

A
SINS
OF THE
FATHERS
NOVEL

By
Virtue I

Fall

USA Today Bestselling Author

Cora Reilly

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Love is an inconvenience Anna Cavallaro doesn't have time for.
She only has one goal: to become a fashion designer. Chicago's elite
already copies her style religiously, not least because she's the daughter of
the city's notorious mafia boss.

When she's accepted at a world-famous fashion institute in Paris, her
father's condition is to take her bodyguard along.
Anna definitely wouldn't mind a few weeks of no-strings-attached fun with
her brooding protector.

Santino Bianchi became the Outfit's enforcer because he liked the thrill of
the hunt and kill.

Babysitting his capo's daughter is an honorable assignment he can't refuse.
His thoughts about Anna? Not so honorable.

Santino's ignored Anna's persistent flirting for years. Now, far away from
home boundaries begin to blur. But Santino doesn't have any intention to be
the reason for a failed engagement and the ensuing scandal.

A summer fling in Paris.
Only two things stand in Anna's way.
Santino's iron will.
And... her fiancé.

Chapter *One*



Santino

I was a loyal soldier.

Being Enforcer for the Chicago Outfit had been a matter of pride. That I enjoyed breaking bones and my task allowed me to do so had been an additional bonus. I was good at it. I enjoyed it.

What I didn't enjoy was listening to the inane chatter of a teenage girl.

Unfortunately, my brutal talents had led to my Capo asking me to become his daughter's personal guard.

Playing bodyguard slash babysitter to his oldest spawn had never been my idea of serving the cause.

"You can't say no," my father had argued, his eyes wide with alarm when I'd told him I was considering to do so.

"I'm not like you, Dad. I don't have the patience to hover beside a spoiled mafia woman and listen to her endless bitching with her friends. I'm a soldier, not a nanny."

"You can't say no to your Capo. It's an honor."

I shook my head. "I want to work with my hands. I want to break bones. I want to destroy our enemies."

“You should reconsider your decision,” Dad said imploringly. “If your Capo asks you to become his daughter’s bodyguard, there’s only one viable answer, Santino, and that’s yes.”

I had absolutely no intention of reconsidering my decision or say yes, no matter what Dad said. Arturo and I were a good team. We had been working together as Enforcers for years and yet it never got boring. Why would I give that up for a job I would undoubtedly despise?

No matter what Dante said, I would stand my ground and remain Enforcer.



“Why don’t you come over to our house to tell me your decision?” Dante had said during our brief call. “Five o’clock.”

He hung up before I could tell him my answer over the phone. Sighing, I resigned myself to a fucking awkward meeting with my Capo. Dante had a way with words plus a subtle cunning that made people do what he wanted.

I rang the bell, glancing back at my black 1969 Camaro, hoping I would be back inside it, racing down the streets of Chicago soon. These kinds of social engagements were the bane of my fucking existence and I usually avoided them.

It wasn’t Dante who opened the door, nor a maid. In front of me, smiling in a sophisticated, polite way, stood Valentina Cavallaro. She was tall, with long brown hair and green eyes that trapped you like a cat did a mouse. That she could make me feel like one of these small fluff balls of vermin made me even more wary to work in their household.

I gave her a nod and polite smile in return. “Your husband asked me to come over.”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “I thought it would be a great idea to have you meet our daughter right away. Why wait?”

I cleared my throat, about to say what I’d come here to say, when Dante appeared behind Valentina and put a hand on her shoulder. “Santino,” he said with a curt nod.

“I’m glad that Anna will have such a capable bodyguard at her side,” Valentina said, not missing a beat, giving me the smile of a woman who had a subtle way to get her will, and seeing it I knew exactly why.

“The thing is,” I began as Valentina ushered me in. Both Dante and Valentina looked at me.

“Yes?” Valentina asked.

My father’s words flew around my brain like an annoying fly you couldn’t swat away. Standing in the Cavallaro’s mansion and seeing their expectant faces, I realized there was no way I could refuse their offer. At least not yet. Maybe I could work as bodyguard for one or two years and then ask Dante to put me back to the task of torturing people for information.

“Kids usually can’t stand me,” I said, which wasn’t really the truth. Kids were drawn to me like flies to shit but I didn’t have the necessary patience to stand their presence.

Valentina laughed. “Oh, don’t worry. Anna gets along with everyone. She’s a very social and empathetic girl.”

Of course. Why did parents always think their kids were God’s gift to humankind, highly talented and well-behaved altruists, when most of them were annoying, spoiled brats with egomaniac tendencies and a penchant for honesty that bordered on cruelty.

“I’m sure she is.”

Steps rang out upstairs and a flash of brown hair popped up at the top of the stairs. Anna Cavallaro practically frolicked down the staircase, her ponytail bobbing up and down in the most annoying way possible. As icing on the cake, she was dressed in a checkered costume even a woman in her fifties would feel old in. She flashed me a smile. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. She pushed her hand in my direction, peering up at me. “Nice to meet you.”

I forced a smile that felt like it might actually freeze over my fucking face muscles. “Pleasure,” I gritted out. It was a lie, but from the look in her eyes, she didn’t realize it. Dante, however, seemed to look right through me. Yet, he didn’t look displeased by my lack of excitement over meeting his daughter. He knew my ability to protect her didn’t hinge on sympathy. I released her small hand the second propriety allowed it. Another thing I fucking hated: having to be proper. Now that I’d spend my days around

Dante's daughter, my unrestrained cursing and bursts of rage were a thing of the past.

"It'll be fun," Anna said.

Maybe she thought I would be her friend or her personal playmate. The girl had a nasty surprise waiting for her. I would protect her. That was the extent of our bond.

"So you'll protect me with your life?" she asked with a curious tilt of her head, her blue eyes trying to put me on the spot and test my sincerity.

And for the first time today, I didn't have to lie.

"I'll protect you until I take my last breath."

Or until your father shows me mercy and puts me out of my misery.



The first time I met Santino, I almost burst with excitement. I had only briefly seen him before but even then, his tallness and handsome face had made my belly flip for the first time in my life.

I was excited about having him guard me. He seemed like he could be fun to be around and not such a stickler to the rules. I thought he and I would get along well.

Soon I realized that wouldn't be the case.

In the beginning Santino had still tried to mask his annoyance over having to watch me, but it became apparent very quickly. He didn't like children, or people in general. He didn't like when I talked to him. Or when I laughed too loudly. Or when I breathed too close to him. He barely tolerated my existence.

I was pretty sure only his sense of duty kept him from strangling Leonas or me.



I was angry. Really angry. I'd been raised to be well-behaved, polite, and think before I acted. Mom and Dad were both poised and controlled in public. They were what I aspired to be.

Santino sat at the table in the guardhouse with his dad and Mom's second bodyguard Taft. I swallowed when I stepped into the room but tried to hide my nerves.

"Can I have a word with Santino?" I asked, my voice firm. I felt proud of how confident and adult I'd sounded. People always told me I was an old soul hiding in the body of a twelve-year-old. That didn't stop them from treating me like a kid though.

Taft's mouth twitched and he got up. "Of course."

Santino's dad gave Santino a look I didn't understand before he rose as well. With a brief smile at me, both men left. Santino leaned back in his chair, one brow slanting upward in a way that was probably meant to insult me as well. I'd learned to read the twitches of his face as a way to express what he couldn't say aloud.

I couldn't take it anymore. "If you hate me so much, why did you agree to become my bodyguard?" Gone was the poise and confidence. I sounded hurt and childish, but I couldn't help it.

Santino released a momentous sigh and I could practically hear his thoughts "here we go..."

"What makes you think I hate you?"

"Because you find everything I do and say annoying."

He didn't deny it, and that, too, stung. I wasn't even sure why I wanted his approval. He was just my bodyguard.

Santino leaned forward, his forearms casually propped up on his thighs. "You don't know what hatred is if you think I hate you. I don't."

"But you don't like me."

"I don't have to like you to protect you."

I pressed my lips together, feeling a treacherous burn in my eyes. "You shouldn't protect someone you don't like. You should have told my dad no

if you hate the job so much.”

“You don’t say no if your Capo asks you to protect his offspring.”

People rarely told me the truth, unless it was pleasant or even flattering. Santino never spared my feelings. It was what I liked about him, but also detested because I wanted him to be nice to me because he liked me too.

I stalked away without another word. I didn’t want to burst into tears in front of Santino. It would probably only annoy him and embarrass me, and I’d done enough of that already.

Heavy steps prowled after me. “Anna, stop.”

I didn’t, nor did I slow as I followed the new underground tunnel connecting our house to the guardhouse. Santino caught up with me in our basement, his fingers clamping around my upper arm. I stopped and glared up at his tall form.

“In case you’re concerned I’ll do a bad job protecting you because I don’t worship the ground you walk on, you don’t have to worry. I take my job seriously. I’ll protect you with my life, even if you annoy me.”

“That’s a consolation,” I said, letting the snark I usually only showed Leonas come through. If Santino didn’t bother being polite, I wouldn’t either.

At first, his disinterest in me and his lack of conversation had bothered me but eventually I’d learned how to get a reaction out of him, any kind of reaction really. It became my favorite pastime to annoy Santino until he couldn’t ignore my existence anymore.

Chapter *Two*



I sat on the grass and dragged the pencil over the paper. The late afternoon sun warmed my back.

It had taken me hours to convince Santino to take me out into nature so I could draw something else than the inside of our house or backyard. He'd eventually taken me to a park close to home and ever since acted as if I was air.

I slanted another look at him. He stood a few steps to my right with his arms crossed as he surveyed our surroundings. Anyone with half a mind would have known he was my bodyguard.

I scratched the pencil over the paper as I tried to get the sharp line of his jaw and the foreboding scowl right. Santino had been my favorite model for a while now, of course, he didn't know. I could imagine what he'd say if he knew all our trips to different locations had been pointless because it was always him that I drew. Sometimes I took liberty with his clothes and changed them to attire from another century to get my creative juices flowing. Today I picked a cowboy hat and cowboy boots for his outfit.

His eyes cut to me and as usual, the harsh glint in them sent a pleasant shiver down my back. Nobody else made me feel this way, definitely not

the childish boys at my age.

People wanted to please me. I didn't have trouble winning people over to my side, but my social skills were completely useless against Santino's stubbornness. He wanted to hate the job and thus dislike me, and wouldn't allow himself to feel differently.

I wasn't stupid. I knew my crush on Santino was completely ridiculous for various reasons, the main one him being ten years older than me. Still, I sometimes dreamed about how it would be once I was older.

I returned my focus back to my drawing, shading the cowboy breeches. Lost in my thoughts, I realized too late when a shadow fell over me. My head shot up to find Santino glaring down at me and my drawing of him.

"You shouldn't draw me," he growled, ripping the paper from my clipboard.

"You have a very prominent jaw. It's an appealing object," I said.

I could see Santino thought I was out of my mind. "And why the hell did you make me look like a cowboy?"

I shrugged. "It's getting boring to draw you in jeans, shirt, and leather jacket all the time."

Santino shook his head, muttering something under his breath, and tore my drawing apart.

"Hey!" I shouted as I jumped up and tried to rip the remains of my work from his hands. It was futile. Santino simply blocked me with his side and calmly crumpled the paper pieces into a tiny ball. "Don't draw me, Anna. If I have to answer to your father because he finds drawings of me in your room, I'll be pissed."

"And how's that different from your usual mood?" I asked haughtily. "You're practically Grumpy Cat in mobster form."

Santino only stared me down but I was used to his dark expression, and stubbornly stared back. "We'll return home now and you'll hand over all of your drawings of me, understood?"

"Understood."



Back at home, Santino followed me into my room like a thunderous shadow and watched as I opened the upper drawer of my desk, where I kept most of my drawings of Santino. I handed him about two dozen drawings. He browsed them, shaking his head occasionally, and one time his brows rose very high. I assumed it was the drawing of him in the wardrobe of Louis XIV.

He leveled his eyes on me and narrowed them. "There are more."

I made an innocent face.

Santino pointed at the drawing at the top of the pile. "This isn't as good and detailed as the drawing I saw today. That means you've made progress since then and because you're such a little overachiever, you'll keep your best drawings separately to admire them."

I flushed and for the briefest moment, my gaze flitted to my nightstand. Santino staggered toward it and tried to open the drawer but it was locked. I didn't want Leonas to get blackmailing material on me. Santino felt under the bed and then smirked. My mouth fell open when he pulled out the little key that I'd taped to the underside of my bed frame and opened the drawer.

"That's private!" I hissed, but he'd already picked up a stack of fifteen drawings of him. The one at the top showed Santino holding hands with my adult self. I'd used a computer app to age me and then drawn myself beside Santino.

I really hoped he wouldn't recognize me. The stare he gave me crushed my hope. "What's this?"

I swallowed and shrugged.

"I know this is supposed to be you, Anna. I recognize you, not to mention the ridiculous checkered Chanel costume no one else under the age of seventy would wear."

"Chanel is fashion, no matter the age," I said indignantly.

"You won't draw me ever again, understood? This is my last warning."

He stalked out, not waiting for my reply.

Embarrassment still warmed my cheeks and I was on the verge of an angry cry when I realized something: Santino had paid enough attention to my drawings to notice the differences in my progress over the last few months.

A grin spread on my face.

"Anna?" Mom called and pushed the door that Santino had left ajar farther open, poking her head in.

“Can I have a word with you?”

I picked up on the tension around Mom’s mouth. She shared the same full lips with me, but now hers looked like a hard line. Had Santino snitched on me? I couldn’t imagine it. “Is anything wrong?”

“Oh no, sweetheart,” Mom said as she came in and sank down on the padded bench in the window frame.

I sank down beside her, wondering what this was about.

“With your thirteenth birthday coming up very soon, your dad and I thought now might be a good time to discuss your future with you.”

This didn’t come completely unexpected. As the Capo’s daughter, everyone was waiting with bated breath to whom I’d be promised. “Okay?”

“Your father and I have spent the last few months thinking about a possible bond. We didn’t want to rush things, especially because the boy we have in mind for you might come as unexpected.”

I’d heard rumors of me being married to someone from the Corsican Union to strengthen the Outfit, but I knew Dad. He’d never allow me to become part of another mafia family. He’d be too concerned about my safety. Dad wouldn’t even let me leave Chicago, even if that would limit my possible future husbands drastically. An Underboss’s son would never want to leave his city for me.

“You know Clifford Clark, don’t you?”

My mouth formed an O. He wasn’t someone I’d had in mind when marriage was concerned. “We play tennis together.” Together was a loose term in this case. He and I had never really played double or against each other, but we played in the same club, and on occasion, our tennis coach had created groups of his students to work on certain skills. A few times Clifford and I had been in the same group, but apart from a quick “hi” we’d never exchanged an actual conversation. He always had a pack of friends around him like an entourage.

“Your dad’s been working with his father. The cooperation is important for the Outfit and we’re trying to create a stronger bond between our families. Having connections to the political elite can be an advantage.”

I racked my brain for my latest memory of him. It had been several months ago. He and a few boys had sat on the bleachers while Luisa and I had played tennis. Clifford was tall and blond, kind of handsome. If only my hair were blond, all the people who begged for a golden couple would have a field day. I giggled, causing Mom to give me a look of puzzlement.

“I just thought that he’d be perfect to satisfy the golden couple enthusiasts. But Leonas would probably have to take my place.”

Mom laughed. “These golden couple rumors won’t ever stop.”

I knew many had wanted Dad to marry someone other than Mom exactly for that reason.

Mom put her hand over mine. “You’re taking it better than I thought you might.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m surprised, but I don’t see why I should be worried. Everyone has an arranged marriage.” Then I pursed my lips, wondering why Mom was worried. “Or do you think I won’t belong in the Outfit anymore if I marry an outsider?”

“Sweetheart, you’ll always be part of the Outfit. Your marriage to someone like Clifford would help the Outfit, which everyone will appreciate greatly. His family is very influential and if his father becomes senator, this will only improve.”

I nodded. The Outfit would be untouchable if we had the support of an important political family. I knew Dad worried a lot about our safety and the strength of the Outfit. If I could help him, why wouldn’t I do it?

“And you would have more freedoms in a marriage with an outsider. You could study art, maybe even work in the field. Our men aren’t as liberal.”

“Have you and Dad already agreed to the marriage?”

“No,” Mom said immediately. “I wanted to talk to you first.”

I bit my lip. It was strange thinking of marrying someone I barely knew, or thinking about marriage at all. Whenever it had crossed my mind, it had been a very distant idea. Now it became reality. “Can I talk to him during training tomorrow? I want to get a feel for him.”

Mom smiled. “Of course, but he doesn’t suspect anything. His family doesn’t want to divulge anything to him until things are more concrete.”

“I won’t tell him anything. I’ll find an excuse for wanting to chat with him.”

“You’re a clever girl. I’m sure he won’t suspect anything.” Mom kissed my temple. “Tell me how it went, okay?”



Luisa looked more nervous than me, as if she had to marry Clifford. After we'd gotten dressed in our white tennis skirts and matching shirts, she and I headed for the tennis courts. My gaze swiped the wide hall until I found Clifford in the second to last court, playing against one of his friends, a boy of Asian descent, whose name I didn't know.

The court beside them was vacant so I steered Luisa toward it.

"Stop staring at them as if you have something to hide," I muttered as we entered the court. Luisa didn't have a deceiving bone in her body. She was way too good. We were like good cop and bad cop.

She flushed. "I can't help it!"

"Focus on the ball," I said and tossed her a tennis ball before I took up position on the other side of the net. Only a low barrier separated our tennis court from the next one where Clifford and the other boy were engaged in a heated match.

Luisa and I played back and forth for a while before I fired the ball to Clifford's side. I jogged over to the barrier. Clifford picked up the ball with a scowl. "Hey, pay attention to where you're pitching your ball. You disrupted our game."

He tossed the ball over to me, not even bothering to come closer. I pursed my lips. Rude. He was as I'd remembered him, tall, blond wavy hair and lanky limbs.

His rudeness rubbed me the wrong way. I turned back around in a sour mood.

Luisa shrugged. I didn't bother another contact attempt, and listening in on their conversation was moot. They were too focused on their match.

Later at the juice bar, I tried my luck again and settled on a bar chair close to Clifford and his friend. Their conversation about Lacrosse almost had me fall asleep. Soon two more boys joined him and his friend.

I'd never paid much attention to Clifford Clark, and now I knew why. We didn't share the same crowd or interests. He was the preppy, polo-

wearing, teacher-pet kind of guy. Their track records were as squeaky clean as their tennis attire.

I knew their parents had their own secrets, but they weren't as dark as the ones mine carried. Clifford and I came from vastly different worlds. He and his friends thought they were tough. I knew what real toughness looked like. I wasn't sure if I could ever like someone like him, much less respect him.

Mom had asked yesterday if I could imagine marrying Clifford one day. I'd always known I'd have an arranged marriage. For a Capo's daughter, there wasn't another option. Right this moment, I had a hard time considering Clifford as anything.

The four boys migrated to a table in the dining room of the tennis club, ordering sandwiches, fries, and sodas. At least in that regard, they weren't as pretentious as they looked. If Clifford had ordered an acai bowl or tuna sashimi, I would have drawn a line.

Santino appeared in the doorway, obviously tired of waiting. "What's taking you so long? Can't you take your green juices to go?"

I rolled my eyes. "We need to relax after training. Give us a few more minutes."

Santino perched on a vacant barstool. The girl working the counter immediately sauntered over to him, tossing her hair in a flirty way. "What can I do for you? Maybe a nice Ginger booster? It's spicy and will give you an extra kick."

Santino's expression almost had me laughing out loud.

Santino got his kicks in a very different way, most of them involved knives and guns.

"Black coffee, as strong as possible."

She smiled almost reproachfully. "Too much caffeine isn't conducive to your health."

I knew what he was thinking: *Pissing me off neither...*

Luisa nudged me, dragging my focus away from Santino and back to the table with my possible future husband.

I still listened to Santino and the girl while Luisa and I watched Clifford inconspicuously.

"I'm good," Santino said sharply when the girl didn't stop pestering him with juice suggestions and finally she took her cue.

"He looks kind of nice," Luisa said, eyeing Clifford critically.

He wasn't bad looking. He was almost too pretty for a boy. I shrugged. "He's a boy. A rich boy."

"And you're a rich girl," Santino commented.

I jumped, my cheeks flaming. Indignation filled me as I glanced over my shoulder at Santino who'd snuck up on us. He was always close, but I hadn't thought he'd listen in on our conversation.

"She's a Capo's daughter," Luisa said almost shocked, then smiled awkwardly.

"Thanks for the heads up," Santino drawled. He cast his eyes skywards, shaking his head and muttering something under his breath. "How much longer will it take you to stalk these boys? I don't have the patience for awkward pre-teen crushes."

He hadn't bothered lowering his voice. Clifford and the other guys slanted us looks and then the Asian boy nudged Clifford with a grin and they all began snickering.

I scowled at Santino. "Great, now he thinks I have a crush on him."

I hopped off the barstool and headed toward the car, Luisa hot on my heels. Santino sauntered after us, almost bored. "Isn't that the case?"

I shoved my fists into my sides. "No, it's not. Mom and Dad are considering marrying me to Clifford Clark, the blond boy. He's a politician's son."

Santino slanted me a look, his face reflecting boredom. "I'm sure they have their reasons," he said in a manner that suggested he didn't care what they were, nor that I'd marry at all.

I bit my lip and shut up. Santino had a way to make me feel stupid and like a little child without actually insulting me. His gaze said more than a thousand words.

The strange thing was, while Clifford's rudeness today made me want to stay away from him, Santino's abrasiveness only made me more eager to be around him.



When Mom came into my room that evening to talk about Clifford, I didn't tell her about my doubts. I could tell how important it would be for the Outfit and I wanted to do my part in helping.

"This won't be public for a long time. And from what I gathered the Clarks won't tell Clifford now. They want to wait until he's older and can grasp the reasons for their decision."

I nodded. For people outside of our mafia world, arranged marriages were rare. His parents probably worried he wouldn't be able to handle the situation or let something slip to others by accident. I had to admit I was glad he wouldn't know until later. That way I wouldn't have to talk to him again soon.

I was proud that my parents knew I was strong enough to handle my future like this. I wanted to keep making them proud, even if that meant putting up with Clifford.

Chapter *Three*



Santino

Five years.

Five fucking years.

Today was the anniversary of my first day as Anna Cavallaro's bodyguard, and as if she'd marked down the date, she did her very best to annoy the living shit out of me. Not that she didn't do this on any other day of the year, but today she went the extra mile.

I could see her smug face in the rearview mirror. Gritting my teeth, I focused on the long driveway that took us to the Cavallaro lake lodge.

I missed my Camaro, the subtle vibrations, the uncomfortable seat, the impatient hum of the engine. But on the job, I was forced to drive a Mercedes limousine so Anna and Leonas felt safe and comfortable. Wouldn't want their pampered asses to feel the bumpy road.

"Do you know if any of the guards have smokes?" Leonas asked.

"I think one of Sofia's guards smokes," Anna said, casting a glance at me. Sometimes I wanted to grab the brat, throw her over my legs, and give her a thrashing.

"If I catch either of you smoking, I'll spank both your asses with my fucking belt."

“Kinky,” Anna said, and for a second, I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. Had she really said that?

I rammed my foot down on the brakes with more force than necessary, jerking the car to a premature stop before the parking slots.

Anna and Leonas both jolted forward. The latter hitting his thick head against the passenger seat because he’d ignored my order to put on his belt.

“Fuck, what was that for?” Leonas grumbled.

I got out without a word before I could do something Dante would make me regret. Samuel’s car and that of his sister Sofia’s personal bodyguard Carlo were already parked in front of the lodge. Samuel was Dante’s nephew and the brooding type, so I wouldn’t have to worry about him grating on my nerves too.

Anna got out as well, cocking an eyebrow at me as she smoothed that ridiculous checkered Chanel costume she wore. “You seem on edge, Sonny.”

I gave her a sharp smile, swallowing a very harsh reply.

“Get inside.” I nodded toward the front door of the big timber lodge. “And carry your own luggage.”

I headed inside, not waiting for them. In my wake, I could hear them bickering because of the luggage.

Low male voices came from the living room and I found Samuel and Carlo inside.

“Santino,” Samuel said with a curt nod. “Stressful day?” He scanned my face.

“You have no idea.”

Anna and Leonas came inside, the latter carrying his and Anna’s suitcase. I’d only packed a bag.

“Hi Samuel,” Anna said with a bright smile and hugged her cousin. Then she gave Carlo a friendly smile and shook his hand. She could be charming, I had to give it to her, little miss perfect.

Steps thundered down the stairs. I assumed this was Sofia, Anna’s sidekick and Samuel’s sister.

She rushed into the room, and I did a double-take when I saw her. She was dressed in a skimpy white bikini and was displaying womanly curves. How old was she?

Seventeen. Fuck. I always forgot that Anna would be seventeen soon as well. I still saw her as the annoying kid.

Five fucking years and no end in sight. As long as she wasn't married, I was bound as her bodyguard. I really hoped Cliffy had his own security team once those two closed their doomed bond.

"That bikini looks hot on you. Good choice," Anna said when she pulled out of Sofia's embrace.

Leonas nodded, leaning back against the sofa with a shit-eating grin. "Yep, you look like a hot piece of ass."

"Shut it," I growled even if the little shit had spoken the truth.

Samuel walked over to Leonas and hit the back of his head. "Watch it. You're not Capo yet, so we can still kick your scrawny ass until your balls shrivel to the size of raisins."

"As if they were ever bigger than that," Anna muttered, giving Leonas a smug smile.

As if she'd ever seen anyone's balls. "I don't care if you two torture each other. The only thing I care about is that you'll return to Chicago more or less alive and that you don't get on my fucking nerves."

"Our other bodyguards don't say fuck because our mother hates the word," Leonas said.

I was close to exploding. "File an official report and see if I give a fuck." I turned to Samuel and Carlo. "I'm heading to the guardhouse. I trust you to keep them alive."



I didn't return to the lodge until dinner, which was surprisingly pleasant thanks to the fact that Anna was busy talking to Sofia and Emma, and couldn't be bothered pissing me off. That, and the fact that I didn't trust the other guards to do a good job watching all of the teenagers alone, was why I joined them afterward as everyone settled around the fire pit. Unfortunately, Anna sat across from me and her gaze promised trouble.

"I want to take a dip," Leonas said with a grin I knew too well. That boy was the spitting image of Dante but his trouble-making ways were a far cry from my Capo's poised attitude. When I'd agreed to becoming Anna's bodyguard, I hadn't taken into consideration that her equally annoying brother would be part of the deal as well.

Samuel gave me a look before he turned to Leonas. “Sounds good. Maybe a creature of the lake will devour you.”

Anna met my gaze in challenge. “We could go skinny-dipping.”

I almost said go ahead. She’d probably get a heart-attack seeing all that nakedness with her virtuous eyes, but so far I’d avoided seeing her in any state of undress and I wanted to keep it that way. I finished my beer. “Clothes stay on, and you two won’t behave like bickering toddlers.”

“I’m not a kid, Sonny,” Anna muttered.

I wished my father hadn’t called me Sonny by accident around her. She’d never stop annoying me with the hated nickname.

Leonas got up from his chair and undressed to his boxer shorts. “I’m going. You keep on chit-chatting.”

He ran down the path to the lower deck and catapulted himself into the black water with an ass-bomb.

Samuel followed shortly after.

Anna was still watching me with a daring smile. She didn’t take her eyes off me when she got up and began to unbutton the summer dress she was wearing. I leaned back, trying to keep my expression cool. She wanted to get a reaction out of me. If she thought her little striptease would get a rise out of me, she was mistaken. The last button popped open and she parted her dress only to let it glide down her shoulders slowly. I simply stared back at her face. I wasn’t a teenage boy who’d blush and snicker because I saw her in her underwear. Sure, she looked like a woman, a good-looking woman, but it took more than that to get a reaction from me.

Her eyes flashed with anger at my lack of reaction before she dashed toward the lake and dove in.

Shaking my head, I got up and tugged my shirt out of my jeans. “I’ll ask for a fucking pay raise once I’m back in Chicago.”

Emma giggled as if she thought it was a goddamn joke. Did my face look like I was fucking joking?

Ignoring her and Danilo, I stalked down to the lower deck, following Anna’s and Leonas’s laughter.

I jumped in headfirst. I needed to cool off for various reasons and was glad for the silence beneath the water’s surface for once. When I emerged after almost a minute, laughter and shrieks drifted back to me. I floated on my back while making sure to keep an eye on my two troublemakers.

My moment of peace was short-lived when Anna began swimming toward me.

“Do you ever just have fun?” Anna asked, hovering beside me.

“Yes. When I’m not working.”

Anna began floating beside me, revealing way too much of her body. I cast my eyes up to the sky. “You mean when you don’t have to be around me.”

