glance back at the pistol my father left and, without overthinking it, I pack that too and am out of my room in five minutes.

But it's not Stefan waiting for me downstairs. It's two of his men, neither of whom introduce themselves.

John stands nearby watching.

"Where's my father?" I ask him.

"Meeting," he says.

"At this hour?"

He only nods once, and I don't know why I feel hurt that my dad's not here. That he won't see me off. See me taken.

One of the two men clears his throat and gestures for me to walk outside. I do and an SUV, probably one of the two from last night, is idling.

The man opens the back door for me and takes my duffel as I climb in. I'm surprised when they sit on either side of me on the drive to the airport, like they think I might try to jump out of a moving vehicle.

My father must have given them my passport. We're ushered quickly through security to our gate and onto the plane. Once again they sit on either side of me in our first-class seats to Italy.

I hate flying. I've always hated it even as a kid, and in these circumstances, it's worse.

The only time they talk to me is when they ask if I need to use the bathroom or if I'm hungry and I'm not surprised when I get up to use the bathroom and one of them follows me.

The flight connects through Rome and it's almost fourteen hours later when we arrive in Palermo. It's the height of summer and if I thought New York was hot, it's absolutely steaming here.

But I'm not outside for long as a car pulls up almost as soon as we set foot outside of the airport. This time, I'm not sandwiched between the men and sit by the window in the backseat to take in the view as we drive to our destination.

It's another forty minutes by the time we turn onto a private road a little outside Palermo proper. A mile in, large gates and a thick wall tell me we've arrived at what I want to call the Sabbioni compound because that's what this is. A highly secure compound.

Our driver greets one of the men at the gate and the striking difference between these men and those at my father's house is that they have large automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. My father's men are a little more subtle, though, I'm sure, no less deadly.

They're all smoking, and I see the curious peering eyes of the men as they get a look at me through the open front window. The back windows are tinted black.

I push the button to open the window but it's locked.

"Can you unlock my window?" I ask. "Please," I add for good measure.

The driver glances in the rear-view mirror and the one beside me tells him in Italian to unlock the windows.

Although I speak Italian, I'm out of practice. But I do understand almost everything.

I push the button to lower my window to inhale a warm, salty breeze and catch glimpses of the blue sea in the distance.

My father still brings us to Italy at least twice a year, but I've never been this far south.

It's another few minutes until the house comes into view.

Well, house is an understatement.

I guess I expected some sort of prison with barred windows. That's not what this is. Not even close.

This is probably one of the most elegant houses I've ever seen. It's big, but it's somehow not pretentious. With the blue backdrop of sea and sky, the impeccable white of the exterior seems brighter. Columns that support a balcony stand perfectly spaced, two of six framing the large carved wooden front doors. The windows on both floors are large, the shutters nailed back, everything in pristine condition with a chimney on either end of the house.

As the SUV comes to a stop, I can already see from here that the back of the house must have spectacular views of the sea.

The men who rode with me climb out and two of them light cigarettes the instant they're outside. I wonder if Stefan doesn't allow them to smoke inside the car.

I go to open my door just as the third man reaches for the handle and pulls it wide.

I slide out and look up in awe at the bright sun, the beautiful house.

Two armed men stand at the front door and when those doors open, I'm surprised to see an older woman emerge. I know immediately she runs the house from the way she snaps at the smoking men who quickly put their cigarettes out. It's almost funny.

She walks to the one who's carrying my duffel and gives him instructions on where to put it before turning her gaze to me.

“Gabriela,” she says with an unexpected American accent. “I’m Miss Millie. I manage Mr. Sabbioni’s Palermo home.”

She speaks in clear English and when she extends a hand to me, I take it.

“You’re American?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes. Although, more Italian now. I’ve been living here for the last forty years.”

I guess her to be in her early sixties and her smile appears genuine.

“Come inside, you’re probably tired from the travel and the heat out here is stifling.”

“I like it, actually. And it’s nice to smell the sea.”

She smiles warmly and leads me into the house.

I try not to gawk at my surroundings as I step into the marble entrance. It’s big, not as big as our house in Rome, but it is more beautiful with windows and French doors open wide to let the bright Sicilian sun in. I was right, the entire back of the house overlooks the sea and the doors are wide open with beige linen curtains billowing in the soft ocean breeze.

“This is so beautiful,” I say. Absolutely not what I’d expected at all.

“Mr. Sabbioni has impeccable taste.”

I watch the man who has my duffel disappear up the wide marble stairs and into one of the rooms there.

A woman in a maid’s uniform comes in carrying a tray on which I think may be a tall glass of lemonade.

“First thing’s first,” Miss Millie says, handing the glass to me. “Have something to drink. Are you hungry?”

I drink most of the lemonade in one go. It’s delicious and I wonder if it’s homemade.

I nod. I only picked at the food on the flight.

“Didn’t those boys feed you?”

Boys.

My smile flounders and my stomach feels funny. She speaks about them with affection. What does that say about her?

“I wasn’t hungry then,” I say.

“All right. Let me show you to your room and you can freshen up while I make you some panelle.”

“Panelle?”

“A local street food. One of Mr. Sabbioni’s favorites so we make it often.”

I follow her up the stairs and look around for him all the while. Is he here already? No, he wouldn’t be. He’d have been on the same flight as me otherwise.

I don’t have a chance to count all the doors up here before she opens one. I step inside and look around at the beautiful, luxurious space with its large four-poster bed in the center draped with a linen canopy that matches the softly blowing curtains at the open French doors.

Outside on the balcony stand two pots of Bougainvillea with their bright fuchsia flowers. I put my hands on the intricately designed iron railing and look out at the vast sea, everything blue for miles and miles.

“This is beautiful,” I can’t help but say.

Miss Millie doesn’t reply, and I look down to see that directly below my room is an infinity pool with large chairs shaped out of stone, cushioned with white and blue pillows in various patterns, shapes and sizes. Potted plants in brilliant colors stand on every pedestal and stairs carved into the rough cliffs lead down to a beach, disappearing into the shallower turquoise water.

In the distance, I think I see Palermo proper.

“Mr. Sabbioni called this morning to be sure you had the basic things you’ll need.”

He did?

“If you’d like to go for a swim after you eat, you’ll find a bathing suit in the dresser and some other things in the closet.”

“This isn’t his room?” I ask.

“No, dear. Of course not.”

I blink away rapidly, embarrassed that I’d asked. I’d just assumed he’d want me in his room. I remember what my father said about sleeping in the beast’s bed, but quickly push the thought aside, ignoring the uneasy feeling in my belly.

“I’ll leave you to freshen up. Just come downstairs and out to the patio when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.”

She walks to the door and just as she’s about to leave, I clear my throat. She stops, turns to me.

“Is he...Mr. Sabbioni,” Christ, will he expect me to call him that? “Is he coming back today?”

“He’s expected for dinner.”

I nod, try for a smile which vanishes as soon as she does.

I find the bathroom and it’s as luxurious as the bedroom. I splash water on my face and comb through my hair with my fingers. I find a toothbrush and toothpaste in one of the drawers. Opening the package, I smear toothpaste on it and brush my teeth, grateful he has provided this because in the five minutes I had to get ready, I didn’t think to grab mine.

Back in the bedroom, I open the drawers of the dresser and rummage through, trying not to think about the lacy underthings. I check the labels and they’re all new and all my size. How did he know and when did he order all these things? When he was giving me my five minutes after he spanked my butt?

Embarrassed at the memory, I busy myself with opening the next drawer. There, I find multiple bikinis. I close that one. I won’t be swimming.

I go to the walk-in closet and find about two dozen sundresses hanging in a neat row.

Without another thought, I strip off my jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt, both too warm for this weather and sticky after the long flights, and put on one of the dresses, a pretty turquoise strappy thing.

I slip my feet into a pair of flip flops and walk out of my bedroom. On my way to the stairs, I count the eleven doors in addition to mine on this floor.

Downstairs on the large round table in the foyer, a huge bouquet of fuchsia Bougainvillea is the only splash of color in the otherwise white and beige house. It's striking and elegant and fits perfectly.

I'm quiet as I descend and once I'm on the first floor, I see Miss Millie right away. She's outside by the pool pouring lemonade from a pitcher into a tall glass.

When I step outside, I stand in the sun and stop for a moment to listen to the quiet stillness, to the distant sounds of the sea. Once again, I take in the beauty of it, the unending blue.

"There you are," Miss Millie says. She looks me over. "Did you find everything you needed?"

"Yes, thank you." I look at the table, at the food, enough to feed half a dozen people.

"Come and sit down," she says.

I take my seat, grateful for the umbrella shielding me from the bright sun. I place the napkin on my lap. She describes everything then leaves me to eat alone.

The panelle is delicious. It's a fried chickpea patty that shouldn't taste nearly as good as it does. I devour two sandwiches and eat a generous portion of tomato salad before finally getting up and walking to the edge of the pool to dip my toe in. The water is cool and inviting and I'd give anything to swim. To feel weightless in water again.

But it's been almost ten years since I last went swimming, so I pull my foot out, remembering the stairs leading down to the sea. I walk toward them, picking my way around the bushes and potted flowers and plants until I get to them. This is clearly not a path often used.

Opposite the house, they're not maintained, and I wonder how many years ago they were carved into the sheer face of the rock as I carefully make my way down.

It's farther than I realize, and much steeper. I get the feeling these stairs aren't meant to be used at all.

At the bottom, I can walk directly into the sea or veer right to where there's a secluded, sandy beach. It's not big and I guess it's part of the property because it's completely private with access only from the sea.

I slip out of my flip flops and walk to the water where soft waves bubble at my ankles. I take a few more steps. The water is so clear, I can see straight to the sea floor, even as I lift my dress and walk until the water is past my knees.

I stay there for a long time, just looking out at the stretch of blue water, at Palermo in the distance, although I have to crane my neck to see it from down here. A school of curious small, white fish circle my legs, and I watch them. A larger wave comes, probably the wake of a far-off boat, and they swim away. I walk back to the sandy beach to sit, letting the water just tickle my toes.

There, I think.

Because I have to process.

Just a few days ago, I had attempted—once again—to run away from home. Hearing myself think those words now makes it sound so childish, but my father was going to marry me off to McKinney and I couldn't do it. I couldn't go from my father's house to that man's. I couldn't.

Then I think about last night. Was it only last night? When I watched my friend beaten for helping me. Watched as his legs were broken. Watched

his face contort in pain when all the while, he refused to scream.

God.

Alex.

How can men do that? What kind of men do that?

Men like my father.

Like Stefan Sabbioni?

I shake the thought away. I don't know him. Not at all. Maybe he'll be different.

"Don't get your hopes up," I say out loud.

I think about Stefan.

I think about how he made good on his promise and how I may have jumped or, more accurately, been thrown out of the frying pan and directly into the fire.

Because now I'm Stefan's pawn. Something he can use against my father.

And what happened this morning, what he did, the thought of it fills me with embarrassment and something else.

He spanked me.

He just turned me over and spanked me.

No man has ever touched me that way and never in a million years would I have thought any man would dare do that to me. Apart from my father's punishments that is, which maybe were meant to humiliate me, but had the effect of making me hate him instead.

I shake the thoughts away and yawn. I'm tired. I only had about two hours of sleep last night.

I get to my feet and begin the steep climb back up to the house. I'm sweating by the time I get to my room, noticing how, like at my father's house, there's no lock on the door. Although there isn't one on the outside of the door either. That's an improvement, right?

Once inside, I go into the bathroom to shower. There is a lock there, so I use it.

I strip off my clothes and switch on the water, testing the temperature, making it as cool as I can. I step under the flow, standing there for a long minute, letting the water clean me, wash the salt and sand from me.

The shampoo and conditioner smell good, like vanilla, and I wash my hair and when I'm finished, I wrap myself in a thick towel and go back into the bedroom, careful when I open the door to be sure I'm still alone, that Stefan isn't lurking somewhere.

According to the clock, it's late afternoon.

I unzip my duffel bag which is on a chair nearby and put on a pair of underwear—one of the few things I did bring with me—and the tank and shorts I'd slept in the night before. Which only reminds me of what he did, and I can't think of why I packed them.

But at least they're mine, not his.

I dig my wallet out and pad barefoot to the bed. The marble is cool under my feet, the breeze that's blowing in from the open French doors salty and warm.

I sit on the edge of the bed and open my wallet to take out the only thing I care about. The only thing I couldn't leave behind.

It's just a small photograph and it's a little bent but I look at it, at us.

Mom, Gabe and me.

We were laughing so hard and I can't remember why. It was taken the year before she died. We were visiting our grandparents in Carmel. They're gone too now.

I see why my father says I look like her. Especially now that I have bangs. Although my hair is a little lighter than her almost black hair, we have the same eyes exactly, a pale blue-green. And even though I've been told some of my expressions match my father's, my bone structure is from my mom.

She was eighteen when she met my father. And looking at this, I understand why he looks at me strangely sometimes. It must make him remember her and I'm not sure that's a good thing.

I look at my brother, Gabe, and wonder how he's doing. Wonder how he'll react when they tell him why I'm not there to visit him this week.

Maybe I can find some way to call him. At least let him know I'm thinking about him. Gabe doesn't like talking on the phone but maybe I can get one of the nurses to convince him.

I yawn again and I put the photo on the dresser beneath my wallet, then I lie down. It takes all of three seconds for me to fall fast asleep.

STEFAN

It's early evening when I walk in the front door of the Palermo house. It's good to be back. Good to be home.

Millie tells me Gabriela is in her room and I pass hers on my way to mine to shower and change. Get the grime of New York City off me.

The sun is still high and it's still warm. I don't mind the heat, though. I grew up in it and it doesn't bother me.

After a quick shower, I put on a pair of jeans, a black V-neck T-shirt and shoes. Rather than walking out into the hallway, I open the balcony doors and step outside. I take a moment to breathe in the salty air, to feel the Sicilian sun on my face.

There's nothing like it anywhere in the world.

I walk down the length of the balcony to the open French doors. I'm sure she doesn't yet know we share a balcony.

The curtains billow softly, and my shoes are silent when I step into her room to find her asleep in her bed. Her breathing remains level as I approach.

She's lying on her back, pretty dark hair strewn around her, the thin blanket pulled up to her chest. One hand rests on her belly, the other is over her head on the pillow. She looks so relaxed, her face soft, her mouth slightly open, thick eyelashes fluttering ever so slightly.

She's pretty. Her features have changed little since I first saw her on her sixteenth birthday. She was like a woman then too.

But with a father like Gabriel Marchese, I guess it's to be expected.

I wonder about her. About what she'll be like.

The first time I went to her house, crashed her Sweet Sixteen, I'd been crazed. After my visit to the morgue, I'd drunk a bottle of whiskey before coming up with the plan to go there.

It was risky, stupid even, but my brother was dead, and his killer had left evidence behind.

I still remember how she'd trembled in my presence.

My glance shifts to the nightstand where her wallet lies open and I can see her driver's license, some credit cards.

Daddy's girl.

Daddy's precious princess.

My jaw hardens.

I'm about to turn away when I glimpse the corner of a photograph sticking up from underneath the wallet. I glance to the sleeping beauty once more before moving her wallet and picking up the picture.

It's a small square and a little damaged so I have to peer close to see the faces, three of them. Two children and their mother. Gabriela must be six or seven in this photo and has a smear of strawberry ice cream on her chin.

Beside her is a boy. I know who he is, too. He's two years older than her.

Gabriel. Her brother

Funny how she's become the image of her mother and her brother looks nothing like either of them but resembles his father instead.

No one's heard from the younger Gabriel Marchese in two years and the rumor is that his father killed him in a rage.

I put the photo down and glance at Gabriela again. Young. Eighteen.

I shake my head, wondering for a moment who I am. What I've become to be able to do this. To take an innocent.

But I stop myself there.

She's no innocent. She's Marchese's daughter. His heir. And her hands are dirty by association.

I wonder if even in sleep she feels this shift in my mood because she stirs, her forehead creasing, her hand coming to her face. She mutters something and I watch her, wondering if she'll wake. If she'll scream when she sees me. But she turns slightly to her side and falls back asleep quickly. She must be exhausted from last night and this day of travel.

When she draws her arm in and the blanket shifts, I notice a scar just beneath her shoulder blade. I peer closer. See seven matching scars, actually. Tiny little burns. I touch one lightly, feel the bumpy skin.

She makes a sound but doesn't wake.

I straighten.

The rest of her back is unmarked, at least the part that I can see. And these are marks that can easily be hidden.

I shift my gaze to her duffel bag nearby and I go to it, rifling through the few things, mostly underthings, a pair of jeans that will be too hot for summertime in Sicily. A book. I pick it out, read the title. A romance. Typical.

She'd packed a gun in here. I wonder if she's realized it's missing yet. My men found it when they searched her duffel before checking in at the airport. It's in my study now. I'll address that with sleeping beauty when she wakes. When I go over the rules.

I smile. Remember her face when I spanked her ass.

Remember the feel of the plump, supple flesh against my hand.

She's mine.

All mine.

The spoils of war.

And thinking about the things I'm going to do to that pretty little ass of hers makes my dick hard.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I lift it out, check the message.

It's Rafa. He's here.

I give my princess one last glance before I walk out the door to meet him, telling Millie to wake her for dinner when I pass her in the hallway.

Rafa's waiting for me in the foyer.

"Stef," he says, smiling. He's the only one allowed to call me that. He's been doing it since we were little. Rafa is a few months older than me and like a brother.

The thought reminds me of Antonio.

Antonio in life.

Antonio in death.

The memory of him on that table at the morgue as vivid as the day I saw it. I'm not sure I'll ever forget that.

But that's a good thing. It keeps me one step ahead of my enemies. Revenge may be best served cold, but it's a churning, burning rage that fuels that vengeance.

Because taking his daughter is only step one in the destruction of Gabriel Marchese.

"Rafa," I say, going to him, giving him a short, tight hug and a pat on the back. "How did it go? You got it for me?"

He hands me the bag. "I thought you had your mother's ring," he says.

I take it from him, reach inside to retrieve the box and set the empty bag on the nearby table. I open it to look at the obscenely large square-cut diamond on its heavy platinum band.

"She won't be wearing my mother's ring." I won't let a Marchese taint the ring that was given to my mother from my father and worn with love.

I close the box and slide it into my pocket.

"Drink?" I ask him just as I hear a door open upstairs.

His eyes flicker to the second floor and I turn to watch Gabriela emerge from her room wearing a turquoise sundress. Her straight hair hangs loose to her shoulders, the thick bangs brushed to the side and tucked behind one ear.

She doesn't realize we're there as she looks down either side of the hallway before turning and seeing us.

She stops short.

Rafa clears his throat.

I remain silent, watching her as she steels her spine and walks to the stairs, her hand tentative on the intricately patterned iron banister as she makes her way silently down the marble staircase. Silent because she's wearing flip-flops and even so, I can see the shape of her slender legs, the lean muscle of her thighs.

As she nears the bottom, her gaze shifts to Rafa momentarily. Before returning narrowed eyes to mine, she lifts her head a little higher. Haughty and arrogant is my princess bride. My stolen bride.

I will rid her of her arrogance.

She comes to stand a few feet from us. "Were you in my room?" she asks me boldly.

I'm surprised by her question, by her daring. Clearly a single spank to her ass didn't instill any fear.

"Correction, Gabriela. You are in *my* room in *my* house."

"Did you come in there while I was sleeping?"

"I did," I say, smiling as I step a little closer so she has to crane her neck to look up at me. She can't be more than five feet five inches tall.

Speaking of.

"Flip flops are for the beach or the pool. You'll wear high-heeled shoes to dinner." I look her over. "The rest is fine. Go upstairs, change and come back."

Her brows rise high on her forehead, and she looks from me to Rafa and back.

“What?” she asks.

Rafa chuckles. “I’ll see you later, cousin.”

I hold her gaze when he walks out of the house.

Millie passes by, carrying something to the table already set for dinner out by the pool. She pretends we’re not even standing there.

“What part was confusing?” I ask Gabriela.

“I’m...are you serious? You want me to change my shoes for dinner?”

“I’m for fucking real, yes,” I say, using her own words from earlier, reminding her how I dealt with her the last time.

She shifts her weight to one foot, jutting her hip out a little and cocking her head to the side. She studies me and I watch her pale blue-green eyes. Eyes the color of the Sicilian sea. The color of foam that washes up on the beach.

“Sure,” she says, pasting a fake smile on her face and turning to march back up the stairs. “Why not?”

I watch her go. This isn’t the response I expected. I thought she’d give me some ridiculous fight. She is only eighteen, after all.

But she’s no child.

I give a shake of my head as Millie reappears with a silver tray upon which sits a tumbler of whiskey.

“Thank you,” I say, taking it, my eyes sliding back up to the closed door of Gabriela’s borrowed bedroom.

Millie’s been with us for a long time. She worked for my father before me and she’s devoted to my family.

I head outside, walking around the pool to the edge of the patio to look out to the vast sea. I think again about how Palermo is the most beautiful place on earth.

A few moments later, I hear Gabriela's heels clicking loudly on the stairs. I don't turn around, but my mouth moves into a smile.

The tantrum's coming, her little show of resistance. It's all she can do because when it comes to us, she has zero control and she knows it.

"Is this more to your liking?" she asks from behind me.

I turn to find her standing just outside the large open doors of the patio. A glance at her feet shows me she chose a pair of turquoise high-heeled sandals, one from a local designer. Her slender legs look even longer now.

I nod my approval and sip my drink, watching how her hands clench and unclench at her sides, how her jaw tightens when she grits her teeth.

Moving to the table, I pull out her chair. "Sit."

She mutters something under her breath.

"What's that?"

"Don't give me orders like I'm a dog."

"I'll give you orders exactly as I wish."

She stands her ground.

I gesture to the chair. "Don't be a child. I'm hungry."

"I'm not a child."

"You're acting like one. You want to pick a fight? I'm happy to engage. But be smart about it and choose well. Now sit. Or go up to your room and I'll be up to deal with you after I've eaten."

I see her throat work to swallow and she studies my face, my eyes, maybe gauging the level of threat. I remember the scars on her back. Remember what she said to her father in the study about punishing her.

"Sit down, Gabriela," I say once more. "I'm hungry and you must be too."

She acquiesces, not replying but making her way to the seat, pulling it out farther and making a point of scraping the iron legs against the tile.

I move to my chair which is across from hers and Millie appears with two of the staff to serve the first course, a homemade pasta dish.

“Wine?” she asks me before serving my guest.

My eyes are still on Gabriela who is studying her plate. “Gabriela?”

She looks at the bottle and I know in the states, she’s too young to legally drink, but she nods her head and I give Millie the okay.

“Leave the bottle,” I tell Millie.

She disappears and Gabriela picks up the glass to drink a sip of white wine. I sip my whiskey.

“Eat,” I tell her, picking up my knife and fork and starting, hungry because I haven’t eaten all day.

She slices the ravioli in half to look at the filling before placing a piece in her mouth. She’s quick to eat another bite.

I smile.

“Is there anything you don’t eat?” I ask when she finishes her plate before I’ve finished mine.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks defensively.

“Restrictions to your diet. Allergies. So I can tell the staff.”

“Oh.” She picks up her napkin and wipes her mouth, then shakes her head. “No.”

I nod and it’s quiet again as I finish my plate. The staff appear to clear our plates and set the second course down. I watch her eat her fish with slightly less gusto and when she finishes her glass of wine, I pour her a second.

We don’t talk until we’ve both eaten the fish course and dessert, a chocolate torte. Millie’s specialty. I think she made it to welcome Gabriela, but I don’t comment.

Millie understands what this is about and although she knows better than to share her opinion with me, I’m aware she doesn’t agree with what I’m doing.

When dinner is cleared, she picks up her glass.

“What do you have on my father?” she asks, surprising me.

I smile at her bravery. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

“It’s got to be big if he agreed to this.”

I just give her a smile and sip my drink.

“I’m not so valuable to my father you know. If you think taking me will hurt him, you’ll be disappointed.”

“I’m not concerned with hurting him. My plan is to bury him. And I think you’re wrong. I think you’re very valuable to your father.”

“As a piece on a chessboard he can manipulate to win his games, nothing more. I’m not *precious*.”

“You remember.”

“How could I forget the stranger in my room stinking of death?”

My mood darkens and she must see it because her expression falters.

I get up, go to her to refill her glass. It’s probably not a great idea but I’m feeling reckless. I walk inside and return with the bottle of whiskey, refill my glass and resume my seat.

“What did he do to you?” she asks.

“Trust me, you don’t want to talk about that, Gabriela.” I pause. “I have a question. It’s strange to name you the feminine version of your brother’s name, isn’t it?”

She looks surprised by my choice of topic. “I guess my parents weren’t feeling particularly creative.” She lowers her gaze to her glass, drinks a big gulp before looking at me again, her sea-foam eyes closed off.

“Explain that.”

“My mom struggled to get pregnant with my brother and they were told they wouldn’t have another baby so maybe they were unprepared. Change the subject. I’m not talking about my family with you.”

She drinks the rest of her wine and reaches for the bottle.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” I say.

She ignores me, refills her glass.

I don’t stop her. She needs the liquid courage, maybe.

“How old are you?” she asks.

“Twenty-nine.”

“Why do you want me?”

“To fuck with your father.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Like I said, you don’t want to know that.”

“Does it have to do with why you smelled like that the first night?”

I wonder if she can still smell that smell. I can.

I nod.

She shifts a little in her seat. “Do you mean to go through with it? Marrying me?”

“You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“Why? How will that punish him?”

“To take his daughter. His heir. To flaunt her, this dirty Sicilian that I am. To watch him do exactly as I say and humiliate him before I bring him to his knees as I steal the Marchese legacy out from under him. That’s how this will punish him.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“What am I? Collateral damage? This is my life too. You’re punishing me too and I haven’t done anything to you. I don’t even know you.”

I set my elbow on the table, lean my chin into it. “Are you innocent, Gabriela?”

“I’m a pawn, Stefan. First to him. Now to you.”

“But he loves you.”

At that she chuckles and turns her attention to the horizon where the sun is beginning to set. After a moment, she pours more wine for herself.

“You need to slow down on that.”

She glares at me and drains her glass.

One side of my mouth curves upward. Her hangover tomorrow may teach her better than my warnings.

“You’ve come into my bedroom uninvited three times,” she says.

“And?”

“And I don’t want you to do it anymore. You’ll knock. It’s polite.”

“Who says I’m polite?”

“You’re right. You Sicilians are more like animals, aren’t you?”

She doesn’t blink, but I can see she’s testing. Unsure.

“Do you mean we *dirty* Sicilians?”

“If you say so.”