I didn’t say anything. Her body floated closer to me and our arms brushed, and I snapped. “I’m not your friend, Anna. I’m your bodyguard. Even if you can’t act professional to save your damn life, I have to.”

Anna’s expression turned frosty but she didn’t get the chance for a comeback because Sofia began screeching. I jerked upright in the water, scanning the area as I grabbed Anna’s wrist. She, too, had stopped floating and swam beside me.

Of course, it turned out to be a fucking seaweed that had wrapped around Sofia’s leg. Anna smiled at me. For once not provoking. “You immediately grabbed me to protect me.”

“That’s my job.”

She nodded but still gave me that strange smile. I was glad when she swam over to Sofia to have a girl’s talk.

I wasn’t in the mood for swimming anymore, so I made my way over to the ladder. By then Sofia had climbed out and walked back up to the house, leaving only Anna at the deck. “You should head to bed. I don’t want to have to take care of you when you have a cold,” I muttered.

Anna rolled her eyes. “I was going to head to the lodge anyway.”

She grabbed the ladder.

“Let me go first,” I ordered. I didn’t want to have her ass right above my head while she climbed out. Anna released the rail with a frown and made room so I could climb up first. When I was up on the deck and turned back to the water, Anna gave me a knowing smile. “I really enjoyed the view.”

“Get out.” I motioned at Leonas. “You too,” Leonas grumbled but swam toward us.

Anna grabbed the rail and climbed out. Immediately goose bumps flashed across her skin. It was fucking cold. I headed back to the upper deck where we’d left the towels and grabbed three then headed back toward Anna who was already halfway up the deck. I dropped two towels then

unfolded one and held it out to Anna. She allowed me to wrap it around her shoulders and angled her body toward me as she peered up at me with a soft smile. “Thanks, Santino.”

I released her shoulders quickly and nodded as I stepped back. I wished Dad hadn’t taught me to be a gentleman. Most of the time, I managed to refrain from acting like one. Anna didn’t move, only looked at me, still snuggled in that towel.

I dragged my eyes away from her, picked up the other towels and thrust one of them at Leonas’s head.

“Hey!” he protested, then narrowed his eyes at me. “Why don’t you rub *me* warm with a towel?”

“I didn’t rub anyone, so stop talking shit,” I growled.

Leonas stalked past me, towel-drying his hair with a snort.

Anna too finally began to walk toward the lodge. I followed close behind her, drying my hair. When she stopped abruptly and turned, I couldn’t stop anymore and bumped into her. Luckily she had the towel wrapped around herself.

“You know, Santino,” she said in a sweet voice, peering up at me through those fucking long lashes. “Dad won’t kill you for drying me off.” She pressed her palm against my naked chest. “He might kill you for all the other things we’ll be doing soon.”

What the fuck? I gripped her wrist and pushed it down, then stepped back. This was a game we wouldn’t be playing. The stakes were too fucking high. “We won’t be doing anything, Anna, and if you touch me like that again, you’ll regret it.”

She held my gaze and her smile widened before she turned around and headed into the house.

“Fuck!” I snarled. “Fuck this goddamn job. Fuck it all!”

“What’s your problem?” Samuel asked.

I scowled at him. He was Anna’s cousin, Dante’s nephew and definitely not someone I’d confide in.

This was a delicate matter, and there were only two people with whom I shared these kinds of things. Arturo and Dad. Unfortunately, their advices were usually detrimentally different from each other’s.



I met with Arturo as soon as we were back in Chicago.

As usual Arturo's advice had been impractical, so I decided to talk to someone not-crazy and whose moral compass wasn't quite as out of whack. Dad was surprised when I came over one afternoon. Usually, we only saw each other at work or for family festivities. Since Dad lived alone, it wasn't as if he ever invited me or my sister over for dinner or tea.

"I'm thinking about resigning."

"Your bodyguard position?" Dad asked in alarm.

"What else?"

"Santino," Dad began in the same voice he'd used on me when I was a small kid.

"Anna's pushing all my buttons. I think she's flirting with me."

Dad's eyes widened in shock, then he gave me a disbelieving smile. "Anna's a good girl, Sonny. She would never make advances on a man before marriage."

"She has everyone fooled."

Dad shook his head again. "Maybe you're misconstruing her behavior. She's inexperienced dealing with men, so she probably doesn't know what she's doing."

I gave him a look. "Trust me, Dad, she knows exactly what she's doing."

Worry crowded on his face. "You didn't take her up on those advances, right?"

He still said advances as if I'd made them up. Fuck, Anna was good. She really had everyone fooled. That girl was playing me for her own personal entertainment. Damn it.

"Of course not, Dad. You should know me better."

He gave me an *oh please* look. "You've made unfortunate decisions regarding your sexual partners in the past."

Thanks for the vote of confidence...

"I occasionally bang married women. But there are two big differences between them and Anna. They aren't my ward and they are of age. That's a

big ass deal for me.”

“I wasn’t sure, to be honest. Your friendship with Arturo had me worried you might forget some of the rules I taught you.”

“Arturo likes killing and torturing. That has nothing to do with my sexual preferences.” Talking sex with my father was fucking strange, but if he didn’t have a problem, I definitely wouldn’t make one. Almost nothing on this planet embarrassed me.

“Be careful, okay? If you lose control, there’ll be proof.”

I almost burst out laughing. Proof? Dad really thought I was like a dog in heat. “Don’t worry. I can control myself. There won’t ever be anything physical between me and her.”

Chapter *Four*



I was still a little hung over from my seventeenth birthday party the day before. Leonas's gift had been a flask with vodka that had given me a nice buzz throughout my very adult-controlled party.

Unfortunately, today my family and I were invited over to the Clark's for dinner. Clifford's parents had finally told their son about our future marriage and now we were supposed to meet officially. He and I hadn't talked since Santino had embarrassed me in front of him years ago and I'd never felt the need to get closer to him. Eventually we wouldn't have a choice but until then I wanted to pretend my future was still a mystery.

One thing was sure: I wasn't in the mood for this kind of surely frosty dinner but as usual, social obligations were more important than personal preferences. I never complained. Mom and Dad didn't either, and I knew they had as much interest in spending the evening with the Clarks as I did.

The Clark's house was a splendid mansion that they'd recently moved into. Mr. Clark probably said it was his wife's family money or his senator's salary that allowed him to own a place like this on the Chicago Gold Coast. I had my own suspicions regarding his recent rise in liquid funds. If there was one thing the Outfit had more than enough of, it was money. I really

hoped Dad didn't have to bribe the Clarks into marrying Clifford to me. That would have been icky.

A maid in a light gray uniform opened the door when we rang and led us into a big living room with plush carpeting and elegant white sofas. The entire Clark family was waiting for us, perfectly arranged beside the marble fireplace and all dressed up as if they were about to go to the opera.

Mrs. Clark wore a floor-length elegant dress in purple and Mr. Clark a dark-three-piece suit. Clifford stood ram-rod straight beside his father. He was a couple of inches taller than his old man but wore a suit very similar to his. Only his unruly dark-blond locks deviated from his politician looks and gave him a surfer-boy appearance. The icing on the cake were Clifford's twin sisters. Someone had forced them to wear matching white cocktail dresses and tied white bows into their two side pigtailed as if they were five and not twelve. They both smiled like creepy murder dolls. Not that a single Clark mastered a somewhat convincing smile.

Leonas exchanged a look with me, muttering under his breath, "What institution did the killer dolls escape from?"

I almost snickered but managed to keep a straight face. Sometimes it was unsettling how similar our minds worked.

"Good thing Bea stayed at home. She would have started crying the second she saw those creepy smiles," Leonas continued, oblivious to Mom's warning expression.

I nudged him. "Shhh."

Clifford didn't take his eyes off me while I shook hands with his parents and exchanged dishonest pleasantries with them. He looked almost... confused, as if he simply couldn't believe that I was his future wife. I wondered if he'd argued with his parents. He wasn't bound to the same rules like people in our world, so what was stopping him from refusing to marry me?

Mr. Clark pointed at his son with a benevolent smile. "This is my son Clifford."

"We know each other from tennis practice," Clifford said in a voice that suggested it wasn't the first time he'd told his father.

I nodded and extended my hand, even if it felt awkward to greet my future husband with a handshake.

After that, we all settled at the table. The atmosphere was tense. Especially Clifford's sisters were obviously wary of us as if they thought we

might pull guns at the table and shoot them all.

Even though Clifford and I sat across from each other, we didn't talk much except for "Would you mind passing me the bowl?" and avoided eye contact. Mom tried to catch my gaze during dinner, her expression questioning. I gave her a quick smile before I focused on dessert once again.

When the maid pushed a trolley with digestif bottles over to the table, I said to Clifford, "This place looks really big." I hoped he'd get my cue.

"Do you want a tour of the house?" Clifford asked with a pleasant smile, finally meeting my eyes.

I got the feeling he wanted to escape the tense atmosphere and not-so-veiled complaints from his parents as much as I did.

"Yes, please."

I glanced at Dad who gave a curt nod. I pushed to my feet and gave Leonas a forbidding look, lest he might consider joining us. I wanted a word with Clifford alone and not have my brother poking his nose into things that didn't concern him.

Clifford made an inviting gesture toward the door. I walked back out into the foyer, feeling lighter with every step that took me farther away from the rest of the Clarks. It was one of the very few occasions away from home that I was allowed to be without either my parents or Santino, and that too felt good for once.

"Do you really want a tour of the house?" Clifford asked the moment the door was closed.

I shook my head. "Not really. I just wanted to escape and I'm not too keen on returning any time soon."

"Me neither. How about we go to my room? Nobody will bother us there."

"Lead the way."

Clifford still kept up his public smile as he led me through the lobby. "The walls have ears."

I gave him a questioning look.

"We've had some problems with personnel in the past."

I nodded and followed Clifford into another hallway that led to an annex.

"This was meant to be the pool house but my parents turned it into my own place."

We stepped into the house which had a big living space with a couch, ginormous flatscreen TV, a kitchen unit, and a pool table. It had a direct view of the pool and the gardens. A pebbled pathway also led from the pool house back to the porch of the main house. There was a door to my left, where I suspected the bedroom to be. I was glad Clifford didn't show it to me, because that would have undoubtedly become awkward.

Clifford leaned against the pool table and finally dropped the constant smile.

“How long have you known about us?”

His voice wasn't unfriendly but I caught the hint of accusation.

“Since I was thirteen. Remember back when I watched you that one day and you and your friends snickered? That was a day after I found out.”

“My friends thought you had a crush on me.” He chuckled then regarded me curiously. “That's not the case, right?”

I burst out laughing. “No, it's not. And that's not why our parents decided to match us if that's what you think. Only tactical reasons have led to the union, not emotions.”

“That's a consolation, I suppose?” Clifford said wryly, his face scrunched up in obvious puzzlement. Poor guy.

“You were really rude to me that day.”

“Was I? It must have been bad if you still remember after all this time.”

“I have the memory of an elephant, especially when it comes to people being rude to me.”

Clifford rubbed the back of his head, still uncomfortable but I could tell he was slowly loosening up. “What did I do?”

“You got mad because I interrupted your tennis match.”

“Ahh, I'm competitive. Sorry. I loathe losing, so I can get really rude if people disturb my concentration.”

“Good to know.”

“Taking notes for our marriage?”

“Definitely.”

Clifford shook his head. “This is really strange. Nobody from my friends is engaged yet, or even thinking about it.”

“I can't say the same. It's common in our world for people to be promised as kids or teens.”

“That's what I hear.”

I could hear a hint of disapproval in his tone and it made me want to defend our way of living, but I held back. I didn't want an argument on this day. "But we're not officially engaged yet. We need to have an engagement party and an official announcement."

"My father wants to wait until we're both eighteen."

Dad had mentioned it. It was uncommon in our world to wait this long, especially if one party was as high profile as me.

"They make it out to be some kind of star-crossed lovers thing. Apparently, that's what will sell this bond to the doubters," Clifford continued.

"Who can resist true love against all odds?"

Clifford's lips curled.

"You don't believe in true love?"

"I only believe in things I can see."

"Your parents don't love each other?"

Clifford smiled in a disarming way. "Do yours?"

I smiled in turn and looked around the room. My parents most definitely loved each other. Sharing family secrets was way too personal for us at this point. Though, I wasn't sure I'd ever trust Clifford enough to divulge any secrets of importance to him. "I guess this is good for parties and for having girls over without being interrupted."

Clifford tilted his head, watching me closely. "Jealous?"

I chuckled. "Not one bit."

It was true. It didn't feel as if Clifford were mine and I didn't feel the desire to claim him as mine. That would probably come once we were married. Now the word jealousy only brought up one name: Santino.

He nodded but didn't stop the staring. He seemed to want to figure me out. It would take him years to do so if I allowed it.

"Are you a virgin?"

I couldn't believe he asked that. "What?" In our circles, it was offensive to ask a girl something like that and to implicate that she might not be a virgin.

"Just curious. It's none of my business anyway."

"No?" I asked curiously, sauntering over to him. "Shouldn't you guard me until our wedding night so I stay untouched?"

"Hell no," Clifford exclaimed, looking honestly put off. "Waiting until marriage, where's the fun?" He scanned me once more, lingering on my

long legs. Today I'd picked an outfit I had designed myself and then let one of our maids who was a talented seamstress sew it for me. It was a cutesy blazer with flowy gossamer sleeves and a narrow waist with a silk bow and matching shorts that looked like a skirt. My legs looked particularly long in it and my high white heels only helped.

"Ahh, you want to sample the goods in advance."

"I want to sample plenty of goods, believe me, not just yours."

My eyebrows shot up. "So you won't even pretend to be faithful?"

Clifford got serious. "Listen, Anna, I know you're from a conservative background, but I have no intention of settling down with one girl right now and I definitely won't stay celibate until we marry. As far as I'm concerned, we have a pre-contract but the real contract won't get into effect until our wedding day. From that day on we can be faithful if that's what you want but until then we're not a couple and I'll sleep around."

I hadn't expected Clifford to be this direct. I liked it, just not what he proposed. Even if I wasn't jealous, that didn't mean I wanted to be insulted by constant sleeping around.

He must have seen my fury because he quickly went on, "You're free to do the same of course."

My lips parted in shock. "You want me to sleep with other men?"

He laughed. "Well, I wouldn't put it like that, but I don't care what you do until we're married as long as you are discreet and keep it out of the tabloids. I don't want to give my mother more reason to eat her pills like skittles."

I could tell he regretted his words the second they left his lips. Pill abuse was definitely a secret worth filing away for later use.

"You really won't feel cheated if I'm not a virgin on our first night together?" I asked, suspicious of his motives. Maybe he was trying to lure me into a trap and test my virtue. Maybe his words about his mother taking too many pills was also false and a way to make me lower my guards.

Clifford shook his head, looking mildly nauseated. "I'll be blunt. I'll be glad if you aren't. I'm not in the business of deflowering girls. I'm not into blood play. No sex during periods and no virgins, which is basically the same."

I burst out laughing. I fumbled in the pocket of my skirt, which was discreetly hidden in the big elegant pleats, for a cigarette. "May I? Or do you want me to go outside?"

Shock crossed Clifford's face. "You smoke?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes. When I'm stressed, mostly."

"I stress you out?"

"You caught me by surprise. I thought you'd be different."

"Many people do," he said cryptically, then motioned at my cigarette. "Go ahead." He pulled a packet from a drawer and lit a cigarette for himself.

After he blew out smoke, he said, "I'm not a virgin, by the way."

"I didn't ask," I said with a laugh. "But thanks for the info."

I wasn't even curious when he'd lost it or to whom, but it made me want to ask Santino about his first time. I couldn't imagine Santino as a fumbling virgin.

Clifford regarded me closely. "And if you are a virgin, then have some fun. Just make sure you don't leave me at the altar. A scandal's rarely a good start to a political career."

"Ambitious."

"Absolutely."

I nodded. "That's good. I want a man who knows what he wants."

"I do. I want to be president one day, that's all I care about."

I tried to see myself at Clifford's side in a few years, being the doting politician's wife. It would be a life full of duties and few freedoms, but that would have been my fate in any marriage.



The Christmas party was in full swing. Music floated through the room, some upbeat jazz that had everyone over thirty swaying back and forth as if it was a disco tune. For some reason everyone thought jazz was the perfect music for a party. This being my fifth Christmas party of the season, and it was only the beginning of December, I couldn't stand it anymore. Today it was the Christmas party of the Alferas, one of Dad's captains who handled our drug deliveries to Canada. I was one of the few guests under eighteen, and neither Sofia nor Luisa were invited. As the Capo's daughter, I always had to be at social events, no matter how much of a bore they turned out to

be. All the girls who envied me for being at so many parties throughout the year had never suffered through an endless string of awkward jokes and horrid music.

Maybe I'd find the music more tolerable once I was drunk like many of the adults. I scanned my surroundings. Mom and Dad were talking to Mom's best friend Bibiana and her husband Dario on the patio, and Santino had disappeared fifteen minutes ago so he wasn't there to stop me. I'd mastered the art of sneaking alcohol into my drinks at parties last Christmas season. I found it ridiculous that I was supposed to abide to drinking laws when ordinary laws pretty much didn't hold meaning in our world. There was no way in hell I'd wait almost four years to have alcohol.

My hand snuck up to the bowl with punch and quickly filled my glass with it before anyone could notice. As I sipped my drink, I allowed my eyes to scan the guests. After a while, I grew bored—I knew everyone and there was no new gossip afloat—and decided to find Santino. Teasing him definitely brought me more joy than any of this. He was too easily riled up. Sometimes I was sure he enjoyed it as much as I did. Other times I was concerned for my safety.

Taking another sip, I slipped out of the living room. The sounds of the party were too loud to search for him by noise, and he was a master at blending in. I strolled through the first floor for a while, enjoying my drink, before I followed my gut instinct to the back of the house. Santino probably needed some quiet. Polite conversation always made him murderous, so he probably needed time to himself. I didn't feel guilty in the slightest for wanting to disturb him. His anger was the hottest thing there was.

A strange noise came from behind a heavy oak door. I'd gotten a tour of the Alfera's house last year so I knew it was the library. I slipped in as quietly as I could and closed the door behind me.

I loved books, so I took a moment to marvel at the many spines on the shelves, even if the room wasn't as big as ours. I had a feeling this wasn't a place that was used very often. Many people in our circles had a library as a status symbol and not because they enjoyed literature.

A wheeze caught my attention and I tiptoed farther into the room.

My mouth fell open as I spotted Santino's upper body peeking out behind a shelf. Santino had his fingers wrapped around the throat of none other than Mrs. Alfera, the wife of Dad's captain. Her lips were parted, her face red. Apart from his head, I only saw his forearm and hand, the rest of

him was hidden behind the bookshelf. Mrs. Alfera was kneeling, judging from her propped-up arms.

Had he lost his mind? I rushed forward and froze, my eyes growing wide. “Oh fuck.”

In the truest sense of the word. Santino wasn't trying to kill Mrs. Alfera with his bare hands, at least not in the immediate future. They were both naked from the waist down and Santino was banging her, looking as if he *wanted* to kill her. *Death by dick.*

Heat flooded my body. My eyes darted from their naked lower regions back up to the hand around her throat. This all happened in a heartbeat but felt like the most awkward eternity in history.

Mrs. Alfera let out a strangled cry, her eyes widening comically. Screaming because someone caught you cheating when you were only a few doors down from your husband wasn't the cleverest thing if you asked me. Santino released her throat and shoved to his feet. Of course, I stared at his erection. And holy shit, holy shit, I was surprised he hadn't killed Mrs. Alfera considering how hard he'd hammered into her with *that*. Death by dick indeed. A laugh bubbled out of me, completely inappropriate, but I couldn't help it.

He staggered toward me and considering his furious expression and the overall situation, I should probably have fled the scene, but I couldn't. He grabbed my upper arm with one hand while his other tried to shove his still very erect cock into his pants, which wasn't working. Part of me worried he might do lasting damage to his member. Still, I watched in amusement. I took a sip from my drink, only increasing Santino's fury.

“Stop staring,” he snarled.

“I could help you with that,” I said before I could think it through. I didn't mean it like *that*. Despite all the teasing, I'd never been daring enough to flirt with Santino in such a forward way. Maybe because it would have given away too much, and probably would have only made Santino annoyed.

Santino's grip tightened further. “Don't even joke about it, girl. I won't get killed because your dad misconstrues your words. And I especially won't get killed for the unpleasant fumbling of a stuffy virgin.”

I stared at him wide-eyed, unable to believe his audacity. I was used to his rudeness by now, but this took it to a new level. “Do you kill all the women you bang or only the married women to hide evidence?” I hissed.

“She wanted me to grab her throat. Some women get off when their air supply is cut off. You wouldn’t understand.” He finally managed to close his fly, but there was still a bulge in his pants.

“If she tells anyone, I’m ruined,” Mrs. Alfera whimpered, stuffing her silk blouse back into her skirt. Good luck with the wrinkles. I hoped she had a discreet maid who’d iron that for her. “Silence her.”

Santino slanted her an annoyed look. “Return to the party.”

She staggered closer. “You have to silence her. If she tells anyone—”

“Shut up and let me handle it.”

She finally left.

“I hope she didn’t suggest you kill me,” I said sarcastically.

“You can’t tell anyone,” he said in a low voice.

“What will you do to silence me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop being a bratty child. You know the consequences if word about this gets out.”

“Banging a captain’s wife would definitely cause quite the scandal. Dad would have to act.”

He tilted his head, eyes narrowed.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I muttered.

Santino nodded, satisfied. His eyes registered my drink. “What is that?”

“Nothing that concerns you. You have your secrets, I have mine, right?”

He stepped back, his jaw flexing. “Don’t overdo it, all right?”

I ignored his warning. The scale had tipped in my favor for now even if he didn’t like it.

I touched my throat with a frown, trying to imagine why anyone would find it pleasurable to be unable to breathe. Santino followed the movement, and he shook his head, looking even more pissed.

“I don’t know what reason you have to be angry at me,” I muttered, getting angrier. “You just made sure I’d have nightmares for months, possibly years. Good job violating my *virgin* eyes.”

To be honest, I’d probably have several very good orgasms while I imagined Santino doing to me what he’d done to Mrs. Alfera.

Santino searched my eyes. “Don’t take what you saw as an example of how it always is. It can be very different.” His voice had become gentler, almost comforting, which was such a novelty that I must have looked even more perturbed.

“Anna?” Santino murmured, touching my shoulder lightly.

A laugh burst out of me. I couldn't help it. Seeing Santino concerned for my mental well-being because of his kinky show with Mrs. Alfera was too much to handle.

Santino jerked his hand back, his lips twisted. Oh, someone was grumpy.

The door creaked, interrupting whatever rude thing he'd had to say.

Voices drifted over to us. Santino grabbed my arm and pulled me behind a bookshelf. It took me a moment to recognize the voice as Dario's, who seemed to be talking on the phone with someone.

I glared up at Santino. "Don't you think it would have looked less suspicious if you hadn't dragged me behind the shelf? Now it looks as if we're hiding something." Mom would definitely be very suspicious if she found us, or if Dario told Dad, which he'd definitely do.

Santino silenced me with a hard look. We stood close together as we waited for the conversation to be over. Our shoulders brushed lightly and Santino's heat seemed to scorch me through the silky material of my dress.

I would probably have appreciated the situation more if I hadn't caught the whiff of a female perfume on him. I leaned away slightly, muttering, "You should probably wash Mrs. Alfera's stink off before you return to the party. I doubt her husband will be happy if he smells it on you."

"Thanks for your concern. This isn't my first rodeo."

"So you're making a habit out of being a homewrecker?"

"That home was already lacking a foundation, it would have crashed down anyway."

I rolled my eyes. "I suppose that's what they all say."

"Maybe you don't realize it but this is none of your damn business, Anna. You better make sure Cliffy keeps his hands to himself, instead of worrying about me."

What was that supposed to mean? Clifford and I had spoken twice since our family dinner and he'd found out about our future marriage, both times during tennis practice, and so far Clifford had shown as much interest in me as a monk. He was focused on school and college and a future in politics, and I was busy with school, designing clothes and... Santino.

Chapter *Five*



Santino

“Do you have anything on her?” Arturo asked, only mildly interested. Human relationships meant nothing to him, which was why I enjoyed his presence. I could voice whatever bullshit crossed my mind without worrying about offending him.

“Not a thing, unless you mean her occasional alcohol consumption. I doubt that’s enough.”

“She’s got you.”

Yep, Anna had me. Since she caught me with Mrs. Alfera a month ago, she’d never stopped reminding me of her new advantage, and only a few days ago she’d finally used it to blackmail me into getting her and her bestie Sofia into Danilo’s birthday party. I knew those two had something else planned than shaking their booties to the beat but I was in Anna’s hands, and she knew it.



As expected, the party turned out to be a major shitshow that ended with Sofia crying her eyes out over something her fiancé Danilo had done and Anna panicked because of her friend's state. I was majorly pissed because it was only a matter of time before someone would let something slip to Dante. Dad was already suspicious too. My career was about to go down the drain, all thanks to little Miss Perfect.

After the party, I dragged Anna up to her room in the Cavallaro lodge where we were staying. "Stay in this room and don't do anything stupid tonight. I'm sick of dealing with this."

Anna crossed her arms over her chest. "Maybe you should stay here with me to make sure I behave."

"No thanks. I don't need any more drama in my life than I already have. I'm sure Danilo would agree with me."

Her eyes flashed and she sauntered closer to me, which looked strange in her Chucky the murder doll costume she'd picked for the costume party.

"Maybe it would be the kind of drama you enjoy."

I cocked an eyebrow. If Anna thought she could seduce me dressed like a killer puppet, she had to be more drunk than I thought, though I hadn't seen her drink any alcohol. "I don't think you have anything to offer that I'd enjoy."

Now she was furious, which fit her killer doll costume so much better than the seductress expression. "We both know that's not true."

I didn't want to consider what Anna might have to offer. Not tonight, not ever. "Go to sleep, Anna."

I turned but Anna grabbed my arm. I gritted my teeth. She was testing my patience.

"You don't mind bending the rules, so why don't you with me?"

I glared down at her. "I'm not interested in you, Anna. I won't have your dad skin my balls for the sloppy, inexperienced fumbling of a virgin."

"Who says I'm a virgin?"

I laughed. This girl had written virgin all over her forehead whenever she pranced around me. "Because I have been guarding you for years and you were never alone with a guy unsupervised."

"That's not true. I was alone with Clifford when our families met." She let her fingertips wander up my chest until I pushed her hand down. "I think he'd tell you I'm worth the drama."

I had half a mind to give her a dose of her own medicine and throw her on the bed. Maybe she was playing around but she'd become the little prude virgin the second she was in bed with me. There was no way in hell that Clifford had dared going near her with Dante nearby. Anna was a good liar but that story was too ridiculous.

I took a deep breath through my nose, resisting the urge. I was a fucking adult and wouldn't let a teenage girl's provocation drive me to inappropriate actions. I released her as if she'd burned me. "This is my last warning, if you don't stop this bullshit, I'll resign."

Her lips parted. "You wouldn't."

I leaned down. "Try me. I've been waiting for this chance for years."

"If you resign, I'll tell everyone you banged Mrs. Alfera."

I lost it. I got in her face. "Do you want your daddy to kill me, Anna? Is that it? I'm sure if you ask him nicely, he'll do his little girl the favor even without dragging Mrs. Alfera into the dirt with me."

"I don't want you dead, Santino," she said quietly, for once earnest, which made her Chucky doll outfit even less fitting. "I want you to stop treating me like an annoying burden."

"Then stop being one," I muttered and closed the door in her face.

I took another deep breath. Anna would eventually give up.



Ever since the Christmas party, unwanted images of Santino banging Mrs. Alfera had popped into my mind.

Instead of putting me off, they'd made me want to experience Santino's animalistic side myself. I could tell he was passionate and lacked control. I

could only imagine what that would mean in the bedroom. Clifford's words about me doing something about my virginity had only enforced my desire to experience pleasure before marriage. If Clifford gave me the green light, what stopped me?

Of course, I had to be discreet, not just because of Clifford. Mom and Dad would certainly not be happy if word about me getting naughty made the rounds.

Two major problems stopped me from pursuing my desire:

Constant surveillance through my family or Santino that prevented me from being alone with a guy.

Plus my unreasonable wish to experience sex with Santino.

I couldn't get him out of my mind.

And he was a reasonable choice. After all, he lacked morals as his adventure with Mrs. Alfero proved and he was the only not-related man I was alone with all the time. He and I could get naughty without anyone ever finding out.

It was the optimal solution. I couldn't fall in love with someone and have sex with them, after all. My future marriage with Clifford would make a relationship really difficult. Not to mention that I didn't have time for a boyfriend. I was busy with school and my designs. Anything more than a fling was out of the question.



A few months later, when Clifford invited me to his end of school year party, I saw my chance. If Santino refused to see me as a woman, I'd have to settle for someone else, and who'd be better than my soon-fiancé?

Because Mom was desperate for me to hang out with him and possibly fall in love with him, Dad grudgingly allowed me to go to the party. Of course, he insisted Santino tagged along. Santino quickly left me to my own devices and sought a place in a corner with a beer and his phone, trying to stay undisturbed. Him looking like he did, and being a hot, a few years older guy, had girls swarming around him in no time of course. But he ignored their advances like he'd ignored mine all these months.

I headed over to Clifford who was talking to a very pretty dark-skinned girl. Like I'd told him, I wasn't jealous. Nobody knew of our soon-to-be-announced engagement anyway.

When Clifford saw me coming his way, he excused himself and met me halfway. I could tell that he was drunk already, not just because he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. He'd never been this touchy-feely before. "So glad you could make it."

"Me too," I said. Santino's expression had darkened at Clifford's familiarity, but soon he disappeared from my view as more dancers got between us, and Clifford led me into the next room. The entire mansion seemed to have been cleared of furniture.

"I can't believe your parents allow you to party in their house like that."

"They are in our holiday house down in Florida. As long as the cleaning staff makes sure everything is squeaky clean once they return, they don't care what I do."

He led me toward his pool house, which was the only place where the party wasn't going on.

Clifford strolled over to the pool table with me by his side and leaned against it. "And? Did you follow my advice?"

"Advice?"

"To get some action?"

I huffed. "It's not easy to have fun when you're me. My bodyguard makes sure fun is impossible. Did you see his sour face because he had to be at this party?"

"Can't you tell him to give you some privacy now and then? When I want to be alone with a girl, I tell my bodyguard to give me some room and he does."

"Santino doesn't follow my orders, only my dad's and mom's. And they won't order him to give me alone time with guys, trust me."

Clifford shook his head with a chuckle. "This is so archaic. You realize how awkward it'll be if I give you your first kiss on our wedding day."

"That's still a few years away."

"More than a few I hope."

I didn't want to burst his bubble but I doubted my parents would want to wait until I was thirty for me to marry. It just wasn't done in our world.

"What makes you think you'll have more chances to be alone with guys in the next few years?"

“Nothing... then kiss me now if it’s more convenient for you,” I muttered.

A grin spread on Clifford’s face as he considered that, taking me by surprise. “Why not?”

I smiled. If Santino didn’t want to kiss me, I might as well test the waters with my future husband. Nobody could say anything against that, right?

Clifford pushed away from the table and moved in front of me. His unruly hair fell into his eyes and he shoved it back with a charming smile as he leaned down slightly.

Clifford was good-looking in a neighbor-next-door way. Santino was a sexy, angry beast.

“You ready?” Clifford asked as he leaned down more. He cupped my cheek with a grin. I nodded, even as my stomach twisted with nerves.

Clifford’s lips pressed against mine. They were soft, gentle, and his eyes searched mine to see if I was okay with what was happening. It was nice and considerate—and not what I wanted. He deepened the kiss and moved closer, his palm pressing against my cheek and his body leaning over mine.

I tried to get into the kiss. This was my future. I closed my eyes and became more active in the kiss, trying to let loose and not get lost in my thoughts.

The door creaked open. Clifford and I both turned toward the sound. Santino loomed in the doorway, looking murderous. He prowled into the room. Clifford immediately stepped back from me, alarmed. “What—”

Santino grabbed him by the collar, lifted him away from me and shoved him toward the door. Clifford landed on the floor.

“What’s your problem, dude? This isn’t the Wild West.”

Santino sneered at him. One of Clifford’s bodyguards staggered into the room, hand on his gun. When his eyes settled on Clifford and Santino and me afterward, he lowered his hand a few inches. Not taking his eyes off Santino, he helped Clifford to his feet.

“You called?” the bodyguard asked.

Clifford gave me a sheepish smile. I raised my eyebrows. He pulled out a small remote with a red flashing button and clicked on it until it stopped flashing. “My parents forced me to carry this at all times.”

“Because of our bond?”

“Threats to my life,” Clifford said.

I nodded. I had to admit it put me off that he'd called for help the moment Santino had grabbed him. Santino hadn't even done him bodily harm. Maybe my standards were just warped because I'd been raised around men who were intimately familiar with violence and too proud to call for help.

Santino grabbed my upper arm and dragged me out, but the bodyguard stepped in our way.

"You can't just leave. You attacked a senator's son. This needs to be reported."

Santino released me and stepped up to the other man, bumping chests with him and giving him a death stare. Santino wasn't a walking wardrobe like that guy, but he was taller, and the look in his eyes even gave me chills.

"This is between the families. No police. No fucking official reports, got it?"

The man guffawed. "You think your gangster intimidation works on me? I don't care what you want, Al Capone."

Santino gave him a smile I knew to mean danger. He slammed his fist up into the man's chin without warning and with such force that the guy toppled backward and landed on the floor with a loud thud. Santino kicked him a few more times for good measure until the guy didn't stir anymore.

I was frozen. Clifford looked completely paralyzed and as if he might be sick any moment.

"Problem solved," Santino said simply. "He won't call the police today."

"Is he dead?" Clifford pressed out.

Santino gave him a pitying look. "No." He stepped up to Clifford who stumbled back. Santino obviously enjoyed Clifford's terror judging from the excited gleam in his eyes. "And you keep your hands and tongue, and especially your dick, to yourself until the wedding night, understood?"

Clifford nodded hastily.

"Santino," I protested but he stalked toward me, grabbed my upper arm and dragged me away. People turned toward us with open mouths when we hurried toward the front door.

Santino practically pushed me toward the car and rounded the hood toward the driver's side and got in without a word.

I slipped into the passenger seat.

“Your place is in the back,” Santino muttered, already starting the engine.

“I feel like riding in the front today.”

He floored the gas. I was pressed into the seat and had trouble putting on my belt as he took the first corner.

I watched his profile. The only thing missing was fume rising out of his ears, he looked so majorly pissed. I had to stifle a grin.

He shot me a scowl. “Don’t look so fucking pleased with yourself.”

“You got mad because I kissed Clifford.”

“I protected you. If your father finds out that you tongue-wrestled Cliffy on my watch, he won’t be pleased, fiancé or not.”

I rolled my eyes. “You protected me from Clifford?”

The hint of amusement crossed Santino’s face. “His wandering hands are a danger to your virtue.”

“When you say virtue, it sounds so weird. You are the least virtuous person I know. You banged a married woman.”

“Don’t talk like that, and that’s none of your business. You should be worried about your virtue, not mine.”

“Clifford doesn’t care about virtue or our rules. He told me himself that he doesn’t care if I’m with other guys before our marriage.”

Santino shook his head with a look of disgust. “Fucking idiot.”

“Why?”

Santino stopped at a red light and turned to me. “Because if you were promised to me, I’d make sure no other guy would get within a mile of you.”

“So that’s why you attacked Clifford? Because you were jealous?”

“Why should I be jealous, Anna? You are my ward. Your protection is my concern.”

“You could have been the first to kiss me, but you didn’t want to.”

Santino hit the gas. “I’m your bodyguard and you’re not of age.”

“I’ll be of age in a few months, Sonny. Don’t be more Catholic than the Pope.”

“Why the fuck are we discussing this? I won’t kiss you. Not now, not ever. You are a job, Anna.”

He said one thing, but his eyes told another story. I’d been cracking his stony exterior brick by brick in the last few months. I’d have to use my chance before Santino rebuild his walls.

“You should be more careful around Cliffy. His father is a snake, and even if he still seems like a likable, sappy idiot, this could be an act. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. So even if he doesn’t care about our rules and traditions, that doesn’t mean he won’t use them against you. If he starts bragging about kissing you, our people will hear it eventually, and they’ll judge you by our standards and not Cliffy’s.”

“He’s too terrified of you to ever mention the kiss to anyone.”

Santino smirked.

I shook my head. Then I smiled secretively and leaned slightly toward Santino. He sent me a warning look becoming visibly tense. I had to admit it gave me a kick. Santino never flinched away from danger or pain, but my flirting made him tense.

“You know, Santino, I wanted it to be you. I imagined it was you. And you protecting my virtue like a murderous, crazy knight in shining armor was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Santino released a sigh and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. I leaned back with a grin.

“Don’t imagine me when you kiss Cliffy. What he considers kissing is an insult to anyone with balls. The look on your face is one my Grandma has when I peck her cheek. It’s not a look of a woman being kissed by a man she isn’t related to.”

“If you think you can do better than Clifford, prove it. I’ll be the judge. I promise I’ll be fair.”

Santino gave a dry chuckle. “I don’t have to prove anything.”

“If you say so.” I shrugged and looked out of the window. Santino muttered something under his breath. I hoped I could provoke him into kissing me. Kissing Clifford had left me... wanting. The kiss had been pleasant and I bet many girls had worse first kiss experiences but it wasn’t what I wanted. I desired fireworks, butterflies wreaking havoc in my belly and heart racing. Pleasant wasn’t cutting it.

Santino wasn’t pleasant or nice. Santino was what I craved.

Even his iron will had to have its limits and if anyone could break it, then it was me.

Chapter *Six*



Santino

Anna practically frolicked up the stairs on her way to her room, probably to talk to her besties about every boring detail of her kiss.

My pulse picked up thinking about the moment I'd walked in on them. Seeing Clifford's lips fused to Anna's...

I'd wanted to kill him in the cruelest way possible. I'd already imagined calling Arturo and making a weekend-getaway out of Cliffy's dismemberment. He wasn't worthy of her. A man should be able to defend his woman. Cliffy couldn't even defend himself against a kindergarten kid.

I'd told Anna I'd wanted to protect her virtue... which was a half-truth. I wanted to protect her virtue from Cliffy and every other guy so I could destroy it myself. Fuck. For a few months, things had gone downhill. My mind couldn't stop seeing Anna as the woman that she was. A fucking gorgeous, very tempting woman who played her assets in all the right ways. Fuck, and she knew it.

I was a dead man walking.

"Santino," Dante's clipped voice tore me out of my inappropriate thoughts of his daughter. I turned toward the sound. He stood in front of his

office at the end of the hallway with a look that suggested he'd read my mind. Of course I knew that wasn't why his expression didn't bode well.

I strode toward him with a neutral expression.

"I'd like to have a word with you in my office," Dante said in a tight voice.

"Of course." I entered the office then took the seat across from the desk and waited while Dante moved behind the desk, but he didn't sit down. He stared down at me. "Senator Clark called me."

"Clifford is a little snitch."

Dante narrowed his eyes. "I assume it's true that you beat up one of Clifford's bodyguards and threatened the boy?"

"The boy had his tongue in Anna's mouth. He's lucky I didn't cut it off."

Dante's eyes flashed with shock then fury before his mask slipped back in place. He looked toward the window, obviously trying to compose himself. I could only imagine what it did to him to find out Cliff had his paws all over Anna.

"Anna and Clifford are promised to each other."

"That doesn't give him the right to touch her."

"Indeed."

"These people don't share our values. They don't have any honor. He might take Anna's virtue and then decide not to marry her."

Fuck, hear me talking about virtue like I had the slightest clue what that was. Anna was right. Virtue and I were total strangers.

"I'll handle the Clarks, and you rein yourself in around them, especially around the boy. I don't want another discussion with Maximo Clark. He asked me to punish you severely for the transgression and have you removed from the position as Anna's bodyguard."

If Clark were a Made Man, he could have asked Dante to remove me as a bodyguard. After all, Anna would be family. "Did you agree?"

"No. He doesn't understand our rules, and I won't have him try to stipulate any kind of rules himself."

I nodded. Many people in the Outfit were concerned that a union with the Clarks would water down our traditions and ultimately pose a greater risk to the Outfit than be a benefit. My main concern with the bond was that Anna deserved better.

Dante still regarded me, his eyes practically x-raying me. “I want to make sure you protect Anna for the right reasons.”

This was dangerous ground I was treading on. “I protect her because of my oath. I’ve always served you and the Outfit with my life and that won’t change.”

Dante nodded but I wasn’t sure I’d completely convinced him.

Fuck. If he started suspecting Anna was making moves on me and that I was even the slightest bit tempted to give in, he’d use my balls as Christmas decoration.

I got up when it became clear that our conversation was over and headed out of his office and straight upstairs. I needed to have a word with Anna. She needed to use her magnificent lying skills on her daddy. I wouldn’t die for such a stupid reason.

I hammered my fist against the door once. That was all the warning Anna would get. I was done playing nice.

Anna was sprawled on the bed on her stomach, while she was FaceTiming Luisa. The last I heard was, “*You should have seen the look in his eyes.*”

If she started daydreaming about Cliffy’s eyes, I’d throw up.

I stalked over to her, took the phone from her hand and turned it off.

“Hey!” Anna said as she shoved to her knees, trying to snatch the phone out of my hand again. I pushed it into my back pocket.

Anna lunged forward and gripped my belt to drag me closer and reach for her phone. I hadn’t expected her to be this forward. I’d have thought she’d have qualms about touching me like that. I’d obviously been very wrong. Her face was right before my crotch while she tried to reach into my back pocket.

I gripped her shoulders and held her at arm’s length. She peered up at me with a coy smile.

“You’d just have to ask if you wanted me to touch your butt, Sonny.”

I took a big step back, narrowing my eyes at her. “This shit right there is exactly why I’ll get killed.”

She raised her brows.

“Your dad’s suspecting there’s more behind me attacking Cliffy than just my sense of duty.”

Anna pushed to her feet. “Well, he’s onto something, isn’t he?”

I bridged the distance between us, snarling. “This isn’t a fucking game, Anna. I won’t get killed because you’re playing games.”

“No, you won’t,” she said haughtily. “You’ll get killed because you’re unable to resist my games. That’s your problem, not mine.”

She was right. I should have more self-control. But with Anna? Control eluded me more often than not. She knew me too well and pushed all my buttons, and I enjoyed it too often.

“That’s over now.”

“If you say so.”

“And you stop provoking me. And stay the fuck away from Cliffy.”

Anna stepped even closer and her scent, like spring and ocean and goddamn sunshine, hit my nostrils. “Why are you really angry, Santino?” she asked with a knowing smile. She was too clever, too cunning, and too goddamn beautiful.



I hurried up the stairs and FaceTimed Luisa the second I reached my room.

Stretched out on my belly, I told her about the kiss, wanting to keep the best for last.

“So how was it?” Luisa asked curiously. I could tell she was sitting at her piano. There wasn’t a day without music for her. For a while, I’d tried to be as good as her but Luisa didn’t just love music, she *lived* music and I didn’t. I loved drawing, especially humans and clothes. Music was a nice way to get in the mood to do what I really enjoyed.

“Pleasant.”

Luisa made a pained face. “That doesn’t sound as if you enjoyed it.”

“I did. It was nice really. Like a pleasant ride on one of those slow water rides in that theme park we once visited.”

“You hated it. You only rode the craziest rollercoasters afterward.”

I grinned, remembering that day and how pissed Santino had been because he had to go on every ride with me. But a few times I’d caught his excitement. He just didn’t want me to know he enjoyed anything I did. “It was okay. Clifford did nothing wrong. I think he’s a really good kisser.”

Luisa watched me silently. She sighed. “I know you, Anna. Good isn’t what you’re looking for.”

A grin crept up on my face. “Santino caught us.”

Luisa made a face as if she knew I’d set it up. “And?”

I bit my lip, my belly bursting with nervous butterflies.

“That expression...” She points at my face. “Should have been on your face while you talked about your kiss with Clifford.”

I waved her off. This wasn’t about the kiss or Clifford. “Santino completely lost his shit. For a moment I thought he’d kill Clifford. He grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off me.”

“He was on top of you?”

“Not really. He was just leaning into me but that’s not the point. Santino cared.”

“Are you sure he didn’t just follow your dad’s orders?”

I shook my head, still not able to stifle my grin or excitement. “You should have seen the look in his eyes.”

Santino burst into my room like a madman. Luisa’s eyes widened in alarm. A normal reaction seeing the murderous look on Santino’s face. My body, however, flooded with desire for him. My heart began racing and butterflies swarmed my belly. This was the reaction I wanted.



“Why are you really angry, Santino?” I asked.

Santino and I stood close, close enough to smell his aftershave, a familiar scent I often dreamed about since I first smelled it years ago. His brown eyes brimmed with anger, but it wasn’t all there was.

Santino looked as if he was torn between kissing and killing me. I should have been wary of his wrath like any sane person would have been but desire simmered in my veins. Nothing compared to the flood of desire I felt whenever I saw Santino's furious expression. He was like a caged beast—wild, furious, untamed.

He was the wild ride I needed before marriage and Clifford's political career caged me in, before life became a string of duties and pleasant kisses.

Santino desired me. Maybe he didn't dare admit it to himself, much less show it, but I could see it in his eyes. In a few months, I'd be of age, and I knew deep down that then all bets would be off. Like Santino had said, eventually he'd give in. It was only a matter of time and my perseverance.

I lowered my voice to a seductive whisper. "I think it's because you're pissed at yourself for wanting me. And you're even more pissed that Clifford kissed me first."

Santino looked ready to explode. "You—" He cut himself off. "Fuck it." He grabbed my neck and jerked me toward his body.

Our lips clashed. All the air left my lungs. The kiss was overwhelming. A wild rollercoaster ride of teeth, lips, tongue. Santino demanded I let him steer this crazy joy ride, and I relinquished my control, knowing the ride would be worth it.

His eyes blazed with fury. He wanted to resist. But he couldn't.

His grip on my neck tightened and the kiss became even harder. His body pressed into mine, forcing me a step back, toward my bed.

My mind went into overdrive, and my stomach filled with nerves and excitement.

Suddenly Santino released me and I almost fell back on the bed.

I gasped for air when his lips no longer held me captive. He glared, his eyes hooded and furious, his lips parted, breathing harsh. "That's a kiss."

"No," I got out. This wasn't just a kiss.

Santino narrowed his eyes.

"That was unbridled fury wrapped in a kiss. This was a revelation."

Santino shook his head. "If you like angry kissing, you'll love angry fucking." He trailed off, a look of regret passing his face. But he couldn't take the words back.

"I bet," I whispered. Hearing Santino for once use the word in the actual sense sent an excited shiver through my body.

He stepped back, his jaw clenching. “It won’t happen again. It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“But you wanted it to happen, and what you really regret is that you didn’t get my first kiss. You didn’t want it, so Clifford got it.”

Santino took a deep breath. “He’s your future husband.”

“Clifford doesn’t care whom I kiss, or if I do more before marriage.”

“I don’t care what Cliffy allows or not. I’m a soldier of the Outfit and abide by our rules.”

I snorted. “Tell that to Mr. Alfera.” He banged the wife of a captain and he wants to tell me about rules?

“That’s irrelevant. I won’t be your plaything until you seal the bond with Clifford.”

“Why not? You’ve been the plaything of married women before but you can’t be my plaything?” I hated the word but Santino had started it. “Clifford is having fun before marriage, why shouldn’t I?”

Santino shook his head with a frozen expression. “Make sure you get your father off our trail. Make him believe you’re a good girl and I’m your dutiful bodyguard.”

“I probably would have been more convincing before you sexed my mouth.”

“Your lying skills are above par. You’ll do fine,” he muttered then turned on his heel and left but not before dropping my cell on the floor with a heavy clung.

I let out an enraged cry. Then I stared up at the ceiling, listening to my pounding pulse and racing heart, feeling the dampness between my legs and the heat in my belly. If this was what a kiss from Santino did to me, I understood why Mrs. Alfera had risked her husband’s wrath for a quickie with him. My chance at freedom had an expiration date. Whatever I wanted to experience, I needed to do it before I married Clifford. I needed to soak up all the adventures I could. Love wasn’t written in my stars. But I wanted lust and excitement, danger and joy. I wanted to collect a myriad of memories before my future caught up with me.

Chapter *Seven*



I was drawing in my room, playing around with different variations of an evening dress. The scratching of my pencil on paper always calmed me. Our kiss had left me restless.

I wanted more. I also wanted to pay Santino back for being a dick, which was at odds with my first want, or maybe not.

I crumpled the paper. I couldn't focus on drawing.

"Anna!"

I groaned.

"Anna!" Steps akin to a charging rhino, thundered upstairs and toward my door.

"Anna!"

I sighed.

The door burst open and Leonas appeared in the doorway.

"What?"

He smirked and leaned against the doorframe, waving a letter in front of him.

I narrowed my eyes. "What is that?"

He shrugged with a triumphant smile.

I stared. If I gave him a stronger reaction, he'd only annoy me more. After the argument with Santino yesterday, I wasn't in the mood for his games.

"It's from France."

I perked up.

"A fashion institute."

I jumped off my chair and rushed toward Leonas. "Give it to me!"

His smile widened and he lifted the letter over his head while he held me at arm's length with his other hand.

I struggled to get the letter but Leonas was taller and stronger than me. Gone were the days I could kick his scrawny ass.

"Leonas!" I hissed.

"I want something in turn."

I stopped fighting with him and crossed my arms. "Spill."

"I want to attend Clifford's eighteenth birthday bash."

"Dad forbade you from any parties. You don't know when it's enough."

"That's why he won't find out. You'll sneak me in."

"Santino and Clifford will recognize you, you moron. Then it's only a matter of time before Dad knows too."

"Ah ah," Leonas drawled, wagging his finger before my face. I had the nauseating urge to bite it off. "We both know Sonny and Cliffy eat out of your hands, sis."

I leaned against the doorframe across from him. "All right."

"And Ricardo and RJ."

"No way!" I growled and lunged at him once more, trying to finally wrangle the letter from his hand. I punched his stomach, which made him choke-laugh. He pushed me to the ground and sat on my stomach.

"Okay, okay. I'll bring you three potheads to the party, but I won't go down with you if you get caught. And I don't want you to follow me like lost puppies."

"Newsflash, sis, we can entertain ourselves without your help."

As if I didn't know it. Those three were the bane of my existence.

"Get off me."

Leonas jumped to his feet and dropped the letter on my belly. I sat up and ripped it open with shaking hands then quickly read it, then another time to make sure I understood it right. My French was good, very good, but I was too nervous to trust my brain.

“Tell me what it says,” I pressed out, holding the letter out to Leonas with a trembling hand.

Leonas cocked an eyebrow and took the letter, then groaned. “French, really?”

“Read it!”

He scanned the letter, surprise spreading on his face.

My heart was racing.

“It says that you’re accepted in their undergraduate program for fashion design.”

I howled in excitement and stumbled to my feet, hugging Leonas. He gave me a worried look, as if he thought I was losing my mind.

“You want to study fashion in Paris?”

“Want? It’s been my dream for years!”

I hadn’t told anyone about my application, not even Luisa or Sofia. I’d felt insecure for even daring to dream about studying fashion in Paris. And now that my dream could actually become reality, a new fear set in, what if I wasn’t allowed to go?

Leonas handed me the letter back. “Dad won’t ever agree, Anna. He won’t let you move to another city, much less another country.”

I swallowed. Leonas was right. He voiced my fears. Getting accepted into the institute was only the first battle. The harder one was yet to come: convincing Dad to let me go. It was why I hadn’t told him or Mom about my plans to apply for the program. With me already being accepted into the program my chances of convincing Mom and Dad had grown exponentially because now they would be taking something away from me. I could play the guilt card if necessary.

“I can be convincing.”

“Even you can’t be that convincing. For years, you weren’t even allowed to attend school because our parents wanted to make sure you’re protected, and you expect Dad to say yes to this?”

“The war with the Camorra has been dormant for a while. Nothing major has happened since Serafina was kidnapped.”

“Tell Dad, not me.” His voice made it clear he didn’t think it would work.

I turned on my heel and headed downstairs, but not toward Dad’s office—he probably wasn’t even home—but toward Mom’s office. She mostly worked at home so she could spend more time with us, especially Bea who

still needed her more than Leonas and I. If I wanted a chance to convince Dad, I needed to convince Mom first.

I knocked and waited, my fingers leaving imprints on the letter. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had sweaty hands.

"Come in," Mom called.

I poked my head in with a sheepish smile. "Do you have time for a talk?"

Mom sat behind her desk, a modern white piece of furniture that was supported by only one diagonal leg. It was a design masterpiece. Mom and I had picked it together. She smiled warmly. Mom always made time for me, no matter how stressed she was. I'd miss having her close.

I strode over to her and held out the letter to her. She took it with a small frown and then scanned it. Slowly she lowered it to the desk then looked up at me with a shocked expression. "You applied to a fashion institute in Paris?"

"It's not just any fashion institute, Mom. It's one of the best schools for fashion design in the world."

"But you applied to the School of the Arts Institute?"

"Yes." It was the best place to study fashion design in Chicago. It wasn't Paris or New York.

Mom nodded then glanced at the letter again as if she still couldn't believe it. "Paris." She shook her head. "Anna."

"Mom," I said pleadingly, grabbing her hand. "You know how much I love drawing, how much I love being creative, how much I want to design fashion, and Paris is the place to do it." I motioned at the dress I'd designed and was currently wearing. A green ombre effect dress with inconspicuous pockets on the skirt where I could stash my phone or whatever else I needed on hand.

"I know, but it's far away and this isn't just a short summer program, this is a three-year undergraduate program."

"It's not like I'm forced to finish. I could start the program and if you and Dad think it's time for me to return to Chicago, then I come back. But think of it this way, time abroad, especially in France, will impress all the stuck-up friends of the Clarks."

Mom gave me a knowing smile. "Try that line on your dad later, maybe it'll work."

I sank down before Mom and put my head in her lap like I'd done when I was small. "I know what my duties are. I'll marry Clifford so the Outfit and our family get even stronger. I'll play the politician's wife. But until then I want to be me, at least for a little while. Clifford won't care. He's not like our men. I could live my dream for a few years before I'd become everything the Outfit needs me to be."

Mom stroked my hair and sighed. "I want you to be yourself, not just for a few years but forever. Maybe you can be that around Clifford."

"He can't ever know all of our world's secrets, Mom, so I'll always have to keep part of myself hidden."

"You're very wise Anna. You always were."

I closed my eyes, relishing the feeling of Mom's fingers massaging my scalp.

"Paris is beautiful," Mom whispered. Dad and she had celebrated their last anniversary there.

"I wish I could see it with my own eyes."

Mom's hands stilled. "Your protection will always be our top priority."

"That's why I never asked to apply to the New York Fashion Institute. But Paris is far from our world's conflicts. I won't tell people who I am. I'll pretend I'm a normal student. I'll blend in. That's the best protection."

"You have my blessing, sweetheart. We'll figure out your protection." She laughed. "But I don't know how we'll convince your father."



Mom went in first. If anyone could convince Dad then it was her.

I paced in the hallway. I was tempted to eavesdrop, but resisted the urge. The voices behind the door were too quiet anyway. Neither Dad nor Mom often raised their voices.

After what felt like forever, the door opened and Mom motioned for me to get in. Her expression told me the fight wasn't over yet.

Dad stood in front of the window, his arms behind his back. I gave him a hopeful smile.

He released a sigh. "You know how dangerous our world is."

“But Paris isn’t anyone’s territory. It’s far away, yes, but that’s an advantage.”

Dad gave a tight smile. “That’s one way to see it. But our conflicts don’t end at any borders.”

“The Camorra won’t send anyone to France to kidnap me. And the Famiglia has never been in the business of kidnapping women.”

Dad’s face had tightened like it always did when the darkest hour of the Outfit was mentioned. I doubted he’d ever get over it.

“Don’t you think I’ll travel the world once I’m married to Clifford? His family has vacation homes in Europe.”

“The Clark’s bodyguards will guard you then.”

“I can take Santino to Paris. He’s protected me for years. He can keep me safe in Paris.”

Dad’s brows puckered. To my surprise, it was Mom who looked more worried because of my suggestion. I definitely needed to be careful around her. If she found out about me lusting after Santino, she’d not only forbid me from going to Paris but she’d also kill him herself.

“Three years is a long time, Anna.”

“I’ll come to Chicago for the holidays and everyone’s birthdays and important social events, and you could come visit me as well.”

“We’re talking about a ten-hour flight, not a short car ride,” Dad said.

I walked toward him, giving him my best puppy dog eyes. Dad was cold as ice but this look always got him, eventually.

“I don’t even have to finish, but I’d love to give it a try, for a little while at least. You know I never get in trouble Dad. You can trust me. I’ll be good. Just let me live a little.”

Dad touched my cheek. “I’ll protect you at any cost.”

“I know, but I’ll be safe.”

“Even if I let you attend the program for a while, you can’t begin this fall. We agreed to have your engagement party right after your birthday. The program will already have started then.”

I bit my lip. My engagement party... I kept forgetting about it. Only three months. “I could come over from Paris for it.”

Dad shook his head. “Many social gatherings will require your presence around the time of your engagement. You can start in the Spring.”