“You’re arrogant.”

“I am.”

“A princess?”

She grits her teeth.

“Daddy’s precious little princess? What will he do when I put my dirty Sicilian hands on you?”

Her smile vanishes and her face pales.

“You had a pistol in your bag, Gabriela.”

“You went through my things?”

“Nothing is yours anymore. Everything is mine. Including you.”

“I’ll never be yours.”

“What were you going to do with it? Shoot me?”

It takes her a moment to answer. “If you put your hands on me, then yes.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I took it before you hurt yourself.” I finish my whiskey and lean toward her. “And just so you know, when I do deign to touch you, you’ll be begging for it.”

She snorts, matches my posture with elbows on the table and her chin resting on her hands. “Let’s get one thing clear, Stefan. I will never beg you

for anything. I don't want you. I don't want this." She takes a breath. "This isn't my choice."

"It's not mine either so that makes two of us."

At that she's baffled.

I get up, walk toward her, reach into my pocket and toss the box at her.

She catches it and I walk away, taking a seat on one of the cushioned benches. I watch her turn in her seat to face me.

"What the hell is this?" she asks, turning the velvet box around in her hands.

"Did this morning not teach you about language?"

Her eyes are darker when she looks up at me and if looks could kill, I'd be dead.

She sets the box on the table. "Yeah, that's another thing. If you're expecting some perfect lady who wears high-heels to dinner and speaks properly, well, you've got another thing coming."

"I don't think so. I think you'll do exactly as you're told."

"And what *in hell* gives you that impression?"

I lean back, stretching my arms out as the sun sets and darkness falls so the lights of the house and those of the pool come on to illuminate her.

"Take care, Princess. Next time I spank you, I'll be sure to leave a more lasting impression."

"If you ever try that again, I will kill you."

I laugh outright at that. "How would you do that? I took your gun."

She glares.

"Are you stronger than me? Will you somehow overpower me? I think not."

Her jaw tightens as her hands fist.

"Open the box," I tell her.

She stands. "I mean it, Stefan. You are never to touch me like that again! I won't have it."

I stand too, shove my hands into my pockets and study her, go to her. I have to give her credit for not shrinking away from me.

I reach out, touch her hair, it's thick and soft and I remember how it lent itself to my grip. I brush her bangs behind her ear and search her face, then lower. I see how her nipples are pebbled against the fine material of the dress and it's not cold enough for it to be the temperature.

When I lean toward her, I hear her breath catch. She puts her hands against my chest.

"You're pretty when you're angry, you know that?" I say in a quiet voice.

"You like playing with me, don't you?"

I straighten and I'm so close that I can feel those hard, little points against my chest through my T-shirt.

"I do. Very much."

I brush my jaw against her cheek, inhale her scent.

"And just to be clear, I'll touch you any way I want. You're mine. You belong to me," I whisper against her ear, feeling her shudder before I draw back and open the box. "Now," I say, turning it so she can see the ring. "Hold out your left hand so I can put this first mark of my ownership on you."

It takes her a long minute before she drags her gaze up to mine and in that time, I can almost feel the rage bubbling inside her. This insult of ownership. Of being made to submit.

I watch her and wait. I've learned patience over the years.

Anger makes her eyes darker. I think this is how they'll look when I lay my dirty hands on her. When I fuck her.

"You know what you can do with that ring, Stefan?" she asks, eyes blazing. "You can shove it up your ass."

She tries to push past me, but I catch her wrist and make her turn to me. I squeeze and watch her face contort with the pain.

“You’re going to make this fun, aren’t you?” I ask through gritted teeth. I turn my attention to her hand and force the ring on her finger before twisting her arm behind her back, forcing her to turn so she’s facing away from me. I tug her backward and close my other hand over her throat.

“I don’t want it. Take it off,” she manages.

“I don’t give a damn what you want.” My voice is tight, years-old rage burns inside me. “You’ll wear my ring. You will never take it off, not at any time day or night because if you do then you and I have a problem. Am I making myself clear?”

“Let me go. You’re a thug. A bully.”

I tighten my grip on her throat. “Am I clear, Gabriela?” I ask, keeping her immobile.

“Crystal,” she spits.

Good.

I release her and step backward.

She stumbles, turns to face me, both hands protective over her throat.

We stay like this for a moment, facing off. I see the fear in her eyes, the uncertainty. I almost feel sorry for her. She is so far out of her league.

But then I remember my brother. I remember my dead brother mutilated and left in that stinking morgue and every muscle tightens.

“Now go to your room and stay there until I tell you you can come out,” I say through gritted teeth.

“With fucking pleasure!” she spits, before running past me and up the stairs, tripping once in her haste before she disappears into her borrowed room.

GABRIELA

I slam the bedroom door and lean against it, not sure if he's on his way up now to make good on his threats. To hurt me. To make me docile.

But I am not that. I will never be that.

I touch my throat and it's like I can still feel his hand around it.

He could snap my neck in a second. He could strangle me on a whim. It would take little effort from him.

The cold of the diamond ring makes me draw my hand away. I look down at it, the too tight ring with its enormous diamond. I hate it. I fucking hate it because it's exactly what he says. His mark of ownership.

Rebellion has me tugging at the thing, wanting it off. I'm not sure if I'm glad it fits too tightly to be pulled off so easily because I did hear his warning loud and clear. I'm not stupid enough not to heed it.

I do not want a problem with him.

No matter how much I fight, how rebellious I am, I know better than to make a problem with Stefan Sabbioni.

He will punish me and the rage that rears its ugly head from beneath that calm, sophisticated exterior, it scares the fuck out of me.

When five minutes pass and it's still quiet in the hallway, I step away from the door.

I look around for some way to block it. The dresser will be too heavy to push so I take a chair and lodge it under the doorknob, not sure it'll work to keep him out. Knowing, actually that it won't. That if he wants in, he'll be in. He'll break the door down if he has to.

What I did was stupid. I know. I shouldn't have pushed him like that.

I slip off my shoes and go into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. I'm trying not to look at the ring on my finger, but I do touch the reddened print of his hand on my throat.

What the hell does he want from me? What does he expect? That I'll meekly do as he says? That I'm remotely okay with having my life stolen so he can take his revenge against my father?

What could my father have done to make him do this?

And aren't I included in that vengeance? I am my father's daughter and Stefan seems to think I'm precious. So, to bury my father, to use Stefan's words, does he then mean to bury me along with him?

I open the bathroom door and walk back into the bedroom. It's dark, the only lights those from the pool coming in through the still open French doors. I don't turn the lights on though.

Instead, I open every drawer in the dresser, then search through the closet for a weapon. Apart from the heels on some of the shoes, I find nothing. Maybe I could lodge one in his eye.

But when ten minutes pass, then twenty, then thirty and he's still not here, I start to relax.

That half hour turns into an hour and I take out my book, sit on the bed to read, although I'm so distracted, I just keep re-reading the same passage.

The night grows darker and I get up to go outside, to look at the sea.

From here, I can see down to where we'd sat for dinner. The table's been cleared, and candles are lit in hurricane jars. Those, combined with the lights inside the pool, makes for a pretty, elegant affect.

I'm about to go back into the bedroom when I hear voices. First a man's. I think it's the same man who was here earlier but I only heard him for a split second so I could be wrong. Then I hear a woman's laughter. A musical sort of laugh that immediately grates on my nerves. It reminds me of my father's whores.

I'm barefoot so my feet don't make any sound on the marble floor. I think every floor in this house is marble.

When the voices grow louder, I walk to the French doors, then edge out a little to get a look at who's here.

I see the top of Stefan's head first, then the other man. I was right. It's the same one who was here earlier. They're drinking their whiskey and laughing at something.

Stefan says something to the woman who must still be inside because I can't see her, and the two men laugh as a tall, beautiful, elegant and very naked woman walks out onto the patio.

I'm not exactly sure what I feel at seeing her. She casually walks up between the two men and pushes them away with one hand on either of their shoulders, saying something in a low, husky voice before slinking into the pool and gliding across to the other end to come to rest there.

I feel the strangest thing at seeing this.

Jealousy.

And I know I'm so far out of my league, I'm not even in the same universe.

When I turn to the two men, I meet Stefan's eyes and freeze.

He's watching me. He was probably watching me watch that woman.

Embarrassed, I blink first. I slip back into my room to hide like a child. Because that's what I feel like. A child.

What are they doing down there?

I want to close the balcony doors, especially when I hear laugh. Are they laughing at me? But I don't dare risk him seeing me again and so I

remain in the darkness of my borrowed bedroom and hug my arms to myself at the sudden chill I feel.

I'm alone. I know that. I knew I would be before I got here. And it's not that I mind it. Even at home, I've always been alone. I've always hidden in some way.

But at least at home when my dad was a jerk, it was still my home.

Here, I'm not wanted. Not welcome.

No, it's worse than that.

I'm their enemy.

And if I had any idiotic doubt as to how this would go before, Stefan made it perfectly clear after dinner.

I pad into the bathroom to change and brush my teeth. Even though it's early, I get into the bed and close my eyes, trying hard to block out their talking, their laughter. I turn my back to the balcony doors and squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to hear their little party downstairs.

GABRIELA

An unfamiliar sound wakes me early the next morning. It's only five o'clock according to the clock by the bedside.

It takes me a moment to remember where I am, to remember the night and how it took me hours to fall asleep. I wonder if they're still here. Wonder what they did.

Wonder if the woman slept in Stefan's bed.

But mostly, I wonder why I care.

A glance at the door tells me he hasn't been in here, although I swear I can smell his aftershave.

It's still dark out, and I hear the sound again.

Someone's swimming.

I push the blanket back and get up, go out to the balcony to peer over it down to the pool and I jump back instantly because it's him.

It takes me a full minute to get my courage up and look again because he's naked.

I watch him swim the length of the pool underwater, then come up for air and repeat again and again and again. He's a strong swimmer. Even from here, I can see how his muscles ripple with each elegant stroke, and I wonder how he doesn't tire.

When he finally hauls himself up and out of the pool in one smooth motion, I slip out of sight and remain hidden until I hear him on the stairs. I hold my breath, thinking he saw me, and only exhale in relief when the footsteps pass my room and I hear a door open and close.

I walk back outside and look down at the empty patio, then out to the sea at the sliver of light in the far distance.

The sun is rising, and I think how much I want to swim. What I would give to swim. To dive into the pool or, better yet, into the salty water of the sea and let myself float. Just float. Let my ears fill up with the sound of water. I remember how peaceful that always felt. Floating with my ears beneath the surface.

I miss it.

I used to love swimming, but now, even the thought of it scares me.

I go into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. My stomach growls. I'd kill for a cup of coffee, but I push the thought aside. Instead of choosing one of the dresses he's bought me, I put on the pair of jeans and a T-shirt I'd brought with me and go out to the balcony to sit on one of the two chairs and watch the sunrise. I think it's the most beautiful sunrise I've ever seen.

A sound from my left startles me and I turn to find I'm not alone.

Stefan is standing on the balcony watching me.

I'm confused for a moment, but I remember the closed doors I'd glimpsed yesterday. I hadn't given it a thought, but I realize now we share the balcony.

His hair is wet, and I think how he looked a little while ago when he was swimming naked.

"Get a good look this morning?" he asks as if he read my mind.

I feel my face flush as I stand and look away. I clear my throat when he approaches.

I glance inside at the chair lodged under the doorknob and feel so stupid. I probably hadn't imagined that he'd come into my room last night. I wasn't imagining the aftershave at all. He probably was in here. Again, while I slept.

"How did you sleep?" he asks.

I fold my arms across my chest, and I don't miss how his gaze momentarily drops to my hand. He's probably confirming I'm still wearing his ring. His mark of ownership. I don't admit to myself my relief that I hadn't been stupid enough to take it off.

"Badly," I say, even though I slept fine.

"You were out when I checked on you."

I grit my teeth.

"Have fun with your friends?" I ask, my voice higher than I want it to be.

"I did, thank you for asking." He smiles, all cocky and sure of himself. He looks me over. "It's warmer here than you're used to and too warm for that. Change into one of the sundresses."

"I'm fine."

"But I'd like to see more of you."

"Didn't you get an eyeful of the woman with the irritating laugh last night?"

"Careful, Princess, or I may think you're jealous."

"I'm not a princess and I'm not jealous."

He brushes past me, disturbing the air. I wish I found the subtle scent of his aftershave intrusive. Offensive even.

He walks directly to the door and removes the chair without a word. "You like the room?"

"I did until just now."

"Well, soon you'll be sleeping in my bed, so you won't be in it for long." He checks his watch. "Millie will be preparing breakfast. You can go

downstairs to eat. Swim if you like. Lounge around. It's what you're used to, isn't it?"

It takes all I have to bite back my words when what I really want to do is tell him to go to hell.

"You have your first fitting at one o'clock."

"What fitting?"

"For your wedding dress, Gabriela."

"Do I get a say in any of this?"

"I chose the dress. I think you'll like it. It's perfect for a princess like you."

"You don't know who I am. You have no idea. You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough and can guess the rest. Our engagement will be announced tomorrow night at a party. Your father hasn't RSVP'd yet, but I'm sure he'll be there. He can't not show up, after all. You'll also be fitted for a dress for that."

"Why are you doing all this? I mean, everyone knows this isn't for real."

"It's very real, Princess. The sooner you wrap your brain around that, the easier this will be for you."

"Do you want it to be easy for me?"

He walks toward me, and it takes all I have not to retreat.

With his finger beneath my chin, he lifts my face. Having him this close feels strange. My chest tightens and it's hard to breathe around him.

I watch his eyes skim my face, my lips, my throat. I wonder if its bruised. He'll probably like that. Another mark of ownership.

"Whether or not you're my enemy is up to you," he says.

"Aren't I already simply for being who I am?"

"You're right about what you said last night. You are a pawn. *My* pawn. But believe it or not, your misery isn't what I want. When I bury your

father, you don't have to go down with him. I don't want to put you in that hole with him."

I tug my face away, step backward. I need to focus. To watch him. To figure out his game.

His voice is harder when he continues. "But if you stand in my way, I will bury you too without a second thought. Do you understand?"

"My father was wrong about you, you know that?"

He cocks his head to the side.

"He said you were as much a monster as him, but I think you might be worse."

His jaw tightens.

"But to answer your question, yes, I understand. I'm collateral damage. That's all. I've never thought otherwise, Stefan. Not with him. Not with you."

He studies me and I feel my eyes warm with tears. Something twists in me, squeezing me from the inside.

"Is it my pity you want, Gabriela?"

At that, I shove all those feelings down. It's good he's such a jerk. It makes it easier. And besides, I know how to shove feelings into a box and lock them up tight. I'm a pro. I stand taller for it and harden my eyes.

"I want nothing from you but my freedom. Let me be perfectly clear on that. And I want *you* to understand that I will never see you as anything other than my jailor. So, you go on about your business. You take your little revenge. You see if that brings you happiness or if it buries you right alongside my father."

He makes a clucking sound with his tongue, exhales and shakes his head.

"I'll see you tonight, Gabriela," he says and walks out the door.

GABRIELA

I wait a full half hour before I go downstairs. I want to be sure he's gone. Miss Millie is humming to herself as she puts a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice on the table for me.

"Well, good morning, dear. How did you sleep?"

"Fine," I snap, not meaning to snap at her, but still upset from my conversation with Stefan.

She looks me over, frowns. "You'll be too warm in that. You should wear one of the sundresses."

"I'm fine," I say, although I'm already too hot.

"What would you like for breakfast?"

"Um." I look at the table. "This is okay," I say, seeing toast and butter. "Just some coffee if you don't mind."

"I'll bring some cheese too, and homemade jams."

"Thank you, Miss Millie."

"You're welcome, dear."

I put my napkin on my lap, and I notice the knife beside my plate. I glance at the closing door which I assume leads to the kitchen and wonder if she'll notice if I take it. Probably. But I decide I'll take it anyway after breakfast. Although honestly, I'm not sure what I'll do with it.

A few minutes later, she's back with a fresh pot of coffee and a tray loaded with more food. I thank her and she leaves me on my own to eat breakfast.

I take my time and when I'm finished, I tuck the knife into my napkin and shove it into the deep pocket of my jeans. I'll take it up to my room as soon as I carry my things into the kitchen in case Miss Millie counts the silverware.

There are no guards inside the house, I notice as I load as much as I can onto my plate. But when I go into the kitchen, I see that the men who'd brought me here yesterday and two others, including the one from last night, are sitting at the kitchen table having coffee and laughing which they stop doing as soon as I enter the room.

Most turn away, but the one from last night, his eyes track me as I walk to Miss Millie.

"Oh, you don't have to clean up, dear," she says when I reach her at the sink where she's drying her hands.

"I don't mind," I say, setting the things in the sink. "I can wash—"

"Don't be silly. Mr. Sabbioni has staff for that. You go and relax until the seamstress gets here."

Relax.

Do they think I'm enjoying this? That this is some sort of vacation for me?

"Thanks," I say, because there's no point in saying anything else.

I walk back out, hoping someone else will wash the dishes so she won't notice the missing knife.

I go straight upstairs and tuck the knife under my pillow before returning downstairs to the large living and dining rooms to the left of the front doors. They take up the entire space on this side.

The furniture is pretty, fitting with the house, the colors mostly muted. It all has a decidedly feminine touch and I can't imagine it was Stefan who

decorated the house.

There's a grand piano in one corner and I wonder who plays.

I go to it, touch the polished surface, check out the fully stocked bar and make my way to the dining room.

A long oval table matching the one in the foyer is topped with a beautiful centerpiece with room for a dozen chairs. I wonder who eats here and think about the engagement party tomorrow night. What is he thinking with that? And is my father really going to fly to Sicily? He hates Sicily. The farthest south he ever goes is Rome.

Leaving the dining room, I walk to the rooms on the right of the front doors, but only see two closed doors. When I try them, I find they're locked.

I wonder about the front doors and am surprised that when I try one, it opens.

But as soon as it does, two men in reflective sunglasses turn to me and I see why they don't have guards inside.

Because they're standing just outside.

Neither man smiles at me and when the one puts his hand in his pocket, the shiny butt of a gun in its holster peeks out from beneath his arm.

I go back inside and close the door. I walk out to the patio to sit on one of the chairs by the pool, bored.

At home, I barely have time to get bored. Although I don't have any friends, not any real ones at least, I was home-schooled, and I do have some level of freedom. When I go out, though, John always takes me and even with something as innocuous as shopping at the mall, he's never far.

One thing I do like to do is run. I'm not much into sports, but I love the high after a long run. I go up to my room and change into the running clothes I brought, leaving the T-shirt and just wearing the sports bra, shorts and running shoes.

I dig out my iPod Touch. Yes, I still use an iPod. I think I'm the last person on earth who still has one but when everyone else moved on to iPhones, I wasn't allowed one. No cell phone for me. My father's argument was that I didn't have any friends to call anyway, which was true for the most part. But it was just another way he could control me.

I don't think he realized that I'm able to send text messages via the iPod, though.

I open the app and check for new messages, but there aren't any. It's pretty much only Alex I text anyway and I'm sure he doesn't want to talk to me right now.

I consider sending him another message. Another text to tell him I'm sorry. Ask how he is. He risked everything to help me and when we failed, he paid the price, not me. I won't forget that.

But I look at my last half-dozen unanswered messages and decide against it. I'll give him time.

Popping the earbuds into my ears, I find a Queen playlist and turn it up loud, hopping down the stairs and casually going out the front door.

I don't really think I'll get by them, but I'm still surprised by the strong grip on my arm when I try to leap past.

"Hey!"

The one who has me looks at his fellow idiot while I tug at my arm.

"I'm just going for a run," I try.

The one shakes his head. "Inside."

"Get off me. I'm going for a run. I'm not leaving the property, don't worry. I don't even know the way out." I do, but it's about two miles to the gates and even if I got there, there's no way I'd get past those guards. This place is like a fortress. Armed men on one side, the ocean on the other.

"In," he says again, and they walk me back inside just as Miss Millie comes around the corner.

"What's going on here? Get your hands off her," she says to the man.

I'm released instantly and she looks me over.

"What are you doing, dear?"

"I just want to go for a run. It's what I do at home."

"Why not swim?" she asks. "It's too hot for a run, don't you think?"

"I don't swim, Miss Millie. I just want to run. Please."

"All right. Let me see what I can do. Just a minute."

She returns to the kitchen where, a few minutes later, the man from last night walks out. He's chewing on something and looks me over as he swallows. I think I should have put a T-shirt on over my sports bra after all.

"Gabriela," he says, extending his hand. "I'm Rafa Catalano, Stefan's cousin."

I look down at his outstretched hand, so surprised by the gesture that it takes me a full minute before I put my hand inside his and we shake.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

He nods. "It's a little hot for a run, don't you think?"

"It's fine. I need the exercise."

"There's a treadmill in the gym. I'll show you."

I shake my head. "I really want to be outside. Look, I'm not going anywhere. I'm just asking for this one thing." I realize how desperate I suddenly am for this. Desperate to get away from all these people, from this place where I'm not wanted.

"Please," I add on. "I'm going to go crazy in here."

It takes him a minute, but he nods. "All right. Give me a few minutes to change. The exercise will do me good, too."

"You're going to run with me?"

"Can't let you go alone. The men don't know you yet. Stefan would kill me if you got hurt over something as stupid as mistaken identity."

God. Does he mean if I got shot?

"Okay," I say, suddenly not sure I want to run at all, but not wanting to give up the opportunity.

Rafa takes out his phone, makes a quick call and I hear him tell someone that we're going for a run as he heads up the stairs. Is that him calling the guards to make sure they don't shoot us?

As I watch him disappear into a room, I wonder if he lives here when, a few minutes later, he's back wearing a T-shirt, shorts and running shoes. I don't think he has a weapon on him. I'm not sure where he'd hide it, honestly. The shirt and shorts hug his sculpted body.

"Try to keep up," he says with a wink and apart from Miss Millie, I think that's the first time someone's been nice to me since I got here.

"I'll try to take it easy on you," I reply as we head out and break into a jog.

I don't switch on my music, but I still have the earbuds in my ears, so I don't know if he thinks I'm listening to something or not when we don't talk for the first fifteen minutes. It feels awkward but I can't think about that.

I'm grateful he doesn't make conversation though because I'm out of breath as I follow him up and down the rocky hills. Twice, he turns to me looking relaxed and smiling, asking if I need a break. He speaks to me in English and I wonder if any of them realize I understand Italian. That I can speak, although I'm rusty. I decide not to mention it.

We only stop when, thirty minutes later, we reach an old pump.

We're both sweating and it really is too hot to jog but I won't admit that because I think this may be one of the few freedoms I'll be granted.

"Water," Rafa says.

I'm out of breath but he isn't.

"I'm not used to the cliffs," I say as he works the old-fashioned pump and water rushes out.

"You can drink it," he says.

I cup my hands and am happy to feel the ice-cold water. I drink and when I watch him duck his head underneath the flow and soak himself, I

splash my face then do the same, gasping then laughing as the icy water drenches my head and neck.

When I straighten, Rafa's watching me.

I clear my throat and look down at myself, grateful he can't see through the sports bra but very aware of how much skin I'm showing.

"Is Rafa short for something?" I ask, walking toward the edge of the cliff where I can see the sea.

"Rafael. My mom's the only person who ever called me that though."

"And you're Stefan's cousin?"

He nods. "First cousin. My mom is his mom's older sister."

Wow. I'm trying to visualize this strange family tree when he interrupts.

"Was, I guess."

"Was?"

"They both passed away some years back."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that." I don't remember reading anything much about Stefan's mother. Only his father and brother.

Rafa sits down on the ground and I join him.

"Do you live at the house?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, not technically. I leave clothes here though. I'm here a lot."

"You were here last night," I don't know why I bring it up.

"Stefan's got the better pool." He smiles at me and I remember the naked woman swimming in that pool. "We're close, Clara, Stefan and I. Grew up together," he adds more seriously.

"Clara is the woman from last night?"

He nods and I wonder if he knows what I saw.

"Is Clara a cousin too?" I ask it casually, but I hear the strange tone of my voice and hope he doesn't.

"You should ask Stefan what Clara is," he says, his dark eyes steady on mine, and I think those smiles—I can't fall for them. Can't think he or

anyone else here is a friend or ally.

I look beyond him. "What's that?" I ask.

He follows my gaze. "Cemetery," he says, standing. "I'll take you, then we'll head back. I have a meeting in town."

"How far is Palermo from here?"

"Twenty minutes by car." He points to it in the distance and I can see even from here how busy the beach is. "There. That's Palermo. That's where I live. Too quiet for me out here."

I follow him when he leads the way to the short iron gates that creak when he opens them.

The cemetery isn't big, and some of the graves are quite old.

"Family plot. I'll be buried here someday too. This is Stefan's mother," he says, pointing to one. "And his father, although we had no body to bury. They only sent back his ashes even though it's against our beliefs."

"He was killed in prison," I say.

"You know?"

I nod.

"Killed while awaiting trial," he says. "And this," he points to another marker. "This is Antonio's grave. Stefan's brother."

I catch the date and it makes an impression because he died one day before my birthday. My sixteenth birthday.

When I look up at Rafa, he's watching me, and I get the feeling he knows how this will impact me. He knows this is important. And I wonder if everything he told me just now was calculated.

He checks his watch. "Let's go back. You'll want to shower before your fitting."

He knows about that, too?

I have questions. So many questions.

But the expression I can't quite read is gone and he gives me a wide smile displaying perfect, white teeth, if not a little sharp. "We can walk if

you're tired," he says with a wink

"Haha," I say, and turn to jog away.

We're silent on the way back, my mind on what I just saw, trying to work out the details, remembering the flakes of what I knew was blood on that necklace Stefan brought me on the night of my sixteenth birthday.

GABRIELA

The seamstress is an older woman who has the personality of a doorknob.

Actually, I think she might be middle-aged, but her pinched face and unfriendly manner make her appear older and when she sticks me with a needle for the third time, I think she better be careful not to swallow all those pins she's got stuck between her lips as she takes in the dress Stefan chose for the engagement party.

She has two assistants with her who seem to jump at her every command.

I have to say, as I stand on a stool in front of the full-length mirror, it's not a bad dress. I want to hate it, but it's pretty. If not a little more showy than I like, leaving more skin exposed than I'm comfortable with.

But it's a pretty mauve satin with a faded layer of tulle the color of ashes of roses.

I think about my sixteenth birthday party. The pink roses. As much as I hated those, this is pretty. Elegant.

"Ouch!" I say as she tugs at the fabric at my lower back and I wonder how I'm going to get out of this with all the pins stuck in it.