“Okay,” I said quietly, trying not to be too disappointed. Dad even considering Paris at all was already a major win. “But I was accepted for

the Fall semester. I don't know if they let me start later."

"I'll handle it. We have a few contacts in France. I'm sure there's something we can do. Three months is too little time to find you a safe apartment in Paris anyway. It requires plenty of planning so spring is more feasible."

"So I can go, after your birthday?" I asked, trying to put Dad on the spot. He raised a blond brow, seeing right through me.

"I'll talk to Santino. If he thinks he can keep you safe in Paris, I might consider letting you go in February until next summer. After that, I'll have to decide again."

I stood on my tiptoes and threw my arms around Dad's neck then kissed his cheek, which was as usually impeccably shaved. I'd never seen Dad with stubble. "Thank you so much, Dad!"

"I haven't said yes yet."

I grinned and darted out. The moment I was in the hallway, determination filled me. Santino would never tell Dad that he could protect me in Paris. Not because he doubted his abilities, but because he didn't want to go to Paris with me. He'd kept his distance since our kiss a few days ago.

I had to talk to him before he talked to Dad. I headed toward the guardhouse and Santino crossed my way, already on his way to talk to Dad.

I grabbed his arm. He looked down at my fingers with disdain. "What are you doing?"

"You have to tell my father that you'll protect me in Paris and that you're confident you can protect me."

His eyes reflected his confusion. "What are you talking about?"

I explained the situation to him in a rush. We didn't have any time to waste.

"So let me get this straight," he drawled. "You want me to go to France and protect you there, 24/7. For three fucking years."

"It's probably only going to be until the summer. Six months tops. Dad won't allow me to stay abroad for longer."

Santino gave me a look that suggested I was full of shit. "France. And babysitting you 24/7. That's a big fat no."

"You have to say yes."

"No."

He shook off my grip and strode away. I hurried after him and caught him in the hallway to Dad's office. "Do you want Dad to find out about Mrs. Alfera and the kiss we just shared?"

Santino's eyes flashed with disbelief, then fury. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"I wouldn't have to blackmail you if you'd care about my feelings."

"I protect your body, not your feelings."

"Maybe you should do both."

His jaw flexed. He was majorly pissed. "So let me get this straight, you'll snitch on me if I don't tell your daddy that I'll gladly keep your ass safe in Paris?"

"And that you're very confident you'll be able to keep my safe."

If looks could kill, I'd be ashes. I'd managed to piss Santino off before, but I don't think I'd ever seen him look this angry.

Santino stalked toward Dad's office without another word and knocked before I could say more. I quickly hurried away so Dad wouldn't see me. Now I had to hope that Santino would do as I asked. Any sane person would lie to save their life. But Santino sometimes acted like a lunatic.

Chapter *Eight*



I waited anxiously in my room. I didn't want to barge into Dad's office too soon. But the longer the wait took, the harder it got to stay put.

A knock sounded and I practically flew toward the door and ripped it open.

Mom stood in the hallway. "Can I come in?"

Her face was unreadable, which made my heart sink. I would probably cry if Paris didn't work out. It seemed my only chance to live my dreams until marriage would crush them.

I stepped back. "Of course."

Mom walked in and sank down on my sofa. I sat beside her. "And?" I asked, unable to hold back any longer.

"Your dad had a long conversation with Santino."

I nodded, ready to burst.

"Santino convinced your dad that he can protect you in Paris, so your father and I will allow you to start your fashion design studies—"

I screeched and threw my arms around Mom's neck. Mom laughed and patted my arm.

“Let me finish,” she pressed out, obviously struggling to breathe because of my tight hug.

I pulled back, my cheeks flushed.

“We’ll allow you to start but how long you’ll be allowed to stay that depends on the overall safety situation and your behavior. If we feel at any time, that your safety is on the line, you’ll return.”

“Of course, Mom. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Mom searched my eyes. “Your father trusts in Santino’s abilities. He’s a very competent soldier.” She paused. “I, however, don’t know if I like the idea of you alone with him in Paris.”

I swallowed and made a shocked face. “Why? He’s been protecting me for years.”

“Yes, yes,” Mom said slowly. “I’m your mother, but I’m also a woman, and I have eyes.”

I tried to look as unsuspecting as humanly possible.

Mom’s expression made it clear I could drop the act. “That look works on men, not on mothers.”

“Why?”

“Because fathers want to believe their daughters are the epitome of innocence and they’d rather preserve it than see it crumple.”

“I don’t want to do anything bad, Mom. I just want to live a little, is that so bad?”

“If you ask most men in our world, yes. If you ask me, it depends.”

I knew I was treading thin ice confiding in Mom about the freedoms I wanted to experience, but Mom was the most understanding person I knew. And despite our world, she was a feminist and wanted equal chances for women and men.

“I want to have some fun before I’ll have to marry Clifford.”

“I know Clifford is having his fair share of fun and I suspect he won’t hold himself back at the frat parties he’ll attend in the next few years.”

“Definitely not,” I said then told Mom about the strange conversation he and I had a while back.

She touched my arm. “Like Clifford has said, discretion is the key. As long as you use protection, I don’t mind you having fun. With your marriage to Clifford, you have more freedoms than most women in our world...” She trailed off. “Freedom of choice doesn’t mean we should choose every option available to us. Some remain unwise.”

I knew she was talking about Santino. I chose to stay silent. Every word I said might reveal more than I wanted. Mom was on a trail and I didn't want to ruin my chances of going to Paris because she thought I had the hots for Santino.

"I want you to stay away from Santino. That's my condition. If I get the feeling that there's something going on between you and him, then you'll be on the next flight back to Chicago and he'll have a new job."

"Mom, you really don't have to worry. Santino doesn't have the slightest interest in me. He can barely tolerate me and he takes his job way too seriously."

Mom's eyes seemed to x-ray me. "You have an iron will and you like getting your way, sweetheart. Both can be an advantage but it can also get you in trouble. I want to be sure that you, too, keep the expected distance to Santino. It would reflect badly on your dad if the man he chose to protect you disrespects him by inappropriate conduct toward you."

Ouch. Mom knew how to land a hit. "Is this really about Santino or do you and Dad prefer if I stay a virgin until marriage?"

"This is solely about Santino. He has a responsibility for you and he's much older and experienced than you. You should pick a boy your age if you want to enjoy your temporary freedoms."

Santino being more experienced was one of the reasons why I found him sexy. I had a feeling Santino knew how to give a woman a good time. Mrs. Alfera probably wouldn't risk her husband's wrath for a lackluster lover.

Of course, I didn't mention either of this. "Dad's twelve years older than you."

"Our situation was very different. I was already married before and I was a grown woman. You're Santino's ward, and he's known you a long time, that puts you at a disadvantage."

That showed how biased Mom was as my mother. "You were only twenty-three when you had to marry Dad. In a marriage you are at a greater disadvantage because the husband holds all the power, especially if he's Capo. Dad knew you from social events since you were much younger. And you told me yourself your first marriage was never real, so really we weren't on so different levels. Only I'm not married to Santino, so he doesn't have any power over me."

"Arguing with you used to be easier."

I grinned.

Mom sobered. “I have one non-negotiable condition, Anna. I don’t want you and Santino to happen. That’s all. You can have fun, but not with him.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. He’s not interested in me, and I’m more interested in meeting a cute Parisian artsy guy. I don’t have any interest in Santino. Maybe I had a tiny crush on him when I was twelve or thirteen, but I’m not that little girl anymore.”

I could tell that Mom wasn’t completely convinced, but she nodded anyway.



Santino

My pulse was pounding in my veins as I stepped into Dante’s office. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this pissed. Anna had backed me into a corner and I had only one option to get out of it, telling Dante the truth about my fling with Mrs. Alfera and kissing Anna.

The former was something that might only lead to disapproval and a warning from my Capo. The latter however could cost me everything, and not just me. Dad had worked hard all his life and was well respected. Even if he had nothing to do with my shit, he would probably be dragged into the mud with me.

“Santino,” Dante said with a curt nod. He stood in front of the window, his arms behind his back and a look of worry on his face. Despite his age, he oozed strength, and his authority certainly hadn’t been diminished over the years. He was one of the few people I truly respected. Lying to him didn’t sit well with me for various reasons.

“I’ve asked you to come to my office because I need your honest opinion on a matter.”

“All right. Dad always tells me I can be brutally honest, so that shouldn’t be the problem,” I said, my voice reasonably calm considering the rage still bubbling under the surface.

Dante turned to face me fully, which made me work even harder to keep my face controlled. “Anna’s been accepted to attend a school for fashion design in Paris starting this Fall and I have to decide if I’ll allow her to go.”

“Paris,” I said, surprised, as if that was news to me. “I assume you’re not talking about Paris, Texas.”

Dante let out a dry laugh. “Unfortunately, Anna’s dream is a year in France. Possibly longer.”

Did she really expect me to live in France for years? I sure as fuck wouldn’t learn French just so she could eat baguette with a view of the Eiffel Tower. I couldn’t believe I’d allowed Anna to blackmail me. Why had I kissed her? What the fuck had gone wrong in my brain? “That’s a long time away from home.”

“Indeed. You’ve been responsible for Anna’s safety for years and I trust your judgment. I need to be sure that Anna will be safe living in Paris. That would require your presence at the very least.”

I took a deep breath. “Paris is probably safer than Chicago for Anna, considering that the Camorra and the Famiglia are far away. If we make sure Anna’s presence in Paris isn’t widely known and we arrange for her to live as a normal student there, I doubt she’ll face more dangers than here.”

“For the time of Anna’s studies in Paris, you’d have to uproot your entire life. You could only visit home when Anna comes back to Chicago for social events, which will happen frequently, but you’d still have to give up your life for her.”

What life? I wanted to ask. Since I’d become Anna’s bodyguard, I’d worked almost every day. And it wasn’t just a fucking nine-to-five job. More like seven to ten in the evening. I had to always be available when she wanted to go anywhere. I was at her beck and call. So the only thing that would make Paris an even harder experience was that I wouldn’t even be off at night and that I’d have to sleep with an eye open to make sure Anna didn’t sneak into my bed. “I don’t have a wife or girlfriend, and my sister isn’t living at home anymore. And I’m sure I’ll see my father whenever you and Valentina visit or when Anna and I come to the States.”

“You’d have to live a lie. It would probably be feasible to pretend you’re her brother in public to explain the two of you being together all the time.”

Brother? Of course, Dante wouldn’t want us to pretend to be a couple, which was probably for the best anyway. Crossing boundaries had let me here in the first place, so getting me in the mindset of seeing Anna as firmly off limits again was key.

“You can’t have any days off, not even a night,” Dante continued, unaware of my racing thoughts.

I nodded. “That’s true. It’ll be challenging.” I cleared my throat. “I’ll do it and I’m confident I can keep her safe, but after I’ve watched Anna in Paris, I’d like to resign as a bodyguard and return to working with Arturo. I miss that line of work.”

Dante’s brows drew together. I wasn’t sure if it was a good or bad sign. Despite knowing the man for decades, I had trouble reading him. He finally inclined his head. “I give you my word that you’ll become Enforcer once you’re back.”

Fuck yes!

I couldn’t wait to tell Anna one day, but definitely not any time soon. “Better not tell Anna yet. I don’t want her to think I won’t work properly because I have my head elsewhere.” The little she-devil would only find a way to convince Dante to keep me as her bodyguard or blackmail me into staying. After Paris, I was fucking done. Things between Anna and me were spiraling out of control, and Paris was already a ridiculously high risk.

“I told Anna she could leave in February. We have to wait for her engagement and a few important social events to pass before she can leave.”

“Will the Clarks agree to her going to France?”

“They follow very different rules than we do, which brings me to my next point.”

I waited. I had a feeling I knew where this was going, and it probably had partly to do with me.

“Because of her bond to Clifford, Anna has more freedoms than most girls in our world. I’m sure Clifford has told her so. He doesn’t strike me as someone who cares what she does before marriage and possibly not even after.”

The disapproval in Dante's voice surprised me. He and Valentina had decided to enter the bond with the Clarks but I supposed it was a bit like the deal with the devil. Necessary at times, but not pleasant. Dante didn't like Maximo Clark, not even his own wife did.

"Fidelity isn't guaranteed in their, nor in our world," I said. I'd had too many affairs with married women who sought comfort in the arms of another man after being cheated on for years and suffering in silence. Maybe that was why I no longer believed in marriage or love. My parents had loved each other, and it had almost killed Dad when Mom had died. Love fucked you over either way.

"In our world, any man would know better than to betray Anna."

"That's true." Most would shit their pants out of fear of Dante. "But Anna is tough. I'm sure she'll wrap Clifford around her finger in no time." The words really cost me. Anna was a major pain in the ass and drove me up the wall almost every day, but she was also a mafia princess, proud and clever, not to mention gorgeous. She deserved better than Clifford. She deserved a man who knew her worth, who really understood who she was and the weight she carried on her shoulders. Clifford was too wrapped up in his daddy and mommy issues, not to mention planning his future career to realize what kind of gem he was given without any work of his own.

"Why I'm bringing this up is because while I want Anna to enjoy Paris, even attend the occasional party with you at her side, I still need you to make sure she abides to our rules and is safe."

"I assume you are talking about boys."

"If Clifford and the Clarks decide to break the engagement for whatever reason, they're not bound by our oaths and honor so I won't rule it out completely, I need to make sure Anna won't face an unfortunate scandal if she enters a marriage with one of our men. Our world remains old-fashioned in this regard and my and Valentina's efforts to lead to a change haven't been successful, at least in that point."

"I'll make sure Anna stays away from boys, don't worry." I'd thoroughly enjoy cockblocking any guy who wanted to put his paws on her. I tried not to dwell on why this gave me such a fucking thrill.

"I appreciate it," Dante drawled and slowly strode closer to me. Now it was coming, the warning I'd been waiting for. "As a father, I try to ignore certain developments, but I'm not blind to the fact that Anna has become a beautiful young woman who'll soon be of age, and you aren't committed to

anyone. Living in such close quarters might make Anna or you forget certain boundaries.”

I chuckled as if this was completely unrealistic. “Trust me, neither Anna nor I are at risk to lose sight of any boundaries. Anna is very driven and dutiful. She’ll focus on her studies, and if she fawns over a boy, it’ll be some Frenchman who’s into drawing and the opera. But even if Anna suddenly had any interest in me, I’m not in the slightest interested in her. I’ve always been more drawn to older women.” That was the absolute truth. All of my affairs and even short-term girlfriends had been older. Arturo, in a rare moment of being funny, had called me the MILFinator once. I wasn’t sure what it was about Anna that was different, that made me show even the slightest interest in her. But it sure as fuck wouldn’t be enough to make me land in bed with her. I’d go looking for a nice French MILF to keep me company. “My Dad was more worried about me making the moves on your wife than Anna when I started working here,” I said in a true foot-in-mouth moment. One day I’d end up with a bullet in my head, because of my dick or my mouth.

Dante’s eyes flashed, and he raised one eyebrow. “That’s certainly reassuring,” he said in a low voice.

I decided to keep my mouth shut before it spewed some even stupider shit. Dante was a controlled man and even more controlled Capo, which saved my life right now.

“I don’t think I’ll have to tell you what will happen if I find out you acted in any way inappropriate to Anna, or my wife, in Paris or at any other place.”

“I’ve been your Enforcer, Capo. No need to give me any details. And knowing Arturo’s freaky brain, he’ll probably see it as an even greater challenge to torture me.”

“Rest assured, I’d handle you myself in this case.”

I chuckled and nodded. “While it would be an honor to die at your hands, I assure you it won’t come to that.”

Chapter *Nine*



Today was Clifford's eighteenth birthday, which meant it was the beginning of August and only two more months before our engagement and six months until I'd move to Paris temporarily.

I already had a list of events I'd have to fly to Chicago for to uphold my social responsibilities but I was still excited.

As promised, I snuck Leonas, Rocco, and Ricardo into Clifford's party. Clifford didn't mind. It was a huge party with over two hundred guests so nobody would notice three pot-headed tweens.

Santino pretended he didn't care. He'd hardly talked a word to me since I made him help me with Paris a few weeks ago. When I'd thanked him for helping me, he'd given me a murderous look and growled, "Don't thank me." That was our longest interaction since then.

Mom's words had been replaying in my mind constantly. Well, her warning. That was why I'd respected Santino's desire for distance. Breaking my promise to Mom wasn't something I could do lightly, and I'd sworn myself to at least try to stay away from Santino. Of course, that had only fueled my nightly fantasies of him. But there wasn't any harm in that, right?

Right.

I was determined to have as much fun as possible at Clifford's party, without wasting a single thought on Santino. He was off limits.

Off limits.

We picked up Luisa first. I grinned when she got into the back seat beside me and Leonas. She'd never accompanied me to a party before and I was glad to have her at my side. She could talk some sense into me in case I forgot my own limits...

Luisa was as usual a bit shy when she greeted Santino. She was a good girl through and through, and I loved her for it. Since she'd found out about our forbidden kiss, she had even more trouble interacting with Santino, though he had always intimidated her. "I'm nervous. This is my first real party."

I gave her an encouraging smile. "You'll be fine. Just have fun."

She nodded, clutching her purse as if it were her lifeline.

Santino headed to the Scuderi mansion next. It was where Riccardo and Rocco still lived with their mother after their father had died. They were already waiting in front of the door and raced down the stairs with huge grins. Of course, they didn't have to sneak out of the house like Leonas had done. Their mother had enough to do getting past her marriage trauma to take care of them properly.

There wasn't any room for them on the back seat, and Santino snarled at them when they tried to get into the passenger seat, so they had no choice but to sit in the legroom in front of us. Riccardo grinned and exchanged a look with his brother when he pressed up to my legs for lack of room.

"You better keep your excitement down," Leonas muttered.

"Oh he will," I said. "Or he'll find out how sharp my heels are."

Riccardo exchanged another look with Rocco but they didn't get a chance to say anything because Santino hit the gas.

If he thought driving like a madman would ruin the party for me, then he was very wrong.

Luisa and I ditched the boys as soon as we arrived at Clark mansion, except for our shadow Santino of course.

We picked up drinks right away and headed toward the dance floor.

Luisa took a hesitant sip from the white wine bowl.

"Take it slow," I told her. I didn't want to be responsible for her passing out from too much alcohol. I'd never seen her drink before. I took out my

phone. “Selfie time. I want to send a few photos to Sofia to cheer her up.”

Her marriage with Danilo was still a bit bumpy, and I was sad that she couldn't be here with us. With her now living in Indianapolis, we'd hardly see each other often, especially now that she had wife duties. We made funny faces into the camera and I sent the five most ridiculous ones to Sofia.

I was glad I didn't have to marry soon. I guess I had to thank Clifford for that. “I'm glad you aren't married yet,” I told Luisa.

Luisa made a face and shrugged. “I wouldn't mind getting married, but Mom is being super picky when it comes to possible husbands.”

No wonder considering her backstory with an abusive rapist of a first husband. I didn't say it. Luisa never talked about her biological father.

“You'll be married soon enough. And you could just pick a husband yourself. I doubt your mom would say no if you fell in love or in lust.”

Luisa flushed at the mentioning of lust. I laughed and nudged her. “You're really going to be the blushing virgin in your wedding night. If I was gay, I'd marry you. You're just the cutest.”

Luisa nudged me back, looking even more embarrassed. “Do you know anyone?”

I shook my head in response. I hardly knew anyone, but that wasn't the worst thing. That way I could relax and not worry too much about every detail of tonight making the rounds in our circles and eventually finding its way to my parents. With Santino in my hands, my life had improved considerably. Even his increased grumpiness because of my little blackmailing scheme was worth it.

“Where's Santino? Shouldn't he be watching us?” Luisa asked worriedly as she looked around. Santino had agreed to watch us both tonight so we wouldn't draw too much attention to us with a second bodyguard. It had only taken a little convincing on my part for Luisa's mom to agree. Adults always thought I was the good girl so they gave me what I wanted, even the overprotective Bibiana.

I allowed my gaze to search the dance floor then drift to the bar on the patio. Most guests were outside, enjoying the warm summer night. I didn't see Santino anywhere. Only Leonas and his two sidekicks were chatting to a couple of girls. Suspicion filled me. Luisa was right, Santino had agreed to watch. Though, I doubted anyone would attack a senator's house to get to me. Where was he? Either he'd hidden away in the furthest corner for some

peace and quiet, or... he wouldn't dare... most of the guests were around my and Clifford's age, only a few seemed to be a couple of years older. If Santino banged a girl around my age, I'd make his life hell.

Off limits, I reminded myself, but my heart ignored my brain.

I motioned at Leonas that I'd head to the toilet and he pointed at his watch, which made me roll my eyes. It meant he'd come looking for me if I wasn't back in five minutes. Whenever he was in charge of my protection, he became this bossy, uber-protective-wise guy.

This was a party of spoiled rich kids who cried already when a piece of bubble gum got stuck under their boots. In our world, you asked your brother to hand you his knife so you could scratch it off and he'd still use the blade to stab someone afterward. I could deal with any boy who dared to approach me. I'd make them cry into their fancy-pansy white-wine-bowl in no time.

"I'll go looking for Santino," I told Luisa. "Do you want to come with me?"

Luisa immediately shook her head. "I'd rather not get involved in a fight."

"Who says we're going to fight?"

Luisa gave me a look that said *really?*

I grinned. "We're an explosive combination." Then I glanced around. "Maybe you can head over to Leonas? I'd feel better if I didn't leave you alone here."

Luisa laughed. "I'm shy and not as outgoing as you, but I'll be fine, Anna."

I didn't move.

She sighed with a small smile. "All right. I'll head over to your brother."

"I'll be quick."

I wiggled my fingers at Leonas and motioned at Luisa then moved outside. Seeing how many people danced in the yard or in the pool, I doubted Clifford had invited only two hundred people. The place was swarming with guests. Mom would kill me if I invited that many people to a wild party. I glanced toward the pool house, which was bathed in darkness. Clifford was clever enough to keep the party out of his own walls. That was the perfect place for Santino to chill, or do other things...

I hurried toward the glass door. The shutters were all closed so I couldn't look inside. I pushed the handle down and was surprised to find it open. Why hadn't Clifford locked it?

Or had Santino picked the lock? I really wouldn't put it past him. The moment I stepped inside, I heard giggling. The asshole.

Had he really picked a girl to bang? Next time he told me I was too young, I'd give him a piece of my mind. As if a few months made such a big difference!

Another giggle rang out. It sounded absolutely wrong. I couldn't pinpoint why exactly.

I followed the noise toward a door behind which I suspected the bedroom. By now the noise had turned into muffled groans and gasps, intermingling with awed "oh gods".

I pushed open the bedroom door, trying to be quiet.

The first thing I saw was Mrs. Clark's awestruck face. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted and she was sweaty. Her breasts jiggled in front of her and the neckline of her dress shoved down so it wrapped around her ribs. Her red thong dangled around her ankle as she kneeled doggy style on Clifford's bed, the skirt of her dress pushed up on her back so her ass was propped up in front of none other than Santino.

She made a face as if the holy ghost had descended on her and she chanted oh god oh god, as if she'd arise to the gates of heaven any moment. Either Clark Senior was the worst lay ever, or Santino had a magic dick. Santino was mostly dressed, but his shirt was untugged and his pants were open as he pistoned into Mrs. Clark with the determination of a brand-new jackhammer.

In a spur-of-the-moment decision, I grabbed my phone and snapped a photo then quickly shoved it back into my purse.

I took a step back and the floorboards creaked. Santino's eyes cut to me and he didn't stop. Only made a motion with his hand that suggested I should get lost.

He did this to spite me. To punish me for forcing him to come to Paris. Maybe even for our kiss. He was pissed. But so was I.

My lips curled and I turned on my heel. For all I cared, he could fuck Clifford's mom until her fake lashes fell off and her contact lenses dropped out. Maybe she'd take him to the gates of hell with her, because God would definitely not answer to her ridiculous chanting.

I was seething. *Seething.*

But worse.

Worse.

I was hurt and jealous.

And that made me even angrier because I didn't want Santino to have the power to hurt me. I wanted him to bang me. That was it. My emotions needed to kindly go fuck themselves and leave me be. My life was already complicated as it was, I didn't need my crush on Santino to complicate things further.

I couldn't believe he'd picked Mrs. Clark to bang. This was his way to pay me back.

Two could play this game.

If he acted like an asshole, I'd show him what kind of bitch I could be.

I checked my surroundings for Clifford but only caught the back of his head. He was busy tongue-wrestling a brunette I didn't know.

I released a slow breath, close to snapping. The guy I should be obsessed with and the guy I was actually obsessed with were both getting it on with other women.

I looked around for my brother, his two sidekicks, and Luisa. Instead of finding the Beagle Boys or my friend, I only found Rocco close to the French doors, looking entirely up to no good. Which meant my brother and Riccardo were probably somewhere outside, getting themselves, and if I was particularly unlucky, me into trouble.

Luisa wasn't anywhere. Today wasn't my day. I scanned the crowd again as I slowly made my way over to Rocco, desperately hoping Luisa would show up again and not let herself be dragged into my brother's shenanigans. I needed a pep talk, or someone to talk me out of doing something particularly stupid. She was good at both, but had plenty of practice with the latter.

"Don't get me in trouble," I said in warning when I arrived at Rocco's side.

"You look like you're in trouble yourself," he commented curiously and with that head tilt and x-ray look that always made you believe he knew more than he should. Sometimes he creeped me out.

"Not in trouble, but I need someone to make out with."

Rocco's eyes widened.

Gotcha.

Then he gave a sly smile, and my lips curled.

“Not you, moron,” I muttered.

I wanted to pay Santino back and not make him pity me for kissing a fourteen-year-old kid. Not to mention that I really needed a spectacular kiss that would make me want to sing to heaven as well. Maybe Mrs. Clark had been faking it, but she hadn’t looked like that had been the case.

“You and the other Beagle Boys stay out of trouble, understood? I won’t go down with you today,” I growled.

“That’s a stupid name.”

I gave him a look that made it clear it fit them to a T before I finally found Luisa standing in the lobby. She was clutching her glass and giving the two boys who were talking to her an awkward smile. Unlike me, boys didn’t recognize her as a mafia princess, so they actually dared to approach her. She looked like Bambi in human form, with huge brown eyes and long lashes, plus silky brown hair. Of course, she also reeked of innocence which seemed to draw in the boys even more. I made my way over to her and immediately relief crossed her face. I didn’t spot my brother anywhere. I decided not to care for the time being. I’d later give him an ass-kicking for leaving Luisa’s side.

“Anna,” she said with a grateful smile as if I’d saved her.

Both boys checked me out as usual, before the face of the first guy flashed with recognition and then caution.

“That’s my friend Anna,” Luisa introduced me.

I leaned in and whispered in her ear while deciding my chances with the guy who hadn’t recognized me yet were better. “I’m going to put the moves on the guy on the right, or have you called dibs?”

It was a rhetorical question. Luisa was determined to wait until marriage for her first kiss.

“He’s French,” she murmured.

It was a clear sign and explained why he didn’t know who I was.

I hit him with a charming smile. “You’re from France?” I asked in French.

His smile brightened. “Yes, from Paris. I’m here to improve my English.”

“What a coincidence. I’m looking for someone to improve my French.”
Kissing...

The guy smiled as if he knew what I hadn't said and introduced himself as Maurice. I told him about me going to Paris and soon we were immersed in a conversation. He often touched my arm and his eyes darted to my lips, so I knew things were going in the right direction. "How about we head outside for a bit? I need some fresh air."

Before I left with him, I leaned toward Luisa. "If you see Santino, tell him you can't find me."

She shook her head with a warning look. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Of course not," I said with a laugh.

Maurice and I strode out into the backyard of the mansion. It was still warm and I could feel the heat rise through the soles of my shoes as we crossed the expensive marble tiles surrounding the pool area. The music was so loud, I was surprised none of the neighbors had called the police yet. Either they had been bribed or Clark's connection to the Outfit was having effects.

Maurice led me toward a more secluded part of the premises down by a pond which was lined by a few tall trees. A bench perched on the very edge of the pond. Maurice and I settled on it, our legs touching. We chatted for a bit but I could tell his mind was already on another task. His gaze was now practically glued to my lips.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Santino step out onto the porch. I wasn't sure if he could see us from his vantage point because our part of the backyard wasn't as brightly lit as the rest.

But he'd find us. That was his job after all.

I batted my lashes at Maurice and bit my lower lip. He didn't need another invitation. One of his arms came around my back and with the other, he cupped my head and kissed me. He wasn't as hesitant as Clifford had been and the kiss was much more enjoyable. Of course, it couldn't hold a candle to Santino's kiss. Still I found myself being pleasantly surprised. Paying Santino back at least proved a nice experience. His palm traveled down my back until it rested right above my ass and our kiss picked up pace. My body didn't spring to life like it had done with Santino but I could imagine getting into it more after a while.

Suddenly Maurice was ripped away from me. It took me a moment to understand what had happened. Maurice's kiss had actually made me forget the reason for the kiss in the first place.

Maurice sat on the ground with Santino standing over him. Maurice let out a string of French curses then lunged at Santino. My eyes widened. Bad idea.

Within a minute, Santino had Maurice back on the ground, face first. Santino's knee pressed into Maurice's back, and his expression suggested he wanted to break his spine.

"Santino," I warned. "Maurice doesn't know who I am."

Santino's cold smile hit me and sent a shiver down my back. "Maybe you should let guys know before you kiss them that they're risking their lives by touching you."

"Get off!" Maurice growled in English.

Santino dug his knee deeper into his back, making him groan in pain.

"Are you her boyfriend?"

"Bodyguard," I said quickly and moved to their side. I grabbed Santino's shoulder, feeling his muscles flex under my fingertips.

"Santino."

Santino straightened and finally released Maurice who immediately shoved to his feet but kept his distance to us. "Bodyguard? You're famous?"

Santino sneered. "She's a mafia princess, so you stay the fuck away from her unless you want me to break your spine."

Maurice seemed to think Santino was joking but a look at my apologetic face had his eyes go wide. He shook his head with another string of French curses. "You Americans are completely crazy." He went off without another word.

Santino grabbed my arm and dragged me away, but not back toward the party instead toward the driveway.

"What are you doing? It's not even midnight yet! I didn't get the chance to congratulate Clifford."

"If you think I'll stay another second at this party so I can watch you let Clifford cop a feel as his birthday present, you're very mistaken. If you think getting it on with horny teenage boys is the way to piss me off, then you don't know me."

"By your standards, I should probably seduce Clark Senior. I won't ever sink as low as you, Santino."

"Give it some time, considering your behavior in the last few weeks, I'd say you're on a good way."

"You want me to be a good girl? Then stop being such a dick."

We arrived at the car. Luisa was already inside.

Santino leaned down, his eyes burning with rage. “Who ever said I want you to be a good girl?”

Oh holy shit. “You want me to be a good girl around other guys.” I moved even closer, grabbing his shirt. “But deep down you want me to keep my naughty side only for you.”

Santino gripped my hand and pried it off. “I’m not playing your games, Anna. And you better stop playing them. Next time I see you with another guy, I’m going to break his bones, no matter who he is, even Clark Senior.”

“I’ll stop kissing other guys if you stop banging other women.”

He laughed darkly. “This isn’t a negotiation.”

“So you think you can fuck Mrs. Clark, and I’ll just sit back and watch like a good little girl.”

“We aren’t anything, Anna. So me fucking whoever I want isn’t your fucking business.”

“It is if you’re doing it while on the job.”

“Get in the car, now. This discussion is over. I’ll keep fucking Mrs. Clark and every other woman I want, and you keep your legs closed until Cliffy feels ready to marry and pops your cherry.”

He threw the door shut in my face and engaged the locks. I let out an enraged cry and gave him the finger.

He smirked and turned, heading back to the house.

Luisa stared at me with shock-widened eyes. “Wow. You two will end up killing each other. Maybe you should take another bodyguard to Paris with you.”

“No way. I won’t let him off so easily. He thinks he can order me around. I know he wants me. And I won’t give up until I’ve made him eat his words.”

“I have a really bad feeling about this. What do you want to do?”

“Santino thinks he knows the game I’m playing, but I haven’t even started playing. In Paris, all bets are off.”

“I’m really worried about you, Anna. You still have feelings for him. What if you get hurt?”

“I don’t have feelings for Santino, not anymore. But I’m attracted to him. I’ll just have a fling with him in Paris. He’s like an itch. I just need to scratch it.”

“My itches always get worse once I start scratching, and usually I can’t stop until I’ve scratched myself bloody.”

I shook my head. “I have it under control, don’t worry.”

Chapter *Ten*



Santino

I couldn't remember the last time I've been this pissed.

Anna was playing a dangerous game, and unfortunately, I was a sucker and kept getting sucked into her games.

I went in search of Leonas. I finally found him in one of the guest bedrooms with a dark-haired girl kneeling in front of him, giving him head. The room smelled of pot, and judging from the sappy look on the girl's face and Leonas's shit-eating grin, they'd both smoked weed.

The Cavallaro kids would be my downfall. Eventually I'd kill one of them.

"Put your dick back where it belongs," I growled.

The little shit actually gave me a smile that suggested it was exactly where it belonged. I took out my phone and snapped a photo. "I'll send it to your mother. Maybe she can reason with your horny, stoned mind."

Leonas staggered back from the girl and tried to storm toward me. "Shit, man. That's no joke."

"Do I look like I'm joking? I'm fucking done with you and Anna grating on my fucking nerves. I don't care if you fuck half of Chicago but don't do it on my watch."

I slipped the phone into my back pocket.

“Did you send it?” Leonas asked, worried as he pulled up his pants.

At least, the little shit had enough respect for his mom not to want to have her see a photo of him in a situation like this. Considering how much he loved provoking his dad, he probably wouldn't have reacted the same way if I'd threatened to send it to him. I was the same way. That's the problem if you love your kids and can't torture them to see reason. My dad had given me a thrashing a few times but I'd never been a pussy so it hadn't had the desired effect. Dante faced the same problem with Leonas. The boy was tough as nails and strong-willed, a shitty combination.

I grabbed his collar and pushed him out into the hallway, then walked past him.

“Not yet, but I'll keep it in case you give me trouble in the future.”

He stalked after me. “That's blackmail.”

I gave him a look as we made our way down the stairs and past increasingly drunk teens. “Blackmail is the currency of choice for your sister and you,” I said as I stepped outside, glad to be away from the party and Mrs. Clark. I could tell she was one of these lonely, clingy types. One fuck and she thought there was a deep connection.

“You don't have to vent your troubles with my sister on me. I don't give a fuck if you two are getting it on, but leave me out of it.”

Anna glared at me from the back seat. Women usually left me cold. They never got my blood boiling from anger or any other reason, because I didn't care about them. But Anna?

Fuck. She was my goddamn gasoline.

“Get in the car, or I'll send the photo off, and stop talking shit,” I ordered before I rounded the car and slid in behind the steering wheel and started the engine.

“What about Riccardo and RJ?” Leonas asked as he sank down beside his sister.

“They aren't my wards, and if anyone asks, I never saw them. I didn't even know you were on the party.”

“You're an asshole,” Leonas muttered.

“He knows, and he likes it,” Anna added, giving me the evil eye.

I hit the gas. I needed to get Anna off my back. This was getting too dangerous between us.

I reached inside my pants and found the handkerchief where Dolora Clark had written down the number of her second cell phone. I rolled down the window and tossed the piece of white fabric out.

“What was that?” Anna asked haughtily.

“Dolora’s panties.”

Anna gave me a disgusted look while her friend Luisa’s eyes were so huge I worried they’d pop out. “They were red, just for your information.”

How the hell did she know what panties Dolora had worn? That girl was the bane of my existence.

“As in Dolora Clark?” Leonas asked. “You banged Mrs. Clark?”

I didn’t say anything.

Leonas let out a whistle, then his expression became calculating. “How about you delete the photo and I won’t tell anyone that you’re a home wrecker.”

“Sure, bring a scandal down on the family that’s supposed to bring new glory to the Outfit,” I muttered.

“We don’t need outsiders to bring glory to the Outfit,” Leonas gritted out.

Preach it, kid.

“Once you’re Capo, you can help your sister dispose of Cliffy. I’m sure by then she’s tired of his boring antics.”

I parked in front of the mansion then motioned at Leonas to get lost. “Now don’t get caught. You smell like a weed farm.”

Leonas got out of the car and snuck around the house. Dad would see him on the cameras, but I’d deal with my old man in a bit.

I got out of the car. Anna and Luisa were still inside.

I turned my back on them. I wouldn’t let her rile me up again. If she wanted to sleep outside in the car, that was her problem.

I headed for the guardhouse. My job was done here, the girls would find the way through the entrance themselves. Anna appeared in front of me and I almost ran her over. She pressed against me and squeezed my ass, completely catching me by surprise. “What the fuck are you doing?”

I took a step back, my pulse pounding in my chest. Did she even realize how many security cameras might have recorded this? Dad would kill me.

She rolled her eyes. “I only wanted to wish you a good night.”

Her smile was pure trouble.

“Get inside.”

She gave me a wave then headed toward Luisa who waited in the doorway, looking stunned. Why couldn't I have watched a goody-two-shoes like her?

Gritting my teeth, I stepped into the guardhouse. As expected, Dad sat in front of the monitors. Luckily his focus was on the monitor that showed Leonas climbing into his window on the second floor. "I don't suppose you know where the boy spent the evening?" Dad said as a way of greeting.

I shrugged. "He's got trouble written all over himself."

Dad fixed me with a look. "You're early. Wasn't the party supposed to go longer? The Clark kid's birthday is now."

"Anna and Luisa preferred to go home. The party was a bore."

Dad narrowed his eyes at me. "Is it because Leonas snuck in?"

I nodded then reached for my phone in my back pocket. But it wasn't there. Instead, I touched silky fabric. I pulled it out and stared at a dark green thong. I knew immediately whose underwear that was. Fuck.

Dad snatched the thong from my hand and frowned. "What's this?"

"I know you've been single for a while but you should still recognize female underwear."

My heart was trying to jump out of my chest. Fuck.

Dad rose to his feet, not a hint of amusement on his face. "Son, whose damn panties are these?" He dropped the thong on the table and pointed at the tiny label saying Fleur du Mal. I raised my eyebrows.

"That's the brand Valentina and her daughter buy."

I snorted. "Do I even want to know why you know this? Don't tell me you're so lonely you're stealing underwear?"

Dad hit me over the head. I was taller and stronger, and he was the only one who was allowed to do it. "Because I've been a bodyguard for the Cavallaros for decades and pay attention to their shopping bags and the stores I drop them off."

Dad grabbed my shirt. "How did Anna's underwear get in your pocket, son?"

Dad looked as if he wanted to pummel me with his fists. He had a way to make me feel like a boy and not a twenty-eight-year-old man.

"It could just as well be Valentina's."

Dad shook me, ripping one of the buttons off my shirt. "That's not funny." He released me and ran a hand through his hair. "I tried so hard to raise you well but without your mom, I just failed."

“You didn’t fail, Dad. You had to raise two kids after losing your wife and still work as a bodyguard.”

Dad looked at me with a worried look. “I can’t lose you too, Sonny.”

“You won’t lose me.”

Dad grabbed my face as if I were a little boy. “I love you, son, and there’s only one reason why I would betray my duty, why I would ever consider killing my Capo and that’s if it was your life on the line.”

“Dad,” I said, prying his hands off. “Stop being dramatic. Nobody’s going to get killed. I’m not touching Anna.”

“Tell Dante you can’t accompany the girl to Paris.”

I grimaced. “Unfortunately, I can’t do that.”

Dad closed his eyes and sank down on the chair. “You’re already in trouble, aren’t you?”

I touched his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I have it under control.”

Dad gave me a look that suggested he doubted it.

“You have the night shift?”

“Until five, then Taft takes over.”

“Good, because I need you to turn a blind eye to me climbing into Anna’s window. She has something I need back.”

Dad stared. I didn’t bother explaining, it would only make things worse.

I hurried out into the night and headed around the building, ducking when I passed Dante’s office. The moment I arrived under Anna’s window, my fury had rekindled. I couldn’t believe she’d stolen my phone and stuffed her damn panties into my pocket.

I used a chair to reach the banisters of the balcony then pulled myself up. Unfortunately, this wasn’t Anna’s room but Leonas so I still had to climb awkwardly to the next window. Luckily it was open. Anna always let air in before she went to bed. With a lunge, I swung myself onto the windowsill.

Luisa let out a shriek, jerking the blankets up to cover herself. I cocked an eyebrow. She’d been in her nightgown, not naked. No need for such a fuss.

Anna whirled around, body tense but immediately relaxed upon spotting me and a sly smile spread on her face. Not the reaction I wanted. Of course, she made absolutely no move to hide any part of her scantily covered body. She was in some kind of silky hot pants with lace and a chemise with a

plunging neckline. She sauntered over to me and I regretted not waiting until the morning to confront her because of my cell.

She leaned against the wall beside the window. The cool air had an immediate effect on her body and I had to force my eyes away.

“I didn’t peg you as the romantic type who’d climb up to the window of his beloved,” she said with a triumphant smile.

“Where is it?” I growled, jumping into the room.

Luisa still clutched the blankets in front of herself.

“Go into the bathroom. This is a private conversation.” I couldn’t stand the look of shock and embarrassment on her face. It reminded me how inappropriate Anna’s and my interactions had become.

Luisa glanced at Anna who nodded but never took her eyes off me as if I were a wild animal who wanted to attack her. Anna often made me feel like one too, and I didn’t like it one bit. Luisa hurried into the bathroom as if I’d come to maul her. If I mauled anyone, it would be Anna.

“Where is it?” I glared down at Anna.

“Where is what?”

I released a slow breath through my nose trying not to let the naughty sparkle in Anna’s blue eyes rile me up.

Rile me up *even more*.

“My fucking phone, Anna. Don’t play dumb. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Someone’s particularly grumpy today,” she said as she strode past me, her arm brushing mine—no doubt on purpose—and perched on the edge of her bed. “Didn’t dear Dolora help you release some pent-up tension?”

I didn’t want to be in a room with Anna dressed like that while she was anywhere near a bed. I was glad for the sound of the running water in the bathroom, reminding me of Luisa’s presence.

I felt a little unhinged today. A sensation that was becoming a constant problem around Anna lately, and she knew it. She could sniff these things out like a fucking bloodhound. Dad was right. I should tell Dante I couldn’t accompany Anna to Paris. But I had a feeling Anna would actually snitch on me after today, and part of me didn’t want to let Anna out of my sight. The latter worried me far more than becoming the center of Dante’s wrath if Anna told him about my adventures with married women.

I held out my hand. “Give me my phone or I’ll search every inch of your room for it, and I won’t be careful.”

Anna rolled her eyes, then flipped over onto her belly, presenting her perky ass to me and long lean legs seemingly going on forever despite her petite form, as she stretched out to reach for something under her pillow.

She rolled back on her back and held up my phone.

“Get up and give it to me.”

“You have to get it if you want it.”

Why did every word from her mouth sound dirty? My damn mind was playing tricks on me.

I needed to cut this madness short. I stalked toward her, glaring down at her as she sprawled on the bed. Her lips puckered in a coy smile. I reached for the phone but she let it drop over her head, out of reach.

I was done. I put one knee down on the bed and leaned over her to get the damn cell phone. The moment I was over her, she murmured, “I could get used to the sight of you above me like that.”

I narrowed my eyes, and in a moment of blackout, I bent down and pressed my mouth to her ear. “You couldn’t handle me, Anna. That’s why I choose older, married women, and not fumbling, sensitive virgins like you.”

When Anna winced, I knew my words had hit their mark. I straightened and pushed my phone back into my pocket.

Anna stared back at me coldly. “I deleted the video of Leonas in case you’re looking for it.”

“I bet you downloaded it to your phone first since you’re so fond of blackmailing others.”

She sat up and the look in her eyes could have frozen hell and didn’t match the sweet smile twisting those dangerous lips.

“As long as I can have fun blackmailing you, I’m happy.”

Chapter *Eleven*



Frosty.

That was the word that described my interactions with Santino in the following weeks.

I was furious. Santino was even more furious.

Neither of us would back down. As usual.

That's why we hadn't shared a word except for public pleasantries when my engagement to Clifford rolled around at the start of October. Luckily, I had been busy with preparations for my engagement party, eighteenth birthday party and my move to Paris. Provoking Santino had been the least of my worries. And if I really felt like riling him up, I still had the option of telling him about the photo I took of him and dear Dolora.

We celebrated the engagement at our home. High tables and buffet tables were still arranged in our living room and the yard from my eighteenth birthday party the day before. Though party was the wrong word for the social gathering my parents had prepared. It was a soiree that required me to smile politely and engage in small talk. Definitely not the excitement I'd hoped for. I promised myself to party once I was in Paris,

away from prying eyes. Santino could sulk all he wanted, I'd have the time of my life in Paris.

I'd picked a white cocktail dress for the occasion, trying to play the good mafia princess everyone wanted me to be. Santino didn't react to my choice of color. Usually he would have commented on it, but he was being overly professional these days.

His vigilant mask didn't crack in the slightest when Mrs. Clark entered the room at her husband's side. Heat traveled up my throat. I wasn't sure if she knew that I'd caught her with Santino. I was pretty sure Clifford was unaware of his mother's extramarital activities and I had no intention to tell him. It would only cast a bad light on the Outfit. My loyalties didn't lie with Clifford but with my family, and I doubted that would ever change. He was a means to an end, and so was I for him.

My family greeted the Clarks under the watchful eyes of our guests. We had invited people from the political elite as well as important families from the Outfit. Of course, the press was invited as well. Clark Senior had insisted on it. His entire life played out before cameras.

Clifford gave me a tense smile. In his form-fitting suit, he looked really dapper. He'd even cut his sonny boy hair short.

"You cut your hair," I murmured.

"My father thought it would look better on camera."

I nodded, though I didn't agree. Then my gaze dragged over to Mrs. Clark who kept looking at Santino. If she kept it up, someone would eventually realize something was going on between them. I really hoped Santino would have the decency to keep his hands to himself today. If he dared banging her at my engagement party, I wouldn't have to tell Dad about Santino's sexual activities, I'd kill him myself.

Fury sizzled in my belly.

I'd thought I was over my anger, but seeing Mrs. Clark now, I realized my jealousy still burned brightly. It was a very sobering realization.

I tore my gaze away and motioned Clifford to follow me to the fireplace. Dad and Mr. Clark stepped in front of our guests and shook hands, then Dad addressed the crowd, officially announcing my engagement to Clifford.

Sofia caught my eyes across the room. She stood beside her husband Danilo. They seemed to have overcome some of their difficulties from the beginning of their bond. Before my birthday party, I hadn't seen her in

almost two months. I could tell that she was eager for a conversation. Talking over the phone was always risky so I hadn't been able to share details of my recent interactions with Santino with her yet.

After a few photos of our families, and Clifford and I holding hands and smiling at each other, the guests began to swarm around us to congratulate us. There was curiosity in the eyes of many, especially the political guests, while wariness lingered on the faces of many Made Men and their families. I knew my marriage to Clifford was a very controversial topic in the Outfit, but I trusted in Mom's and Dad's judgment regarding the bond.

Eventually the constant hand-shaking and small talk got overwhelming, even for someone as accustomed to it as me.

Clifford gave me a look that suggested he felt the same way. "The photographers must have taken a billion photos of us by now."

"I'm sure they'll pick the least favorable. They always make the best stories," I muttered under my breath. I had a love-hate relationship with the press, especially after they ridiculed one of the outfits that I'd put together a few months ago and worn to a charity event: a flowy oversized blazer almost reaching my knees that was held together by a wide belt and micro-shorts plus a lace bralette beneath it. What had really set them off had been the checkered knee-socks matching the blazer that I'd combined with ridiculously high heels.

I'd felt a great amount of satisfaction when not long after the derogatory article, girls not only from our circle but socialites from Chicago as well had started wearing similar outfits to parties and public events.

Clifford cleared his throat at my badmouthing of the press and a tense pause ensued. Too many people were watching our interaction, analyzing every facial expression, trying to read from our lips. Clifford was a politician's son. Pissing off the press probably was very high on his list of things to avoid. "A good love story sells too."

I shrugged. It probably did, but I wasn't sure we'd convince them our story was one of love. Maybe it was just my overthinking mind but I doubted anyone would see sparks flying between Clifford and me.

My gaze found Santino standing off to the side watching everything with a bored expression. Anyone who thought only girls could have a resting bitch face had never seen Santino. His constant pissed-off look was legendary.

"I'm used to attention but today I feel like a zoo animal," I whispered.

Clifford nodded and smiled as if I'd said something nice. He knew how to play the game. I smiled in turn, even if I didn't feel like it.

"How about we go somewhere more private?"

"I'd love to," I said immediately, needing a breather.

Clifford lightly touched my shoulder as he steered me toward the door. I could see Santino watching us from across the room where he hovered behind Mom and Dad and chatting with one of the Clark's bodyguards that he hadn't offended yet.

We stepped into the lobby but even here a few people mingled to chat. We gave them smiles and I nodded toward the back. Clifford and I headed toward the kitchen, which of course was also crowded with staff. But the kitchen had access to a part of the garden that usually only staff used for their breaks. Now at the busiest time of the party, none of them were out there, so Clifford and I had some privacy as the door closed behind us. We settled on the chairs.

"So now we're engaged," Clifford said in disbelief.

"We are."

Clifford pulled two cigarettes from the pocket in his pants and offered one to me, but I quickly shook my head. Even if staff was currently too busy for a break, they might poke their head out to check on us and I didn't want them to see me smoking. This would undoubtedly reach my parents' ears in record time and then I'd be in a whole world of trouble.

Clifford gave a knowing smile. "Keeping up appearances, I get it." He lit his cigarette and took a deep drag.

"Let me take a quick pull," I said.

He held out his cigarette to me and I took a deep drag before he put it back in his mouth. "Everyone probably thinks we're exchanging spittle in a different way right now."

"Would you prefer that?"

Clifford thought about that then shook his head. "Last time was a bit of a turn-off," he said with a laugh.

"Santino won't act like that again, especially at our engagement party."

"I'm seeing someone anyway, so I can't kiss anyone else."

My eyebrows shot up. "You're dating someone." I'd taken sleeping around into consideration but a relationship? That really posed the risk of Clifford going into our marriage in love with someone else. The odds definitely wouldn't be in our favor then.

“Not dating. We’re friends with benefits, but we agreed to be exclusive for the time being.”

I pursed my lips. My experiences with relationships were limited but this sounded like dating, even if they didn’t call it by that name. A rose by another name is still a rose, right? “So you’re getting along well, have sex, and are faithful to each other... that’s dating where I come from.”

“Does anyone in your world really date?”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Like I said we both don’t want a relationship.”

“Does she know about me? It’ll be all over the news tomorrow.”

“She knows.”

“You didn’t tell her about the deal, right?” That was top secret after all.

“No, I told her we’re in an open relationship because we know we’re too young to commit fully but so madly in love that we know we’re endgame.”

I snorted, couldn’t help it. “I hope this doesn’t backfire and you’ll be heartbroken when you have to marry me and are in love with your friend with benefits.”

“I could say the same to you, right? Only you have a bodyguard with benefits.”

I tensed. “There’s nothing between Santino and I.”

Clifford’s expression made it clear that he didn’t believe me.

“I’m not lying. We don’t sleep with each other and we definitely aren’t in love.”

Technically neither was a lie. I had the tiniest crush that I had every intention of killing very soon.

“Maybe that’s true. But I remember the way he looked at you when he caught us kissing, and today again when we announced our engagement. He wants you.”

I shook my head.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to admit it because you’re off limits, but trust me, he wants you, and I can tell that you wouldn’t say no.”

I shrugged. “So what, you said I could have fun.”

“Definitely. Just make sure it stays that, just fun.”

“Don’t worry.”



When the guests finally left late that night, I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. It had been a long day. I wasn't sure what I'd thought I would feel after I got engaged to Clifford, maybe a stronger sense of peace with my future. But my conversation with Clifford today hadn't laid my worries to rest. He and I were bound by duty, not by emotions. He had someone he enjoyed spending time with and I had to trust that he wouldn't get emotionally attached and either cancel our marriage or enter it being in love with someone else.

I didn't try to dwell on the part of me that hoped Clifford would break our bond at some point. That wouldn't reflect well on the Outfit. I put on my pajamas but was too restless for sleep so I snuck out of my room, hoping I wouldn't cross paths with Mom and Dad. Mom would definitely want to talk to me after my engagement. If today hadn't been as busy as it was, she probably would already have taken me aside for a talk. She wanted to make sure I was okay, and I wasn't sure I was in a state of mind to lie as convincingly as a conversation with Mom about Clifford required.

I hurried across the hall to Leonas's room. I knocked, then waited impatiently.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," I hissed, glancing up and down the hallway nervously. I could hear voices downstairs. Mom and Dad were probably still discussing the day's events.

"Come in!"

I slipped in and closed the door.

Leonas perched on his windowsill, his legs dangling outside, a cigarette in his mouth. He threw a glance over his shoulder. He was still in his dress shirt and elegant pants but had dropped his tie and jacket on the floor.

"If I were Dad, you'd be in major trouble," I said as I closed the door and walked toward him.

"Dad always knocks. You are the only one who doesn't knock." He took another drag.

“I did knock this time,” I muttered. Now that Leonas was getting older, I was protecting myself by knocking. I didn’t want to catch him doing things I’d never be able to erase from my mind.

I climbed onto the sill beside him, even if I wasn’t too fond of the prospect of falling to my death.

“You aren’t supposed to smoke,” I said with a smirk.

Leonas blew smoke into my face, making me cough. “You really wanna play who’s more in trouble with Dad?”

“As of now, I’m not in trouble. I’ve been good as far as Dad knows.” I held out my hand. “Give me a cigarette.”

He fumbled for one in the pack balancing on his thigh then gave it to me with that annoying knowing smile. “Yeah, you’re better at hiding your trouble-seeking ways.”

I shoved it into my mouth. “To be fair, you aren’t even trying to play the good kid most days.”

Leonas shrugged. “Dad’s stricter with me anyway.”

“Comes with being a boy,” I said around the cigarette in my mouth.

“Santino hates when you smoke.”

“I know, but he’s not here now, is he,” I said. “Now shut up and give me fire.”

He lit up my cigarette. “Bitch.”

“Asshole.” I smiled sweetly, took a deep drag then coughed.

Leonas shook his head. “You’re just doing it to piss him off.”

“And you’re doing half the shit you’re up to, to piss Dad off.” I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Let me have some fun.” I took another, even deeper pull, coughed even harder, and handed the cigarette to Leonas who put it in his mouth as well. He looked ridiculous with the two smokes in his mouth. Only the brainless groupies crushing on him would think his quirks were cool. “You can have all the fun you want for all I care. Mom and Dad probably won’t see it that way though.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t tell.”

“Works for me, sis.”

I grinned then took another drag. I never really liked smoking. Leonas was right, in the beginning, I did it to piss Santino off. Now it’s become a stupid habit whenever I’m anxious.

“You realize Dad will hunt Santino down if he finds out there’s something going on between you.”

“Shut up. What are you talking about? There’s nothing going on between us.”

“Sure. I’ll ask you again in a few months.”

“Stay out of my love life.”

“You don’t have one.”

I glared. “Well, I have every intention of changing that.”

“Good luck with that.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “As my brother, you should tell me to stay away from men. You’re not doing a good job being the overprotective Made Man.”

“I’ll protect you from real dangers, don’t worry, but I sure as fuck won’t protect your hymen, sis.”

I grimaced. “Do me a favor and never say that word again.”

“I’m having fun, so why shouldn’t you? Clifford isn’t waiting for marriage either.”

“You know most people in the Outfit won’t see it that way. If they find out, I lost it to anyone but my husband there’ll be a scandal.”

“I’ll make sure to cause an even bigger scandal to distract them from you.”

I laughed. “I’m sure you’d succeed.”



The following weeks and months passed in a blink, and before I knew it, I’d attended my last two social events in January, Dad’s and Danilo’s birthdays. Wistfulness caught me by surprise when I closed my suitcase one day before I’d leave for Paris. This was it. Tomorrow I’d leave Chicago and my family behind for months, possibly years. If all went to plan, I’d be gone for three years.

My stomach flipped with nerves.

I’d never been separated from my family for that long. A weekend in our lake house had been the extent of it. Suddenly, I was terrified. I was used to having a tight-knit family and always someone to talk to. In the future, I’d have to pick up a phone, and that meant being careful what I said

because you never knew who was listening. I swallowed. Of course, there would be Santino... but he and I weren't really on speaking terms right now. I had every intention to change that in Paris, but I wasn't sure if our relationship would ever reach a level that would make me feel comfortable sharing problems with him.

A soft knock rang out.

"Come in," I called but nothing happened. Instead another soft knock sounded. I got up and went over to the door. I found Bea's little face looking up at me when I opened the door. She held her favorite stuffed animal in her arms, a pink pig called Peppa. I'd watched too many episodes of the series with her to feel the same joy seeing the well-loved toy as Bea did.

"Can I come in?" Bea asked with a sweet smile. I opened the door wide. "Of course."

Bea tiptoed in almost shyly, regarding my suitcases warily. She bit her lower lip, clutching Peppa Pig even closer.

"Is everything all right?" I asked, getting down on my haunches in front of my little sister.

"I don't want you to go. I'll miss you too much."