She mutters something under her breath and when she straightens, I turn to look at the back and how the material drapes so low, you can see the

swell of my hips.

The seamstress' assistants, two younger women, help me out of the dress and I stand there in my underwear, my arms folded over my bare breasts as they unzip a huge garment bag and lift out the wedding dress.

My mouth falls open when it takes the two of them to haul the thing out.

"He expects me to wear that?" I ask.

No one answers as they carry the gown with its layers of material toward me. They hold it up to me and it's not ugly. In fact, I'm sure it's very expensive and that a lot of brides would die to wear it.

I'm just not one of them.

But maybe that has something to do with the groom.

They help me get into it, tightening the ties at the back of the corset-like top as I push down the skirts that make me think of a royal wedding, a dress for a princess.

"I'm not sure I'll fit through the door," I say, knowing no one will reply as I stare at my reflection.

But I stand there and do as I'm told and slip on the high heeled pumps I'm expected to somehow balance on underneath this monstrosity.

Miss Millie comes inside to peek at the dress. She gets a strange smile on her face, her eyes tearing up.

"You're going to be a beautiful bride for him, Gabriela," she says with the affection of a mother about her son.

Does she realize this isn't for real? That I'm being forced to do this against my will?

"Thanks," I say.

"I'm getting lunch ready for you now. Stefan will be here soon so you'll want to pack a few overnight things."

"Overnight?" I ask.

"Yes, didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

“The engagement party is in Rome. You’ll fly out after lunch.”

“Rome? Why Rome?”

She looks confused. “Your father’s hosting, dear.”

“My father?”

The seamstress says something to her, drawing her attention, and they walk out together as the other two help me out of the dress. Once they leave, I put on a bra and one of the summer dresses because it is too hot for jeans. I go out into the hallway and down the stairs where the table’s been set for lunch for one. At least I don’t always have to eat with him.

I go into the kitchen to find Miss Millie. “What do you mean my father’s hosting?” I ask.

She smiles uncertainly. “I’m sure Stefan will tell you as soon as he’s here.” She checks her watch. “Have you packed?”

“Packed what exactly?”

“An overnight bag. You don’t need to worry about anything for tonight but take a dress for tomorrow. I’m not sure if you’ll come straight back or spend the day in Rome. He does like Rome.”

“When are we leaving?”

“Stefan should be here within the hour. Now go on, have your lunch first, then pack. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

No, I know he doesn’t.

I pull my iPod out of my pocket, go out to the patio and sit down at the table. I pop my earbuds in and switch on some music as I eat a sandwich and I’m about to put it down when a text message pops onto the screen.

I open it, smiling when I find it’s Alex.

“Gabi, I just got your messages and you have nothing to apologize for. What happened wasn’t your fault. I’m more worried about you. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

I tuck the iPod into my pocket and shove the last chunk of my sandwich into my mouth. “I’m going to pack, Miss Millie,” I tell her when I pass her

on my way to the stairs. "I don't want to keep Stefan waiting."

At that she smiles. "That's a good idea. Did you eat enough?"

"Yep." I try not to charge up the stairs.

As soon as I'm in my room, I sit on my bed, lean against the headboard and type my reply.

"I'm okay. My punishment was watching what they did to you. Are you still at the hospital?" I ask.

"Long story, but I'm in Rome at my aunt's house. And I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"Rome? What? Why?"

"I guess your dad wanted to be sure I wasn't a threat. I'm sorry, Gabi."

"He sent you to Rome?"

"Yeah. And if he finds out we're talking..."

"He won't. I won't let him hurt you again, I promise."

"I have to go. I just wanted to tell you I'm okay before I disappear."

"You're not disappearing. Nothing's going to happen to you. Things have changed, Alex. But I'll be in Rome too. Tonight."

I hear footsteps as I begin to type the rest of my message and when the door opens, I quickly drop the iPod, bolting upright. I'm sure I look guilty as hell when I meet Stefan's eyes.

I try to relax, clear my throat, pull the earbuds out of my ears. "Ever hear of knocking?"

He eyes me curiously.

I get up, wrap the earbuds around the iPod and shove it into my duffel, my heart thudding against my chest.

"It's my house. I don't need to knock." He looks me over. "Are you ready to go?"

I nod, zip up the duffel. "Yeah."

He seems surprised by this but nods, and gestures for me to walk out into the hallway. When I get to the door, though, he extends his arm to

block my way.

“What?” I ask, my mind working a million miles a minute, not sure what I plan to do, but if I’ll be in Rome and Alex is there, I need to see him.

Stefan’s eyes narrow and I have to steel my spine to hold his gaze. I tell myself to remember it’s not like he can read my mind.

He closes his hand on the strap of my duffel.

I pull back, but I know I need to relax.

“I’ll carry it,” he says.

It takes me a full minute to relinquish the bag to him.

“Any weapons I should know about?” he asks.

I remember the knife under my pillow. *Can* he read my mind?

“More guns?” he adds.

I exhale. I guess this is Stefan joking.

I’m not in a joking mood, though. Nor will I ever be with him. “You confiscated my weapon, remember?”

He studies me silently, his gaze too knowing, like he’s some sort of lie detector and for some reason, it’s hard to hide from him.

I step away, break eye contact with a shake of my head. “I forgot my toothbrush.” Without waiting for him to reply, I head to the bathroom, taking a moment there to breathe and calm down.

He’s just carrying my bag. He doesn’t know anything.

There isn’t anything to know.

I pick up my toothbrush and walk back out to find him still standing in the same spot.

“Ready,” I say.

He nods and gestures for me to go ahead. I head down the stairs, feeling him behind me with every step.

The front doors are open and Rafa is standing there. He smiles at me and I smile back.

“Catch your breath?” he asks.

“Catch yours?” I retort, slipping past him and to the waiting SUV.

A soldier opens the back door and I step in, turning back to find Stefan’s glance shift from me to Rafa. I get the feeling he didn’t know about our run this morning. Get the feeling he doesn’t like the idea.

Good.

The cousins exchange words I don’t hear before Stefan loads my duffel into the back and climbs into the front seat.

STEFAN

“F light’s just over an hour,” I tell Gabriela when the plane takes off. She’s strapped into a seat at the window and her nails are digging into the leather of the armrests.

“I don’t like flying,” she says. “Is this thing even safe?”

I take the flight attendant’s offered tumbler of whiskey.

“It’s perfectly safe. Here.” I hold my glass out to her. She didn’t want anything.

We’re on my private jet. I hate flying commercial and only do it when I absolutely have to.

She turns to me, looks at the drink and shakes her head.

“It’ll help you relax.”

“Can’t we drive?”

“It’s too far. Drink.”

She takes the tumbler, sips it, makes a face. “That’s nasty.”

I smile. “You’re young.” I see how her eyes go wide when she looks out the window again and I reach over to pull the blind down. “Relax. If it wasn’t safe, you wouldn’t be here. You went running with Rafa?”

“Is someone going to report everything I do back to you?”

“Probably.”

“Yes, I went running. Only because your cousin was nice enough to take me.”

“Rafa? Nice?”

She nods.

“Oh, Gabriela,” I can’t help my chuckle. “There’s nothing nice about Rafa.”

“I don’t know, he seems nicer than you.”

I don’t reply. I find silence puts people on edge. Forces them to talk. Gabriela is no exception.

“Actually seems to have a sense of humor,” she continues.

“Does he?”

“Your mom and his mom were sisters?”

Just how much did my cousin tell her, I wonder.

I nod. “It’s too hot to run unless you get up very early before sunrise or go after sunset.”

“I was fine.”

“If you wanted exercise, why didn’t you swim instead?”

“I don’t swim.”

“Don’t or can’t?”

“Doesn’t matter. Why is the engagement party in Rome? And since when is my father hosting it?”

I know about her mother’s drowning and I have questions, but now isn’t the time.

“Maybe he wants to show off the groom,” I deadpan, taking a sip of my drink.

“He hates you.”

“Hate is a harsh word.”

“It’s an accurate one.”

I shrug a shoulder. “It’ll be nice to be back to where we first met, won’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your bedroom.”

She’s confused and it takes her a minute. “The party’s at my father’s house?”

I nod.

“How did you get him to do that?”

“I have my ways.”

“How many people are coming?”

“A few hundred.” I want to change the subject. “What did you think of the wedding dress?”

“It’s hideous.”

“It’s one of a kind. Made especially for you, Princess.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“You are a brat, though. Grow up, Gabriela.”

She seems momentarily upset by that, offended almost. But she recovers quickly. “You wasted your money on it. I won’t wear it.”

“You’ll wear what I tell you to wear.”

“We’ll see.”

“We will.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Your brother died one day before my sixteenth birthday,” she says.

My hand fists around my almost empty glass. “He did,” I say, signaling for another whiskey.

She studies me and I know she timed this. She’s a clever girl. I’m sure she’ll be putting two and two together soon if she hasn’t already.

“Did my cousin give you a tour of the cemetery?”

One corner of her mouth curves upward. “You didn’t like me knowing. Why?”

“That’s a family plot. You have no business there.”

“But I’m marrying into the family, Stefan. You’re making it my business.”

“Be careful, Gabriela.”

“You be careful, Stefan.”

“Or what?” I ask, my voice a whisper. When I lean toward her, she plasters herself against the back of the seat.

She licks her lips, swallows.

I watch her throat work, watch the pulse drumming away along the curve of her neck. Tilting my head down, I close my lips over that rapidly beating pulse.

She gasps.

When I draw back, I see the shock on her face. But I also see how her nipples have hardened and are poking against the fabric of her dress.

“Do you like my mouth on you, Gabriela?”

Her cheeks grow red and her eyes are huge as she searches mine.

Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I brush the backs of my fingers over one taut nipple.

She captures my hand.

“Your body is very responsive.”

She shoves my hand rudely away. “Don’t touch me again.”

“But I think you liked it.”

“I didn’t.”

“Liar.” My gaze drops to her chest before I sit back in my seat and take the fresh tumbler of whiskey the attendant brings over.

“You’re a jerk, Stefan.”

“Relax, Gabriela. I’m just fucking with you.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Then don’t make it so easy.”

I drink, watching her, giving her space to breathe.

“Is that why…” she starts, sounding less certain.

I raise my eyebrows. Wait.

“How did he die?” she asks, and I guess I admire her courage. She’s afraid of me, but she hasn’t cowered. Yet.

This line of questioning, though, it takes anything casual out of our conversation.

“He was murdered. Shot. His head and hands removed.”

Her mouth falls open and the color drains from her face.

“Someone wanted to be sure I didn’t find out.”

“That’s...how...I mean, how could you identify him?”

“A tattoo.”

“Tattoo?”

I put my drink down, unbutton the top buttons of my shirt and open it.

“What are you...” she trails off and her eyes drop to my chest and again, she licks her lips. I doubt she’s aware of that. Of how her face flushes. How her eyes grow just a little wider.

A thought occurs to me then and I wonder how experienced she is. I just assumed she was because she’s rebellious. But I wonder if I’m wrong.

Now isn’t the time for that, though.

I just give her a glimpse of the tattoo before closing my shirt again.

“There was a mistake on his. Only he and I knew about it. A kid who worked at the morgue recognized the tattoo. We all have it, Rafa too. Didn’t he show you his?” I ask, wanting to change the subject.

“Of course not!”

“Hmm. I thought he might. Anyway, all the men of the family get it when we turn sixteen.”

“What is it?”

“Family crest.”

“And you think my father had something to do with Antonio’s death?”

“I don’t think. I know. And you remember his name. Good girl.”

“Is that why you’re doing this?”

I just watch her.

“My father wouldn’t brutalize someone like that,” she says but even as she does, her words falter.

“No?”

She swallows, lowers her lashes. She picks up the drink I’d set down and takes a swallow of it.

“Did you keep the necklace I gave you?”

She nods.

“It was in my brother’s pocket. That’s what led me to your father.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. It could—”

“There’s more, Gabriela. Maybe I’ll tell you one day.”

“I don’t believe you. He wouldn’t...he *couldn’t* do something like that.”

The pilot comes over the intercom to tell us we’re landing.

I reach over to push the blinds up and when she glances out the window, I see her stiffen.

“He would and he did,” I say, leaning nearer to her to watch as the city comes into view before turning to face her.

She leans as far back as possible and I like this. Like how she trembles when I’m so close.

“You let me know when you’re ready to hear the whole truth, Gabriela.”

GABRIELA

A car and driver, along with four more soldiers, are waiting for us at the airport and an hour later, we're pulling into the guarded gates of a gothic style mansion.

"This is my uncle's house," Stefan says.

It's huge and beautiful in a very different way than Stefan's Palermo house.

"How long are we staying?" I ask as we pull up to the front entrance. I notice the scaffolding along the whole of one side of the house.

"Just overnight."

"What's going on there?" Part of the house seems to be under major construction.

"There was a storm a few weeks ago that blew over a tree. Damage was extensive."

Stefan steps out of the car and extends his hand to help me out.

I ignore it and climb out on my own. I stand taking a deep breath. It's a little less warm here than Sicily, but it's still hot. I love Rome. I always have. And I'm excited about the party being at our house later. I'm hoping to sneak away to my old bedroom just for a few minutes at least. It always felt more like home to me than the New York house.

We enter Stefan's uncle's house which is loud with construction work, and an older man whom Stefan resembles comes to greet us.

"Stefan," he says with a wide smile. The two embrace.

"Uncle Jack. It's good to see you."

Uncle Jack stands back to look Stefan over. Stefan does the same.

"You look good," Stefan tells him.

Uncle Jack pats his round belly. "Enjoying life," he says, then turns to me, openly looking me over.

"This is Gabriela," Stefan says. "Marchese's daughter."

I guess they all know my father.

Whatever Uncle Jack thinks of that, he hides it well because his expression doesn't change. He extends a hand.

"Welcome to my home, Gabriela." He touches my ring and lifts my hand to examine it. "And congratulations to you both on the engagement."

Stefan comes to stand beside me, wrapping an arm around my waist. "Thank you, Uncle. Gabriela's excited about tonight's party, aren't you?"

"Can't wait," I say with a false smile.

There's a sudden sound of something crashing in the other room. Uncle Jack shakes his head. "I'm going to kill these idiots," he mutters as he turns toward the cordoned off construction area where the sound came from. "They'll be gone in a few hours," he yells over his shoulder to us.

Stefan turns to me. "I'll take you up to your room. You have about an hour before the hair and makeup people come."

"What time are we leaving?"

"Seven."

It's a little after five now.

I let him lead me up the stairs and to a bedroom. I note the dust that's crept into the undamaged part of the house and feel a warm breeze. I wonder how much of the side wall is gone.

"Here," Stefan says, opening a door.

“Where are you staying?”

He grins, opens his mouth to say something but I hold up my hand to stop him and roll my eyes.

“Don’t get excited. I just want to know which room to avoid.”

“I’ll make it easy,” he says, gesturing for me to enter. I do. “You’re to stay in yours until I come for you.” He walks through and peeks into the adjoining bathroom, then walks to the door.

“My bag?” I ask when he reaches it.

“Someone will bring it up shortly.”

When he’s gone, I go to the window and watch the construction crew out there. There must be fifty men and the scaffolding only stops when it reaches my window.

There’s a pool in the distance where three women are sunbathing. A big truck is pulling in through an opening in the gates and when I look down, I find Stefan and Uncle Jack walking outside, each of them holding a beer. They head to the pool to greet the women, and I watch how each one wraps herself around Stefan and kisses his cheek. I see the happy smile on his face as they all chat.

Well, good for him because I’m never going to wrap myself around him like that.

I walk away from the window and think about what Stefan said about his brother.

About my father.

I think about what my father ordered done to Alex and I think about how quickly I defended my father to Stefan even though part of me knows the truth.

But why would my father order the killing of a man in the witness protection program? A mafioso turned snitch? He has nothing to do with the Sicilian mob. No business with them whatsoever. At least not that I’m aware of.

Stefan's wrong. There's no link. Even if my father is capable of such brutality.

I shake off the thought and sit on the bed. There's nothing to do but flip TV channels so I do that until, an hour later, a man walks in carrying my duffel and a garment bag. He's followed by two women each dragging a suitcase.

The man leaves and the women begin to set up, telling me in Italian that they're here to do my hair and makeup and prepare me for the party.

I answer them in English and just smile when they admire the engagement ring. I manage to sneak to the bathroom for a few minutes with my iPod so I can message Alex that I'm in town. That I want to see him. I will figure out a way how. The party is big enough and I can sneak away once Stefan is distracted. But I can't switch the thing on because it's out of charge and the cord I shoved into the duffel is a US cord. Shit.

I take a minute to think. This is fine, not a huge setback. I can message him through my computer at home and grab a charging cable from there too.

When I return to the bedroom, the women are set up and waiting for me.

It takes them a full hour to do my hair and makeup and I sit obediently through it. I don't wear make up most days mostly because I'm lazy and it takes too much effort but also because I hardly see anyone or go anywhere, apart from parties my father arranges and then he has people come and do it for me. Like tonight.

I don't give it too much thought, honestly, and wonder how irritated Stefan would be to know how similar he is to my father. They both want to dress me up like a doll to show off to their friends or, in tonight's case, to flaunt me in my father's face.

But I push those thoughts aside because I have more important things on my mind.

Like Alex.

The woman is just zipping up the side-zipper of the dress when the door opens. My back is to it, but I don't have to look to know it's Stefan. It's like every hair on my body stands on end in warning.

When I turn my head, I find him standing in the doorway wearing a black tuxedo and I have to admit, he looks good. Really good.

He's tall, taller than most men I know, and built well with thickly muscled shoulders and arms, a trim waist and powerful legs. Those I remember from his swim the other morning.

The thought brings a flush to my face and I give a shake of my head to clear the image.

But it's not just that he's beautiful. There's something else about Stefan Sabbioni. It's the way he carries himself. He has an amazing amount of self-confidence like nothing and no one can fuck with him.

No, it's more than that.

It's like he's daring anyone to try.

He looks me over and I think he's taken off guard for a moment.

I haven't seen what I look like yet. I know my hair's up, and that they loaded me with so much mascara that it's hard to blink, but apart from that, I don't know.

Stefan clears his throat, gesturing to the door with a tilt of his head. The women straighten and scurry from the room. Is that how he thinks I'll obey someday? Because I never will.

He never takes his eyes off me as I stand, becoming aware that I'm nervously turning the ring on my finger. I school my features, not quite looking at him because it would only inflate his ego to know I find him attractive.

Or I *would* find him attractive if I didn't hate him.

"What?" I ask, happy my voice sounds almost bored.

He's shaved so the scruff of earlier is gone and when, a moment later, he gives me his signature aren't-you-a-piece-of-work grin, I see the dimple

on his cheek. He steps into the room and closes the door.

“Turn.”

“What?”

“I want to see the back.”

“I’m not a thing.”

“You’re very beautiful, Gabriela,” he says, that grin gone.

The compliment—or maybe its delivery—catches me off guard.

I look away, feeling my face heat up.

Instead of thanking him, I look at the full-length mirror in the corner of the room and I’m not a vain person and looks are a freaking lottery and I know I got lucky, but okay, yes, this, what those women did, it looks good. I look older. Maybe even a little beautiful.

Like her. Like my mom.

I walk to the mirror and meet my own gaze. I reach out one finger and touch it to the glass and I feel suddenly, incredibly sad. My eyes fill up and fuck the eighty pounds of mascara on my lashes because I can’t cry unless I want to look like a raccoon. But this, the way they have my hair in this twist with the bangs pinned neatly to the side, and the dark makeup, I look exactly like my mom on her wedding day.

She was eighteen too. And Stefan is twenty-nine, just about the age my father was when he married her.

Ironical all these similarities.

Or just life’s cruel joke.

Stefan’s reflection as he comes up behind me makes me force those thoughts away. Makes me steel myself.

Show no weakness.

It’s the one thing I’m grateful to my father for teaching me. Although, it’s not that he meant to teach it on purpose. These men, men like my father or Stefan, they see an opening, any tiny crack in the surface, any chink in the armor, and they’ll attack. They’ll devour you whole.

I narrow my eyes and look up to meet his in the mirror.

His gaze slips down my back and I remember how the dress drapes at my lower back, the swell of my hips pronounced by the fabric collected there.

I realize then he's holding a box and I don't move when he opens it, lifts whatever is inside and tosses the empty box on the bed. He raises a long, gold chain over my head and closes the clasp at my neck and I remember that first night we met. When I didn't know who he was. When he closed a blood-crusted necklace around my throat, and I thought he'd strangle me with the chain.

My fingers move to touch it as his brush my spine, just the very tips light as a feather as they trace the line of it, from the nape of my neck down, barely touching each vertebrae, making me shiver as they move lower, lower, stopping just where the dress stops.

His gaze follows the line of his hand and a moment later, he straightens. His eyes are darker when they meet mine in the mirror.

He clears his throat, reaches out to lightly touch my shoulders and turns me so I'm facing him.

His eyes trap mine and my throat goes dry because I've stopped breathing. I seem to do that around him, especially when he's so close. It's like there's not enough oxygen in the room for the both of us. Like one of us has to give.

One will.

He touches my chin, lifts my face and with the pad of his thumb, wipes at my temple. His touch is so soft it's almost not real and it's so opposite this hard man. This brutal, dangerous man.

"Eyelash," he says.

I blink away, nod. Because I don't know what the fuck I'm thinking or should be thinking or feeling or anything.

He's just picking off an eyelash, dummy.

He gestures for me to look back at the mirror.

I turn to it to see how the necklace, a simple, delicate gold thing, hangs all the way down my back with a single sparkling diamond like a pendulum, the weight at the end of the chain.

It's beautiful.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

I turn back to him and think what a couple we make.

"Sure," I say, trying to sound casual, unaffected.

When we move to leave the room, his hand comes to my lower back, to the bare flesh there. It spans the width of it, and it takes all I have not to shudder at his touch as he leads me out and down the stairs.

Uncle Jack is dressed in a tuxedo and smoking a cigar while drinking a whiskey.

He gives me an approving nod.

"I'll see you there," he says to us.

"Don't drink so much you forget to come, old man," Stefan throws over his shoulder as he leads me outside into the warm night.

STEFAN

Gabriela keeps her gaze out the window as we ride to her father's house.

I watch her in profile.

She's stunning. She's a beautiful girl, but tonight, she's more than that. She shines.

She hasn't worn makeup—apart from lip balm if that can be considered makeup—in the days she's been with me.

The women I date—no, date isn't the right word. I don't date. The women I fuck are older than her, granted, but there's something different about Gabriela. Something innocent. It's a quality none of those women possess. One I've never cared about.

And that innocence, it's different than being naïve. If she were naïve, I wouldn't be interested in her, but I like sparring with her. She's fascinating. Unexpectedly so.

But she's her father's daughter and I see it even in how she reacts to me when I give an order. Something as simple as changing into shoes last night. If she were anyone else, she'd have fought me. She wouldn't think to save her strength. To choose her battles.

What I told her on the plane about Antonio, I saw what she thinks she hides well.

She knows her father's hands are dirty. She may not want to admit how blood-soaked, but she knows.

I remember her that night in her father's study when she'd walked in wearing that blood-splattered T-shirt and those hideous army boots. She would do battle with her father herself. She seems accustomed to it, and it makes me curious.

Although it doesn't matter for my purposes.

When our car pulls to a stop at the front entrance of her father's house, Gabriela shifts her gaze to the imposing double doors. If I didn't know better, I'd say she looks nervous.

I don't care though. I get out of the car and extend my hand to her.

She sets one slender leg out, placing her hand in mine. I see they've painted her nails to match the dress. I help her out and even though I'm watching her, she's looking at everything but me.

Again, I don't care.

Because tonight marks my second victory against Gabriel Marchese as I walk his daughter, my beautiful bride-to-be, into *his* house where *his* soldiers open the front doors at my approach, where I smile to see his eyes narrow at the sight of me entering like a king, the biggest prize of all on my arm.

I watch him when he shifts his gaze to her.

Watch him take her in, his beautiful daughter in a dress that exposes perhaps more than he'd like.

His gaze runs the length of her, but it's what I see in his eyes when he looks at her face that makes me pause. That makes my stomach turn.

Gabriela stiffens beside me. Her back is ramrod straight as if braced for war, her eyes on something beyond her father. Her lips are tightly drawn, and I see how her jaw clenches when she finally meets her father's strange gaze.

Only moments have passed. Mere seconds in time. And by the time I look at him again, he's schooled his features. He's simply a father looking proudly at his daughter. But through that smile, I see the tick in the corner of his left eye. I saw it the other night too. It's a small tell of what's really going on inside his head.

"Gabriela," he says, voice hoarse. He comes toward us, arms outstretched to hug her.

"Dad." Her tone is flat. She's going for casual. Bored, even. But she isn't either of those things.

I watch them, watch him embrace her, watch the space she leaves between them, barely touching him. Her eyes focus on something at the far wall when he kisses her cheek.

I see how she seems to shrink into herself and something makes me want to pull her away. To hide her behind me.

Marchese straightens, turns to me.

I clear my throat. Force a smile.

I'm imagining things. Seeing things that aren't there. Tonight is a victory I plan to savor.

"*Dad*," I say and his obvious annoyance at my greeting does make me smile a real smile.

He clears his throat, makes a show of looking around for a waiter. "Apple juice for my daughter," he calls out loudly enough to embarrass her.

Gabriela's eyes narrow and I watch this strange interaction between father and daughter who are like enemies themselves.

I don't know much about their relationship but after this, I'm going to find out.

Gabriela takes the offered apple juice in the decorated flute without a word.

"Stefan," he says, gesturing for me to take the other flute of champagne.

"I prefer a whiskey."

Gabriel Marchese gives me a cold grin as people crowd around to congratulate us, the women fawning over Gabriela's ring, her dress, our apparent whirlwind romance and what a good-looking couple we are. Some even comment on the beautiful babies we'll make.

I wonder what Marchese's told them to save face.

As we move through the house and outside to the back garden, we're separated momentarily. I reclaim her as we make our way to greet our guests, an almost even split of Marchese and Sabbioni family members. My face hurts from smiling and I fucking hate small talk, but I do enjoy Marchese's cringing every time he's forced to introduce me to his friends and associates as his future son-in-law.

Gabriela excuses herself to use the bathroom and I take the moment to slip into the shadows, watching the people, making note of who's who and who will be a problem.

When a waiter appears to refresh my whiskey, I see Rafa walking toward me with Clara on his arm. He's not smiling.

"Christ. Pretentious much?" he asks, gesturing around him.

I sip my whiskey and watch Marchese. I don't miss how he, even as he appears to be in intense conversation, keeps one eye on me.

"Just rubbing his face in it," I say. I turn to Clara.