Tears sprang into my eyes. I hugged her tightly. When I'd made plans to go to Paris, I hadn't thought about what that would mean for Bea. She was only five. I'd miss so much of her growing up while I was gone. I pulled back and pushed her blonde hair out of her eyes. "I'll come visit often. And maybe you can visit me in Paris as well. Then we can go to the Eiffel Tower and have hot chocolate in one of the artsy cafés near Montmartre."

"What's that?"

"A beautiful part of Paris up on a hill. You'll love it."

She nodded gravely, then held out her pig. "This is for you."

I took it. "For me?"

"So you'll remember me in Paris."

"But it's your favorite."

She nodded again, looking even more serious. "I want you to have it so you won't forget me."

"Bea, I could never forget you. I'll call often and I'll send you pretty clothes so we can match even if we're not in the same city."

She beamed up at me. "Will you come back for my birthday?"

“I’ll come back even before that. I have a long list of events I’m still supposed to attend, so you’ll see me very often.”

“Okay,” she said, sounding slightly mollified. “Can we watch Peppa Pig together?”

It was almost seven-thirty, Bea’s bedtime, but I agreed anyway. We settled on the bed together, Bea snuggled up against my side. I opened an episode of Peppa Pig on my iPad. We had already watched it a while ago, but I doubted there was a single episode we hadn’t watched at least twice. Mom poked her head in a few minutes later, probably wanting to bring Bea to bed.

My little sister had fallen asleep beside me.

Mom smiled, her eyes glistening.

“Don’t get emotional,” I whispered.

She smiled apologetically as she crept closer to us and perched on the edge of the bed. “I’ll bring her to her room.”

“Let her sleep here.” It had been a while since she’d spent the night in my bed. Mainly because she was a restless sleeper and I couldn’t sleep with her kicking and turning all night. But tonight, I wanted to hold her close.

Mom nodded, then kissed Bea’s and my forehead before she left. I actually had to push back tears. I hadn’t thought I’d feel overly emotional leaving Chicago and my family behind. Not because I didn’t love them or enjoy being with them, but because I was looking forward to experiencing something new.

And it wasn’t as if I’d be alone in Paris. I’d always have Santino by my side. Though, if he kept up his sour mood, that would probably not be the most pleasant experience.

Chapter *Twelve*



Santino

Dad had come over to my apartment to say goodbye the night before my flight to Paris. Now he was watching me pack my suitcase with an air of silent disapproval that he was a master at.

“You know what I think about this. My opinion hasn’t changed,” Dad said while I tried to shove another pair of pants into my already crammed suitcase. We were of course flying first class so I could have taken three suitcases with me, but I was too lazy to pack that much and so I chose to cram as much stuff as possible into a single piece of luggage.

“You haven’t held back your opinion, Dad. And you know I agree with you. I don’t want to go and it’s most likely a bad idea, but as I keep telling you, I don’t have a choice.”

“We always have a choice.”

I sighed, giving up on fitting the pants into the suitcase. “Yes, we do. But sometimes the choice is only between pest and cholera.”

“I could go in your stead. Valentina and Dante trust me. They’ll let me watch Anna.”

Anna would do everything in her power to prevent that. She wanted me in Paris with her, and in usual Anna fashion, she’d find a way to get her

will. “Frederica needs you here. You’ll have to make sure she doesn’t forget to live.”

“She’s busy, and you know she won’t listen to me. She’s eighteen now and with the path she’s chosen, I can’t interfere.”

“You could arrange a marriage for her and ignore her choice.”

Dad shook his head. “Not a single priest would agree to do the ceremony.”

I sank down on my bed and allowed myself one last look around the apartment. I’d bought it only last year from my savings. I’d felt proud having my own place that I’d bought with my hard-earned money. Dad had offered to give me money so I could buy a place sooner, but I’d wanted to do it myself. Now I’d leave my home behind to watch Anna 24/7. I’d never felt the desire to travel the world, to uproot my life and live somewhere else. Chicago was my home. I’d grown up in those streets, knew almost every corner, even the most notorious ones. I fucking loved going to the same coffee shop every morning where I knew the barista’s entire family history, I loved going to my favorite restaurant and being able to order food without looking at the menu because I knew it by heart. Anna was different. She wanted to experience new things, wanted to roam the world.

Now she was dragging me along. She didn’t care if I wanted this or not. For her, it was a game. She didn’t care if I couldn’t risk playing her game. Of course, part of it was my fucking fault. The kiss we’d shared had definitely sent her the wrong message. Now she would be even more determined to push my buttons, and Paris was the perfect place for that.

I had sworn myself not to fall trap to her mind fuckery again. I had plenty of self-control in general. In the last few months, I’d reinforced my walls, had been as professional around Anna as humanly possible, had let out whatever pent-up energy I had in the gym or with one of the lonely wives who wanted dick.

Anna had respected the new boundaries I’d set, which could mean only one thing: she was waiting for a better time to attack, and I knew exactly when that would be. In Paris, the goddamn city of love. What bullshit.



The next day, around lunchtime, Dad and I headed to the Cavallaro mansion together in his car. Our flight was scheduled in the late afternoon, so we had time.

Three suitcases waited in the entrance hall when we stepped into the house. Anna was probably still packing her three suitcases in her room.

To my surprise, I spotted her in the living room with her little sister Bea on her lap.

“Where’s the rest?” I motioned at the suitcases. “My father and I are going to load them into the car now.”

“That’s all,” Anna said. “Mom has one suitcase and I have two.”

“Only two? Are you sure you have packed enough outfits?”

Anna gave me a sweet smile. “Paris is the home of fashion. Why should I bring what I can buy there or create myself?”

Dante came out of his office and headed my way. “We’ll say our goodbyes here. I don’t want to draw too much attention to your trip to Paris.”

“That’s reasonable.”

I glanced at the clock. “We should leave in about fifteen minutes, just to make sure we have plenty of time.”

Dad and I carried the suitcases out into the car, and when we returned the Cavallaros were already in the midst of their farewells. Valentina held Bea in her arms who clung tightly to her mother. Anna was wrapped in her father’s arms and actually crying. Despite having worked for the Cavallaros for years, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen Anna cry. She was like her father in that regard.

I stepped back outside to give them some privacy but kept glancing inside from the corner of my eye as Anna hugged her brother next. Those two often fought but you could tell they were close. Watching Anna being so honestly emotional and cry, I felt a hint of guilt over being an asshole to her most of the time, but it was the only way how I could keep her at a distance.

I really wished I hadn't seen this vulnerable side of Anna. Fuck. Now I would have an even harder time pushing her away.

Dad watched me, no longer disapproving, but with honest concern.

"Everything's going to be fine."

He nodded, but he didn't believe it.

In all honesty, neither did I.



When we boarded the plane to Paris in late January, I could have danced from joy. Until the last moment I'd been worried Dad would change his mind and not allow me to leave for France. The wistfulness and sadness lifted off my shoulders as soon as we lifted off the ground.

Mom accompanied us and would stay for a week to help me settle in, and to make sure everything was to her satisfaction. Of course, I knew she also wanted to make sure Santino and I didn't seem too close. That was the only advantage of the cold war between Santino and me at the moment. Nobody would suspect there could ever be anything between us.

When I stepped into the apartment that Dad had rented for us, my heart did a little jump. It was near the Jardin de Trocadero and had a partial view of the Eiffel Tower from the small balcony with its iron banisters and flower pots. A small round metal table and two very uncomfortable matching chairs filled the space. I couldn't wait to have breakfast there.

It was a two-bedroom place with high ceilings and old wooden floors. The interior was a mix of a few old art nouveau pieces and modern French furniture from Roche Bobois.

I was in heaven. I hugged Mom tightly, completely overwhelmed. “It’s perfect!”

“Your dad and I picked it together.”

“I wish Dad could be here now.”

“We’ll all come to visit you over Easter, Anna.”

That was still two months away. I bit my lip. “I hope nothing happens that’ll force Dad to stay in Chicago.” Dad was dutiful and wouldn’t leave his men to deal with problems alone if something major happened. But he’d never missed one of our family holidays, not birthdays, Christmas, or Easter. And I really hoped this time would be no different.

I glanced over my shoulder at Santino who lounged on the colorful sofa. With his sour expression, he looked out of place amid the red and orange and yellow of the Missoni fabric of the Roche Bobois sofa. His arms were stretched out on the backrest and his legs parted in his usual bad boy man-spread way. He slanted me a look, his expression unmoving.

“You can pick a room,” I told him.

He pushed to his feet without a word and checked the two bedrooms. Even the cold shoulder treatment from him was hot.

Mom touched my shoulder and I met her gaze. “I still worry about you being all by yourself in this place.”

“I have Santino.”

Mom’s lips pursed. “With a grown man under the same roof—”

“Mom, now you sound like Grandmother.” Dad’s mom was ancient and so were her views.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I can handle myself. I have been alone with Santino before and he’s such a dutiful killjoy, you really don’t have to worry of me having too much fun. He’ll prevent it, trust me.”

Mom laughed, looking entirely too happy about that. “Your dad will be very pleased.”

“I’m sure he had a conversation with Santino before we left Chicago.”

“Of course.”

I shook my head.

Santino came back out of the bedroom to the left and closer to the entrance door. “I’ll take this one.”

I strode into the other bedroom. It didn’t have a view of the Eiffel Tower like the living room, only at the facade of the houses across the street

but I still loved the room for its chic coziness.

Then something registered on me. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“In Europe, en suite bathrooms aren’t common, especially in older buildings. There’s only one shared bathroom.”

Santino would hate it, and I wasn’t quite sure I enjoyed the shared toilet situation. Santino and I weren’t at a point in our relationship where I wanted him to know I had any kind of body functions. Yet, the shared bathroom offered many opportunities for “accidental” nudity.

The idea of catching Santino under the shower was definitely pleasant.

Mom and I would share my queen-sized bed for the week that she was going to be in Paris. I still had three weeks before the first introductory courses would begin, which was perfect to get acclimated and get used to speaking French. My practical skills were a bit rusty.

I thoroughly enjoyed the days with Mom. Since Bea had been born, I’d very rarely had her completely to myself, so going shopping on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées together and sightseeing every beautiful corner of Paris proved to be a wonderful experience. Santino managed to fade into the background, giving us space while keeping a close eye on us, and I really appreciated his ability to gift us with a feeling of normalcy.

I felt already freer than I ever had in Chicago. In Paris, nobody knew us and with Santino’s discreet way of watching us, nobody even knew we were guarded.

On our last evening together before Mom would return to Chicago, she and I leaned against the headboard of my bed, talking for a long time. I rested my head on her shoulder, soaking in her comforting scent. “Do you ever miss the days when you were younger and not a Capo’s wife? Everyone’s attention is always on you.”

Mom didn’t answer right away. “Even before I married your dad, I was being judged and had a certain level of attention on myself due to my backstory. But of course, being a Cavallaro multiplies the pressure. I suppose for me what helped braving the pressure of the outside world was your father’s support. I knew he had my back and in private I could be myself, without the pressure of expectations. Our family gave me the necessary cushion to fall on.”

I nodded because that’s how I felt about our family as well. “I hope Clifford will have my back.”

Mom took my hand. “Once he’ll get to know you better, he will. He’ll realize how wonderful you are, how could he not?”

I laughed. “I think you’re biased.”

“I want you to be happy, Anna. Your dad and I chose Clifford because we think he could give you the kind of life you desire.”

“If I was promised to a Made Man, I couldn’t have studied in Paris, so you’ve made the right choice.”

For now, being engaged to Clifford gave me more freedom than I’d ever dared to dream of. Whatever happened after I married Clifford... I would handle it then.



Santino

I couldn’t sleep, so I settled on the balcony despite the cold.

Tomorrow Valentina would fly back home and leave me alone with Anna. The last few days in Paris and even before that, in the weeks leading up to our trip, Anna had kept her distance and been civilly polite. I didn’t trust her sudden reserve.

The moment Valentina was gone, Anna would attack. I could practically smell her eagerness to push my buttons.

The floorboards groaned under quiet steps. I was surprised when Valentina settled on the chair beside me, wrapped in a thick woolen coat and still shivering.

“I see you can’t sleep either,” she said pleasantly, but I didn’t miss the underlying tension. She had come out with a purpose in mind. “Before I’m returning home tomorrow, I’d like to have a word with you.”

I leaned back with a sardonic smile. “Your husband already gave me a very impressive warning before we left for Paris.”

“I’m sure he did, but I’m also sure that Dante, as most fathers, doesn’t notice the little details like mothers do.”

I waited expectantly. I doubted Anna shared any of her excessive flirting or blackmailing with her mother. Anna was too clever for that and even if she trusted her mother, she wouldn’t risk Paris for that.

“Ten years become less and less relevant over time. Anna is of age. That’s a fact that definitely will have changed things, not just in her mind but also in yours.”

“Being of age isn’t the main deterrence in our world. Anna is my Capo’s daughter, that’s what really matters.”

“Maybe. But you’re also far from home and Anna knows this is her shot at freedom. You’re the easiest option for her.”

Ouch. That was one way to look at it, and probably not far from the truth. Anna wanted fun without the risk of losing her good girl reputation. With me, she wouldn’t have to worry about word getting out. I’d chew my own dick off before spreading the news that I was banging her. “I have to say, I’m surprised you’re so invested in making sure Anna doesn’t enjoy herself too much in Paris. I thought you were one of the strongest supporters of allowing girls to not be virgins until their wedding.”

“You misunderstand me. I’m concerned for Anna’s safety. I don’t mind if she meets a boy her age and experiences the same things Clifford does as long as I know she’s safe. But I don’t want her to start anything with you. I know Anna has had a crush on you when she was younger. I’m not sure about the current state of things because she’s become better at masking her emotions, but like I said, you’re a safe and easy option for her. I don’t want you to take her up on any advances.”

So some random French guy was good enough? But I wasn’t? What the fuck?

As if Valentina could read my thoughts, she continued unfazed. “Any boy she meets here, will be forgotten once she’s back in Chicago, but you’ll be around and that’s a catastrophe about to happen. I want your word that you won’t touch Anna and that you’ll let me know if she tries anything so I can either send her a new bodyguard or bring her back home.”

I sighed. “I promise.”

Anna wasn't the only good liar because deep down I knew I wouldn't give Valentina that call no matter what happened.



Valentina disappeared in the security check area and Anna turned to me with a serene smile that set my alarm bells off.

“Don't try anything, or I'll call your father even if it costs me my job.”

She smiled in that innocent way that didn't fool me anymore. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

The fuck she didn't. This girl had trouble written all over her. When she settled on the passenger seat in our rental car, I half expected her to try something as I drove us home, but she surprised me by glancing out the window almost contemplatively.

Maybe she had finally accepted that we couldn't happen. It was a little disconcerting that I didn't feel the elation that I should.

“We should consider giving back the car and renting a Vespa instead. We could weave through traffic and not get stuck in it,” she said when we'd been crawling through Parisian traffic for almost an hour.

I followed her gaze toward a mint-colored Vespa. The guy driving the thing wore a matching helmet and tight pants that accentuated long lean legs that would make most girls jealous. “I'm not metrosexual enough for that.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Being manly isn't linked to what vehicle you drive. It's a practical choice.”

“Where's the fun in that?”

“You'd be surprised how much fun you could have doing the unexpected.”

Chapter *Thirteen*



Part of me was sad when Mom left Paris seven days after our arrival, but she was needed back in Chicago. But the other part was eager to finally experience the city on my own terms and be alone with Santino.

He'd probably have preferred if my mom had stayed. He knew all bets would be off once we were alone, and he was worried. For good reason. His control was slipping, and I'd make sure to crash through it like a wrecking ball.

But first I wanted to enjoy Paris on my own terms, really soak everything in. For the first time in my life, I was so far away from home without my parents, without the pressure of being a Capo's daughter resting on my shoulders. Santino knew my flaws. He certainly didn't expect me to act like the good girl everyone expected me to be—he knew I wasn't. I could be good, but sometimes I just wanted to be bad, to enjoy life more than I should, to do all the things I wasn't supposed to do. One of them was of course Santino, but Paris first.

"Let's go out tonight. Fancy dinner, then drinks and a club afterward. I want to celebrate," I said the moment we stepped into our apartment.

Santino's expression didn't exude excitement. If he realized how sexy the grim set of his jaw made him, he'd probably try to smile more often around me.

"Come on," I said with a grin. "You've had to be on your best behavior while my mom was here, don't tell me you wouldn't enjoy a night out."

"You're overlooking something. I'll have to watch you."

I rolled my eyes. "We'll have fun."

Santino heaved a sigh but then he nodded. To be honest, I'd expected more resistance from him. Either he was glad to be out in public with me or he really needed a bit of a break. No matter the reason, I was super excited. I pushed to my tiptoes and threw my arms around Santino's neck. "Thank you! I promise I'll behave!"

It felt good to be so close to him, especially as he didn't immediately try to push me off. When he grew tense, I pulled back.



A few hours later, I emerged from the bathroom, ready for the night, dressed in black hot pants and a short form-fitting black blazer with big golden buttons that made it look like a naval uniform. Beneath it, I wore a white bandeau top with narrow sleeves that left my shoulders bare. To make the look perfect, I wore a cute bonnet that rounded off the sailor look. Golden stilettos matching my buttons were the icing on the cake.

Santino's eyebrows rose when he spotted me. "When are we setting sail?"

I turned around myself to show him the look, knowing my butt looked spectacular in the hot pants. "I'm not someone who wants to follow a trend. I want to be the person who creates a trend. Clothes are more for me than a cover for my body. I want my looks to make a statement. They are a way to express myself."

"And you're trying to express your interest in hooking up with a sailor and live on a boat?"

Santino stood. He'd put an effort into his clothes too. The black chinos ended above his ankle and created a nice contrast to his white sneakers.

Thankfully, he was wearing sneaker socks like any person with a hint of fashion sense did. The white simple shirt hugged his muscled chest in a very pleasing way and his jacket just made it perfect.

“You can swear like a sailor,” I said with a shrug. “Maybe it’s a message for you.”

Santino ignored the comment but I knew it would float around in his brain for a while. We headed out to a small restaurant near Sacre Coeur. Once we’d settled at the table, I felt a brief moment of worry that we wouldn’t have anything to talk about and it might become awkward, but Santino nodded toward a guy who wore very form-fitting chinos and sandals with plush golden fur lining plus matching golden socks. I remembered the shoes and socks from the Balenciaga runway show in the fall.

“Explain this to me.”

“Well,” I said thoughtfully as I took a sip from the champagne. “It’s bold.”

“He’s wearing sandals in winter, with socks. How can this be fashionable in anyone’s mind?”

“Fashion always tries to break rules, at least if it wants to be progressive. Not everything is there to last of course. But someone once said you only regret the things you didn’t do, and I suppose that goes for fashion too. As a designer, you don’t want to do what everyone has done before you. You want to be innovative and surprise people. That becomes harder and harder over the years, and especially with fashion being such a fast business.”

“If something has worked for years, why change it? Why not reinvent old fashion trends and not create new completely insane ones.”

“That’s what I’m hoping to do. Rethink old trends and try to create something new and exciting with secondhand pieces. At least, I hope that’ll work out. I don’t know what to expect.”

“You always do your thing, Anna. I doubt a French fashion professor can stop you. And from what I’ve seen you always look good with your secondhand pieces.”

“Thank you,” I said, surprised. “Many people think I’m crazy for loving to shop in secondhand stores because I could afford the most expensive pieces.”

“You could, but then you’d look like all the other rich girls. You always manage to stand out.”

I set down my glass with a smile. “Did we just manage to have a conversation without fighting?”

“Don’t get used to it. I’m sure we’ll find something to fight about soon enough.”

“I have to say, I enjoy both, the fighting and the talking.”

Santino regarded me for a moment and I couldn’t read his expression which made me unreasonably nervous.

The waiter arrived with our starter then, cutting our strange moment of peace short. We ate in silence, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence where you’re grasping for a topic to talk about and every scratch of the cutlery echoed painfully. This just felt cozy and nice, us both enjoying the delicious food and occasionally exchanging a look when someone with odd clothes caught our eyes. One cock of Santino’s brow said more than a thousand words, and when I answered with a roll of my eyes that gave him his answer.

After dinner, we headed to a bar that also had a club on the floor below. I didn’t think Santino would join me on the dance floor. Over the years he’d always avoided dancing but this time he followed me to the center of the club where the beat had taken hold of the crowd, turning dozens of bodies into one pulsing mass. “I thought dancing wasn’t part of your job description,” I shouted into Santino’s ear. That was one of his favorite phrases whenever I asked him to do something. Not part of my job description...

He bent down to answer over the music. “This is an extraordinary situation. Don’t get used to it.” His lips brushed my ear briefly and I shivered pleasantly. Our eyes met. We were close, too close to be socially acceptable in our world, but these rules were suspended for now.

I wondered if Santino realized it as well. That in this moment, he could be whoever he wanted to be, and not limit himself to being my bodyguard. He straightened, bringing a bit more distance between us, but not nearly as much as he would have in the past.

I shrugged and allowed myself to let the music dictate my movements. My eyes closed, basking in the here and now. I rarely let loose. Dancing at social events in our circles was a statement and show for everyone around. I was being judged constantly and I acted accordingly, but here, amid a

crowd of fun-hungry tourists and Parisians alike, I didn't have to put on a show or pretend. I could be an unfiltered version of myself.

Someone bumped into my back, followed by Santino's warning growl, and then I felt a strong, warm hand on my back. I didn't have to open my eyes to know it was Santino. I could feel his protective presence close to my back. Still, I couldn't resist a quick peek to see him as he danced at my side, tall and strong, shielding me from everyone around, not just with his body but also with his warning expression. I got a little thrill. Our eyes met and I smiled. It wasn't meant to provoke or tease, for once I just wanted to show Santino my appreciation, for the chance he was giving me to do this, even if it had taken some light coercion.

Maybe it was my imagination but I thought he lightly stroked my back in response, even as his face remained unmoving. The music changed, becoming slower, and the dance floor filled even more, forcing me and Santino even closer together. His hand moved to my side lightly. The touch was still protective but I felt it everywhere. I leaned back, pressing my back to Santino's front and my head to his chest.

"Anna," Santino growled.

"Let me enjoy this moment. It'll pass soon enough."

Santino lightly squeezed my hip. I wasn't sure if it was warning or agreement but he didn't step back and so we swayed to the gentler beat, body against body, his heartbeat pounding against me. His heat scorched me, and the crisp scent of his aftershave flooded my nose. I could have stayed in this moment forever but the music changed once more, back to a fast tune, and we drifted apart. Eventually we moved back to the bar for another drink. Santino settled for something non-alcoholic, always on duty, but I opted for another cocktail.

I could already feel the alcohol take effect, enhancing this new feeling of unbridled freedom.

When we walked home in the early morning hours, me slightly tipsy and Santino as vigilant as always, I could tell that something felt different between us. Maybe it was that Santino for once treated me like a normal woman and not a petulant child and bother. He was almost relaxed and I too felt comfortable in a way I did with very few people. Santino felt a bit like family, in the way that I knew I could trust him and be myself around him. But definitely not in a related way. Nothing about my feelings for Santino was chaste enough for that.

When we arrived in our apartment, Santino settled on the sofa with a glass of Pernod, finally off duty. I hovered in the living room, unwilling to get ready for bed, unwilling to leave, knowing in the morning things would probably be back to normal, to us fighting and Santino keeping his distance and me trying to break through it with teasing and provocation.

“Can I have one?” I asked, motioning at the milky white drink.

Santino stood and poured me a small sip of Pernod in a long drink glass before he added water, apparently the only way to enjoy Pernod.

I settled beside him on the sofa, taking the glass and sniffing at it. I’d never had this drink before and as the strong note of anis hit my nose, I was fairly certain this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Santino gave me a sardonic smile. “It’s not an easy drink.”

“I suppose it’s fitting. A complicated drink for a complicated man.” I took a sip and shuddered at the strong note of licorice and alcohol that burned my tongue. I’d need at least a gallon of water to dilute the taste. “Huh.” I blew out a deep breath and suppressed another shudder.

“That’s why you and I aren’t a good idea,” Santino said, surprising me.

I cocked an eyebrow. “Because I don’t like Pernod.”

“You said it yourself. I’m as complicated as that drink.”

“I know you, and I can handle it.”

Santino took another sip, watching me in the strangest way. I raised the glass to my lips again as well, trying to prove a point, which of course led to another wave of shudders as Pernod hit my tastebuds. Santino took the glass from me. “It’s a good thing to know when it’s enough, or when you shouldn’t even start in the first place.”

“Have you never heard of the term acquired taste? Over the years that’s happened with you.”

Santino chuckled and shook his head, muttering something under his breath. “You are God’s way to punish me on Earth, Anna.”

“Well, I’m a hell of a good time, that’s for sure.”

He laughed some more and finished his Pernod, then mine. “Go to bed.”

On any other day I would have made an inappropriate comment but this moment right there, and the whole evening felt too special to ruin it with something like that, and so I only leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek before I stood. “Sweet dreams, Santino.”

I could feel his eyes following me as I headed into the bathroom to get ready. Inside, I took a deep breath, trying to suppress the wave of loneliness

and longing I felt. I wanted to snuggle up to Santino and talk through the night. This was such a strange thing to want, but today I felt closer to him than ever before. I'd always been strongly physically attracted to him but now another layer had been added, which was disconcerting. I wasn't sure if I wanted this new feeling to last or pass. The latter was probably the wiser choice considering everything. Emotions weren't practical. Not when they posed a risk for the future that lay ahead of me.



Santino was already awake when I came out of my bedroom around nine the next morning. Only the hint of shadows under his eyes and an even grumpier expression than usual spoke of a long night and a little too much alcohol. I wasn't sure how many more Pernods he'd enjoyed after I'd gone to bed.

"I need food," I groaned as I sank down on the hard kitchen chair across from Santino.

"Good luck with that. We forgot to go grocery shopping yesterday."

I grimaced. Mom had reminded us to go shopping before she'd left, but of course I'd forgotten it right after. I'd never had to go grocery shopping before, without Mom.

"What do we do now?" I said miserably.

Santino smirked. "We could go grocery shopping."

"I think I'll pass out until then. I really need to eat."

"You're a drama queen."

I scowled.

"How about we head into one of these tiny cafés you're always raving about? Croissant and a hot chocolate will cure your hangover."

I gave him a pleased smile. "Sounds like a plan. Let me get ready."

I put on a cute dress, an oversized cashmere sweater, cashmere chunky cable knit leg warmers and suede boots, and braided my hair before I put a beret hat on.

Santino glanced at his watch when I emerged. "Thirty minutes? I thought you needed food ASAP."

“We’re heading into a café in Paris. I can’t go in sweatpants.”

Santino rose to his feet. “Allrrriggghtt.”

Despite his grumbling, I didn’t miss the appreciation in his eyes as he scanned me. I looked cute, even if he would never admit it aloud.

We strolled through the street side by side, the winter sun kissing our faces. On occasion, our arms brushed and it felt marvelous. “I think we’re pretty good together. You can tell that people think we’re a cute couple.” It was a thought that hadn’t left me all night.

Santino slanted me a weary look. “But we aren’t.”

Apparently, his lowered guards were no longer in effect. He was back to being the distanced bodyguard.

I motioned at a small corner café ahead of us. I’d seen a recommendation for it in a Time Out article about breakfast places in Paris. When we stepped in, a waiter gave us a curt nod and greeted us in French then proceeded to ask if we had a reservation. His words were directed at Santino who stared back blankly.

I replied, before Santino could ask him to speak English and cost us any chance at a table. The waiter’s face brightened when I spoke to him in fluent French, which was probably why we were lucky enough to get a table. Someone had canceled their reservation and we got a small round table near the window overlooking the street.

I settled on the chair. Santino with his larger frame bumped his knees against the underside of the table. “Are these places made for kids?”

“Not everyone’s as tall as you. If you don’t man-spread, you’ll be fine.”

Santino gave me an annoyed look, then turned the menu card over, probably looking for the English version, which wasn’t there. He sighed.

Santino was trying to find fault in all kinds of things because he simply didn’t want to be in Paris. If he’d just enjoy it, he’d find joy in the differences.

“You should consider learning French. It broadens the horizon, which is never a bad thing if you ask me.”

“I didn’t,” Santino growled. “And unlike you, I don’t have any spare time.”

“French people don’t like to talk in English. They’ll be nicer if you at least try to speak their language.”

A waitress sauntered over to us and gave us a tight-lipped smile. I ordered an Americano and an egg-white omelet and was about to ask

Santino what he wanted when she turned to him, ignoring me. He was leaning back in his chair, manspreading in all his muscled glory and giving her a smile that suggested he had a secret to share with her. The expression made me want to stab someone with a fork, mostly the stupidly smiling waitress. “You American?”

“Italian American,” Santino said, still smiling, and making me feel even stabbier. “What can you recommend from your menu?”