She smiles, pulls herself free of Rafa and spins to show off her dress. That's the moment Gabriela returns, and I see how she looks at Clara and remember the other night. I wonder what she thought was happening.

Her face hardens as she comes to stand beside me.

"You look beautiful as always, Clara," I tell my cousin.

Gabriela's jaw tightens and she folds her arms across her chest. "I'm hungry," she says, not quite looking at Clara or Rafa.

I do note that Rafa is watching her more curiously than I like.

"Gabriela, this is my cousin, Clara," I say. "I believe you saw her at the swimming pool the other night."

And this is where Gabriela's upbringing kicks in and she's lucky that she stands about an inch taller than Clara because it gives her the opportunity to look down on her. It's just for a split second, just long enough to send a message.

Clara extends her hand, cocks her head to the side and smiles wide. "Lovely to meet Stefan's chosen bride-to-be," she says in her silky voice.

Gabriela takes her hand and Rafa and I both watch as Gabriela digests Clara's carefully selected words.

"Such a close-knit family, you are," Gabriela says. "The three of you."

The music stops then, and Gabriela's father announces dinner.

"Excuse us," Gabriela says. "So glad you could make it," she tells Clara, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Gabriela and I sit together at the head table for dinner along with her father. She picks at her food while I eat with gusto and listen as her father toasts us, then make my own toast, being sure to mention my Sicilian roots.

I watch as my family mixes with his, watch his face grow darker and darker as we infiltrate his home and eat his food and drink his liquor.

An hour passes, then another.

I keep a close eye on my fiancée and notice when she slips into the house. I excuse myself a few moments later and follow her, knowing where she's going.

The last time I crept up these stairs was the night I learned my brother was dead. It was the night I delivered my message.

Tonight, I climb them as if I own them, because in a way, I do.

Her room is dark when I enter, but from inside the bedroom, I see a light and hear the clicking of keys on a keyboard. I walk silently toward it and the way her desk is situated, she has her back to me. She doesn't hear me enter but is reading whatever is on the screen before scrolling down, clicking on something else, reading that.

When I clear my throat, she stiffens. She quickly closes the screen and sits back but doesn't turn around.

I set my hands on her shoulders and squeeze. "You slipped away," I say, leaning down to touch my cheek to hers. "What's so interesting that you left your own engagement party?" I whisper.

"It's not a real engagement party."

I squeeze her shoulder with one hand as with the other I tap the mousepad and bring the screen back to life. On her home screen is a photo of a puppy.

"Your dog?"

"Stock photo."

"That's not weird at all."

I click on the Safari button and her hand flies to close over mine to stop me.

She turns her head a little, so her face is an inch from mine. Her eyes meet mine, then travel slowly to my mouth and she licks her lips.

I smile.

Her eyes narrow infinitesimally when she meets my gaze again. "I'm tired. How long do we have to stay?"

"Just until I have a look at your browsing history."

"There's nothing to see."

"Then you won't mind."

She rolls the chair backward and rises.

I straighten so our bodies are touching with her trapped between the desk and me.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to distract me," I say.

She lifts her chin a little. "What's with you and Clara? Is she really your cousin?"

I shift my gaze down to her pretty, full lips, to the swell of small breasts with their hardened nipples pressing against the satin of the dress.

“Third cousin.”

“Do you guys have a thing or something? You and her and Rafa?”

She’s so close, I smell the soft hint of perfume.

“Strange question to ask your fiancé at your own engagement party, don’t you think?”

“This isn’t real, stop acting like it is. I want to know. I have a right to know. I won’t be made a fool of.”

“How would I make a fool of you?” I want her to say the words.

She glares at me. “If there’s something going on, I want to know.”

“What would be going on?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Grow up, Gabriela. *Use your words.*”

“Fine. You want me to use my words? Here you go. Are you fucking her?”

I smile wide. “Would you be jealous if I were?”

“You’re cousins.”

“And it would bother you if we were kissing cousins?”

“I’m done. Are you fucking her or not?”

“Gabriela,” I say, voice low. “Be a good girl and go sit down on the bed to wait for me.”

“Or what?” she asks, straightening, inadvertently pushing her breasts against me.

My gaze drops to them. “You’d better sit down before I decide I like the distraction, little girl.”

“If I’m such a little girl, then why do you look at me like you do?”

“Like you think I look at Clara?”

“You’re trying to get a rise out of me.”

“No, I just want to have a look at your computer.”

“Why was she swimming naked in your pool?”

I cluck my tongue. “You’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“She’d lost a bet, Gabriela.”

“A bet?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Now be a good girl and do as you’re told.”

“Screw you.”

“Not until we’re married, Princess.” I wink.

Annoyance flashes through her eyes but she masks it quickly, plastering a wide grin on her face. “Of course, you’re assuming I’ll screw you at all.”

I press against her, let her feel me as I wrap one hand to the bare skin of her back, and I watch her eyes and hear her breath catch as I slide my fingers down her spine. Down as far as the dress will allow. When she exhales, I cup her ass and squeeze.

She gasps, slaps her hands against my chest.

“Don’t worry. That doesn’t mean we can’t do other things,” I start, kneading her tight little ass as she pushes against me.

“Get off me, pervert.”

I chuckle. “How does cupping your ass make me a pervert?”

“Just stop it.”

“Tell me something and I’ll stop.”

“What?”

“Would you like that? Like me to get you off? Maybe I should give you a taste. I know I’d like one. I’d love to hear what that sharp little tongue of yours calls out when you’re coming on mine.”

Her face burns a deep red.

She shoves harder, but she won’t move me until I want to be moved.

“Why are you such a jerk?” She’s so angry, she looks like she’s going to cry or stomp her foot or something.

“Go sit down,” I say more seriously.

“No. Get out of my room, Stefan.”

“This isn’t your room anymore, Gabriela. Your room is in my house. The sooner you understand that, the better.”

She shoves again, and when I press against her I see her falter, momentarily uncertain.

“What were you looking at?” I ask, seizing the opportunity.

“What?”

“On your computer. Why did you close out as soon as you heard me?”

“None of your business.”

“Wrong. Everything about you is my business now. What are you hiding?”

“Get away from me, I mean it.”

“Then tell me what you were looking at or go sit down while I search for myself. I’ll find out anyway.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ve already told you not until we’re married.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” she asks, shifting her hands to grip my shoulders. “Let me tell you something, you’re not,” she says with a smirk and in the same instant, her knee rushes toward my balls and I have to admit, it would have been a pretty good hit. She’s fast. Faster than I expect.

But I’m faster and I capture her knee between my thighs and shift my grip to the tight twist of her hair. I’m messing it up, but I don’t care. I want her attention.

I tug her head backward and I know it hurts from the look on her face, but that’s the point.

“Don’t ever try that again, understand?”

“Don’t you ever try putting your hands on me again!”

I twist my fingers and she makes a small, pained sound.

“I’ll put my hands on you whenever and wherever I like. You belong to me, remember?”

“Last I checked you can’t own another human being.”

“That’s another point you’re wrong on. See, you’re in my world now. And in my world, *I* make the rules and *you* obey them. I. Own. You.”

With that, I spin the chair around and sit her back down facing me. I cup the back of her head and hold her to me as I search her browser’s history over her head. She didn’t have time to wipe it clean and I guess I shouldn’t be surprised at her search results, although I am surprised she searched in Italian.

I make a mental note of the fact. Note the fact that she hasn’t mentioned that she understands Italian but that’s my bad. I made an assumption. I underestimated my fiancée.

That won’t happen again.

My teeth grit as I scroll through the results. Although I know there isn’t much for her to find, seeing my brother’s name linked with her father’s, seeing the few details publicly available, it still irritates me. But it’s not those things that piss me off.

It’s when I notice the little message icon pop up with a brand-new message. When I read it, I realize why she looked so guilty this afternoon. When I walked into her bedroom to find her sitting on the bed with her iPod, I’d assumed she was listening to music.

Again, I underestimated her.

It’s just a one-word text in response to her longer one from someone named Alex and it simply reads “*Okay.*”

Her question to him makes my blood boil and it takes all I have to keep my face neutral.

“I’m in Rome and not too far from you. I need to see you. Please. I promise no one will find out. Tonight may be my last chance.”

Who the fuck is Alex?

I close it all down and draw back to look at her.

I knew I'd have to test her. And I'm sure this will be the first of many such tests.

So why do I feel a sense of betrayal? What did I expect?

Placing my hands on either side of her on the desk, I cage her in and lean in close.

What she sees in my eyes must frighten her because hers go wider, and she leans as far away from me as she can.

"If you want information on my brother, all you need to do is ask me. Don't go behind my back and don't lie to me. Do you understand?"

She looks surprised but nods. "I didn't think you'd tell me," she says, her voice sounding hoarse like her throat is dry. Or maybe that's relief I hear.

I study her for a long minute, then step away, giving her space.

"I have a meeting with your father, but I'll have a driver take you back to my uncle's house."

Her eyes search mine like she can't fucking believe it's going to be this easy.

"Thank you."

I hate being lied to. I fucking hate it. And I hate being lied to by someone in my own house. It's what brought our family down once. The thing that ripped it apart. I won't have it again.

Granted, Gabriela isn't with me by choice, but she will be my wife. If she's fucking this Alex asshole, I will put a stop to it, and I will punish her. I will not be deceived. And my wife, no matter the circumstances of our marriage, will absolutely not sleep in any other man's bed. Ever.

I hold out my hand, palm up, and give her a false smile, amazing myself with the calm exterior because inside, I want to wring her pretty little neck.

Her eyes haven't left mine, but it takes her a long moment before she places her hand inside mine and rises to her feet. I walk her out of her bedroom and down the stairs to the front door. I call one of my men.

“Take her home,” I tell him in Italian, not making any acknowledgement that I know she understands what I’m saying while she keeps her face blank as if she doesn’t understand a word.

The soldier nods, gestures for Gabriela.

She takes a step, but I catch her by the wrist. I step to her and tilt her face up to mine.

She stares up at me probably wondering if I’m changing my mind or playing some trick on her.

“Sleep well,” I tell her, and lean down to give her a long kiss on the mouth. Our first.

I don’t force her lips open. I don’t slide my tongue inside. This isn’t that.

Instead, I imagine Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, not that I consider myself a martyr. Far from.

But I think about that kiss in the garden.

Because for as soft as her lips are and as sweet as she tastes, I know she will betray me tonight.

GABRIELA

I'm flustered by that kiss. As one of Stefan's men drives me back to his Uncle Jack's house, all I can do is think about that kiss.

Why did he do it? It was wholly unexpected and unnecessary.

My mind slips back to Clara. To how beautiful and sophisticated and polished she looked. How confidently she gave me her hand and how carefully she chose her words.

She knows the circumstances that bring Stefan and I together. I have no doubt of that.

And the way he answered—or didn't answer—about her and the fact that I even asked—because I don't care—pisses me off to think about it. That, and it embarrasses me.

Why did I ask anyway? What do I care who he's fucking as long as he doesn't touch me?

As we pass through the gates of the gothic mansion and drive toward the front door, I note that the opening of the temporary fencing where the truck drove through this afternoon is still unguarded. It strikes me that it is. Wouldn't that be more of a threat against intruders than the front gates?

But maybe Uncle Jack isn't a target.

Is Stefan?

I realize I'd never thought of that because if Stefan is a target, does that make me one too? And as the boss of a mafia family, there must be a constant threat against him. I mean, I know of at least one man who would kill Stefan Sabbioni if he could. My father.

We pull up to the front door and I have to wait for the driver to open my door because it's locked.

I feel like a child, but I climb out and pass him into the house. I don't speak to anyone and no one speaks to me. They're just a bunch of soldiers and I'm sure their orders don't include making small talk with me.

As I make my way slowly up to my bedroom, I make a note of where everyone is, and pretend to be curious about the construction if anyone asks why I'm peeking my head into the sealed off living room.

Tools, work tables and dust cover the room and the furniture is set against the far corner under multiple dust-cloths. I glance back, but none of the soldiers have come to check up on me.

I need to go upstairs and change my clothes, grab the money. I plan on giving it to Alex and his aunt. I'm sure they need it, considering he no longer works for my father and I remember being at his aunt's house years ago. She's not well off.

I wish I could just walk out right now, but I hurry up the stairs and put on the same sundress I'd had on earlier, along with a pair of flip flops. Not ideal but they'll do. I hadn't actually packed before leaving Palermo.

After I'm dressed, I let my hair down because the pins are digging into my skull. I just drop them where I stand, and finger comb my hair, which is wavy now from the tight twist. I find the tear in the lining of the duffel that I sewed shut a few nights ago.

I pull at the stitching until it gives and dig my hand between the layers to find the Ziploc I'd stashed there. I pull it out, eyeing the wad of cash, a credit card and my passport. A fake one. Alex had it made for me. The currency is American, not Euros, but it's still money.

I don't know why I take the passport with me. I just need the cash because I'm not planning on running away, am I? Stefan would find me. Or my father would. I wonder which would be worse.

I take the credit card out of the Ziploc then tuck the bag into the little clutch which is too fancy for my sundress but it's all I have. I leave my iPod and the European charger I picked up from home in the clutch.

It feels strange to mess up the bed, stuffing the pillows under the covers in case anyone peeks in, so they think I'm sleeping, but this isn't the first time I've snuck out. I'm a pro.

Although I guess if I were a pro, I wouldn't have to sneak out now because I wouldn't have gotten caught the other night.

Wishing I could call an Uber, I walk back out into the hallway after checking that it's clear and creep back down the stairs and into the dusty living room. I stop when I hear two men talking but their voices fade as they pass somewhere inside the house.

I make my way to the temporary door, open it and think how easy this is. Something niggles at me about that.

I never did get a reply from Alex to say it was okay that I come, but I just need to at least drop off the money. That's all. Apologize in person. I don't know. All I know is I owe him because he has two broken legs because of me.

Those are the thoughts that I busy myself with as I step out into the dark night. I hug my arms to myself even though it's not cold and, after making sure the path is clear, I hurry toward the large truck parked near the fence, scoot around it and a few moments later, I'm on the street walking quickly away from the house wondering how I was able to do it, counting my lucky stars.

I know Rome pretty well, although this neighborhood not as much. But I walk back the way we'd driven and fifteen minutes later, I get to a gas

station with an attached café and walk in. Only a couple of tables are occupied but there aren't enough people here that I can go unnoticed.

Everyone turns when the bell over the door jingles as I enter. I tuck my hair behind my ears and make my way to the counter where two men stand sipping espressos.

The bartender acknowledges me and, after ordering an espresso I won't drink, I ask if I can use the phone to call a taxi. He does one better and calls it for me, and I pay for my coffee with the credit card then walk back outside to wait for the taxi which pulls up just a few minutes later.

This is too easy, I think, but I climb in and give him the address, which is about a half-hour ride.

The driver eyes me in the rear-view mirror but I ignore him and settle in as we drive, thinking I'll ask him to wait and drive me back to Uncle Jack's and sneak back into my room without anyone noticing I even left. Even if Stefan comes back, if he peers into my bedroom, he'll see the pillows and assume I'm sleeping and that will be that.

And if I do get caught, I'll deal with the consequences. I'm sure Stefan will punish me, but I've survived Gabriel Marchese's wrath. How much worse can Stefan Sabbioni be?

When we pull up to the house, I ask the driver to wait, telling him I'll pay him for that time too. He agrees and I climb out.

This isn't the best neighborhood, and I'm aware of that as I make my way to the front door of the small house that belongs to Alex's aunt.

I only know where it is because Alex's dad worked for my father years ago when we were all kids. A couple of times, my mom would let us pick Alex up and take him with us when we went to a park or a pool. His mom had died when he was just a baby, so I guess in that sense, I was lucky. I had my mom for eight years.

Before I push the button to ring the doorbell, I twist my engagement ring so the diamond is on the inside. I hope Alex won't see it.

I realize the doorbell doesn't work so I pull open the screen, which wobbles on its hinges, and knock loudly. There's a light on around the back of the house which I saw walking up here, but the front room is dark.

A few minutes and two more knocks later, I hear the chain and the lock turns and Alex's aunt, a fifty-something woman with small features and a look of worry on her face opens the door.

That worry turns darker the moment she sees me.

I greet her, pretending I don't see the way she's looking at me. She mutters something, makes the sign of the cross. I don't need to catch the words to know what she's trying to say.

She doesn't want me here.

And when I see Alex roll up behind her on a wheelchair, both legs in casts up to the thigh and stretched straight out in front of him, I can understand why.

"Alex!" I rush in, tears flooding my eyes.

I saw him beaten. I heard his bones break. And as terrible as that was, this, the result, the consequence he bore for me, it's more overwhelming than all of it.

"Gabi," Alex says when I hug him, trying not to hurt him as I do.

He hugs me back as best he can, one arm around my shoulders as I bury my face in his neck.

"I'm so sorry. So sorry."

"We talked about this," he says, pulling back.

I straighten and look down at him, look at the stitches on the side of his head where the doctors must have shaved his hair to close the cut. I remember when he'd been struck by the broken beer bottle and I hate the man who did it.

"It's not your fault. And besides, I'd do it all again if I had to," he says.

At that, his aunt calls out to God.

He turns to her, tells her it's okay, and to go inside.

She looks at me, distrust in her eyes. I don't blame her. "She shouldn't be here," she says. "She'll get you killed."

"I just want to give you something," I say, reaching into my clutch to take out the Ziploc of cash. "They're dollars but you can exchange them for Euros. There's almost ten-thousand here."

I hold it out to her, but Alex puts his hand over mine. "No need for that, Gabi. I told you that, too."

"Just let me do this one thing, Alex. It's nothing compared to what you did for me."

"You'd have done the same thing if our roles were reversed. And Gabe..." He trails off.

A moment of silence passes between us. We're both thinking of Gabe. Of what happened. Of the consequences *he* bore.

"I shouldn't have gotten you involved," I say, needing to not think about my brother.

"Do you still have the passport?" Alex asks.

I nod, feeling the sharp edges of the diamond in my palm. I don't have the heart to tell him it doesn't matter. That my circumstances have changed. I gesture to the money instead.

"Please, take it."

Alex nods, giving his permission. His aunt cautiously takes the money.

That's when the front door crashes in and Alex's aunt screams and I scream too, jumping in front of the wheelchair, thinking it's my father's men and they somehow followed me and came back to punish Alex again. Maybe to finish the job this time.

But it's not my father who walks inside. Who stands there brandishing a gun. It's not his men who stalk into the small house as if they own it, as if they have every right to be here.

It's Rafa and two other men I don't know.

And behind them is Stefan.

STEFAN

So this is Alex? He's a fucking kid. Her age, I'd guess. With two broken legs and fresh bruises on his face and arms.

But he's got his hand on Gabriela and is tugging her back behind himself, away from me.

As if he'd stand between me and what I want.

The older woman has dropped to her knees and is sobbing, praying out loud and Gabriela, my deceitful little fiancée, stands beside Alex, eyes wide. The makeup of earlier has smeared around her eyes and her hair is wavy from the up-do. She looks stunning and messed up and utterly terrified all at once.

"What the hell is this?" I ask as I step over the splintered wood of the door and deeper into the house to collect what's mine.

When I take Gabriela's wrist, she pulls back, and I see how Alex's hold on her tightens as he sets his other hand on his lap and cocks his pistol.

He must have had it tucked into the side of the chair. I would too if I were him.

The sound of Rafa's gun being cocked comes from behind me and I raise up my hand to stop him or anyone else from shooting.

"You're Alex?" I ask, noting the plastic bag of American dollars on the dirty carpet.

The younger man nods, eyes narrowing.

“I’ll ask you exactly once to get your hands off my fiancée.”

His eyebrows furrow together, and he turns to Gabriela.

I notice she doesn’t quite meet his eyes when she nods to him.

“It’s okay,” she says, her voice quaking. She must know it’s not okay.
Not at all.

He lets her go.

I turn to her, look down at her hand. I see the platinum band, so I twist the ring until the diamond is on the outside. This, I guess, is her following my order to not take it off.

“Outside. In the car. Now.”

She shakes her head and I gesture to Rafa who puts his gun away and steps forward to take her to the car.

I brought Rafa on purpose. I want to be sure she’s clear that there’s nothing nice about my cousin.

Rafa takes hold of her arm. “Let’s go,” he tells her, his voice slightly less harsh than mine.

“No!” she tugs against him, taking hold of the back of a nearby chair.

Alex turns, points his gun at Rafa.

“She said no. Get your hand off her or I’ll blow it off.”

Rafa smiles, but that smile turns evil in the space of a second as he reaches for his weapon and I lunge forward, gripping Alex’s arm and aiming it up toward the ceiling when it goes off.

Gabriela screams and so does the old woman who buries her face in the seat of the ratty couch as plaster rains down on us.

“Let’s put all the fucking guns away, shall we?” I say.

I relieve Alex of his and I think we’d be well matched if it wasn’t for the fact that his legs are both broken, and he’s confined to a fucking wheelchair.

“You too, Rafa,” I tell my cousin, turning to him as I tuck Alex’s pistol into the back of my pants. “And get her out of here.”

“Let me explain! I can explain,” Gabriela begs as Rafa tugs her toward the door. “Please, Stefan. Don’t hurt him. You can’t hurt him. Please just let me explain.”

I look at her, take a step toward her.

When she tugs at her arm, I gesture for Rafa to release her. I grip a handful of hair myself and force her tear-stained face up to mine.

I note her wince in pain but the fact that it still takes her a moment to drag her gaze from Alex to meet mine fills me with an unexpected and indescribable rage.

“Are you fucking him?” I spit.

Her expression becomes confused. “What? Am I...no!” She shakes her head as much as she can with the fistful of hair I’m holding. “You’re hurting me, Stefan.”

I don’t relax my grip. Instead, I twist a little harder.

She grits her teeth, taking it.

“Then explain.” The room goes silent but for the blubbering old woman. “And for fuck’s sake, someone take that woman to another room.” The fucking prayers she’s chanting over and over again are pissing me off almost as much as finding Gabriela with another man.

Two men walk the woman out of the room. Gabriela’s attention turns toward them.

“Over here. Eyes on me, *Gabi*.” I read the texts after she left. It’s what Alex calls her. They’re that familiar.

She obeys. “Please. It hurts,” she says again, tugging at my arm.

I let go of her hair.

“You have thirty fucking seconds. Talk fast.”

“I just came to give them some money. He...my father did that to him. Broke both his legs. That’s why the other night...that’s why there was that

blood on my shirt. They made me watch.”

“Why did he break his legs?”

“I ran away. Alex helped me.”

Her father ordering the beating makes sense, but making her watch? That’s fucked up.

“My father was going to marry me off to Abe McKinney’s son and I ran. It was all I could do, Stefan. But they caught up with us and he did this to Alex then sent him here and I know his aunt doesn’t have any money and he has no job and—”

“Alex worked for your father?”

She nods. “His father did too but he died a few years ago.”

“And he betrayed your father to help you?”

“Yes.”

I glance at Alex, at the casts, wonder if he’ll walk again. I don’t ask that. Instead, I ask another question. “Why?”

“Why?” she parrots, teary-eyed.

“Why would he do that?”

She studies me and the look in her eyes becomes almost pitiful.

“Because you help your friends,” Alex answers from behind me.

I ignore him. “And why is he here? In Rome?”

“To keep me away from Gabriela,” he answers again.

“I didn’t ask you,” I say, without turning to him. I step closer to her, catch her when she steps backward and stumbles over the splintered door. I narrow my gaze. “What is he to you?”

“My friend. That’s all.” Her voice breaks and fat tears fall from her eyes. “He’s my friend, Stefan.” I get the feeling she doesn’t have many of those and I don’t know if it’s the way she said it or the way she’s looking at me or how fucking pathetic she looks right now, a mess, but beautiful still, and crying. Crying for her friend. Desperate to save him from me.

“Do I need to keep him away from you?”

“Why?” she asks, her face crumpling, tears black from all that mascara. “Why would you do that? Am I not isolated enough? Don’t you have what you want? Everything you want?” She hugs her arms around her middle, her shoulders rounding, shrinking in. Like she did with her father tonight.

I’m not like him.

I’m nothing like that monster.

“Not everything, no.” I grit my teeth. “I’ll ask you one more time and you’d better not lie to me. Are you fucking him?” My voice is low but hard, harder than I intend.

She steels her spine and I see a wall go up. Remember how she’d been when she’d seen Clara.

“Not everything is about fucking. Maybe for you it is, but not for me.” Her voice, too, is hard. Her hands fist. “I don’t have to be fucking someone to love them, Stefan.”

That last part is like a slap to the face. I feel my chest tighten, my hands clench and unclench.

Alex cuts in. He must feel the tension growing.

“Gabi’s like a sister. I’ve known her and her brother since I was two for fuck’s sake. What I did I’d do again knowing the consequences. Her brother did the same for me. So why don’t you step away from her. Give her some space.”

I hear him mutter *asshole* at the end of that heroic sentence and I turn on him. Because I’m going to hurt this mother fucker, broken legs or not.

Gabriela grabs my arm and I think this is the first time she’s touched me. At least not to shove me away.

Does it count when she put her hands on my shoulders to brace herself to kick me in the nuts? I decide it doesn’t.

I take a step toward Alex and her grip tightens.

“Stefan, stop. Please. Alex is my friend. That’s all. If you hurt him because of me—” her voice breaks and I turn to watch her swallow the

lump. “If you hurt him, or worse, because of me, I’ll never forgive you just like I will never forgive my father for what he did.”

I don’t know why that matters. Why those last words leave any impression at all.

I turn to one of my soldiers. “Give me that.” I point to the bag of cash.

“That’s for them. It’s not yours!” Gabriela says.

“Gabi,” Alex warns her with a shake of his head, and it fucking grates on my nerves, that fucking nickname. That and the fact that she heeds his warning.

I open the bag. “How do you have this much cash?” There’s several thousand in hundred-dollar bills.

“I always save it, little bits at a time so my father won’t find out,” Gabriela says. “It’s all I had when I left the other night.”

I turn to her. “And you’re just going to hand it over to him?”

“Yes. And it’s none of your business,” she says, reaching to take the bag. “It’s my money.”

I capture her wrist when she does. “I’m being patient, Gabriela. You need to be very careful here.”

She searches my eyes and I study hers, think how pretty she is even if she is a mess with her spoiled make-up and hair.

She lets go of the bag and waits.

I study her, give her a nod, then toss it onto Alex’s lap.

“Let’s go,” I tell my men.

GABRIELA

I'm shuffled into the backseat of one of the cars and Stefan rides in the front. He doesn't talk to me on our way back to the house.

Once we're there, he walks me up to my bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I ask when he comes inside.

He closes the door and takes my clutch which I'd grabbed on our way out of Alex's house.

He opens it, takes out my iPod, pockets it. He does the same with my credit card and cocks his head to the side as he lifts out my passport, tossing the clutch onto the bed.

I watch him as he opens it and reads the name.

"You don't look like a Sandy," he says. "How did you get the passport?"

"Alex helped me."

"You were really going to run away? Disappear?"

I nod.

"With him?"

"No. Just me. He was helping, that's all."

"You'd give everything up?"

"What was I giving up?" I feel my eyes fill up. "You don't understand what it's like to be Gabriel Marchese's daughter, Stefan. You have no idea."

"Then tell me." He pockets the passport.

“Why? It doesn’t matter anymore. And besides, you don’t care.”

“You don’t know me, Gabriela.”

“I know you’re more like my father than you think.”

“Don’t insult me. I’m nothing like that man.”

“Really? Let me make my point. He would sell me off to another man for his gain. You take me for yours. He isolated me, kept me under guard. I don’t even have a cell phone, Stefan. Nothing. You’re doing the same. Even taking my iPod. I was a prisoner there, I’m a prisoner here. He did the same thing to my mom. It’s what you’re going to do to me. Do you think I don’t know that?” I swipe the back of a fistful hand across my eyes, hating my tears. “Just leave me alone, okay? It’s been a really long day.”

“I gave him the money, didn’t I?”

I don’t reply.

“Let me ask you this. What would your father have done?”

I don’t want to answer that. I don’t want to think about the truth of it.

“You set me up,” I say instead.

He nods.

“I knew it was too easy to get out of here. I knew it. How did you find out?”

“Text message from Alex. It popped up when I was looking at your computer.”

“You were testing me.”

“And you failed.”

My stomach tenses.

“What did your brother do for Alex?” he asks out of the blue.

“What?”

“Alex said your brother did the same for him. What did he mean?”

I look away and think about Gabe and what happened. “Nothing,” I answer, swallowing back the lump. “He just meant when we were little. My

mom would pick him up and take him with us sometimes. Alex's mom died when he was a kid and they never had a lot of money. That's all."

"Sounded like more than that."

"Well it's not." I need to change the subject. "What now?"

He cocks his head to the side. "Now you wash your face and brush your teeth and get ready for bed," he says, undoing his bow tie and letting it hang there as he unbuttons the top button of his shirt.

"If you're going to punish me, I'd rather just get it over with." I feel a little sick.

Stefan's eyes narrow infinitesimally while he studies me and it's hard for me to hold his gaze.

"What do you think I'm going to do to you, Gabriela?"

I hug my arms to myself, look down.

"Christ." A long, silent moment passes. "I'm not going to punish you."

I look up at him, surprised, expecting something else.

He steps toward me, close enough I can feel the heat of his body.

"This is your one reprieve with me, Gabriela. I won't allow another. You belong to me. Understand that and understand it fast. I already told you, I don't want to bury you along with your father. Believe it or not, I don't want to hurt you. But don't push me. If you stand in my way, or you pull any stunt like this again, you will get hurt. Am I clear?"

I nod. He's crystal clear. Always was.

"Good. Get cleaned up and go to bed," he says, and turns to walk into the bathroom, taking off his jacket on his way and tossing it over the back of a chair.

"What are you doing?"

He pulls his shirt out of his pants, undoes the buttons and cuffs and strips it off.

My gaze shifts to his chest and I have to drag it back up to his face.

He's got that one-corner grin thing going on.

“What are you doing?” I ask again, having to clear my throat before I can speak. My voice sounds strange even as I shift my weight to one leg and set my hands on my hips to appear annoyed.

“Having a shower,” he says.

“Go have one in your own room.”

He undoes his belt, then the button of his pants. “This is my room now. I can’t have you wandering around in a construction zone. It’s unsafe.”

“You said...you can’t.”

He walks toward me, tips my chin up. “That’s where you’re wrong, Princess. I can do whatever I want.” He cups the back of my head and pulls me to him, then kisses my forehead, holding his lips there for a long moment. It’s like a marking, a branding. Like I’m his.

When he releases me, I stumble backward. He disappears into the bathroom. He doesn’t bother closing the door and a moment later, the shower goes on. “Join me if you want,” he calls out.

“In your dreams,” I say but not loud enough for him to hear. I go into the other bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth.

I realize I don’t have pajamas with me. With the alternative being sleeping in my underwear, I slip into the bed in my dress and turn out the lights. It’s a big bed. He’ll sleep on the other side.

The shower switches off and a few minutes later, I hear Stefan walk into the bedroom, feel the comforter lift and the bed depress as he climbs in.

And he doesn’t sleep on his side. He takes up the middle.

In fact, not a moment later, his heavy arm drapes over me and he pulls me backward toward him.

I gasp, try to get free, but he’s too strong and when my back is plastered to his front, I can feel that he’s naked and I freeze.

“Why are you still dressed?”

“I didn’t pack pajamas.”

“Neither did I. Take off the dress.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve seen naked women before, you know.”

“I know.”

He tugs me closer, curling his body around mine. “Suit yourself.”

I squirm but he holds tight. “Can you put something on?”

“No.”

“But—”

“Grow up.”

I shut up. It’s quiet and all I can think about is his big hand on me, his big, naked body behind mine. I can’t sleep. I won’t be able to. No way. But he seems to have no trouble at all.

“Thank you for not hurting him,” I say quietly after a few minutes.

“It’s okay,” he answers, surprising me. I thought he’d fallen asleep.

“I’ve never slept with a man in my bed,” I tell him for reasons I can’t understand.

“Well, it’s not a big deal. Just go to sleep.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Stefan...I’m not ready—”

Before I can finish, he rolls me onto my back with a hand across my belly and lifts himself up a little to look down at me. He doesn’t switch on the lamp so I can only make out his dark features in the light that comes through the split in the curtains.

“Nothing is going to happen, Gabriela. We’re just sleeping.”

I bite my lip and I don’t know what I’m feeling. Embarrassed. Inexperienced. Out of my league.

The image of Clara naked and gliding across the pool the other night, her clever words and sophisticated confidence earlier this evening flash across my memory.

“I’m not going to touch you. Not like that,” he adds.

“Okay,” I say quickly, hoping he can’t see me clearly either because I can feel my eyes filling up with tears. I don’t know what it is that does it. If it’s his words or the way he says them because there’s a tenderness in them. A gentleness.

He rolls me back onto my side and resumes his position behind me and I don’t move to wipe away the tear that slides over the bridge of my nose and onto the pillow.

I don’t know what this is.

If he were brutal, it would be easier.

If he made me hate him, I could do this.

But this? I’m at a loss.

“Goodnight, Gabriela.”

I want to say it back, something as innocuous as that. But I’m afraid to open my mouth, to speak because he’ll hear that I’m crying, and I can’t have that.

And I keep thinking that he’s right. I betrayed him tonight. I did more than push him when I compared him to my father, a man he loathes. A man he’s vowed to destroy no matter the cost. And my going to Alex, I didn’t give it a second thought, never once considered telling Stefan about Alex. Asking him to take me there himself.

I behaved the way I would with my father. And as much as I want to believe Stefan is exactly like him, as ruthless as him, as cruel, what he did tonight, all of it, it’s not what I expected from him.

And that’s the hardest part of all.

GABRIELA

When I wake up in the morning, I'm alone, and I feel embarrassed when I realize I'm turned toward his pillow and my arm is laid out across his side of the bed.

Did I do this while I slept? Turn into him? Wrap myself around him like those women at the pool did yesterday?

I have to be careful. I have to remember that he's much more experienced than me in every way. And I have to remember that no matter what, he has a purpose for what he's doing.

I am collateral damage. That is all.

Last night, he came across as caring because I'm pathetically starved for that kind of affection. Hell, for any kind of affection. And his touch, his arm around me, his body solid behind mine, as good as it felt, it means nothing to him.

I mean nothing to him.

I am a means to an end. To my father's end, to be specific.

Didn't he say as much?

I push the covers back, forcing myself to look at the brutal truth. To remember it and not let myself become confused or ridiculously infatuated.

He was also full of shit when he said he wouldn't punish me. He took my iPod, my only means of communication with Alex, and the fake

passport. I didn't even think to try to get them back or argue. Last night was an insane whirlwind of events and emotions.

I get up, have a shower and put on the now wrinkled dress because it's that or the evening gown. I open the door to go downstairs only to be greeted by a soldier standing guard beside my door.

Did Stefan station him there when he left? And when did he leave? As soon as I fell asleep? I wonder if Clara's staying with Uncle Jack too. All the cousins cozy in one house, in one bed.

I muster my courage and step out into the hallway.

The guard doesn't stop me but when I make my way down the hallway to the stairs, he follows.

I look back over my shoulder. He keeps a stony face. I just give a shake of my head and walk down to the first floor, following the smell of bacon, eggs and coffee.

A buffet is set up in the dining room and as soon as I enter, a woman in uniform comes from the kitchen and greets me.

"Good morning," I say, eyeing the coffee.

She explains for me to help myself to everything.

When I ask her if she knows where Stefan is, she just shakes her head.

I get myself a cup of coffee and take a big sip before making a plate of food. I didn't eat much last night and I'm hungry.

I'm just sitting down to eat my first strip of bacon when Stefan walks into the dining room. He's been working out because he's got his shirt off and is using it to wipe his face. It takes all I have to drag my gaze from his bare, sweaty chest. From that tattoo over his heart. From all that muscle beneath tightly stretched, tanned skin.

Rafa follows close behind, the two of them talking.

"Good morning," Stefan greets me.

My heartbeat picks up and I give him a quick smile before shifting my gaze to Rafa who has a casual expression on his face.

“Missed you on our run,” Rafa says.

It takes all I have to not mention last night. To not remind him how cruelly he’d gripped my arm. To not point out the bruise he left.

Stefan pours himself a big glass of ice water and leans against the buffet, watching us.

“No one invited me,” I tell Rafa while glancing at Stefan over his shoulder.

Rafa picks a strip of bacon out of the platter on the buffet and stuffs it into his mouth. I see how his eyes move to that bruise. Does he recognize his own handprint?

“I’m going to go shower, Stef,” he says.

“Good idea. Losing makes you stink worse than usual.”

Rafa flips him the finger and walks out.

“So he can flip you off but I can’t? Seems like a double standard when the rules come to me.”

Stefan refills his glass and comes to sit in the chair beside mine.

“You’re in a mood.”

I glance to the arched entry of the dining room. “Waking up with a guard at my door will do that. Not to mention having my iPod confiscated along with my passport.”

“Fake passport. And not a very good one.”

“Still mine.”

“What do you need it for?” he asks, picking bacon off my plate.

“I don’t. I just want it.”

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “Fine. I don’t have it on me,” he says, leaning back in the seat. “But you can have it back if you want it. I have no use for it.”

That’s it? I can just have it? “What about my iPod?”

“How old is that thing?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It works just fine.”

“That too. I’ll get it back to you.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to isolate you,” he says, using my own words.

“You have shitty taste in music by the way.”

“You listened to my music?”

“Only as much as I could stand.” He grins, takes the last piece of bacon off my plate.

I slap his hand away. “Get your own.”

“I like yours,” he says, watching me and I don’t know if it’s that he’s more relaxed now than usual or the fact that he’s half naked, but it’s hard to focus.

A sound interrupts us and a moment later, a sleepy Clara walks into the dining room wearing a nightie that’s so short and so see-through, I don’t know why she bothers. She’s barefoot and I’ve never felt anything like this against any woman ever, but Christ, even her feet are perfect.

When she sees us, she starts to say good morning but yawns and makes her way to a cup of coffee.

I look at the wall just beyond Stefan’s shoulder as he makes a comment about too much champagne and she laughs. I’m relieved when she leaves with her cup of coffee instead of sitting down with us.

“Did you sleep well?” Stefan asks when she’s gone. Is he taunting me?

“Not really,” I lie.

“You have a cute little snore.”

I feel my face heat up. “I don’t snore.” I don’t know why I say it. How would I know if I snore and why would I care?

“You’re sweeter when you’re asleep, too. All soft when you curled up into me and even reached out for me when I got out of bed.”

“Shouldn’t you go shower?”

“Does it bother you that I’m not wearing a shirt?”

“No. It’s not...” I clear my throat. “I hadn’t noticed,” I lie badly.

“Right.”

“I’m not interested in you, Stefan.”

“Don’t be so defensive, *Gabi*.”

“Then don’t make fun of me, *Stef*.”

“I’m not making fun of you.”

“Did you slip out of bed for that?” I ask, gesturing to where Clara was just standing.

His eyebrows knit together and a moment later, he exhales. “Is that what this is about? I already told you—”

“That you’re kissing cousins. Got it.”

“I don’t think I said that.”

“You didn’t deny it either.”

“Well, we’re not so don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not being stupid. And you shouldn’t have slept in my bed last night. You took advantage—”

“Enough. I did not take advantage of you and you know it.” His expression hardens, and I can see him growing angrier as he speaks. “I’m a man of my word. I realize you haven’t had many of those in your life but do not ever accuse me of taking advantage of a vulnerable girl. And for your information, last night was me making sure you didn’t do anything stupid and force my hand.”

I swallow, unable to answer.

I’ve poked the bear and now he’s awake and hungry.

“Do you remember the morning I came to get you, Gabriela?”

I’m not sure where he’s going with this but yes, I remember. How could I forget.

I nod.

“That’s good. Do you remember what happened when you mouthed off then?”

I narrow my eyes at him, thinking how different this version of Stefan Sabbioni is to the one of last night. How this is the real Stefan. The one I need to remember.

“Did I make a mistake not punishing you last night?”

I swallow and it takes all I have to hold his gaze. But I can’t show fear. I can’t show weakness.

I clear my throat and push back from the table. When I move to stand, he clamps a hand over my knee to stop me. I look down at it.

“I asked you a question.” I hear the warning in his voice.

I lift my gaze to meet his. “Get your hands off me.”

His eyes narrow. “I already told you, I’ll touch you whenever and wherever I please. Remember, respect is a two-way street, Princess. Now answer my question. And be careful, Gabriela.”

“No,” I bite through gritted teeth.

“No what?”

“No, you didn’t make a mistake.”

It’s another minute before he pulls his hand away and another until he stands, and I see how the muscles flex when he lifts his arm to run his fingers through his hair, his expression annoyed or ruffled or something.

“Get packed and ready to go. You’re leaving.”

GABRIELA

He shipped me back to the house in Palermo before lunchtime. Stefan and Rafa, and presumably Clara, stayed behind. I guess they're spending the day in Rome shopping and having fun and doing whatever the fuck it is they do.

But true to his word, he gave me back my iPod and the fake passport and I text Alex as soon as I'm alone to make sure he and his aunt are okay.

He tells me Stefan sent someone to fix their door and that they're fine.

That surprises me. Why would Stefan do that?

But then again, he did break it so why shouldn't he? This doesn't make him a saint or something.

I spend the day on my own and this time, I put on one of the bikinis, a simple yellow one, and sit on the edge of the pool to stay cool. I take a long nap in the afternoon and have dinner on my own and by nine in the evening, I'm bored and fed up.

From the patio, I can see the lights of Palermo and if I listen hard enough, I think I hear music on the beach but I'm probably imagining that.

I find Miss Millie in the kitchen. "I need something to do," I tell her. "Can I go for a walk or something?" I hate asking permission like this, but it was the same at home.

"Oh, I don't know—"

“Just a quick one. Maybe—”

“What about a book?” she asks.

“A book?” I love reading but I finished what I brought, and I haven’t seen so much as a magazine in the house. Stefan doesn’t strike me as the reading type.

“I don’t think you’ve seen the library. Come on.”

I follow her. “There’s a library?”

She smiles. “Well, it’s small but maybe you’ll find something to occupy your time.”

I’m surprised to see her take out her keys to unlock the door to the library, which makes me wonder why it’s locked at all. But as soon as we’re inside, I realize.

So much for Stefan not wanting to isolate me.

“This is great,” I say, looking around, pretending I don’t see the phone on the far table.

Miss Millie pulls the curtains open. “He should open this up,” she says under her breath.

“It’s a beautiful room.”

“It’s where Laura, Stefan’s mother, spent most of her days. She got bored too, what with Antonio and the boys always attending to business. I think it holds a lot of memories for Stefan. He used to love coming in here with her when he was little.”

“I understand,” I say, running my fingers along the spines on a shelf. “Is it okay if I borrow a few?” I ask her, hoping to hide my excitement at my discovery of the phone. “I take good care of books and—”

“Don’t be silly. Of course, you can. It’ll be good for someone to use Laura’s library. She’d have preferred that over leaving the books to sit unread and unloved collecting dust on a shelf.”

“Thank you, Miss Millie.”

“I’m glad to see your spirits lifted.” She smiles at me. “He’s not a bad man, you know. Just had a hard life.”

I just smile back because haven’t we all? I don’t and won’t feel pity for Stefan Sabbioni.

She doesn’t close the door when she leaves and as much as I want to run to the phone and make my call, I don’t. I need to be patient. If she catches me, she won’t let me in here again.

But there’s enough to occupy me.

I take three books off the shelves and curl up in one of the armchairs but before opening the first, I notice a large, leather-bound photo album on the lower shelf of the table between the chairs.

Leaning down, I pick it up, and note how it’s not dusty in here so they must clean it regularly even if it is unused.

I wonder when the last time someone opened this was because it almost creaks when I open it.

The photos inside are older, some yellowing a little. Not the quality of photos now but as I flip through the pages and read the hand-written captions underneath each picture, I realize this is Stefan’s mom. Laura. His father I recognize from photos on the internet, but he’s much younger in these.

And then there are the boys. Antonio and Stefan.

I peer closely at Stefan as a toddler. He was a cute kid. It makes me smile to see him at the beach in his underwear with his chubby little thighs and round belly. I guess his brother has just knocked over the sandcastle he’d made because they’ve captured the moment just before the scream.

Wow. Stefan was a kid once.

I flip through more pages and it’s a whole other perspective, a peek into his life before he became what he is. There are even photos of Rafa with them.

The album ends when he's about sixteen and I'm about to close it when Miss Millie comes into the library. She's carrying a cup of steaming tea.

I think she'll be angry when she sees the album, but she just smiles sadly.

"How long has it been since someone's looked through that?" she asks, handing me the tea and taking the album from me. She sits in the chair opposite mine and opens it.

"Were you here when they were little?"

She nods, turns a few pages. When she looks up at me, her eyes are watery. "Stefan's father, Antonio, he helped me once. He saved my life, quite literally, when most people would have walked away. Stefan was no more than a baby when I started to work for his family, and I don't regret a single day of it."

She stands up, puts the photo album back. "I'm going to go up to bed. Do you need anything before I go?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you, Miss Millie."

"Goodnight, dear."

I watch her leave and note the time, a little after ten. About fifteen minutes after she's gone and the house seems quiet, I get up and close the library door. My heart beats a little faster as I make my way to the back of the room and pick up the phone. When I hear the dial tone, I pull the phone away to punch in the number to the clinic, keeping one eye on the door as I do.

When it starts to ring, I mentally calculate the time. It should be late afternoon. My brother likes long naps after lunch, so I keep my fingers crossed he's awake.

A familiar voice answers the phone. "Clear Meadows, this is Melanie."

"Hi Melanie, it's Gabriela Marchese."

"Oh, Gabriela, how are you?" she starts, and when she continues, her voice is strained. "Is everything all right?"

I've known Melanie for two years now. I've paid twice-weekly visits since Gabe became a patient. For me to not show up or call must have worried her.

"Yes, it's fine. I'm okay. Just... there was an unexpected trip and I didn't have access to a phone to call and let you know. Was Gabe very upset?" Yesterday was one of my days to visit my brother. If I could go every day, I would, but with our father essentially pretending Gabe is dead it doesn't quite fit into his plans.

"We talked him through it," she says kindly.

Guilt gnaws at my heart. I should have tried harder. Tried to call last night while I was home. But I was distracted, absorbed with my own problems.

"Do you think he'll get on the phone with me now?"

"You know he doesn't like to talk on the phone. It upsets him."

He has a hard time understanding how a person's voice is there when they're not. It's such a strange thing. A simple, heartbreaking thing.

"I know, but thing is, I'm in Sicily. And I don't know when I'll be back."

"Can you access FaceTime? If he can see your face—"

"No, I'm sorry. Please let me just try. I don't have much time."

"Sure. Hold on and let me walk down there so I can explain it to him."

"Thanks, Melanie."

"You're welcome."

It's silent for a few minutes before she gets back on the phone and I can hear Gabe in the background. The sound of his voice makes me smile.

"Gabi! Where were you? I waited and waited, and you never came. Are you here now?"

My heart hurts and that smile vanishes as tears fill my eyes.

Fuck.

One stupid minute. One heroic decision. And this is the result. My brother trapped in the body of an adult with the mind of a child forever. My brother who is so good. Who deserves a life, a better one than this.

One stupid minute.

One act of bravery.

And this.

“Hi Gabe, it’s so good to hear your voice,” I try to keep my tone light. Try to smile so he can hear me smile. It’s somehow easier when I’m there, when I can be with him and hold his hand and see his face, even if I don’t see the man he was becoming before it happened anymore. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come.”

“You’re not here now?” He’s confused, I can hear it.

“I had to take a trip. I’m so sorry I missed our lunch. What did you have?”

“When are you coming to see me?”

Shit. He’s getting agitated. I hear Melanie’s voice as she tries to soothe him.

“I don’t know yet but as soon as I can, okay? Is it okay if I call until I can visit?”

“You’ll come on my half-birthday though? Melanie said we’re going to have cake.” Gabe and I always celebrated half-birthdays when mom was alive. We’d stopped that after her death, but since what happened to Gabe, it’s one thing he remembers and wants. And if it brings him joy, I will give it to him.

I nod. “Yes. Yes, for sure I will come on your half-birthday. No way I’d miss that.”

“Promise?”

“I promise, okay?” I know even as I say it, I shouldn’t. He’ll be heartbroken if I miss this.

“Okay.” Then, as quickly as he was upset, his tone changes. “I have to go, Gabi. The magician’s here.” I can hear his excitement and it breaks my heart.

“Okay, Gabe. You go have fun. Let me talk to Melanie, okay?”

“Sure. Bye. Oh, I love you, Gabi!”

“I love you, Gabe.”

Melanie gets on the phone a moment later and I’m relieved I don’t have to try anymore.

“He sounds good,” I say.

“He is. He’ll be fine, Gabriela. Don’t worry. We take good care of him here. All the nurses love him.”

“Thank you, Melanie. You don’t know how much that means to me. I have to go but I’ll try to call again soon.”

“And if you can FaceTime him, some of the other patients seem to do well with those so...”

“I will. I’ll try. Thank you. Goodbye Melanie.”

I disconnect the call and can’t help the tears that stream down my face. It’s an ugly cry and it never changes because every time I see Gabe or talk to him, I think about what happened and how it changed everything. How his life was stolen from him by the very man who gave it to him.

I wonder if he thought he had some right to do it? To decide that?

Or was it the moment? His rage when he saw them together?

I wipe my eyes, take a random book and get up to go into the living room. I’m still barefoot so I’m silent and no one seems to notice I’m there. Or maybe they just don’t care.

I remember the liquor cabinet in the living room and go to it. I don’t drink usually, I don’t really like it, but tonight, I feel like I could use something. So, I grab a glass and a bottle of whiskey even though it’s nasty stuff, and head out to the patio to wallow. To drown my sorrows and cry myself a river. Because I haven’t cried since I was brought here. Not really.

And it's not that I feel sorry for myself because it could be worse. Gabe is living proof of that.

I still wonder if he's still in there somewhere trying to get out. Desperate to. For his sake, I hope not.

I pour myself a generous glass of whiskey and drink it straight before pouring another, thinking if I shouldn't go up to my room first, but too tired to move. Too tired to do anything but sit here and wallow.

STEFAN

It's past midnight when I walk into the house in Palermo.

Today was a bad fucking day. Marchese pulled his first punch and I admit it was a good one. Didn't see that coming.

I wonder if he timed it because today used to be one of my favorite days. Well, before everything happened.

Mother fucker.

Today is—was—Antonio's birthday. First-born son is a big deal in our family and our parents, especially mom, went crazy with the celebrations.

I looked up to Antonio growing up. He was a good big brother to me.

I always knew what kind of family we were. The things we did. As much as our mother tried to shield us from it all, our father wanted us in the business from as far back as I can remember.

And when Antonio turned on the family, I wanted to hate him for it. Wanted to hate him for being the cause of our father's murder and our family's downfall. I did, too, for a while.

But he was my brother and I knew he was good. I knew underneath, he was good.

Maybe too good to be the first-born son in our family.

I walk into the living room to pour myself a whiskey and I think about Gabriela upstairs, asleep. I think about why she's here, how she's involved.

I think how if it weren't for Antonio turning informant, she wouldn't be.

And I wonder if it isn't better for her that she is.

Because Marchese is a son-of-a-bitch.

And he'll screw his daughter—his own blood—to fuck with me.

I think about how she was at the party when he came to greet her. How she stiffened. How she almost cringed when he kissed her cheek.

And I think about the look in his eyes when he first saw her.

I give a shake of my head.

No. I imagined that. It's too sick to think otherwise.

I think about last night as I search through the liquor cabinet for the whiskey. About what I said to her about not wanting to hurt her.

How far am I willing to go to bring down Marchese?

Am I willing to bury her too?

With this new condition, I may have to.

Because her brother isn't dead. He's alive. Not quite well, but alive.

Which means Marchese has a second heir, the rightful heir, as he called him. The rule of the Marchese inheritance is that it goes to the first-born child, boy or girl. Gabriela is second-born, but considering her brother's condition, the inheritance had shifted to Gabriela. Marchese plans to shift it back and cut Gabriela out unless I make sure all ties with her brother are severed.

I know from the two times her brother's come up, Gabriela cares about him.

"So what the fuck is your point, mother fucker?" I say out loud.

Just when I do, I hear a crash out on the patio.

In an instant, I grab the gun I keep in the right-hand drawer of the cabinet and rush out just as my men charge through the front doors, weapons drawn.

Floodlights go on before I even reach the patio and the instant I do, I stop. I raise my hand to the men behind me to do the same, signaling to put

away their weapons.

Because there, kneeling by the pool, is Gabriela in a little yellow bikini, startled eyes wide, mouth open, staring back at me, at the men behind me, at those she must see on the roof.

I walk outside, look up, see the two snipers with weapons pointed.

“I got this,” I call up to them, tucking my pistol into the back of my pants. I see what the crash was because there’s that missing bottle of whiskey.