She oohed and ahhed for too long before she read the entire menu to Santino, despite other customers waiting to be served, and then proceeded to take Santino’s order in English without batting an eye. She whirled around without another look in my direction.

“You ordered half the menu. Have you invited anyone over I’m not aware of?”

“I’m starving.”

“Just because the waitress was making the moves on you and thus making an effort to talk in English doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to learn at least some basic French. It’s disrespectful to live in a country and not learn the language.”

“It wasn’t my choice to live in France, was it?”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re here now.”

“I’m being nice to the locals as the waitress can attest, while you gave her the evil eye.”

I pressed my lips together to stop myself from saying something very petty. I needed a coffee before I could embark on a verbal battle with Santino.

The waitress came back soon after with our drinks and part of Santino’s order, not my omelet though.

I took a deep sip from my coffee then glanced back toward the kitchen, hoping for my food to arrive soon. My belly was already grumbling angrily. I was always starving after I drank too much alcohol, one of the reasons why I tried to limit my intake.

Santino held out the basket with croissants: plain and chocolate. “Take one. They’re really good.” He emphasized his words by taking a bite from a plain croissant after he’d dipped it in raspberry jam.

“I have a figure to maintain.” The girls in Paris were slim and very aware of their bodies, and I knew the girls who studied fashion design would be even worse.

Santino rolled his eyes. “Your figure is fine. Eat a croissant.”

I rolled my eyes in turn. “I’m sure my omelet will be here any moment.”

Santino ripped a piece off his croissant and held it out before my face. “Come on, be a good girl for once and take a bite.”

Had he really just said be a good girl? I was equally annoyed and thrilled. Instead of a snappy comeback, I leaned forward and snatched up the piece, my lips brushing his fingers. Santino’s eyes locked on mine. He was probably as surprised by my actions as me. The buttery taste of the croissant filled my mouth. I sat back, licking a few crumbs off my lips. Santino never took his eyes off me.

The intensity of his gaze had a new quality. In the past, he only ever reached this level with pure fury, but it wasn’t fury that I saw in his eyes.

Chapter *Fourteen*



Santino

My fingers tingled. Strike that. My entire body tingled because my boss's daughter had touched my skin with her daringly smiling lips.

Last night, I'd dreamed of her. It wasn't the first time, but it had definitely been the most vivid and dirtiest dream. I really hoped that was a one-time slip, and the result of too much Pernod, but the way my pulse sped up as I watched Anna now, I harbored little hope for myself.

I took a sip from my coffee. I needed to shift my focus to other things, other women preferably. Anna was a job, not a woman. I needed to internalize it until even the last fiber in my body got the message.

"Your expression is very strained. What's going on? Not happy with your croissant?" Anna hit me with a teasing smile.

I wasn't sure why but since our evening yesterday, I found her more tolerable than in the past. It was probably a sensation that would pass soon. If I could count on one thing then it was Anna's talent to drive me up the wall.

"Just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I'll be living in France for a while."

"There are far worse places to live than Paris."

I had to admit I was pleasantly surprised by Paris so far, but I still would have preferred to return to Chicago.

“How about we do something you want today?” Anna suggested, surprising me.

Unfortunately, my mind went straight to a scene from my dream last night, which was definitely not something that would happen today.

Or any day.

I hadn't done much research on Paris. It wasn't a leisure trip after all, but there was one thing that had caught my eye when I'd read about the city before our trip. “The Catacombs.”



Doing the Catacombs on a cold winter day and walking home in the snowy rain probably wasn't the best choice. Anna was shivering when we finally got home.

“Admit it, you were trying to let me freeze to death so you could return to Chicago.”

“If you freeze to death under my watch, I better not return to Chicago. Your father would make my last days on earth very unpleasant.”

“Dad's a fair Capo.”

I smiled sardonically. Maybe she forgot that I had been his enforcer for years. Yes, Dante was fair, but that didn't make him any less brutal and ruthless than any other Capo. He judged you by his standards of moral and fairness. “I don't think that would be the case if you were concerned.”

“Then you better make sure I warm up quickly,” Anna said, peeling off her soaked blazer. The blouse beneath it was see-through and clung to her body. Her lace bra teased me through the sheer fabric.

“Take a hot shower,” I said. I didn't easily feel cold but even I was looking forward to a warm shower later.

Anna leaned in the doorway to the bathroom, snowflakes melting on her hair. “We could take a shower together.” She bit her lip. “Or you could start by warming my lips with yours.”

Had she forgotten that kissing her had brought me here in the first place? And the worst thing was that I couldn't stop thinking about it. “Why

would I kiss you again? So you can blackmail me again?”

I kicked off my wet shoes.

She sighed, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have used our kiss against you, and I swear I won’t ever do it again. Paris just meant so much to me.”

“More than my safety and feelings anyway.”

“I didn’t know you had feelings. You’re so good at hiding them.”

I only stared at her, not in the slightest amused. And I sure as fuck wouldn’t start sharing my feelings with Anna, especially when they had been all over the place in the last few weeks.

“It’s not true. I would have never told Dad anything, even if you hadn’t done what I wanted.”

“I’m supposed to take your words for that?”

Anna looked honestly hurt but I didn’t want to let her off easily. No one had ever blackmailed me before. “I’ve never ratted someone out when it really mattered. Not even Leonas after he pissed me off.”

“I guess we’ll never know. I’m here in Paris now, so you got your wish.”

She looked away. “Then don’t believe me.” She disappeared in the bathroom and for some reason, I felt a hint of guilt when it was really Anna would feel that way. That woman was messing with my mind again!

I went into my room and got out of my wet clothes and put on warm sweatpants.

A screech rang out. I raced out of my room, grabbing my gun on the way and storming into the bathroom, not even thinking about it. Anna stood in front of the shower stall, dripping wet and stark naked.

I froze, my mind drawing a blank for a moment. I lowered my gun. “What’s going on?” My voice was strangely hoarse. Anna’s eyes took in my naked chest, and she didn’t bother covering herself. I should have looked away, but I simply couldn’t. She was absolutely breathtaking. My imagination, even my wildest dreams hadn’t done her justice. Goose bumps covered her entire body. Her nipples were hard and dusty pink, her breasts perfectly round. Droplets of water traveled down her belly, catching in her lovely belly button, except for a few wayward drops that slid lower to the trimmed triangle of dark hair.

I forced my gaze back up, only to meet Anna’s coy smile. “Like what you see?”

Like? I was fucking mesmerized. “Why did you scream?”

“The water suddenly turned ice cold.”

I narrowed my eyes as I walked closer to her. I grabbed a towel and held it out to her. She needed to cover herself if I wanted to focus on anything but her body. “Here.” She took the towel with a cocked eyebrow, but simply held it in her hand instead of wrapping it around herself.

Gritting my teeth, I reached inside the shower stall only to feel warm water. “The water’s warm.”

Anna held her fingers beneath the stream. I really tried to ignore how close her naked body was to mine, how good she smelled, how much I wanted to reach out and pull her against me. Her lips formed an “O” when she felt the water. She gave me a sheepish smile. “It was cold, I swear.”

“I told you to stop your games.”

“I don’t play any games, Santino. You’re being pissed on principle because you don’t want to be here.”

Damn right. I took a step back from her, needing more distance between her tantalizing naked body and me.

Things were slipping out of my control. I could practically feel it. I hated that Anna had that much control over me, and I just wanted to get my control back. “Have you ever considered that I didn’t want to leave my entire life, my family and friends, behind? All for you?”



Santino looked absolutely furious. I swallowed. I hadn’t asked him, it was true. Santino being my shadow had become my reality. I could hardly

remember a time when he hadn't been my protector, and I didn't want to imagine a time when he'd ever not be anymore.

"You are right," I said quietly. "And if being in Paris to protect me is too much for you, then I'll ask Dad to exchange you for another bodyguard."

Santino made a dismissive gesture. "I'm not in the mood for that long-ass flight so soon again. Not to mention that none of the other bodyguards would be able to tolerate your moods."

I widened my eyes. "Excusez moi, you are constantly on edge because of my supposed moods. I doubt anyone would handle them worse than you do."

"I'm doing my job, that's all. I'm the only person who doesn't try to schmooze with you to get in your dad's good graces."

"Pity," I muttered. He was one of the few people I wouldn't mind being schmoozed by.

He shook his head again. "Take a shower and go to bed. And if you scream again, I won't come running." He turned, giving me a look at his strong back and perfectly shaped butt in the low-hanging sweatpants.

He threw the door shut with more force than necessary. With a small smile, I stepped back into the shower stall. I hadn't lied when I'd said the water had been freezing, but now it was pleasantly warm.

I leaned back against the tiles, closing my eyes so I could replay the look of awe that had taken hold of Santino's face when he'd seen me naked. My belly clenched thinking about how close he'd been, how good he'd smelled. And his furious expression?

I allowed my fingers to glide down between my legs and find my already needy clit. One angry look from Santino did more to me than kissing Maurice or Clifford had done. I began stroking myself, regretting that I hadn't found time to unpack my toys yet. But even without toys, it didn't take me long to orgasm.

But it only left me wanting more.

Santino sat on the sofa and watched BBC on the small TV when I left the bathroom a little while later. He'd put on a T-shirt. I was in my favorite ruby-colored silk chemise and matching hipsters. Santino briefly glanced my way before he returned his attention to the screen.

I walked over to him and perched on the armrest beside him.

"What do you want?"

I watched his face, the hard line of his mouth, the wary glint in his eyes. “I’d have never pegged you a coward.”

He tensed. “I’m not a coward, Cherie.”

My heart thudded hearing him call me by the French endearment. He didn’t mean it in a kind way but I loved the sound all the same. I shrugged. “You’re scared of me.”

Santino gave me a condescending smile.

“You are. You’re scared because you want me.”

“Since when are you an expert on spotting a man’s desire?”

I hated how abrasive he could be, how easily he could brush me off when I knew what I’d seen in the bathroom. “When I kissed Maurice and Clifford, I could see their desire for me. Clifford’s a good kisser, by the way.”

It wasn’t a straight-out lie. I assumed Clifford was a good kisser considering his success with the ladies. Only because I hadn’t particularly enjoyed it didn’t mean he wasn’t.

Fury gleamed in Santino’s eyes. He could say what he wanted but he hated that I’d kissed other guys.

“You don’t want to bang me, but you look pissed when I talk about kissing other men.”

“Cliffy isn’t a man, he’s a boy, and once you’ve been with a man, you’ll know the difference.”

“You’re forgetting about Maurice.”

Santino scoffed. “He isn’t a man either.”

“Who said I haven’t been with someone else than Clifford and Maurice?” I said in frustration. “You know Clifford doesn’t care about our traditions. He doesn’t expect me to wait until marriage.”

Santino’s face became pure stone. “Good for him.” Then a taunting smile pulled at his lips. “You can do whatever you want but I won’t kiss you again. I learned my lesson.”

I could have screamed in frustration. Why did he have to be so stubborn? I decided to try another, more honest approach.

“I’m dutiful like you Santino, but I want to live before I spend my life being the good politician’s wife. Clifford enjoys himself, why shouldn’t I?”

He only stared. I wished I knew what went on in his head.

“Would you rather I enjoy myself with someone else?”

“Your father asked me to protect you and that’s what I’m doing.”

I huffed. “From sex.”

He looked back at the TV. I got up with a shrug. “Then I’ll just get myself off without your help, like I did in the shower.”

I turned, not waiting for his reply, and went into my room, not bothering to close the door. “You know where to find me if you find your courage.”

Steps rang out behind me and then Santino grabbed me by the shoulders and whirled me around so I was facing him.

He glowered down at me. “What is it you really want, Anna? For me to lose control? My mind? My job? My life?”

His voice was harsh and low, stroking the fire in my belly.

He was the sexiest man I’d ever seen. He was everything I wanted. “I want you to lose control.”

Santino growled and shoved away from me, taking two steps back. Without another word, he stormed out of my room and threw the door shut.

I bit my lip and closed my eyes, listening to the furious beating of my heart. My golden cage allowed me few pleasures, even fewer thrills. But provoking Santino always breathed life into me.

Chapter *Fifteen*



The next few days, I gave Santino some room and focused on my schedule. The first introductory courses were about to begin and I wanted to make sure I had everything I needed. I also signed up for an additional sewing course. I had already taken sewing lessons with our maid in the months leading up to my move to Paris, but I was still far from good. I knew I needed to get better if I wanted to get a good understanding of how clothes were made. How could you be a good designer without being able to sew a piece of clothing yourself?

Santino worked out in his room while I stayed in mine. Eventually, we headed out on foot to go to a secondhand shop that also sold sewing machines to people who wanted to upcycle items.

“My mother used to sew,” Santino said when we picked up an older model that still required plenty of handy work.

Surprise washed through me. He rarely talked about family, and if he did it was about his dad. I wasn’t sure what to say, completely caught off guard. I’d have thought he’d keep his silence for a few more days to punish me for my teasing. “It’s a handy skill.”

Santino nodded simply and silence descended on us once more as he carried the heavy machine while we strolled back home. As we waited on the sidewalk for the pedestrian lights to turn green, a group of nuns came our way. I stepped back with a small smile. Santino, however, let the nuns pass with a hostile expression as if they'd personally offended him.

"What's your problem with nuns?" I asked as we finally crossed the street. The sidewalk here was narrow so Santino and I had to walk arm against arm, which felt nice. Santino had stopped walking a few steps behind me since we were alone in Paris anyway. It felt less and less like a working relationship.

"I don't have a problem with nuns," he said nonchalantly. Whom was he trying to fool? I'd known him for years and seen him at his worst and best, mostly worst though.

I knew when he was lying.

I made a face that made it blatantly clear I didn't believe him. "Right. Did you hit on a nun and she refused your advances?"

That was something I could imagine vividly. Santino was the type to do so, just for fun.

Disgust skimmed his lips. "Why would I hit on a nun?"

"The thrill of the hunt and the forbidden? Just out of spite? Or maybe even boredom?"

"Since you entered my life, boredom is the least of my problems."

I flashed him a cocky grin. "Thanks."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"It sure sounded like one. I take it."

Santino shook his head but I could tell he was fighting a smile. I really wished he would let it win more often. The sun had been shining all day, and it almost felt like spring. Considering how cold it had been a few days before, this caught me completely off guard. "Let's head into the park and soak up the sunshine for a bit."

Santino nodded and together we headed toward the lawn at the base of the Eiffel Tower. To my surprise, we weren't the only people. Several people had put down blankets and sat on the grass, drinking wine and chatting.

"Let's do the same."

"We don't have a blanket."

I motioned at one of the street vendors that sold everything from small corny Eiffel Towers, over fake Cartier watches and MCM umbrellas, to blankets with the Louis Vuitton logo. Santino went over to the man and bargained for almost ten minutes until we got the blanket for half the price and an umbrella for free. We settled on the blanket. The ground was still cold, not yet warmed from the sun but I didn't mind. I just wanted to enjoy the sun on my skin even if my butt froze off.

"It could be worse," I murmured. "Most people would kill for your job."

Santino sank down beside me. "Today has been one of my better work days."

I chuckled and lay back on my back, loving the sight of the Eiffel Tower rising above us with the sun peeking out behind it. The thing with the nuns wouldn't leave my mind though. There was a story to be told. I could feel it.

I rolled over on my belly, pushed up on my elbows and propped my chin up on Santino's thigh.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a low, tense voice. He'd straightened his back, ready to spring, and I could feel his thigh muscles flex under my chin.

"Chill. I'm only getting comfortable. I won't ravish you in the middle of a park."

Santino didn't crack a smile but I couldn't help but grin devilishly. I loved when I could rattle him. Little phased Santino, but I did, *big time*.

He narrowed his eyes. "You realize the Paparazzi would have a field day if they got a photo of us like that. It would make headlines."

"Nobody knows we're here, and Dad would prevent it."

"Probably. He'd also roast my balls on a barbecue."

I let out a pleased sigh as I shifted so my cheek rested on Santino's thigh instead. My pulse had picked up being so close to Santino and the part of him I had every intention of getting more acquainted with very soon.

"Anna."

The low hum of warning in Santino's deep voice sent a pleasant shiver down my back.

I closed my eyes. "Can you rub my back? I feel like napping."

"Anna."

I cracked open one eye. "How about this: you tell me what nuns ever did to you and I'll sit beside you like a good girl?"

Santino considered it for almost a minute before he heaved a sigh. “All right. But get up first.”

“No, you go first. You’ll only run off if I lift my head.”

He chuckled. “Sometimes I really don’t know what’s going on in your head.”

“It’s called creative chaos.”

“My sister’s a nun.”

I sat up, my lips parted. “Really?”

“Yeah. She’s been a novice since last July.”

“Wow. But why?” I let out a stunned laugh. “Does she hope to cancel out your sins?”

Santino stared off toward a group of people, his expression serious. I sobered immediately, realizing this really bothered him. “Not my sins, no.”

I touched his hand, which rested on the blanket. “Santino?”

His eyes found mine and my heart clenched. I wanted to wrap my arms around him, kiss him, hug him.

“Misguided guilt, I suppose,” he said quietly.

I wrecked my brain for the family history of the Bianchis, but all I knew was that Santino’s mom had died when I was very young. I didn’t know why, had never asked. I didn’t know anything about his sister. I wasn’t even sure if I’d ever met her.

“What happened? Does it have something to do with your mother?”

Santino’s body became tenser. I expected him to pull away and say something dismissive. Santino didn’t do emotions. Not deep emotions at least. “My mother died giving birth to my sister Frederica when I was eleven.”

I didn’t even know that Frederica was close to me in age, only one year younger. “I’m so sorry.”

Santino nodded. “Frederica blames herself for it. She denies it but I can tell. My mother suffered a cardiac arrest. She had an undiagnosed heart defect. It could have happened at any other time, but because it happened during labor, Frederica blamed herself.”

“Your poor dad, and you were only a young boy, this must have been such a horrid experience.”

I wondered if Santino had some kind of strange Oedipus complex because he’d lost his mother so early and that was why he always picked older married women.

“But it’s not her fault. Did your dad ever blame her?”

“No,” Santino said firmly. “Dad treated her like a princess.”

“But he always kept working for my parents, how did he manage with two kids?”

“One of his sisters helped us out, and once Frederica was a bit older, I took care of her a lot when Dad wasn’t home. Later when I began to work for the Outfit, my aunt took over most of the time though.”

I took a deep breath and linked my fingers with Santino’s even if I feared he’d pull back. “I’m really sorry for your loss. And I’m sorry that your sister’s suffering because of it. Maybe being a nun will help her realize that it isn’t her fault.”

“She’s not living. She’s only existing. She should enjoy life, not beg for forgiveness for something that isn’t her fault.”

I nodded. After that we sat in silence beside each other, our fingers still entwined. I would have leaned my head against Santino’s shoulder, if I hadn’t feared spooking him. I was content with holding his hand. It was more than I’d dared hoping for. The sense of peace and contentment I felt being close to Santino in such an innocent way showed me that my heart still hadn’t given up, even when my mind had settled for a fling.

Eventually Santino removed his hand and straightened, his expression becoming hard again. Our moment was over.

“We should head home.”

Santino didn’t say a word as we walked through the darkening streets. It was becoming increasingly cold now that the sun was gone.

My phone beeped and I glanced down.

Surprise widened my eyes.

Hey Anna, it’s me Maurice. I’m back in Paris and your brother told me you’re there as well. Why don’t we meet up? I don’t like how our last encounter ended.

“Who’s it from?” Santino asked.

“Maurice,” I said before I could think it through.

“Tell him no. No matter what he wants, the answer is no.”

I frowned at his commanding tone. “Maybe he only wants to chat because you assaulted him last time.”

“He better make sure I don’t assault him again.”

“I’m allowed to see boys. You heard what Mom said.”

“I doubt your dad was involved in that decision.”

“What’s really your problem, Santino? You say you don’t want me but you don’t want me to meet any other boys.”

“I’m not a boy, Anna. The Maurice kid probably won’t mind taking a bite off you even if the cake is promised to another, but I don’t want a fucking bite. I’ll eat the cake.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You won’t meet Maurice. End of story.”

I glared but he ignored me and opened the front door of our apartment building while he held my sewing machine under his other arm.

Our ascend was stopped by our neighbor from below. She was a married woman in her early forties, with two kids, and a husband who worked on an oil rig. Like many French moms, she didn’t look like one. She was always impeccably dressed, had a slim figure and a flirty smile that was completely inappropriate for a married woman.

Since we’d moved in, she’d set her sights on Santino, and he’d immediately introduced me as his sister which had only fired up her interest.

“Santino,” she said in her heavy accent. “I need your help.”

And we both knew with what she needed help. Your husband being gone for six months at a time probably made you particularly horny.

Santino didn’t miss a beat as he leaned against the wall and gave her a slow, dirty smile.

Jealousy burned through me.

It was almost as if he was trying to cancel out our meaningful conversation with a meaningless fuck. I hated this, hated that he’d rather bang some French wench than give us a try.

You’re going to marry.

We could have something special for a little while. That was better than never having something special. And even if it was only sex.

“Maybe you can come over later and help me with my window?”

“Of course,” Santino said, and the way he said it and from the look in his eyes, I knew he was sexing her up. “Just let me take my little sister and her sewing machine up to the apartment.”

I stalked up to the next floor and went into our apartment. Santino followed shortly after.

“If you think I’ll go to bed, while you go down fixing Mrs. French-Wench with dick, you’re crazy.”

“French-Wench?”

I stared.

“It’s late. Even my duties are over at some point. I’ll tuck you in and then I’m free to do what I want.”

“Fine,” I said with a slim smile. I stormed into my room and threw the door shut, not caring how childish that made me look. After the moment we’d shared in the park, Santino’s flirting with that woman hurt even more.

I texted Maurice the second I was alone in my room.

Do you have time to meet me now?

Sure. How about we meet at the Seine?

Deal. Give me thirty minutes.

I grabbed my nightgown and left my room. Santino leaned against the kitchen counter, drinking an espresso, probably for a little extra energy so he’d satisfy the French-Wench. He watched me as I headed into the bathroom to “get ready for bed.” I turned on the water, but instead of starting my nighttime routine, I refreshed my makeup to look presentable for my meeting with Maurice. If Santino had fun with French-Wench, I’d enjoy the rest of the night with Maurice. I was done waiting for Santino to give in. I didn’t know how much time I had in Paris, but what I knew was that my freedom had an expiration date, and I’d make the most of it until then, with or without Santino’s help.

I listened to the front door open and click shut, then the sound of the lock. I couldn’t believe his audacity.

Maybe he’d promised Dad to keep me away from all fun, but I wouldn’t let myself be locked in. I waited a bit more before I opened the door a gap and peeked out. Santino was definitely gone.

He probably thought a locked front door would stop me. With a brother like Leonas, lock-picking was an easy feat.

Armed with a hairpin, I started working on the lock. After a bit of fumbling, the lock eventually clicked. Again I carefully opened the door and peeked out, then listened for voices from downstairs. The hallway was silent, so Santino was already inside French-Wench’s apartment.

I practically rushed past her door on my way downstairs. I didn’t want to be caught, and I couldn’t bear the thought of overhearing them getting it

on. I wasn't sure why the thought of hearing them was too much for me when I'd already seen Santino bang Mrs. Alfera and Mrs. Clark. Maybe because I felt like we'd been getting closer over the last few weeks, especially today.

I took a taxi to Notre Dame and paid cash, in case Santino was tracking my credit card. I recognized Maurice at once. He leaned against the stone wall at the bank of the Seine. He was dressed in dark chinos and a white T-shirt, and held a bottle of wine in his hand.

I smiled and greeted him with the usual number of three kisses. The "Faire la bise" how the French called it.

"You look beautiful," Maurice said.

"Thanks."

He glanced behind me with an ironic smile. "Where's your bodyguard?"

"Busy with a lonely, married French woman."

He laughed. "He'll be busy for a while then, huh?"

I laughed too because it would have been weird if I'd acted annoyed. To my ears, it sounded horribly fake but Maurice didn't seem to notice.

"I'll keep you busy," he said with a slow smile, lifting the bottle with Viognier, one of my favorite wines.

"I'm counting on it."

Chapter *Sixteen*



Santino

I knocked at Veronique's door. When she opened it, she made a badly played surprised face, closing a bathrobe over her very naked body. It was a lovely body, one few men would say no to, but it left me annoyingly cold.

"Oh, I didn't expect you so soon. I took a shower."

"Should I come back later?" I asked, even if I knew the answer.

She grabbed my upper arm with a dismissive laugh. "Oh no. Don't be ridiculous."

I stepped into the corridor of her apartment. It was smaller than the one I shared with Anna but still not cheap. Her husband probably earned good money on that oil rig while his lonely wife sought the company of men like me.

"Come in," she said, leading me toward the kitchen. "Maybe you can take a look at my table as well? It's wobbly."

I nodded and got down on my haunches to inspect the table. Veronique positioned herself right beside me, her bathrobe slowly becoming loose and revealing long legs and the hint of a shaved pussy.

I peered up at her face. It spoke a clear language. She wanted a night full of hot sex, and she knew I was a man who could provide it.

Problem was, my head wasn't down here. I couldn't stop thinking about Anna, about the conversation we'd shared, and about the way my pulse picked up whenever she flirted with me. Anna too wanted me for the fun I could provide. I'd never minded being the fling-kind-of-guy but with Anna, the idea simply didn't sit well with me.

Veronique touched my shoulder. "Santino?"

I glanced at her pussy once more. I could spend the night banging a lonely, horny woman, or I could return upstairs. For what?

I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore. Anna. Definitely. That was the damn problem.

I shoved to my feet. "The table is fine. Let me check the window now." I strode toward the window, which was jammed but I couldn't see how I could fix it.

"Do you want a glass of wine?"

I shook my head. "I should go."

Not waiting for a reply, I left the apartment and hurried up the stairs. Anna had become my cockblock.

I went to unlock the door but it wasn't locked anymore. I shoved open the door and stormed in. Anna wasn't in the bathroom. I only found her nightgown thrown over the bathtub rim. I whirled around and checked her bedroom, even if I knew I wouldn't find her there either. What I found was her cell phone. She probably suspected the tracker we'd put in it. Did she even realize how dangerous it was for her to run around without a way to contact me?

"Damn it!" I roared as I rushed back down the stairs and knocked at Veronique's door. She opened a moment later, looking confused. "I need your Vespa. My sister's run off and I need to go looking for her."

She took the key from a hook on the wall. "Do you want me to call the police?"

"No," I clipped as I grabbed the key of the fucking Vespa and hurried down the stairs. Taking a car would take longer, so even if I hated the yellow-colored thing, it would do me a better service if I wanted to find Anna as quickly as possible.

I meandered through traffic, regretting not checking Anna's text. Where would a French Casanova like Maurice take Anna? Probably some cozy nook where he could put his paws all over her.

Fuck, and what if something happened to her? I'd never forgive myself.

I headed for the Eiffel Tower first. Too many people had gathered on the grass below the steel construct, drinking wine and chatting despite the cold. I didn't see Anna anywhere. I jumped back on the Vespa and raced away. One of the most romantic places at night was the area around Notre Dame, especially the Seine embankment.

When I dismounted the Vespa at my destination, I followed my gut. It didn't take me long to find a place where many couples had gathered with a view of the church and the Seine to get it on.

I didn't see Anna anywhere though. I searched the area for another hour until I gave up and headed toward Montmartre. But I didn't find her there either. Panic was starting to set in.

If I didn't find Anna until the morning, I had to consider calling Dante so he could organize help. I couldn't risk waiting too long before I rang the alarm. If she'd been kidnapped, every hour mattered. And calling the police was out of the question.

It was four in the morning when I headed back to the apartment. My shirt stuck to my sweaty body and my veins were still pulsating with adrenaline.

I parked the Vespa in the street and froze when I spotted Anna in front of the building. She didn't have keys, so of course she had to wait in front of it. I stalked toward her, torn between overwhelming relief and fury.

Anna's lips were puffy as if she'd spent the night glued to Maurice's lips, or worse... The mere idea made my blood pump with jealousy and rage.

"You're lucky I'm supposed to protect you, or I'd kill you!" I growled as I grabbed her arm, unlocked the door and dragged her upstairs.

To my surprise, Anna followed along without much protest.

I released her once we were in our apartment and away from curious eyes. "Where the hell have you been?"

"You're in a foul mood. Didn't the French-Wench cheer you up? She gave you her Vespa as a thank you, I suppose."

"Where the hell were you?" I got in her face, so very close to exploding. I immediately smelled the alcohol on her breath. "Are you drunk?"

She grinned. "Maybe. I think we shared two bottles of very delicious wine."

I gritted my teeth. "You met with Maurice?"

"I did. Why should you be the only one to have fun?"

I'd find the fucker and chop off his head. "What happened?"