She follows my gaze slowly back to the ground where she’s kneeling in broken glass as if just realizing it.

“What are you doing, Gabriela?” I ask as I near her.

She looks up at me and squints.

“Turn out those floodlights,” I tell my men. “And someone bring some bandages.”

The lights go out and again, she turns her attention to the broken glass, the pool of whiskey.

“I tripped,” she says, sitting back, looking at her knees which are bloody with shards of glass. She then shifts her gaze to her hands, opens her palms. She takes a long time looking at them.

“Is that my whiskey?” I ask her as one of my men hands me a first-aid kit.

She looks up at me as I crouch down to take her hands and gauge the damage. She must have fallen into the broken bottle because the heels of both are badly cut.

“I broke it,” she says, dragging her gaze back to the mess on the ground.

“I see that, but how much of it did you drink before you broke it?” I ask, noting her wet suit and hair.

She doesn’t answer but pulls one hand away to pick a piece of glass out of her knee.

“All right,” I say, cradling her to lift her up. “Let’s go.”

“I want to swim,” she says pointing to the pool.

“Sweetheart, you are in no condition to swim.” I take her into the living room and lay her on the couch. She flinches when she tries to straighten her legs.

“Wait. I need to get the glass out,” I say. I reach to switch on the lamp.

“It hurts.”

“I bet it does. How much did you drink?”

“Not a lot.”

“Really?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Really,” she answers, eyes out of focus as she leans forward to again pick at the glass.

I take her hand and move it off. “Don’t touch it. I’ll be right back.” I go outside to retrieve the first-aid kit and when I get back, she’s still picking.

“Do I need to tie you up so you don’t touch it?” I ask, looking at the bikini again. At her smooth skin. At how much of her it leaves exposed.

I think about all the men here. They’d better not be looking at her.

“No,” she says, laying her head on the arm of the couch so she’s staring up at the ceiling.

I let my gaze slide over her throat, down to her small, high breasts.

The fact that her nipples are hard and the goosebumps on her bare arms and stomach tell me she’s probably cold.

I work quickly, using the tweezers in the first-aid kit to pick out the glass on her knees then do the same to those shards on her hands.

By the time I’m finished, I notice her eyes are closed.

“Gabriela?” I ask, standing.

She doesn’t answer. She’s asleep.

I look her over, see the color she must have gotten today. The yellow of the bikini is pretty on her. She’s thin, but it’s not for lack of eating from what I can see. That makes me smile. It’s good to see a girl with an appetite.

She makes a sound and rolls, almost falling off the couch. I catch her, tuck bandages and antiseptic into my pocket and scoop her up in my arms.

“Let’s go, sweetheart.”

She opens her eyes, reaches one hand to my shoulder.

“What’s happening?”

“I’m going to clean up your cuts then put you to bed.”

“I can do it.” She wriggles in my arms.

“No, you can’t. You’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Were you swimming alone?”

“I just dipped my feet in.”

“Then why’s your hair wet?” I ask as I maneuver her to open my bedroom door.

“This isn’t my room,” she says, again trying to get out of my arms.

“It’s my room,” I say. I close the door and carry her to my bed, draw the covers back and lay her down.

“Your bed,” she says, turning her face into a pillow and inhaling.

“Yes. Now answer my question. Why is your hair wet?”

“I dipped my head under.”

Which explains why it’s all coming forward and sticking to her forehead funny. I imagine her standing in the middle of the pool doing that and have to smile.

I walk into the bathroom to get a washcloth. When I get back, she’s pushing herself to a seat on the bed and struggling to do so.

“Can you swim, Gabriela?”

“Of course,” she says as I help her sit up. She slaps my hand away once she’s upright but when I start to clean her knees, she lets me.

“But you don’t like to?”

“My mom drowned,” she says.

I know this.

I look at her but she's not looking at me. She's looking somewhere beyond me and I see her pupils working to focus.

"And you're scared you'll drown?"

She meets my eyes then and shakes her head. "It wasn't an accident."

Surprised, I stop. I study her but a moment later, she tries to lie back down.

"Let me just wrap these up," I say.

"So I don't get blood on your sheets?" she pauses, then gives a nervous laugh. "I will anyway."

"It's not blood on the sheets I'm worried about." As I say it, I realize it's not blood from her cuts she means.

But is that even possible?

I shake my head. I have other questions for now. If she's a virgin, I'll find out soon enough.

"This is going to sting," I say as I put the antiseptic on her cuts.

She sucks in a breath and tries to pull away. I stop her.

"Almost done." I do the same to her other knee then bandage them both before taking first one hand, then the other.

She manages to lie down as I do that and turns onto her side to watch me.

"What do you mean your mom's drowning wasn't an accident, Gabriela?" I ask as I bandage each hand.

"You have a lot of questions, Stefan," she says, managing to point one finger at me before her arm drops to her side. "I'm tired." She starts to get up. Or tries to.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"My room." She points to the balcony.

I smile and sit her up.

She flops against me, arms at her sides, and rests her head in the crook of my neck. She sighs deeply and for a long moment, I just hold her like

that and feel her relax against me. Feel her cool, soft skin on me.

“You smell good,” she says.

“And you’re sweet when you’re drunk.”

“Better than that first night,” she continues as if she hasn’t heard me.

I remember that first night I met her in her bedroom on her sixteenth birthday. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.

I work quickly to untie the bikini straps and I don’t know if she notices when I pull it off as I lay her back down. I try not to look at her but fail. She’s so beautiful, even when she’s a mess.

She makes a sound, looks from the strip of yellow cloth in my hand, to my face, then down at herself.

Her eyes widen.

I lean down to take the bottom of the suit off her and she tries to wriggle away.

“You said we wouldn’t—”

“They’re wet. That’s all.”

But is that all? I ask myself as I drag my gaze over her, over the small round breasts, those hard nipples, down over her flat belly to the tiny triangle of neatly trimmed dark hair. To the delicate slit of her sex.

I swallow, feeling myself harden.

She rolls onto her side away from me, bending one knee, inadvertently giving me a glimpse of her ass.

I should sleep on the chair. Or maybe take her to her room. But what if she gets sick at night?

I have to laugh at myself for that load of bullshit because I know the truth.

I want her in my bed.

And I want her in my bed naked.

She moves, rolling onto her stomach. I see those marks again, the seven scars beneath her shoulder blade. But that’s not all. There are more.

I crouch down, touch another spot. This is from a knife. I know. I have a matching one. Hers is shallow though.

And lower, along her hip, more of those circles. Burns. Almost like cigarette burns. And more cuts.

She makes a sound, rolls onto her back again. She blinks her pretty eyes open and they slowly focus on me.

“Sleep, Gabriela.” I pull the blanket up to cover her.

She pushes it off, reaches out to grab my hand. “Stay with me.”

“Not a good idea.”

“Please.” She tugs, then her hand drops away and her eyes flutter closed again. “I’m always alone.” She rolls away again, hugging one knee up.

I swallow, take in the sight of her like this, and something animal inside me stirs.

It wants.

I drop her wet things on the floor and adjust my cock, but that’s not going to go away, not with her lying here like this.

I walk around and get into the bed, keeping my clothes on. I’ll just stay until I’m sure she’s asleep, I tell myself. I switch out the light and turn to her. I don’t pull the blanket over her yet.

When I push the wet hair back from her face, she opens her eyes and they shine almost a silvery green in the moonlight.

I let my hand brush her arm, then slide it to her breast, just touch her nipple with the backs of my fingers.

She swallows, arches her back as it tightens into a hard nub.

I draw closer, rising up on my elbow as I roll her gently onto her back and bring my mouth to that nipple, kissing it. Tasting salt from the pool on her skin as she sucks in a breath and her hand comes to my chest.

She’s not pushing though. Not pushing me away.

That’s because she’s drunk, asshole.

My dick is a steel rod when I take her nipple into my mouth to taste. Just a small taste. I hear her moan as her hand slides to cup the back of my head to pull me to her.

When I draw back, her eyes are darker, the pupils fully dilated.

She licks her lips and I can't drag my eyes away from her little tongue, from her wet, plump lips. And when I kiss her, it's a world different from the last time.

She opens her mouth and kisses me back and when I slide my tongue into her mouth, she meets it with her own and fuck, I'm going to blow. Just from a kiss. From a single kiss.

I draw back and hold her gaze as my hand slides down over her belly, lower.

I smell her, the soft scent of arousal sweet, inviting. Intoxicating.

She makes a sound when I touch the soft hair between her legs, then closes her hand over my wrist.

I meet her eyes as her grip loosens and instead of pushing my hand away, she starts to pull it between her legs.

I swallow, feel the wet heat of her and I should stop. I should stop this right now. She's in no condition to say what she wants. What she doesn't want.

She takes her lower lip between her teeth and I softly touch the hard nub of her clit.

"Is this the first time someone's touched you here?"

She nods, bites her lip.

Fuck.

I rub. Just once. Just one stroke.

"That feels..." she starts, then rolls onto her back. Her legs fall open and her eyes close. "Good."

And I remember her words from this morning.

Remember her accusation.

When I drag my hand away, she makes a sound, turns toward me, but her eyes never open and she stills into sleep.

I get up, draw the covers over her.

Because tonight, I am taking advantage.

And maybe what I said about being a man of my word, maybe that was all bullshit because she's drunk, almost passed out and I'm pretty sure if she wasn't, she wouldn't choose to be lying here naked beside me now.

My dick a steel rod, I walk barefoot out of the room.

GABRIELA

My head throbs and my mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton. I squint against the bright sunshine and turn away. That's when I realize I'm not in my bed.

My eyelids fly open and I take in the rumpled sheets I'm tangled in. The scent on the pillow my head is resting on.

His scent.

I lift my head and groan against the pain. When I sit up and the sheet falls away, I see that I'm naked. I grab the sheet, pull it up to cover myself and look around the room. I know without a doubt that this is his room.

That this is his bed.

That I'm naked in his bed.

My hand hurts and when I reach to scratch my head, I notice the bandage. I pull my knees up and they, too, are sore. When I drag the covers off, I see matching bandages and I have a vague flash of memory of me at the pool with his bottle of whiskey, which explains this monstrous headache.

Then me at the pool tripping as I made my way back to the water.

Back to the water.

I'd gone in. I'd stood there like an idiot and dipped my head in—face first—before climbing back out, deciding I needed another drink before I'd

let myself float in there. Seemed like a great idea at the time. Until I tripped and fell.

Then light flooded the patio.

And all those men appeared out of nowhere.

And all those guns.

And Stefan.

I cover my face with my hands as I remember the rest of it. Him carrying me into the living room, then up here. Him cleaning glass out of my cuts and bandaging me up. Him being gentle.

Then I remember more.

I remember leaning into him as he untied my bikini top and stripped it off. I remember lying back as he took off the bottoms.

And then, nothing.

My memory goes dark from there. Maybe that's a blessing.

I'm relieved when I close my eyes and do a mental scan and don't feel any soreness anywhere except my knees and hands.

I force myself to move, to swing my legs over the bed. I see my bikini on the floor and bend to pick up the pieces. It takes a minute for the room to stop spinning when I straighten and when I stand, it's another minute before I'm steady.

I drag the blanket with me as I take painful steps toward the open balcony doors and peer out over the edge, grateful that the pool and patio are empty.

As quickly as I can manage, which isn't quick at all, I make my way to my own room. The balcony doors are closed but unlocked, thank goodness, and I slip inside.

My bed is still made but I bypass it to go to the bathroom. I need to pee.

When I'm finished, I wash my hands and groan at the sight of myself. My eyes are puffy and bloodshot, my hair looks like I literally dunked my

head into the water face first then pulled it back out. Which is exactly how I did it.

I cup a handful of cold water and splash it on my face, then brush my teeth before opening the medicine cabinet to search for aspirin but I'm out of luck.

My legs are heavy as I make my way back to the bedroom. My knees hurt and the heels of my hands feel raw as I climb in.

Discarding Stefan's blanket, I roll onto my side to sleep.

I can't think about last night right now. Can't think about why I was naked in his bed. Can't think about him undressing me.

I just close my eyes and sleep and hope to God this monster of a headache will be gone when I open them again.

Later that day, I have a vague memory of Miss Millie coming into my bedroom with tea, toast and aspirin. I'm pretty sure she helped me take that aspirin.

The toast and cold tea are still beside the bed when I open my eyes later. A glance at the clock tells me it's almost ten at night.

My stomach growls and I sit up, grateful my head doesn't feel quite like a bowling ball anymore. I pick up the cold tea and drink it, then eat half a piece of toast before climbing out of bed.

I'm still naked but Stefan's blanket which I know I'd dropped on the floor beside my bed is gone. Miss Millie probably took it. Does she know I slept in his bed last night? And where was he? Where did he sleep?

Clara's bed, most likely.

The thought makes me angry and strangely sad at once.

I walk into the bathroom and switch on the shower. I take my toothbrush in with me and stand under the water for a long time even though the cuts on my hands and knees sting in the hot water. I shampoo and condition, then scrub myself with soap. I'm not sure what I'm trying to scrub off, his touch or my embarrassment.

My stomach growls. I'm starving.

I switch off the water and wrap a towel around myself as I walk to the closet. I look for my jeans, but they're gone, and my duffel bag has been emptied. Did he confiscate my jeans?

I pick a sundress off a hanger, not caring which one, grab a light sweater and slip my feet into flip flops. If he tells me to put on heels for dinner, I'm going to stab him with one, I decide.

Although I'm not sure why I'm so angry with him. I remember that he took care of me. If I'm honest with myself, it's that I'm embarrassed.

Memory flashes a piece of our conversation. Something about getting blood on his sheets.

I cover my face again. Did I try to tell him in some roundabout way that I was a virgin? Did he pick up on that?

I look up at the ceiling. "Please God, let it not be true and I swear I will never drink another drop of alcohol ever again."

Taking a deep breath in, I open the door and walk out into the hallway. I have to face him sometime.

I'm just grateful it's quiet as I make my way downstairs. All I hear is the soft sound of a soprano somewhere in the house. I'm tempted to investigate where it's coming from, but the kitchen door opens and Miss Millie comes walking out.

"Well, there you are."

I smile. "Good morning."

"It's night, dear."

"Yes. Sorry."

"Are you feeling better? Stefan said you had a headache."

"He did?"

She nods and I know she's not stupid. I know she knows I was hungover. And I'm so grateful to her that she leaves it at that.

"I'm feeling better. Hungry, actually."

She smiles “I’m glad to hear it. He thought you might like just some plain pasta.”

I nod, forcing myself not to overthink this. “Yes. I’d love that.”

“Go sit down. I’ll bring it out.”

“Miss Millie?” I ask.

“Yes, dear?”

“Is he here?”

“He’s on a call. I’m sure he’ll be finished soon. He’s been on it for over an hour already.” She shakes her head in disapproval.

My heartbeat picks up. “Thanks.”

She disappears into the kitchen and I walk out to the patio. I breathe in the warm night air. It’s so quiet I can hear the sound of the sea, of waves on the little beach below. I close my eyes and listen and it’s so still and peaceful here. I don’t think I’ve ever felt peace like this before.

“It’s the water,” comes his deep voice from behind me, startling me, wreaking havoc on me as I spin to face him.

How is he so quiet? He’s a big guy. And it’s not like he’s walking around barefoot.

“It’s what relaxes you,” he says, walking toward me, looking me over. “How do you feel?”

“Why was I naked in your bed?”

He smiles, his cheek dimpling when he does, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“We’re going to get right into it, are we?”

Miss Millie chooses that moment to walk outside carrying a tray of food. A bowl of plain spaghetti sprinkled with what I’d guess to be parsley, a decanter of olive oil, a bowl of grated parmesan cheese and a huge bottle of water.

“Here we are,” she says. If she notices the awkwardness between Stefan and I, she doesn’t let on. Instead she sets my place and leaves.

Stefan gestures to the plate. "Eat before it gets cold."

"Aren't you eating?"

"I already ate."

I make my way to the table and sit. He follows me, taking his seat across mine. He pours me a glass of water as I pick up my fork and start to twirl pasta.

"Use your spoon too."

I glance up at him and make a point of shoving a heaping forkful of pasta into my mouth with just my fork, the noodles slapping against my chin as I loudly suck them in.

My father would probably smack me if I did this at home.

Stefan just grins, his eyes steady on me, making me remember all those things I remembered earlier. I look away when I feel my face heat up.

I continue to eat using just my fork even though I'd normally use my spoon too. We're quiet until I finish the entire dish and push the plate away.

"That was good," I say, feeling a little more human as I swallow the contents of my water glass.

Stefan pours me another.

"Do I have to lock the liquor cabinet?" he asks.

"I just had a bad night."

"Why? What happened?"

I shrug a shoulder, remembering my call with Gabe. "Why was I naked in your bed?" I ask instead of answering him.

"Because your bikini was wet."

"You undressed me."

"You remember?"

"Of course, I remember. I remember everything," I lie.

"Hmm," he says as if he sees right through me. "I don't mind if you have a drink or two, but I don't want you drunk and definitely not by the pool."

“I don’t make a habit of getting drunk and hanging out by pools.”

“You hurt yourself, Gabriela.”

“It was an accident. I just tripped.”

“Because you were drunk. What if you’d fallen into the pool?”

“Then I’d have gotten wet.”

“I don’t know that you were in any condition to swim out.”

“I wasn’t there to swim.”

“You told me you were.”

I did?

“Did you... Was there... Did anything happen?” I cringe to ask it, feeling my face burn in embarrassment when another memory returns. Me telling him how good he smelled.

He raises his eyebrows and one side of his mouth curves upward.

My embarrassment deepens but the fact that he’s laughing at me helps. It makes me angry.

“Between us, you mean?” he asks.

“No, between me and Rafa,” I deadpan, unsure why.

But the moment the words are out, the amusement vanishes from Stefan’s face.

I hadn’t really meant to say that, to use Rafa’s name. But I’ve just found a chink in Stefan’s armor.

“Be careful, Gabriela.”

“Are you jealous of him, Stefan?” I push.

“Jealous of my cousin?”

I nod.

“No, I’m not jealous of Rafa. He knows better than to touch what’s mine. Maybe it’s time I show you what that means.” He cocks his head to the side. “Should we discuss the things you told me last night?”

I hate this. Hate not remembering. It gives him such an advantage over me.

I push the chair back and stand. “My head hurts, actually. I’m going back to bed.” I turn to walk away.

“Gabriela.”

I stop.

“I haven’t dismissed you. Sit your pretty little ass back down.”

I bet he got an eyeful of my ass last night. “I said I have a headache,” I say, unable to mask the defensive tone of my voice.

“I have questions, Gabriela.”

I turn back to him, narrow my gaze to study him. What the hell happened last night? What could I have said that he has questions?

I fold my arms across my chest and try to look bored.

“Who put the marks on you?” he asks.

The instant the words are out, I feel my entire body flush. But it’s not heat I feel, it’s cold. Ice cold.

“What?”

“You heard me. Who did it?”

I’m at a loss. I just stare back at him at a total loss.

Then instinct kicks in.

Distract.

“What did you do, strip me naked so you could have a good look? What else did you do? Huh? Did you touch me, Stefan?”

His eyes harden. His jaw tightens.

I should stop. I should stop now. But I know myself. I won’t. I can’t.

“Or more?” I ask.

At that, he stands, his chair scraping loudly as he pushes it back.

“That’s too far, sweetheart.”

He takes a step and I don’t wait for him to take another. I turn, and I run. I run back to the stairs knowing there’s nowhere I can go. Nowhere I can hide from him.

By the time I reach the staircase, he's right behind me. I trip more than once in my haste and have no doubt he can catch me, but he doesn't. Instead he chases me to my room, and I get the feeling he's just herded me.

When I go to slam the door shut behind me, it bounces off his shoe and shudders as it opens.

I scurry around the bed.

He closes the door behind him and stands there. He's pissed but he's not out of breath. Not after that sprint up the stairs.

I am, though.

"Get out, Stefan! I mean it!"

Without a word, he stalks toward me

"Are they cigarette burns?"

"Get out!"

He doesn't though, he just keeps coming.

And I do the only thing I can. I take the only thing I can protect myself with. The knife I'd swiped from breakfast.

I grab it out from under my pillow and hold it up between us, pivoting from foot to foot, not sure what the hell I'm doing because I have no plan. The knife isn't even that sharp, but still, it's a knife.

"Put that down."

"You shipped me back here yesterday so you could play house with your cousin in Rome. What did you call her? A kissing cousin? You left me here alone, locked up, not even able to leave the house. I have nothing to do. No one to talk to. I am completely alone until you get the idea you'd like to fuck with me? Is that it? What, are you bored now? Am I your plaything when you're bored, or you happen to be home and don't have anything better to do or whenever the hell it suits you?"

His eyes narrow and he sets his jaw.

"I'm your pawn in this stupid game you're playing with my father. I get that. I accept it, even, as fucked up as it is. Hell, I'll even let you dress me

up and flaunt me under his nose because I heard your warning loud and clear and I have no doubt you will bury me without a second thought. But understand this. I have no intention of tucking my tail between my legs at your command.”

“Gabriela.” The single word, my name spoken so quietly, so calmly, is a warning on his tongue.

I’ve never been one to stop, though. Never could back down.

“You told me respect is a two-way street. I’ll remind you of it. You may think you own me, and maybe you do, maybe you own my body. But my mind, my thoughts, my secrets, they’re mine. Not for you. My past is *my* past. My scars are *my* scars. Don’t ask me like you care. Like you give a single fuck. You don’t. You’re a monster, Stefan. Like him. Like the man you hate. Do you know that you and I, we’re even repeating history? My mom. My dad. Are you going to drown me too?”

I gasp.

I hear the words too late. Only after they’re out.

Shit.

What did I do?

What did I say?

His face is unreadable. A crease forms between his eyebrows as he takes this in.

God.

Fuck.

I’ve never said it out loud. Not to anyone. Not even to myself.

Why did I say it?

“Gabriela,” he starts, his tone no longer a warning. Almost softer. Almost.

I can’t read him. He’s so closed, he doesn’t give anything away and I’m so stupid.

“Get out, Stefan. Leave me alone.”

“You don’t want to be alone. You said so last night.”

“I was drunk. Drunk people say stupid things they don’t mean.”

“The opposite is true, actually.”

“Get out. Please.”

He opens his mouth to speak and I don’t wait to hear what he has to say. I don’t want to hear. I can’t.

I lunge and I don’t mean to. I don’t mean to hurt him. It doesn’t occur to me that I even can.

But he moves too and then there’s blood because he catches the knife. Catches it by the blade.

I gasp, look at his hand. Look at the blood. I let go.

When he releases it, I watch its progress as it twirls, falling to the floor. Watch the splatters of blood on the white sheets, on my legs. On the marble when it clatters to the floor.

And I expect him to be raging. It’s what I’m prepared for. What I deserve.

But when he grabs hold of my wrists and tugs me close, it’s not rage I see. It’s something else. Something worse.

Pity.

Fucking pity.

And I can’t stand it.

“Get your hands off me!”

“I won’t let him put a mark on you again,” he says, and his words, they somehow surprise me because I know he knows who did it. Who burned me. Who cut me. He’s not stupid. It wouldn’t take a genius to figure out who put the marks on me anyway. I handed him the answer on a silver fucking platter.

I feel the heat of more tears sting my eyes, but I steel myself against this man. This monster. Because even if he’s not the same as my father, he is still that.

Just a different sort of monster.

I have to remember that.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

“Only your mark going forward, Stefan? What will you use? What should I prepare myself for?”

I don’t know why I’m pushing. Why I’m goading him. I remember him from the night of my sixteenth birthday. Remember his rage. How there was just the thinnest layer of control shielding me from it.

“Shut up, Gabriela.”

“Tell me. Tell me so I’m ready. It’s only fair. Tell me. What is it that’s going to get you off, Stefan?”

His hands tighten on my wrists. I feel the warmth of blood from his cut hand on one. A second later, he shoves me backward onto the bed so hard, that I bounce twice.

He leans down, pressing his knee between mine, forcing my legs apart and sliding his knee high until it collides with my sex.

I gasp with the impact. There’s nothing sexual about this. This is something else.

This is violence.

This is dominance.

This is power.

He looms over me, closes his bloodied hand around my throat and presses his knee against me. “You want to make me your enemy?” he asks, and his voice, it’s hoarse and harsh and low, like there’s so much rage inside that he’s struggling to control. Like he’s too close to losing the battle.

I try to swallow as he squeezes. Try to make a sound.

“Is that how you want this?” he spits.

I claw at his forearm. I don’t know if he realizes how hard he’s squeezing.

I slap at his arm, his chest, I can't reach his face and my vision is fading. I can't hear what he's saying. All I feel is the rage coming off him. Like the floodgates have opened and I'm the one who opened them and I'm standing in the path of the storm. This tsunami of rage.

And just when I think I'm going to pass out, he releases me and stalks from my room.

STEFAN

“**A**re you going to drown me too?”

It's late the next afternoon and those words are still circling my head. I should have let her be. Not pushed. She was acting out because she was embarrassed. I knew that. And still, she made me so fucking angry.

What did I expect, though? That she'd welcome my protection? That she'd even believe I *would* protect her?

She's right in a sense. I am a monster. A different sort of monster than her father, but not a whole other breed of animal. Case in point, the fact that she's here. That the seamstress is walking down the stairs from her room right now, her attendants carrying that hideous dress as they scurry behind the older woman who is grumbling under her breath.

I'm forcing her to marry me.

And I did touch her. She wasn't off the mark to ask.

Was that what pissed me off? The fact that she was right about me? That I am not a man of my word, like I so pretentiously claimed to be just hours earlier?

Because I wouldn't have admitted that to her no matter the cost.

When I took the knife, the look of shock on her face, I'll never forget it.

The cut isn't bad. It wasn't a sharp knife. I know better than to leave her with something she can do real damage with and Millie had informed me

about it going missing the day it did.

But that look on her face. It takes me back to the night in her father's study. The blood on her clothes. The splatters of it on her face. Marchese had ordered his thugs to break Alex's legs. Ordered that she be made to watch.

Was the blood reminiscent of that? Of the violence in our world?

Is she safer with me than with her father? Not in her eyes, I'm sure.

I meant what I said, though. I won't let anyone put a mark on her. But isn't she right? That I will leave my own mark when it suits me?

Monster.

I think about the way he looked at her at the engagement party.

"What is it that's going to get you off, Stefan?"

The thought of what that could mean sickens me and I think about how she looks so much like her mother.

But she's a virgin. Didn't she tell me as much last night? And he couldn't be that much a monster.

Other words repeat then.

"Are you going to drown me too?"

I walk into the study, close the door and pick up the phone to call a contact in New York, Matt Lawrence.

Lawrence picks up on the second ring. This is his private line. He's the investigator who got me the information on Marchese in the first place. Gave me what I needed to force his hand. And that knowledge reminds me again just how much a monster Gabriel Marchese is.

"Stefan. What can I do for you?"

I don't bother with casual conversation. Lawrence knows when I call him, it's straight to business. And he knows how much his information will be worth to me. He's fast and not opposed to using less than savory methods to get what I need.

“I want to know about Gabriel Marchese’s wife’s death. She drowned about ten years ago. It was filed as accidental, but I don’t think it was.”

I hear him hitting some keys. “Maria Marchese. Twenty-nine at the time of her death. Two kids. I’ll have something in about a week.”

“I need it sooner than that.”

He clucks his tongue. “That’s not going to be easy.”

“I don’t pay you because it’s easy.”

Pause. “Okay. This a good number to call you on?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be back to you in a few hours.”

Better.

“I’ll talk to you then,” I say.

There’s a knock on the door and Rafa opens it just as I hang up. His gaze drops instantly to my bandaged hand.

“What happened to you?” he asks, walking straight to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a whiskey. He takes a seat on the couch and crosses one ankle over the opposite knee.

“Grabbed a knife on the wrong end.”

I see one eyebrow rise. Rafa’s a smart guy. He likes to give the illusion of being very laid back. Almost uninterested. But he sees everything and hears everything. People underestimate him. It’s what he wants. But it’s a mistake to underestimate my cousin.

“Clara situated?” I ask, not intending on going into detail about my night.

He smiles. “Complained she’d be bored but yeah, she’s set up.”

“Good.” I had Rafa take her to the house in Syracuse. “Get her what she needs but I don’t want her back here right now.”

“Your fiancée is the jealous type, I take it?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Why do you give a fuck? You’re not going soft on me, are you, cousin?”

“Don’t be a dick, Rafa. What did you find out about the brother?”

“He’s in a place called Clear Meadows in New York. And he’s not in good shape.”

“What do you mean?”

He gets up, takes his phone out of his pocket, swipes the screen and turns it toward me.

I look at the image of Gabriel Marchese’s son. His namesake. Gabriela’s brother.

He looks nothing like her, which I already knew from the photo of him as a kid. He resembles his father. Except not.

He’s a big guy, and he’d be good-looking, but for the obvious fact that there’s something not quite right. Something a little off.

Rafa swipes to show me another image. I take the phone, zoom in on the image. Read the shortened version of his name on the sticker stuck to his shirt. He’s laughing and pointing at a giraffe.

“Trip to the zoo,” Rafa says.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Rafa puts the phone away and drinks his whiskey. “Gunshot a couple of years ago to the head. Doctor’s called him lucky. I’m not sure I agree.”

“How long ago exactly?”

He looks at his phone, uses his thumb to swipe through a file. “He was sixteen.”

“Who pulled the trigger?”

“Doesn’t say. All I get is that it was an accident and no criminal charges were brought against anyone.”

“Where did this accident take place?”

Rafa reads an address. It's New Jersey, but I don't recognize the neighborhood.

"Here's the interesting piece. Ready to hear whose house it is?" he asks.

"Who?"

"Ed Romano."

"Is that name supposed to mean something to me?"

"The kid the other night with the broken legs? His grandfather."

I think back to that night. To what was said and what the kid had done for Gabriela.

"Was the kid there?"

"No clue."

"We still have a man on him?"

"Yeah. He's not going anywhere. There's one more thing, Stef," he says.

"Don't leave me hanging."

"Your girl called her brother yesterday."

"What?"

How?

Rafa nods. "Promised to call him in a few days."

"Did she?" My tricky little fiancée.

"You want me to put on a man on the brother?"

"Yes. And get the jet ready. I'm going to Rome. I need to revisit my fiancée's friend."

"Now?"

"Now."

GABRIELA

I don't see Stefan the next day and Miss Millie is gone too. A girl I haven't seen before greets me when I come downstairs. When I ask where they are, she tells me that Miss Millie will be back later that evening and Stefan is out of town.

Thanks for letting me know.

On the upside, I notice the library door is still unlocked so I'll call Gabe again later.

I finish breakfast and spend the next few hours sitting around reading when, around one in the afternoon, Rafa walks into the house with another man, the two of them laughing about something. He pauses when he meets my eyes and I remember the Rafa of the other night. The night he held a gun to Alex. The night he bruised my arm in his rush to obey Stefan's order.

Without taking his eyes off me, he almost dismisses the other guy. I guess as Stefan's cousin, Rafa's high on the totem pole.

He makes his way to me, a wide smile on his face that I don't trust for a second.

"Gabriela," he says, his voice deep and smooth. Too smooth. "Morning."

"Morning." I turn to pick up my cup of tea.

He pulls Stefan's chair out, turns it and straddles it, arms resting on the back of the seat. He's more casual than Stefan. Dresses in jeans and T-shirts rather than suits. He's got a holster on his shoulder, but his gun isn't in it.

"How are you doing?" he asks.

"Fine." I sip my tea, give him a fake smile. "Just great. What do you want?"

He narrows his eyes, but not cruelly. Or he hides it well, at least. He's about as easy to read as Stefan.

"Millie mentioned you were bored. I figured you'd be tired of being cooped up in here."

"Your concern is touching." *Jerk.*

"I'm heading to Taormina in a little bit. You're welcome to join me if you like. It's about a three-hour drive but it's along the coast. It's pretty."

"Why?"

"Why is it pretty?" he raises his eyebrows.

"Don't mess with me, Rafa. Why are you inviting me?"

"Like I said, I figured you'd get bored being cooped up. And I guess I want you to like our little island. Not come to see it as a prison."

"Why do you care how I see it?"

He shrugs a shoulder. "Just trying to do something nice for you, Gabriela," he says, standing. He spins the chair around easily in one hand and replaces it. "You're welcome to stay here if you prefer." He walks away.

"Wait."

He stops, turns to look at me expectantly.

"Did Stefan put you up to this?"

He smiles. "Stefan's too busy to put me up to this."

"What's he busy doing?"

"Business." He checks his watch. "Are you coming?"

I'm desperate to get out of here. Although it'll mean calling Gabe later, when I'm back. But with the time difference, it may even be better.

I nod.

"Good," he says, smiling. "I'm glad. Grab a bikini in case you want to swim in Taormina."

"Do I have to?"

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. There's a private beach where my meeting is. I figured you'd want to lay around. You can go into town, but I'd have to send men with you."

"It's fine. Beach is great. It'll be good to get out of here. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

I run upstairs to throw a bikini and a cover up into a beach bag, and grab my iPod Touch, which Stefan, true to his word, returned to me.

When I return, Rafa is waiting. We step outside to find a waiting SUV. He opens the passenger door and I get in and when he climbs into the driver's side, I'm surprised.

"Don't you have a driver?"

"Nah. I'm just an underling." He checks the mirrors and pulls out.

I turn the air conditioning down a little and look around as we drive off the property and head onto a coastal road.

"Are you sure Stefan didn't pawn me off on you?" I ask when he switches the radio to an Italian channel.

"I don't think Stefan sees you as something to pawn off."

"I'm not so sure."

"Are you the reason for the bandage on his hand?"

I nod, feeling guilty. "It was an accident. At least, I didn't mean to do it, but I haven't seen him to tell him. To apologize."

"I'm sure you can do it when he's back. He's a pretty understanding guy."

"Yeah, right."

“I mean it. Listen, I’ve known Stefan all my life. Grew up with him. I’ve never known him to treat anyone unfairly.”

“So, what he’s doing to me is fair, then?”

Rafa goes silent for a minute. “You don’t know all the details, Gabriela. And besides, you have his protection. That’s something.”

I chuckle. “I don’t have his protection, Rafa. I have his wrath, simply for the fact of my parentage.”

His phone rings and he digs it out of his pocket with one hand while keeping the other on the wheel.

“Speak of the devil.” He puts a finger to his lips, and I wonder if he doesn’t want Stefan to know he’s taking me along to his meeting.

“Stef,” he answers.

Stefan talks and I strain to listen, but I can’t make out what he’s saying.

Rafa reassures him of something then asks how his trip is going. At Stefan’s answer, Rafa chuckles. They then disconnect and Rafa puts the phone in a pocket on the front console.

“Looks like Stefan will be gone one more night.”

“Where is he?” I ask.

“Here and there.”

I want to ask what that means but Rafa turns the radio up and starts to sing along so I shift my gaze out the window and watch the scenery which, like he said, is beautiful.

RAFA DRIVES ABOUT TWENTY MILES OVER THE LIMIT AND WE ARRIVE IN JUST over two-and-a-half hours. He explains that Taormina proper is about ten minutes farther, but we’ll go after lunch.

He slows the car once we reach a secluded restaurant and Rafa hands his keys to the valet. He slips on a jacket, which surprises me as this seems

like a casual place.

“Grab your bikini. You can go to the beach after we eat.”

“Okay.” I bring my bag and step onto the sandy path leading to the building. Music plays outside and although there are about a dozen tables inside the cool building, most of the seating is on the beach under palm trees which are blowing in the breeze. Even in their shade, it’s hot.

I excuse myself to use the ladies’ room and when I return, I find Rafa talking to someone. When that man sees me, he gives me a cold look, then tells Rafa he’ll see him soon.

“Outside or inside?” Rafa asks me, still casual, as if he didn’t notice the way the man looked at me.

“Outside, if you don’t mind. I like the heat.”

“Me too.”

He puts a hand at my lower back, and we follow a hostess outside to an out of the way table.

When I sit down, I slip off my sandals and dig my toes into the warm, soft sand. I watch the kids playing on the beach while their parents sit with bottles of wine on their tables eating heaping plates of fresh seafood. The band is set at the far end and they’re playing an upbeat tune. Colorful lights are strung above our heads, so many of them that they almost make a canopy.

“It must be pretty at night,” I comment.

“It is. Especially with the moon on the water.”

A waitress appears with a bucket of ice and a bottle of white wine.

I remember my hangover of a few nights ago but feel like a child to order a coke instead so I let Rafa pour for both of us and I just sip from my glass.

I open my menu but Rafa interrupts. “They have a daily catch. It’s always amazing and fresh. Do you like fish?”

“Very much.”

“I suggest you take the special then.”

“Okay, sounds good to me.” I close my menu.

“Two of the fresh catch please,” he tells the waitress in Italian, giving her a charming, disarming smile.

I study that smile. It’s so at odds with the man of the other night.

A moment later when she walks away, there’s a momentary awkwardness.

“Stefan doesn’t know I’m here, does he?” I finally ask.

“I’ll tell him when he’s back.”

“He won’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“I accused him of being jealous of you.”

He smiles wide, showing off big white teeth. “Sounds about right,” he says with a wink. “Don’t worry about Stefan. His bark is worse than his bite.”

I’m not so sure.

“I’ll tell him I made you come with me, so you won’t be in trouble.”

“I won’t be *in trouble*. I’m not a child and I’m not afraid of him.”

“No?”

“No.”

“You should be, Gabriela. You should take care with him.” His expression has gone deadly serious and his words send a chill through me.

“Weren’t you just singing his praises? Telling me how fair and understanding he is?”

“Just stay in his good graces.”

“I don’t think I am in his good graces.” I think I already fucked that up if I ever had it at all.

“He’s being careful with you. You may not see it, but I do.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said.” Before I can ask more, the waitress returns with a large plate of fried calamari, wedges of lemon and a shaker of salt. “Just smell those,” Rafa says, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply when she sets them down.

They do smell amazing.

We eat the calamari then the catch of the day, which is a white fish roasted over a fire. It, too, is delicious and before I know it, I find I’ve drunk two glasses of wine and eaten my entire plate.

A few moments later, Rafa wipes his mouth and checks his watch.

“Are you going to be all right here? I need to go to my meeting.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll just be inside if you need me.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say. “Is it all right if I go to the square there and just check out the market? I’m not going to go anywhere.”

“I’m not afraid of you going somewhere. I can’t leave you unprotected. You’re with Stefan now. You’re valuable, Gabriela.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean taking his fiancée would give his enemies power over him.”

“Like kidnapping me?”

“Don’t tell me it’s never occurred to you growing up a Marchese.”

Guards surrounded me 24/7 then. I guess it’s no different than now. And I never thought about it. Maybe I thought it would be a blessing if someone would take me.

And now someone has.

“Stay on the beach. I’ll take you myself once I’m finished. I’ll even take you into Taormina proper. This market is for tourists.”

“Who’s going to be watching me now?” I ask, irritated.

“See those two men?” he asks, gesturing to the two who stand just outside the restaurant doors. I wonder how long they’ve been standing there because Rafa didn’t even have to turn his head to look for them, he just

knew they were there. “They’re with the man I’m meeting. They know who you are and will keep an eye on you.”

He must see worry on my face because he reaches out and squeezes my hand. The gesture is odd. Out of place.

“It’s fine. Just pretend like they’re not there. They won’t come near you unless there’s a threat.”

“There are kids here, Rafa. What are they going to do? Take out guns if they think someone may be a threat?”

He checks his watch. “Relax, Gabriela, they’re not inexperienced men.” He stands and signals to the waitress who comes over right away. “Order a dessert. And have another glass of wine. I’ll be finished before you know it.”

I don’t do either as I watch him walk toward those men, nodding to them as he passes into the restaurant. I see him cross the window and shake hands with someone I don’t see. I turn my gaze to the beach, to the kids building sand castles, to the parents all smiling and happy as the music plays and I feel sick to my stomach.

GABRIELA

The sun is descending when, two hours later, Rafa returns. I can see right away from the look on his face that he isn't happy. I watch the guards who stood by the door walk away as he comes toward me.

"Ready?" he asks, and he can't even muster a fake smile. "We need to head back. I'll take you to Taormina another time."

"That's fine." I don't much feel like seeing the town anyway. I gather up my things and force a smile. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he says as we turn to go.

We walk out over the beach, not bothering to go into the restaurant and I can see the men who'd just been guarding the entrance flanking another man, a shorter, fatter one, for whom they open the back door of an SUV with windows tinted black.

When the SUV drives away, I find Rafa watching it and when the valet pulls up with our vehicle, Rafa snaps at the man.

I follow him to the passenger side, and he opens the door for me. I climb in and fasten my seatbelt.

Before he gets in, he takes off his jacket and tosses it into the backseat. He then takes the gun out of its holster and puts it somewhere in the side of the door.

"You have a gun," I say, realizing that's why he'd put the jacket on.

He looks at me like it's the most natural thing.

"Why do you have a gun?"

"Don't be naïve, Gabriela. You know what I am. What Stefan is."

"But—"

"You also know what your father is."

"My father isn't the Sicilian mafia."

"No," he says, just glancing at me with a sardonic look before shifting his gaze to the road to merge with traffic. "He's a saint."

"I didn't say he was a saint. I just...he never carries a gun when I'm around."

"You think."

It's not true, what I said. I've never seen my dad hold one, not in a way that suggested he intended on using it, but he did pack one in my duffel, didn't he? And even if I didn't see it, I know he has fired at least one shot.

"Besides, how am I supposed to protect Stefan's fiancée without one?" He spits the words.

When his phone rings, he checks the screen. He declines the call and mutters a curse.

"Did something happen?" I ask, not liking this other side of him, this reckless, almost angry side and feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

My mind drifts to Stefan. To how he took care of me the other night. But I give it a shake.

It's fine. I'm fine. I'm perfectly safe with Rafa.

I watch the turquoise sea as we drive, and he's right that it is beautiful. Pristine, because somehow, when the rest of Italy was being overrun by tourists, Sicily has managed to remain unspoiled.

Rafa again plays with the radio but he doesn't sing along this time.

The next time his phone rings, I see who it is before he snatches it up.

Clara.

Rafa gives me a strange look, swiping the screen and answering. Their conversation is short, like she's annoyed and I already know he's annoyed. I keep my gaze forward, pretending not to listen or at least pretending not to understand.

They talk for a few more minutes before he tells her he'll come by next week and to be patient. Everything will work out. And that he misses her too.

I don't know why I think it's a strange conversation. I wonder where she is. I thought the three of them were like the Three Musketeers. At least that's the impression I'd gotten.

When he hangs up, he turns to me. "She's bored. Stefan shipped her off."

"Shipped her off? Where to?"

"Syracuse."

"New York?"

He shakes his head. "Sicily."

"Why?"

Rafa glances at me, gives me a strange look. "Don't you know?"

I shake my head.

"You," he says one corner of his mouth curving upward.

"Me? Why me?"

He opens his mouth to answer when he shifts his gaze to the rear-view mirror and a look of alarm flashes across his face.

"Assholes!" he curses, and I hold on when he hits the gas as two cars pull up, one on either side of our SUV. I don't recognize the cars or the men from the restaurant. These aren't SUVs, which is all Stefan seems to have, and these vehicles are not in the best shape. The drivers are also younger, dirtier looking. Like if you ran into one on a dark street, you'd get the hell out of there.

Music plays loudly, spilling through their open windows and penetrating our closed ones.

“Rafa?” I ask, panic in my voice when the driver of the car next to mine meets my eyes and gives me a smirk before hitting the gas hard as he steers his car into ours. Metal screams against metal, and I scream too as my door dents and we drive like this, the two cars sandwiching us as Rafa speeds up too, cursing up a storm.

“Hold on!” he yells, simultaneous to slamming his breaks.

I scream again.

My seatbelt catches me as my head rolls forward, then crashes down against the dashboard as the SUV swerves, cars honking their horns at us and Rafa spitting curses at the two driving off. One of them flips us off as they disappear and, a moment later, Rafa picks up speed again, turning the car back onto the road.

“You all right?” he asks as we resume our drive.

“What was that? Who were they?”

“Just a couple of punks,” he says, but I know they’re not punks and I know he knows it too. “Shit,” he says, shifting his gaze to my forehead where I feel something warm.

I reach up, touch it and my fingers come away bloody. I pull down the visor and look in the mirror at the cut that’s bleeding heavily.

“It’s all right,” he says, eyes shifting from me to the road and back. “It looks worse than it is. Heads bleed a lot.”

I guess he’d know.

“Here,” he says. He reaches over, opens the glove compartment. He pulls out a handful of tissues and hands them to me.

I take them, put them to the cut to stop the bleeding.

“Are you okay?” he asks again.

I turn to him “Who were they, Rafa?”

“Punks. I told you. I’ll keep you safe, don’t worry.”

“We could have been killed.”

“That wasn’t meant to kill us.”

“Then what was it meant to do?”

He looks over at me and just then, his phone rings. I see it’s Stefan.

His forehead furrows, the worried expression making him look older. He declines the call, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

When I open my mouth to ask a question, he turns up the radio and I shut up, shifting my gaze out the window, trying to calm my heartbeat as I keep pressure on the cut to stop the bleeding.

I spend the rest of the ride watching the sun set, then the sky darken. He takes a different road home and it takes us longer to get back. We finally pull through the gates of Stefan’s house two long, silent hours later. Well, silent except for when Rafa was making angry phone calls.

I never thought I’d be glad to be back here, and I can feel the panic quelled just beneath the surface. I need to process what just happened because the longer I sit here, the more I know those guys weren’t just punks. They meant business. And they did target us.

When we pull up to the front doors, Rafa kills the engine, but when I reach to open my door, he captures my arm.

His grip is surprisingly hard. He must realize it when I meet his gaze because he softens his hold.

“Gabriela,” he says, looking like he did that first morning when he’d taken me jogging.

I don’t say anything but wait for him to continue.

“I need you to do something for me. Or, more precisely, *not* do something.”

“What?”

“I need you to *not* mention what happened to Stefan.”

I study him, wonder about his motives, wonder how I can *not* mention this to Stefan.

“Actually,” he laughs almost nervously. “It may be better not to tell him I took you at all.”

“You want me to lie to him?”

“Just don’t talk about it. You won’t have to lie.”

“Why?”

“Because he’ll be pissed I took you without protection. And he’d be right.” He gestures to my forehead.

I touch it, feel how some tissue has stuck to the dried blood.

“And he probably won’t let you out of his sight. Or at least not with me.”

“He’ll want to know how I got this.”

“You tripped. Walked into a wall maybe.” He touches it gently. “It’s not too bad. Once you clean it, it’ll barely be noticeable.”

“He doesn’t miss anything, Rafa. Don’t you know that about him?”

“Listen, it’s up to you. I’m just asking for both our sakes.”

Is he afraid of Stefan? Do I care? I know I don’t want to be a prisoner here. And I could use an ally even if that ally is Rafa. My options are limited.

“I won’t say anything.”

He smiles, seeming relaxed again. “Thank you. I’ll see you later.”

“See you,” I say, and climb out of the car to head inside.

STEFAN

Alex Romano was more forthcoming than I thought he would be. But I guess if you don't have anything to hide, it's not that hard.

I understand now why he did what he did for Gabriela. Why he was willing to risk his life for her. I get why he felt he owed her and believe fully that they're like brother and sister.

What I don't understand is why Marchese didn't kill him outright when he caught him helping Gabriela run away. I wonder how much Gabriela had to do with that. Maybe he couldn't afford to lose another kid.

It's early evening when I arrive back at the house from my trip to Rome. I have a message to call Matt Lawrence back. He's apparently dug up a little more information on Gabriela's mother's drowning.

A smiling Millie approaches as I take off my suit jacket. I hand it to her when she stretches her arm out for it.

"Welcome home, Stefan," she says.

"Thanks, Millie." I look beyond her out to the patio but it's empty. "How are things here?"

"Oh, fine," she starts telling me about something in the kitchen but I interrupt.

"Where's Gabriela?" I ask. I don't care about anything else.

"In her room. She was out by the pool earlier though."

“Swimming?”

“No. Reading.”

“What else did she do?”

“Not much. I think she’s bored, actually. It may be a good idea to get her out.”

I nod. I agree, actually. “That is a good idea. I have to make a call but have her get dressed to go to Palermo for dinner.”

Millie smiles. “I know she’ll love that, Stefan.”

I nod. “Thank you, Millie.” I turn to walk away but stop. “Oh, has she been in the library?” I realized the door was unlocked and guess it was Millie who’d innocently let her in, not thinking about the phone.

“Yes. She sits there when it’s too hot outside and reads. I hope that was okay. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“It’s not a problem.” I know she’s not reading in there but calling her brother and that’s fine. I think I may even have a solution for the problem Marchese created. But that will take some doing.

Millie heads upstairs and I make my way to the study, dialing Matt on my way.

“Stefan, thanks for calling me back.”

“What do you have?”

“I finally got my hands on the coroner’s report, which listed accidental drowning as the cause of death.”

“M-hmm.”

“I’ve read my share of these and although I’m not an expert, I think I have a pretty good understanding.”

“Go on.”

“During Maria Marchese’s autopsy, bruising was noted on the report that, even to a person of limited understanding, should have suggested a different conclusion than accidental drowning.”

“What kind of bruising?”

“Marks on her wrists. Rope burns.”

I’ve seen rope burns. They’re raw and obvious. “How were they explained?”

“They weren’t. The notation was made by a police officer at the scene. No one followed up. And there’s one other piece of evidence that no one really knew about.”

“What’s that?”

“She wasn’t the only person who drowned in the lake that day.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Her bodyguard, his body was found on the opposite shore. Accidental drowning. And from what I gather, the two were close.”

“They were having an affair?”

“That’d be my guess. They took the kids on a camping trip, just the four of them. Who knows, maybe she was even going to take them and run.”

“Thank you, Matt. You’ve done well.”

“You always offer a challenge, Stefan.”

“I’ll be in touch if I need anything else.”

I disconnect the call, pour myself a whiskey and sit down. I think about what I’ve just learned and wonder about what Gabriela said. About the drowning. If I would drown her too.

Is it possible she witnessed her mother’s murder? Because I have no doubt it was just that. Murder.

Once I finish my whiskey, I head upstairs to shower, change into a pair of jeans, a black V-neck T-shirt and a jacket. I then knock on Gabriela’s door.

“Come in, Miss Millie,” she calls out.

I walk in, surprising her because she gasps upon seeing me and closes her arms over her breasts. Which is odd since she’s dressed but I see a moment later, it’s because the dress isn’t zipped. I wonder if she couldn’t reach it and was waiting for Millie to help her.

“I said come in *Miss Millie*,” she says.

“Aren’t you glad I knocked at all?”

“I’m not ready. You can wait outside.”

“I don’t think so, sweetheart. Turn around,” I say, walking toward her. Apart from the zipper, she looks ready to me.

“I can do it,” she says.

“No, you can’t, or you’d have done it by now. Turn.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve already seen you naked, remember?”

“When you undressed me while I was incapacitated.”

“Yes. When I undressed you because you couldn’t undress yourself because you were drunk.”

She gives me a glare, but her face turns a pretty shade of pink.

“Turn around, Gabriela.”

She turns.

I look at her, at the exposed expanse of flawless skin. Flawless but for those marks I know are hidden by the silky material of the dress.

The straps of the dress are thin, spaghetti straps. The patterned deep blue falls to just above her knees.

When I look up, I meet her gaze in the mirror. She’s unblinking. On alert.

I’m not an inexperienced man, but there’s something about this petulant, defiant girl, my unwilling bride-to-be because when I shift my gaze down again, down to the naked skin of her back, to the curve of her spine and swell of her hips, my cock stirs.

I reach out, touch the silk, push it wider so I see more of her.

“What—”

“Don’t move.”

I run my knuckles softly over her warm skin, feel the goosebumps rise as I trail my hand down, then up again, fingertips light along each vertebra.

When I reach her hair, I lift the mass of it, feel the weight as I set it over her shoulder. It's not long, it was once, but it's not anymore. Just a little past her shoulders. But still, to see it like this, the dark, sleek mass soft over one shoulder, her back more fully exposed, it awakens something inside me. A thing that wants to claim. To mark as my own.

I lean down, bring my mouth to the curve of her neck and meet her eyes as I kiss it.

Her breathing is shallow, and she watches me as I run the scruff of my jaw along the line of her shoulder then back. She shudders and I inhale her scent, kiss the curve again, opening my mouth this time to taste her, to bite, just a little. To hear her breath catch as she gasps and to watch her eyes darken as the pupils dilate.

I run my fingers down the length of her arms, lightly circle her wrists because she's going to fight me in a minute.

"You said something the other night, Gabriela. Something about putting my mark on you."

I was right. She tries to pull free but I tighten my hold on her.

"Let me go, Stefan."

"No."

"Please, just—"

"You were right. Your body is mine. But thing is, I want the rest too. Your mind. Your past. Your secrets. Your soul. I'll take it all. And in exchange you'll have my protection. I won't harm you, Gabriela. You're safe with me. But you do belong to me and you will behave."

I release her wrists but remain close. Taking hold of the dress, I zip her, all the while keeping my eyes locked on hers.

When I'm finished, I step back.

She spins to face me. And she looks livid.

"I've never been one to do as I'm told, Stefan. Just ask my father."

“I love a challenge, sweetheart.” I step backward, check my watch.
“Where are your shoes?”

She points to the high-heeled sandals on the floor beside the bed.

“Case in point, you’re already obedient.” I’m referring to the flip-flop situation of the first night.

“You’re a dick.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Shocker.”

I can’t help my smile.

She sits on the bed and slides on her shoes. It’s when she’s bent and her bangs shift that I notice the bruise there.

“What happened to your forehead?”

As soon as I say it, she stiffens. She’s quick to fix her hair to cover the spot.

“Nothing.”

“Not nothing.” I go to her, brush the hair to one side to find a cut about an inch long. The skin around it is bluish and there’s a small bump.

“Leave it alone,” she says, trying to pull away. “It’s nothing.”

“You’re a bad liar. That’s a good thing, actually.”

“I bet you’re a great liar,” she counters.

I smile wide and press on the bruise harder than I need to. She sucks in a breath, wincing.

“What happened, little liar? How did you get this?”

“I tripped coming out of the tub.”

I watch her.

“That’s all,” she continues.

“When?”

“Last night.” She doesn’t quite look at me.

I don’t know why she’d lie about something like this.

“Well, be more careful. That’s two accidents in the same number of days.”

“Maybe it’s this house. Or you. Maybe being around you is dangerous for me.”

“I have no doubt.”

I don’t think she expects that response from me because she’s quiet for a long moment.

“How’s your hand?” she finally asks.

“It’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t mean to... I never intended on what happened to happen.”

“I know that.” I hold out my good hand, palm up. “Ready?”

She looks at it distrustfully. “Why are you taking me out?”

“Date night,” I say with a wink.

“Who’s the liar now?” she asks, placing her hand inside mine and letting me help her to her feet.

GABRIELA

Stefan drives but we're followed by two SUVs with two soldiers in each. His is a sleek black Bugatti, the only vehicle that's not an SUV.

"Do you always have to have body guards?" I ask.

He shifts gears smoothly, maneuvering the car expertly if not a little too fast out of the gated property and onto the street. He glances at me before shifting his gaze to check the mirror as we merge into traffic.

"I have enemies who wouldn't mind seeing me dead."

"Besides my father?"

He looks at me, smiles and I can see the dimple on his cheek when he does. "Yes. We were once a very powerful family, then came our decline when Antonio betrayed my father and my father was ultimately killed because of that. Actually, they were both killed because of that. But over the last few years, I've managed to rebuild the Sabbioni family almost to what it once was and it's only the beginning. But I've made enemies."

"Why did your brother turn against your father?"

His jaw sets and he keeps his gaze out the front windshield. "That's a very ugly story that involves your father." He finally looks at me. "I won't stain what affection you have for him with that one."

"I'm not sure you can tell me anything that would surprise me."

"Don't be so sure."

“And I have no affection that you could stain.”

“No matter what, he’s your father.”

“He’s a monster.”

We pull into the city and one of the SUVs in our entourage pulls up to pass Stefan. I watch as we follow him, and the other SUV follows us.

They’re experienced at this. It’s a smooth ride as we drive up to a house on a dark street outside the center and a garage door is opened. Stefan pulls in, parks the Bugatti. He kills the engine and steps out.

I step out on my side and watch as he talks to the driver of one of the other cars who meets him at the edge of the garage. They discuss something too quietly for me to hear before Stefan turns to me.

“Come.”

He gestures to the SUV where the man he was just talking to opens the back door. The driver is still inside with the engine running and the second SUV is idling at the end of the street.

I get in and slide over to the other side as Stefan climbs in beside me. It feels strangely intimate, this small act. Almost more so than what happened in the bedroom. I don’t know why I think this, but I watch him as the door closes and he takes in the surroundings, the dark night.

When his eyes find mine, he gives me an almost reassuring nod.

I turn away, unsure why I’m looking at him like this. I hate him. He’s my enemy.

The ring on my finger weighs heavy and I twist it in a circle as we pull out, a new SUV drives out ahead of us, blinking its lights once as we turn the corner.

“This is a production,” I say, realizing they’re part of Stefan’s security team.

“A necessary one,” he answers.

Palermo is a busy city with a lot of tourists and mostly a walking town. It’s old, and beautiful.

“I’ve never been south of Rome,” I say. Even though we’ve spent summers here for as long as I can remember, my father isn’t a fan of anything farther south than Rome. In fact, he detests it. Especially Sicily.

“You’ve missed out,” Stefan says.

“Where are we going?” I ask as the driver veers to the right and toward an obviously less traveled road.

He leans toward his window. “See the lights up there?” he asks.

I lean toward him to look up. “Yes.”

“There’s a little-known restaurant, well, little known to tourists. They don’t venture up this far and certainly not on foot. It’s local food at its best. Simple and delicious. And one of the few places I can relax.”

That last part strikes me and when I shift my gaze to his, I realize how close I’m leaning.

I clear my throat and inch farther.

“And you get a beautiful view of the city from up there.”

It takes another ten minutes of driving on a single lane, unpaved road that snakes in tight curves. I think I could get carsick here but before that happens, we arrive and I’m climbing out into the fresh night air which is cooler than I expect up here.

“I should have brought a sweater,” I say absently, hugging my arms to myself.

Stefan takes off his jacket. “Here.” He puts it around my shoulders before I can protest and it’s warm and I smell him on it, and I find I don’t want to protest.

“Thank you.”

He nods as we step up onto a platform where colored lights are strung. I can see more of them around the back. The steady sound of quiet conversation flows from the back and I guess seating is outside if I look at the size of the building.

The glass door opens from the inside and an older man comes out with a big smile on his face, wiping his hands on a towel.

“Stefan!” he exclaims, hugging Stefan who hugs him back.

They exchange greetings in Italian, and I get the feeling they know each other well.

Stefan turns to me and introduces me as his fiancée.

The man gives me an approving nod but doesn’t shake my offered hand.

When I glance at Stefan, I find him watching.

I drop my hand to my side.

We’re led through the small building and I’m right. All the seating is outside because the inside is a kitchen and the food smells amazing. Our table is at the very back corner and I take the seat the man pulls out for me as Stefan takes the one across from mine.

The man leaves, telling us he’ll bring some drinks and an appetizer.

“Why didn’t he shake my hand?” I ask.

“He showed respect.”

“Respect? I think that was a lack of respect. Is it because I’m a woman?”

“Relax, Gabriela. This is Sicily and Lorenzo is in his eighties.”

Lorenzo returns with a bottle of wine and sets a plate of appetizers on the table between us.

Stefan smiles wide, thanks the man and nods his permission for Lorenzo to pour me some wine.

“Pannelle,” Stefan says. “It rivals Millie’s but don’t tell her I said that.”

“Did you just give him permission to pour me a glass of wine?” I ask.

Stefan’s smile fades. “We do things differently here, Gabriela. Don’t get hung up on it. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal. He doesn’t shake my hand. He doesn’t ask me if I even want wine. Maybe I wanted something else.”

“He’s being respectful. Enough of this.”

“Respectful to you but disrespectful to me.”

Stefan sips from his glass, leaning back in his seat and studying me.

“No, not that,” he says simply, casually but finally. “You belong to me, Gabriela. He knows that. You need to wrap your brain around it. This is your new life, like it or not, and if you ask me, there isn’t much to dislike. You’ll have everything.”

“Everything I don’t want.”

“Don’t be a child.”

I exhale, shrug off his jacket and push my chair back to stand.

He puts his hand on mine to stop me.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I lie. “If you don’t want me to act like a child then don’t treat me like one. Now I need to use the bathroom and I’m not asking your permission.”

His eyes narrow and one side of his mouth quirks upward. He moves his hand and I stand, but he gestures for one of his men who walks to the door and opens it, waiting for me.

“He’ll show you the way,” Stefan says.

I’m pretty sure I can find the ladies’ room but fine. I drop it and go inside. In the bathroom, I stand at the sink and look at my reflection. I brush my hair away to look at the bruise, remember what happened. Remember what Rafa said about Stefan not letting me out again and I understand that even better now.

I belong to him.

I am a thing that belongs to that man.

It’s not so different from before, is it? Then, I belonged to my father. Now, I belong to Stefan Sabbioni.

“Suck it up, Buttercup,” I say out loud.

Gabe used to say that. He still does sometimes, but now it’s because it rhymes, and he finds it funny. Then it was his way of telling me something

wasn't important enough to fight for. To save my strength for the battles that matter.

I wash my hands, dry them and return to our table.

Stefan stands, pulls my chair out.

I sit and that's when I notice the box wrapped in pretty paper with a bow on it on my still empty plate.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Open it."

A breeze chills me and I shudder.

Stefan drapes his jacket, which is on the back of my chair, over my shoulders again.

I pull the ribbon from the box and watch the bow unravel. It's a pretty blue-green ribbon. Sea foam, I think. I pick up the box and rip off the paper and am surprised—shocked, actually—to find a brand-new iPhone inside.

I look up at Stefan.

"If you don't like the color, we can swap it out," he says.

I look back at it. It's rose gold. It could be poop brown and I wouldn't care.

When I shift my gaze back to his, he's still watching me.

"Why?" I ask, any more words catching in my throat. I feel strange. Caught off guard. I don't know what to make of it. How to react.

"Figured it'd be easier to text Alex. Or call your brother. FaceTime and see him rather than using the land line in the library."

I feel my face heat up. He knew?

I sit back, let his jacket swallow me up. I don't know what to say. I look down at the box in my lap.

My father wouldn't allow me to have a phone. He wouldn't have allowed me to talk to Alex if he knew. He managed my visits to Gabe. He controlled every aspect of my life. Every single thing, no matter how inconsequential.

And I want to cry.

It's probably the stupidest reaction, but I feel my eyes filling up.

I'm grateful when Lorenzo returns with menus and I can turn away. I use the heel of my hand to wipe a tear from my eye and force myself to sit up. To not be a fucking baby. It's probably bugged for all I know.

But it's a phone.

I turn to Stefan who is pretending to read the menu. Giving me space. Maybe not wanting to embarrass me.

I've embarrassed myself enough with him, haven't I?

"Thank you," I say simply.

"You're welcome." He holds his hand out and I hand him the box. He opens it, takes it out. "It's already set up. This is your number. Mine is programmed here. This is the house, and this is Rafa. This one is if you ever need someone and can't get hold of us. It calls the guard house. Do you know how to use it?"

"I've been denied but I don't live under a rock." I hit the safari button and am instantly on line. "Are you going to monitor it?"

He smiles and this smile, it makes his eyes sparkle. "Are you going to visit any adult sites I *need* to monitor?"

"No. God!"

He laughs out loud at my reaction and I realize he was joking. It makes me smile.

"It's exactly what it appears to be. No strings. Use it as you like. And just remember the gesture, Gabriela. I don't have to be your enemy. I don't *want* to be."

I look at it again, then back up at him. "You knew I was calling Gabe?"

He nods.

"You know about him then? I mean, you know how he is?"

"Yes."

"How?"

His expression darkens and he gestures to the menu. “Let’s talk about that later. I want to have a nice night. Do you know what you want?” he asks.

I scan the menu, nod.

He’s watching me when I look back up at him and when Lorenzo comes, he gestures for me to order.

I do.

In Italian.

And I realize something.

The menu was a test. Or he already knew I spoke the language. I wonder when he might have figured it out.

“You knew that too?” I ask when Lorenzo is gone.

He nods again.

“Anything else?”

“A few things,” he says.

His phone rings before I can press and his brows furrow together. He takes it. As soon as he does, his face darkens and he stands, setting his napkin on the table and walking away. He’s out of earshot but I hear his raised voice, at least momentarily raised. He kicks at a nearby table leg and I’m not the only one watching him now.

When he glances at me, I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

But he turns his back again and it’s another ten minutes before he’s back at the table. And his mood is black.

“What is it?” I ask. “Who was that?”

He doesn’t look at me and before he can answer, Lorenzo is back with our dishes.

But when Stefan finally meets my eyes, I know it’s bad. I know it’s very bad.

“There was a fire, Gabriela.”

Fire?

He says something else, but I'm still processing that word. Trying to make sense of the look in his eyes.

"Gabe?" I finally ask, feeling myself begin to shudder. Feeling tears burn my eyes.

He shakes his head, but I don't have even a moment of relief because he tells me who in the next instant.

"Alex."

Those tears spill down my cheeks. "Alex?"

He turns, gestures to one of his men and they're all on their feet. He stands too, takes my arm. "Let's go."

I stand, my legs weak, knees wobbly. He holds me up and somehow, we maneuver through the closely packed tables and I don't care about the people watching us. I don't care about anything.

"Stefan?" I stop, turn to him once we're inside the kitchen of the restaurant and the sounds and smells which a few minutes ago made my mouth water now make me nauseous.

He knows what I'm going to ask.

And I already know the answer. I don't have to ask it. I see the answer on his face.

"Is he... Did he..."

"He's dead, Gabriela. I'm sorry."

Why did I ask? Why? I already knew so why did I ask? Why did I have to hear him say it? Say those words?

I don't know how I get back to the car. Or how we get home. Or how, once we're there, I get to my room while Stefan disappears somewhere downstairs. But somehow, I do. Somehow, I'm in my bedroom and on my bed and sobbing. Holding my new phone and sobbing.

All I can think about is Alex. Alex beaten because of me. Alex dead—because of me? Because my dad found out I'd gone to see him?

I think about his aunt. She knew I'd bring trouble.

Oh God, his aunt. Is she dead too?

Did my father do this to him? Fire. Killed by fire. Alex helpless in his wheelchair with his two broken legs because he helped me. All because he helped me.

God.

No.

How? How could this happen?

I stand up, take a step but my knees give out and I catch hold of the dresser, so I don't fall. And there I see my iPod Touch. It was in my bag that I'd forgotten in Rafa's car. He must have returned it while we were away.

On the screen I already see there's a message.

My hands tremble as I pick it up because only one person messages me here.

I walk back to the bed and sit down. I force in a deep breath before I unlock the screen and open up the text box and the sobbing starts all over again when I see his name. See the message from Alex. It's from yesterday.

I open it, see it's a long text with a clown emoji. I smile at that. I hate clowns and he always uses that emoji just to poke fun at me.

But my smile fades as I read the text and I didn't think I could feel colder. More alone.

More like a fool.

Except that this time, my foolishness has cost Alex not only his legs, but his life.

Betrayed.

I feel betrayed. And it's like someone has my heart in their fist and is squeezing.

What was tonight about? Was it to raise my hopes high then watch me come crashing down? What did he get out of it? What *would* he get out of it?

My eyes blur and I have to wipe tears away to read it again because this is wrong. It can't be.

When Rafa told me yesterday that Stefan was here and there and he'd be spending the night away, then told me about Clara being sent away, I assumed the worst. Well, what I'd thought the worst then.

I assumed he was spending the night with Clara.

But Stefan was in Rome.

Stefan had gone back to Alex's aunt's little house. He'd paid my friend a visit.

"Your boyfriend was here. Sorry, fiancé.

Don't tell him I told you. He's secretive, to say the least. But I thought you should know what he was asking about.

He wanted to know about Gabe and I told him. I told him the truth. All of it. I told him what your father tried to do when he found us together. And I told him Gabe took the bullet that was intended for me.

I think it's better for you that I did. He knows where you're coming from. And he knows now we're really just friends and I think he'll let us be. Even mentioned I should come to the wedding. Weird huh? I never thought I'd say this, but he may not be a bad guy.

Anyhow, message me when you get this.

Hey by the way, talked to Gabe today. He sounds good. Did you get a chance to call him? And do you think I'll ever get through a conversation with him without breaking down like a girl?

Gotta go, Gabi. You take care.

Alex"

STEFAN

The study door opens, slams against the wall and bounces off of it.

Gabriela stands in the doorway, her face puffy from crying, eyes alternately filled with rage then utter defeat.

“You liar. You fucking liar! You killed him! You went there and you killed him!”

I hang up the phone, shake my head at the guard who appears just outside the study.

“You killed him,” her voice breaks and her shoulders slump.

I go to her but when I do, she’s raging again. “Don’t come near me!”

I close the door. “Calm down, Gabriela.”

When I put my hands on her arms, she slaps them away, moving farther from me.

“How could you? Why would you? He told you the truth. Why did you do it?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re a liar. I knew you were a liar. A monster. Why did you give me that phone? What was it? Do you get some sick pleasure from manipulating me? Playing me for the fool I am?”

“Sit down, Gabriela.”

“Did you have a good laugh afterwards?”

“Sit down. We’ll talk about it. I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Let me tell you what I know, Stefan. You’re a murderer. A cold-blooded killer.”

It’s like she remembers her friend in that instant because her shoulders slump inward and she’s sobbing.

“Did you kill his aunt too?”

“The house burnt down. They were both inside asleep.”

She whirls on me. “Asleep? You’re that much of a coward?”

I get the bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, pour a glass and hold it out to her. “Here. Drink this.”

She slaps my hand away and I’m not expecting it. The glass goes flying, shattering against the far wall, liquid spilling across the room, on my desk.

I take her arms more forcefully, make her sit down and hold her there.

“I went to see him, yes. And he told me what happened with Gabe. Told me about their relationship. About your father finding out.”

Her face crumples. I don’t know how she has tears left.

“You knew he wasn’t a threat. You knew.”

“I didn’t do this, Gabriela. I wouldn’t.”

She pushes out of my grasp and I let her go, let her stand.

I stand too. Go to her.

She backs away. “I’d thought you’d gone to see her you know that?”

“Who?”

“When Rafa told me, I thought you’d gone to see Clara.”

“Rafa? When did he tell you anything?”

“I’d thought,” she stops, sobs wracking her body as she struggles for a shuddering breath. “I’d thought you were out fucking her. I’d thought you had left me here to go fuck her. I stupidly cared about that.”

“You’re upset, Gabriela. I’ll take you to bed. We’ll have this conversation when you’re not so upset.”

She shakes her head and I’m not sure she can hear me.

“I thought you were fucking your cousin. You *should* have been out fucking your cousin! But instead you were murdering my best friend.”

She looks down at the desk, and I see what her eyes zero in on immediately and the instant she puts her hand on the letter opener, I put mine over hers, grabbing her wrist before she can pick it up, whirling her around and tugging her into me so her back is to me. I hold her tight, two arms across her chest.

“Stop this,” I tell her.

“Let me go!”

She squirms but I hold tight.

“I did not hurt Alex Romano. Why would I? What would be my reason? Think for fuck’s sake.”

“Get off me! Don’t touch me!”

“I’m going to have Millie get you something to help you sleep. We’ll talk about it tomorrow,” I say, walking her toward the door.

She claws her fingernails into the bare skin of my forearms, scratching out skin, drawing blood.

“That’s enough,” I say, squeezing my arms tighter around her. “I’m warning you.”

“You’re hurting me. Let me go!”

I loosen my hold and the moment I do, the moment she’s able to, she spins around and knees me hard in the balls.

“Fuck!”

I grab hold of her, doubling over in agony, but she slips away, grabs the letter opener and comes at me.

I manage to get hold of her wrist, squeeze until she screams. I spin her around so her back is to me again.

“That was a fucking mistake!”

“I’m going to kill you!” she cries out. “I’m going to fucking kill you!”

“You need to calm the fuck down! Are you going to calm down or do I need to make you?”

“Fuck you!”

“I guess I’ll make you then,” I say as she fights hard, harder than I thought she could, and I hug her closer, moving my arm up to her neck, shifting her a little to squeeze on the pressure point there and the result is instantaneous.

The letter opener drops to the carpet with a thud, and Gabriela goes limp in my arms.

I lift her up, put her over my shoulder, swallowing back the pain in my balls, and open the door.

Two soldiers watch, as does Millie.

But they all know to stay back as I carry her up to my bedroom and lay her on my bed.

Her hair is matted to her forehead, and she looks sad, even unconscious. I look down at her, at her young face, her sad face and I think how much she’s seen for her eighteen years. How much violence. How much loss.

I think about how she’d looked at me at the restaurant when I’d given her that phone. A simple fucking phone. How she’d tried to hide the fact that she was crying.

I bend and take off her shoes and cover her with the blanket and I think for the first time in my life, I am not only a predator but a protector.

Her protector.

GABRIELA

I wake up feeling nauseous, my head aching. It doesn't take me long to remember why and for a moment, I think it's not true. Not real. But I know it is. And sadness overwhelms everything else.

I'm in Stefan's bed. Again. I know right away. He must have brought me here after our fight.

Alex.

Alex is dead.

Alex. Is. Dead.

Sadness overwhelms me and I roll onto my side and for a moment, I let it. I let myself feel this agony. This loss.

But then I think about Stefan again. Stefan at dinner and how he was. Even laughing.

The Stefan at dinner was a world different to the man I've come to know. The true monster. He took me off my guard with his gesture today, but he is a monster. I can never forget that.

I don't know how he got me up here. Did I pass out? Did he do something to me? Give me something?

He's so strong, it takes nothing for him to overpower me.

I remember Alex's text. How he thought maybe Stefan wasn't a bad guy and how wrong he was. That mistake, it cost Alex his life.

I suck in a deep, shaky breath, push through the pain in my head to sit up. I wait for the world to right itself.

The clock beside the bed tells me it's a little after three in the morning.

I have to get out of here. I have to get away from him. He's a sadist. A murderer.

And here, he's king.

He can get away with anything. Even murder.

Climbing out of the bed, I use the joint balcony to walk back to my room.

I'm still dressed at least. He didn't strip me this time. I find the phone he gave me on the nightstand. I pick it up and I dial the one man who can help me. The one man who is as heartless as Stefan. As much a monster.

Because I was right.

Coming here, Stefan taking me, it was jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

Because Stefan is more cruel. More dangerous.

My father answers on the second ring. He sounds like I just woke him up and I wonder if he's still in Rome. I'd thought he'd have gone back to New York by now.

"Dad?" I say, tears coming again, tears for Alex, for Gabe. For myself.

"Gabriela," he pauses. "I heard what happened."

He already knows?

I sob. It takes me a long time to talk.

"Has that bastard hurt you?"

I shake my head, but he can't see me, and I can't seem to talk.

"If he's hurt you, I'll fucking kill him."

"I want..." I can't get more words out, every time I try, sobs choke me.

"He's got men watching your brother too. Who knows what he'll do to Gabe."

"Gabe?"

He wouldn't hurt Gabe. Gabe's been hurt enough. But he hurt Alex. After Alex told him the truth, he still hurt him. And hadn't Alex been through enough too?

"Where is Sabbioni?" my father asks, sounding angrier than I've ever heard him.

"I don't know."

"The house in Palermo has sea access. You're there?"

"Yes."

"Can you get down to the cove?"

"I will."

"I'm sending a boat, Gabriela. It'll be there in twenty minutes. Can you get there in twenty minutes?"

"Yes. I will."

"Fuck this bastard. Fuck his contract. I'm bringing you home. Go."

I nod, hang up. I go into my closet, change out of my dress into a pair of dark shorts and a black T-shirt, put on jogging shoes. I stuff my phone and iPod into my pockets and listen at the door. The house is quiet.

I walk out into the hallway. It's dark. I make my way downstairs where it, too, is dark.

The patio doors are closed but not locked. No need to lock them. This house is built on a cliff. The only access to the back is from that cove which is only possible by sea.

But I have to remember the guards on the roof the other night.

I stay close to the wall of the house as I creep toward the steep stairs that lead down. The night is dark but for the sliver of moon. It's good for cover but not so good for my trip down. I move as quickly as I can, taking care not to make any noise.

It gets darker the lower I go and I trip twice, but catch myself and when I get to the sandy bottom, I hear the waves on the shore and think how will

he get a boat to me? They'd shoot at it, for sure, if he even got close enough to the island.

But then I see it coming. It's a small boat and two men are on board rowing.

I don't recognize either of them but having them this close, having escape this close, it makes me stop. Makes me look back up at the house.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I'm already burning in the flames.

And so, I run toward the water, run into the cool waves and one of the men helps me into the boat.

I think about what Rafa said about Stefan's enemies. About me being valuable to them.

My father is his enemy.

Isn't he my enemy too?

A brick settles heavy in my belly and I don't know if it's being on the water in this small boat that's making me feel sick.

Lights go on in the house and I look up at it as a wave hits the side of our boat, making me cry out and grip the edges.

One of the men chuckles.

These men, I look at their hard faces as they row me away from Stefan's house as more and more lights go on. As I hear the sounds of Stefan's soldiers.

Water crashes along the sides of the boat and I think about my mother. I think about her hands tied behind her back. I think about his hands on her. His fist in her long black hair.

I hear her as she screams. Gulps water. Screams again, coughing and choking as she's dunked. Taught a lesson.

Did he mean for her to die?

Did he mean to kill her?

I think about Gabe. What he did to him. To his own son.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

There is no safe place for me.

I have no friends.

And I'm not sure which is the frying pan, and which is the fire anymore.

Before the men steer the boat out of sight of the house, I see him up on the roof. I see the man who owns me. The one who blackmailed my father into giving me up.

The man who plays with me. This predator who plays at being my protector.

But the sound of a speedboat breaks into the night and I turn to see the large boat approach, the men on deck with machine guns slung over their shoulders. The one whose gun is aimed just a few feet from us, bullets raining down into the water.

I scream and our small boat sways dangerously from side to side as the men curse and oars are dropped and weapons drawn, and I get one last glimpse of him. Of Stefan up there on the roof and I think I hear him scream my name as gunshots explode around me. One last glimpse before the waves are too high, the boat too unsteady. Before a wave crashes against it and I'm dumped head-first into the cold, dark sea.

Thank you for reading ***Collateral***. I hope you love Stefan and Gabriela!

Their story concludes in ***Damage***, the second and final book of the *Collateral Damage Duet*, available in all stores! [One click Damage now!](#)

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We're a match made in hell, Stefan and I.

He took me to exact his revenge. I went from being a pawn to my father to being a pawn to Stefan. The only difference is I have a ring the size of a boulder on my finger and a husband I don't want.

And the hardest part is I thought he was different. I thought I was falling in love.

I guess my father was right. I'm not a very smart girl.

Stefan is a powerful man. He doesn't play nice, not if you're his enemy. But I've learned one thing about my husband.

He takes care of what's his.
And I am his.

His enemies have become my enemies, but he'll never let anyone hurt me.
He's fiercely protective. It's the predator inside that scares me.

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