I wasn't even sure why I was asking. Anna's lips were swollen, her hair tousled and her blouse buttoned the wrong way. Even an idiot could guess what she'd been up to with Maurice. Maybe I should have expected it. Anna was an eighteen-year-old who finally got a taste of freedom. She'd been trying to seduce me for weeks—hell, months now—of course, she'd eventually find someone else who'd scratch her itch.

Regret tasted bitter in my mouth. Why did I not take her up on her offer? Why did I have to act noble when I decidedly wasn't?

Anna smiled crookedly. "It's the city of love, what do you think happened?"

I nodded, bottling up my rage as deeply as I could even when I wanted to roar. Anna wasn't mine, had never been, and would never be, but my heart didn't care. I was jealous.

"I hope it was worth pissing me off. Because from this day on, I won't leave you out of my sight for a second."

"Is that so?"

I didn't say anything only glared at her, even if it hurt looking at her when the proof of what she'd done with Maurice screamed at me. I hadn't hooked up with anyone in more than a month now because Anna had wormed her way into my head and wouldn't leave.

Anna shrugged. "All right." She began unbuttoning her shirt.

"What are you doing?"

"If you'll follow me wherever I go, I might as well undress right here."

Still not done playing?

I didn't react.

Anna opened her blouse, revealing one of those lacy bras I always saw laying around in the bathroom. She then pulled down the zipper at the back of her skirt and let the piece of clothing drop to the floor. In only her underwear, she was a sight to behold. But I didn't give her the satisfaction, of checking out every inch of her body, even if I wanted to. I had seen her naked, had memorized every inch of her body.

"I'm heading into the bathroom now," she said, turning around, presenting round ass globes to me. She bent forward to pick up her skirt. The string of her thong between her ass cheeks teased me and barely covered her pussy.

I could have had this, if I hadn't been trying to be a virtuous idiot. Now Maurice had had his paws all over this amazing ass, and I had pushed Veronique away.

Maybe I should go down to her. She'd probably still let me in for a fuck even after I'd turned her down before. I could fuck the anger out of my system, could fuck Anna out of my system.

Anna sauntered into the bathroom and left the door open. I didn't follow her but I watched her through the open door. She unhooked her bra to perfectly shaped breasts that would fill out my hands if I kneaded them. Despite her slender figure, Anna didn't have small breasts. She finally removed her thong and tossed it into the laundry bin. The idea that Maurice had seen her like this was too fucking much.

I turned around and stalked into my bedroom. Anna had always been Clifford's, always been someone else's, which was why she'd been forbidden to me. It had never bothered me because for the time being, she'd almost been mine, even if I had never had her in the first place. Sharing her with someone in the now was too fucking much for me.

I got out of my clothes and lay down. I listened to the sound of the shower, feeling an even deeper sense of regret.

I desired Anna. I wanted her still.

Why was I still holding back?

Chapter *Seventeen*



Santino

I cocked an eyebrow. Anna leaned in the doorway in what looked like an oversized dress shirt and a wide leather belt accentuating her narrow waist. She wasn't wearing shoes or tights, and the top buttons were open.

She held a shoebox in her hand. "I need batteries."

I got up from the kitchen table where I had been typing and deleting my letter of resignation to Dante for the last hour. It wasn't the first time I did it either. I'd lost count of the number of resignation letters I'd written and deleted by now. Ever since the night Anna had snuck off with Maurice two weeks ago, I'd been considering quitting the job. I knew what I should be doing, but I couldn't bring myself to hit send. For weeks I had been fighting with myself. I couldn't stop thinking about Anna, about her body, about her coy smile. About how I'd let Maurice have her. I'd smelled his aftershave on her another time after she'd come out of fashion school. He'd probably snuck in and met her for a quickie in a bathroom stall. Anna hadn't denied anything, and I had tried to bottle up my unreasonable jealousy and fury.

"Santino?" Anna strolled over to me and of course, I tensed. I closed the laptop. If she found out I wanted to quit she'd find a way to make me stay and I had a feeling I'd gladly allow her to do so.

“Don’t be scared. I’ll be nice,” she said with the teasing smile that drove me up the wall.

“You’re intolerable.”

“Most people find me charming.”

“That’s because you are charming to them and keep your intolerable self for me.”

“That’s because you are one of the few people I can be myself around. You already don’t like me very much. It’s not like I could impress you.”

If only she knew...

“What do you need the batteries for?” I asked as I got up and opened one of the kitchen drawers where I picked up a selection of batteries.

Anna opened her shoebox. My eyebrows shot up and my dick gave a little twitch. Inside the box lay three little sex toys. One looked like a red computer mouse with a suction cup.

“Trust me, a mouth can do it much better,” I said.

She picked up the red toy. “I know, but if I don’t have a mouth on hand, I can use this one to have some fun.”

“I suppose even with Maurice’s mouth around, you still need that thing to have fun.”

She ignored my snide comment and turned the thing on and motioned at the small suction part. “There are different intensity levels. And I can take it into the bathtub with me. That’s not something a man can do no matter how talented his mouth is unless he can breathe underwater.”

I was fairly sure I’d drown happily if it happened while I sucked at Anna’s sweet little clit.

She had two more toys in her shoebox. A white, smooth slightly curved dildo and a dildo that also had a suction mechanism.

“They are all very good.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing you don’t have to worry about Cliffy being pissed if he can’t poke your hymen with his dick considering Maurice and your dildos got there first.”

She simply smiled, not at all fazed by my words. Just thinking that Maurice might have been the guy who’d popped her cherry two weeks ago drove me up the wall. I really wanted to find the guy on principle and kill him.

Anna motioned at the red toy. A light was blinking red and then the suction stopped. “I need batteries for this one.”

“Why don’t you give Maurice a call and ask him to take the place of the toy?”

“Because you’d only kill him if he showed up.”

I gave her a sharp grin. “You never know.”

Anna shrugged. “I won’t risk it. But if you’re so concerned about the performance of my toy, why don’t you take its place instead and show me how talented you are?”

She didn’t wait for my reply, only grabbed a couple of batteries and her shoebox before she headed back into her room.

I leaned back against the chair and stared up at the ceiling, debating if I should just follow Anna and give her the pussy-licking of her life. She’d never praise that fucking toy, or Maurice, again. I sucked in a deep breath, remembering Dad’s concerned email from yesterday and Dante’s and Valentina’s warning words. I grabbed my laptop and went into my room, lest Anna came out naked.

I was about to write my father when the hum from Anna’s room made me put down the laptop with a groan. Her bed was right against the wall my bed was pressed up against. The humming got louder and soon Anna’s soft moaning mingled with the traitorous sounds of her little suction device. I wondered which of her pleasure devices were at work. The small pink suction device didn’t create such a hum, so she definitely had a dildo in hand as well. The image of Anna pushing a dildo into her pussy immediately sent blood into my cock.

This was the purest torture. I wasn’t even sure why I was still holding back. Things between Anna and me had already crossed into unprofessionalism a long time ago. I might as well bang that sweet pussy and stop that snarky mouth from spouting more provocation.

Anna wanted me. She wanted a few meaningless fucks without the risk of attachment. I was the man for that. Or I used to be. With Anna things were more complicated, but why should I deny myself sex with the woman I desired only because a few complicated feelings were thrown into the mix? Most of them were annoyance anyway.



As if Anna could sense my resolve slipping, she kept pushing all my buttons. She was going in for the kill and I was ready to fall victim to her.

Fuck, we were thousands of miles away from home, away from my Capo. I'd banged married women with their husbands sleeping in the next room and thrived on the thrill, but with Anna it was different. Mainly because of Dante.

It was late, already after dinner when Anna stepped out of the bathroom in a man's shirt. I couldn't tell if she wore anything beneath it and the thought was enough to drive me insane. I wasn't sure if it was a shirt she'd bought in the man's department of a secondhand shop or if Maurice had given it to her during another meeting in Anna's fashion school. I hadn't smelled him on her again, and I tried to tell myself that she wasn't seeing him anymore. I tried to keep an eye on her as much as possible, but it wasn't always possible during her fashion studies and Anna used every chance she got to shake me off. "Is that Maurice's?"

I was a sucker for punishment. I didn't even want to know the answer.

Anna glanced down at herself and gave a shrug. "What if I say yes?"

"You should be careful. Maurice knows who you are. He could ruin your reputation."

"I doubt it's my reputation you're worried about, Sonny. Can you just stop the fucking charade and admit that you want to fuck me and that you regret that Maurice had me first?"

She knew exactly when to use the hated nickname to rile me up.

"I'm sorry if you regret your past choices but I won't sit back and wait for you while you are busy banging our married neighbors."

I wished I had actually banged one of our neighbors, but Anna held me in her teasing iron grip.

She gave me a pitying smile. "I bet you wish you could turn back time now. But it's not too late yet, Sonny. You can have me now. I'm free tonight. Maurice has other plans. We're not exclusive, you know?"

She bent over to pick up a hairpin she'd "accidentally" dropped, causing the dress shirt to ride up, revealing her perky ass cheeks and a tiny red thong.

And fuck, I could see a darker spot. She was aroused. Pissing me off got her wet. My nostrils flared with rage and desire.

Something snapped in me. I'd controlled myself for far too long, had let Maurice get a taste of something I'd been craving for many months. I was

done holding back, done playing noble when I was anything but. I stalked toward her, grabbed her arm and pushed her against the kitchen table.

Her eyes flashed up to mine, and a knowing gleam filled them.

She'd be my downfall. One day, I'd die because of Anna Cavallaro.

She opened her mouth, but I was sick of her provocation. I grabbed her narrow waist and hoisted her up on the table. I fell to my knees, ripped apart her tiny thong, and dove between her legs. I licked her from her firm ass crack up to her swollen clit, tasting her sweet arousal. She cried out as if she was already close to coming, but she'd suffer first.

I shoved my tongue into her tight pussy and began fucking her with it, getting off on the tight hold of her muscles. She tasted like pure sin. I sucked one smooth labia into my mouth, enjoying Anna's twitch and gaspy moan. Her fingers clutched the edge of the table and her eyes were wide with surprise.

I smirked against her dripping flesh. She pushed her fingers into my hair and tugged sharply as I admired her wet flesh. Her bundle of nerves was pulsing with blood, desperate for some love. I drew in a deep breath of her heady scent, memorizing it. My cock was rock hard in my boxers, ready to explode from our banter.

Her hand in my hair tightened and she pushed me back against her pussy. I took her up on the invitation but gripped her hand and tore it away from my head. She wasn't in control this time.

I plunged my tongue even deeper into her pussy. She cried out again, her legs parting wider and her toes curling. I fucked her with my tongue as my hands held on to her ass cheeks, messaging them. Her ass taunted me as she lay spread widely before me. As I buried my tongue deep inside of her once more, I pushed the tip of my thumb into her tight ass. It was a primal part of me that wanted to claim a part of Anna first, and even if Maurice had taken everything else, he didn't strike me as the type who knew what to do with a woman's ass.

"Santino," she cried out. Her ass muscles fought the intrusion but her pussy begged for more.

I rubbed my tongue along her seam over and over again, while my thumb kept circling her other hole. Anna's face was flushed red and her usually immaculate hair was all over the place. I never wanted to stop devouring her. She'd probably have rug burn from my stubble tomorrow, and I knew I'd love the sight of it. I pressed even closer, pressing the flat of

my tongue against her opening before I flicked the tip up. Her legs fell open completely as she let loose, and handed me control for the first time.

“Good girl,” I murmured against her pussy, smirking at her sound of protest, but my tongue circled her clit, silencing her.

And then I closed my lips around her swollen nub and sucked. Anna went off like a firecracker. She almost leaped off the desk. Her pussy pulsed against my mouth as she came hard. She rocked and moaned loud enough that the neighbors from across the street could probably hear her too. I licked up her release eagerly, almost delirious about her body’s reaction. Fuck, she was explosive.

I watched her and slowly drew my thumb out of that tight ass, eager to replace it with my cock.

She gave me a triumphant smile as if she’d gotten exactly what she wanted. This woman was trouble, pure trouble.

I shoved to my feet, leaning over her. “You showed me your perky ass for weeks now, why don’t you bend over and let me claim your tight ass with my cock.”

Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. I couldn’t read the emotion in her eyes. I definitely caught her off guard. What? Did she think I wouldn’t talk dirty to the princess? We’d crossed that line the first time she walked around in front of me half naked.

Fuck, I wanted to kiss her. But I knew all bets would be off if I kissed those smirking lips right now. Anna already had me wrapped around her fingers, and I hoped she’d never find out.

“You’ll have to settle for my mouth,” she said with a teasing smile.

Anger surged through me. Of course, she still wanted to stipulate the conditions of our fucking sessions. Always in control. Always teasing me.

“Then I’m going to fuck it as I would have your ass,” I growled.

“It’s all yours.” One corner of her lips darted up. She was sweaty and a flush still spread between her breasts. Her inner thighs were red from my stubble and her pussy was glistening invitingly.

Sooner or later, I’d lose my mind.

Anna hopped off the table with a smirk. Hints of her lust remained on the wooden surface. I raised my eyebrows at her. “How much longer do you intend to make me wait for your mouth?”

“You’ve waited for so long for this moment, Santino. Don’t pretend otherwise. And now that you tasted me, you’ll yearn for me even more.”

She was right. I'd go berserk if she went near another guy again because I wanted all of her for myself. Just the knowledge that someone like Cliffy and this goddamn Maurice fucker had any part of her before me was enough to drive me to the brink. I wanted to fuck them all out of her system thrust by thrust.

Anna stepped close to me, peering up at me with a coy smile. "You want me on my knees?"

"I want you on your back."

Confusion flickered in her eyes. I gripped her by the waist and carried her over to the sofa where I dropped her so she was stretched out tantalizingly and her head lay on the armrest.

I glowered down at her and unzipped my jeans. I had trouble freeing my cock because it was so goddamn hard. I gripped the backrest over Anna's head and leaned over her, my cock dangling over her face.

Surprise flashed in her eyes when she realized what I wanted. "Not ready for having your mouth fucked?"

Her expression became taunting. "I'm not the proper virgin, remember? You aren't the first to claim my mouth."

She moved her head farther back, stretching her narrow throat and peering up at me daringly through her long lashes. "If this is what you want, it's yours."

I wanted so much more, but I'd take this before I got nothing. I bent my knees slightly as I guided my cock to Anna's still smirking mouth. My tip brushed her lips, coating them with my lust for her before I parted them. My grip on the armrest tightened when my cock slid deeper into her mouth. She stared at me, but I couldn't read her for once.

"Ready?"

She smiled around my cock.

I began to slide in and out of her mouth, leaning even more over her. Soon my thrusts sped up, taking more of her mouth. She breathed heavily through her nose, swallowing sickly around my girth.

Her fingers dug into the sofa, trying to steady herself as she took me into her mouth.

"I bet Maurice never did this. Too proper to fuck properly, right?" I snarled. Anna pulled back, spittle running down her chin.

"Shut up, Sonny, and keep fucking my mouth."

"You ready to take me down your throat?"

“More than ready,” she growled, her eyes full of challenge and anger.



Santino and I had been pushing each other more and more in recent days. Ever since I'd returned home from my night with Maurice. Maybe Santino had tried to downplay his anger and jealousy over finding out about Maurice and me, but it had been written all over his face. It had given me a kick, especially because so far it had always been me being jealous, of Mrs. Alfera, Mrs. Clark, and the French-Wench. It felt good to have reversed our positions for once.

I'd finally driven him over the edge. With a lie, or with an omission by which I'd confirmed his assumptions.

My clit still throbbed with the remnants of my orgasm. Everything felt swollen and damp. I'd never thought I could feel this vehemence during an orgasm. I still could hardly believe Santino had gone down on me. Though calling in that didn't do it justice in the slightest. Santino had devoured me, made me feel dirty and worshipped. I'd barely stopped myself from crying out to the heavens like Mrs. Clark had done a long time ago.

Santino's expression was harsh as he slid his cock into my mouth. I only saw the hard line of his mouth because he was bent over me to take my mouth. It was strange having my head tilted back so Santino could fuck my mouth.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy it, or wouldn't have enjoyed it under other circumstances but the tension between us right now was toxic so this felt like he was punishing me. Maybe my own game was slowly catching up to me, and I hated it.

Santino tilted his head so he could meet my eyes and I quickly smirked around his length. He returned the smirk and sped up even more. He reached out, his fingers brushing my clit, which sprang to life at once. Santino's finger teased my folds then he pushed one finger into me and began to finger me hard and fast, the heel of his hand pressing against my clit.

I parted my legs wide and closed my eyes, handing myself over to my body completely, allowing pleasure to guide me and not allow my confusing feelings for Santino to get in the way.

I had trouble breathing around his length and my throat began to feel sore from his thrusts. On occasion, I gagged but I grabbed his thighs to steady myself. I wouldn't admit to Santino that this was too much for me. I wouldn't back down. The slaps of Santino's heel against my pussy mingled with my heavy breathing and slurpy chokes. He added a second finger, making me wince briefly. Luckily Santino didn't notice and soon pleasure banished the twinge.

My muscles constricted tightly around Santino's fingers and my mouth widened for a lustful cry which was stifled by Santino's cock as he plunged into me even deeper only to let out a guttural moan. Something hit the back of my throat and my tongue as Santino slid back and forth in jerky movements. I swallowed quickly when it became too much.

Santino slowed then stilled and pulled his cock out of me. I gave him a tight smile, my mouth full with the last spurt of his cum. A slight soreness pounded between my legs when Santino removed his fingers. I stood and spit his cum in his Pernod glass on the living room table before I sauntered into the bathroom and threw the door shut behind me.

Tears stung in my eyes, which was absolutely stupid, because I'd finally gotten what I wanted. I stared at myself in the mirror. My lips were red and puffy, some of my mascara smeared, and my hair was a complete mess. A wild thudding spread between my legs. I was still sensitive and my nipples were still erect, my body still in orgasm mode.

I leaned against the door, my body yearning for something Santino probably would never give me, for something I should want from Clifford. I wanted him to wrap me in his arms, to hold me while I slept. I wanted things that could only be temporarily mine. Maybe it was better if I never experienced them in the first place. What Santino and I had was safe, and

whatever we'd still have in the future would be pleasurable. Emotions would only get in the way, and would complicate things.

I straightened with a resolute sigh. I grabbed a washcloth to clean myself and froze when it came away light pink.

I cringed then closed my eyes, pressing my lips together to stop a furious cry from slipping out. I could only hope Santino wouldn't notice. I didn't want to have him ridicule me for being a fumbling virgin.

I'd done my best to convince him otherwise. If it had been up to Maurice, I wouldn't even be one anymore. We'd kissed a lot that night, had touched each other through our clothes, but I couldn't bring myself to do more. He'd wanted me but I hadn't been able to put Santino out of my mind. No matter how often I tried to convince myself otherwise, Santino was the man I wanted right now.

Chapter *Eighteen*



Santino

I breathed heavily, my head hanging forward, my balls still pulsating from my orgasm. This had been... fuck. A wild ride. Fucking Anna's mouth, that was something I'd never forget. It wasn't what I wanted, not nearly enough, but it was all I could have. Anna was taken, and I had to deal with it.

I opened my eyes. Anna was still in the bathroom. She was probably pissed for whatever reason. I stared at the door. I felt the irresistible urge to go to her. I wanted her close. With other women, I'd wanted to get away from them as fast as possible once the sex was over.

But I still longed for Anna, for more than what we'd just had, and not just on a physical level. I was a moron. Anna saw me as her plaything, as a nice way to entertain herself until she had to enter her marriage with Cliffy. I was a comfortable choice. I was always available and as an added bonus she could blackmail me. And I sure as hell was a better lay than Maurice, that was for sure.

I shook my head and dragged my eyes away from the door. I wouldn't run after Anna no matter how much I wanted her close. I wouldn't turn myself into more of a fool than I had already done. I had to draw a line somewhere.

I reached for a tissue to wipe my fingers and cock clean and paused when the white came away pink. I stared at my fingers and immediately my gaze darted to the bathroom door.

“Fuck,” I groaned. Anna had played me well, had made me believe in her little charade.

Damn it. I’d fingerfucked her so hard I’d taken her virginity.

I ran a hand through my hair. I should say something. I stepped closer to the bathroom. “Anna?” I called. Damn it. I hadn’t just fingerfucked her. I’d practically fucked her mouth too.

I was going to hell. Not that that was news but today I’d cemented a cozy place in hell for good.

Anna didn’t react.

“Anna, we need to talk!” I jerked up my pants and closed them, but didn’t bother pushing my shirt back in. “Anna, come on.”

The door opened and Anna stepped out in her nightgown. She wasn’t wearing makeup and if I wasn’t mistaken, her eyes were slightly red. My heart plummeted. I stared at her, searching for something to say. Anna had played me so often, but I knew the tears she’d cried in the bathroom weren’t fake.

I racked my brain for something gentle to say, maybe even apologize even if Anna had wanted what we’d done, had practically seduced me. Still, I felt like I had done something wrong.

I cleared my throat, making my voice as gentle as I was capable of, which still wasn’t much. Being gentle wasn’t my strong suit. “We should talk.”

Anna shoved past me. “I’m not in the mood to talk. You gave me what I wanted, now I want sleep.”

She breezed away and into her room before I had the chance to say another word, then she closed the door audibly.

I stayed where I was for a while. Part of me wanted to follow her, but what was I supposed to say?

And maybe it was better if I didn’t seek her out now because I was angry too. Angry because she’d pretended to be something she wasn’t. If I’d known she hadn’t done the deed with Maurice, I may have been able to hold on to my meager control.

Fuck, who was I kidding? I would have given in eventually.

I decided to wait until the morning to confront Anna again. We both needed time to clear our heads.

Of course, I couldn't fall asleep that night. All I could think about was Anna lying in her bed and possibly crying. I wanted to protect her. Over the years my duty had become a deep urge. I wanted to keep her safe, even if she managed to make me want to kill her half the time.



I must have dozed off when I heard shuffling in the corridor. My eyes darted to the door, which opened a second later. Anna's slender form appeared in the doorway. She leaned against it, regarding me. The light from the street allowed me to make out slightly more than outlines.

"I can't sleep," she said. Her voice was calm and quiet.

I sat up, the covers bunching at my waist. "I can't sleep either." Silence settled between us. "Do you want to talk?"

Anna nodded and came in. She perched on the bed, and I lifted my covers, not even thinking about it. She looked like she needed to be consoled and I wanted to be the one to do it. I couldn't fight it. I wanted to have her close even if I was pissed.

The briefest smile flitted across Anna's face, not her usual provocative or challenging smile, it was a small sweet smile, one that made my pulse speed up in a way it had never done because of a woman before. She crept under the covers and sat beside me with her back against the headboard. Then she looked at me. She didn't say anything, only looked at me. I almost leaned forward and kissed her again. Having her in my bed was bound to lead to more unfortunate events.

"You should have told me the truth and not pretended to be experienced."

"Who says I'm not experienced?" she asked haughtily.

I turned on the lamp on the nightstand, wanting to see the expression on her face. "Cut the games, Anna. There was blood on my fingers."

Her gaze moved away and the hint of a blush traveled up her throat. Anna rarely avoided eye contact. She always held my gaze no matter how furious I was. I admired that about her. She was tough and clever, cunning

even, which had made me forget that she used to be a sensitive girl. She'd learned to hide that side of her over the years. I wasn't quite innocent about that development.

She shrugged as if it was irrelevant. "I've never been with Clifford, or Maurice, or anyone. What happened between us last night was the most I've ever done. I've always wanted it to be you who kissed me, touched me..." She shrugged again. "And I got what I wanted."

I became very still.

"Now you know," she said.

"Damn it, Anna," I growled, focusing on my anger. Anna's admittance wreaked havoc with my insides. "You should have told me sooner."

"It doesn't change anything."

"It changes things."

"It doesn't. Don't make a big deal out of it. I'm not. I just want some fun, and I know sleeping with you will be fun."

"It's a big deal. And we didn't sleep with each other and we won't."

Fuck, but I wanted to. I wanted to forget my duties and Anna's, and only listen to my body. And my heart.

"What about fucking? That's what you've called it until now."

"If I take your virginity, I'm not doing it by fucking you. Every time that follows after will be fucking."

Did I really just suggest I pop her cherry? I should ask Anna to leave my bed and try to return to an appropriate polite distance. But when had we last managed polite distance?

"There'll be more than one time?" Anna asked, angling her body toward me. She smelled of Yasmine and... me. This realization sealed my fate. Possessiveness and desire flooded me.

"There won't even be one," I lied, even as my body sprang to life, as I imagined making her mine at least temporarily. No other woman had ever made me feel such a myriad of emotions, and in such intensity, no less. With Anna, life was a rollercoaster ride. With her, I didn't miss my days as Enforcer, never felt boredom.

"You don't sound convinced," she said.

"Because I'm not," I admitted.

"Well, you could still fuck the French-Wench again if you don't like my performance."

What the fuck was she talking about? “I don’t care about your performance and from what I witnessed a few hours ago, I’d say it’ll be outstanding, but let me make something clear, I didn’t fuck Veronique or anyone else since we arrived in Paris.”

“Why not?” Anna asked.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t play dumb, Anna. You’re way too clever to be convincing.”

“Why not?” she repeated more firmly this time.

“Because of you, fuck it. You are in my head and I can’t get you out. I want you like I’ve never wanted anything in my life before.”

“I like the sound of that,” she whispered, smiling slightly, and leaned closer. She peered up at me and my gaze lingered on her lips. On lips that had given me pleasure yesterday evening. Seeing her now, without makeup and smiling sweetly, I couldn’t imagine fucking her mouth, but I knew there was another Anna. I wanted them both. Good girl Anna, and naughty Anna.

“I want this. I want us, in this moment in time. Like I said, I’m not bound to stay a virgin.”

“I’m sure your parents would disagree on this.” As if it still mattered. What had already happened between Anna and me was enough to make Dante kill me. I doubted he’d differentiate between me fucking Anna’s mouth or her pussy. I was a dead man either way. I couldn’t resist anymore and ran my palm over her arm and back. Anna immediately pressed into me, one hand on my chest.

“We’re both adults. If we want to have fun, then that’s our business. Don’t play noble, Santino.”

“I’m not,” I said with a smirk. Did she really think anything about me was noble? After what had happened last night? “But we’re both not acting like responsible adults when we’re around each other. I need to pretend to play by the rules at least. You seem to lose any sense of self-preservation around me.”

Fuck. I’d fucked her mouth and dipped my thumb into her ass before I’d even taken her virginity. I had a first class ticket to hell.

Anna pursed her lips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You kept up the charade of being experienced just to prove a point.”

She didn’t say anything. I wished I knew what she was really thinking about what happened between us. She brought our faces closer. “I didn’t tell

you because I knew it would have reinforced your will to stay professional. You wouldn't have lost control if your protective streak had won out."

I shook my head. She had me wrapped around her little finger.

"I'm fine, really."

"You cried." I still felt slightly sick thinking about it.

She actually rolled her eyes. "Because of our constant fighting, because it felt like you wanted to punish me for being with Maurice."

"Not because you pretended to have slept with Maurice. I'll be honest, I hated the idea of him being with you, but that's not why I angry-fucked your mouth yesterday. I was just sick of your provocation, but mostly I was pissed at myself for my inability to stay cool and resist you."

"Okay," she said simply.

"I still can't believe yesterday was the first time." Someone fucked your mouth. With Anna smiling this sweetly at me, I couldn't even say the words, much less let actions follow.

Anna lowered herself until she rested her chin on my chest, a teasing smile playing across her lips. "My first time with a cock in my mouth?"

Naughty Anna was back, and fuck me, I'd missed her.

"A cock in your mouth, and fingers in your ass and pussy."

"I've had fingers in my pussy before." She touched her upper lip with the tip of her tongue, obviously enjoying my facial reaction, the little vixen. "My own. Yours were slightly better."

"Slightly, hmm?"

She shrugged, then lifted up on her elbows. Her face hovered in front of me. "I want to spend the night."

I knew if she spent the night, we wouldn't only be sleeping but I'd lost the fight today. I wanted more. I cupped her face and pulled her closer until our lips pressed against each other. Anna immediately leaned into the touch, her body softening against mine. Her softness against my hard muscles was a sensation I'd memorize forever.

"If you stay, you'll know what'll happen."

"What?" she whispered against my lips but her hand already traveled down to my waistband where she found my cock tenting the fabric.

I kissed her again. "I'll make you mine. You won't sleep."

"I don't want to sleep. I want you."

I rolled us over, pressing between her legs as I kissed her harder. Whatever happened tonight, I could still regret it tomorrow. I'd already lost

control once. I wanted Anna, wanted her before anyone else could have her. Wanted her before Clifford got her.

Fuck, I just wanted her.

Anna wrapped her legs around my waist and pressed her pussy against my cock through our clothes. She began to shove down my sweatpants and I allowed her to do it by lifting my hips and getting up on my knees. I wasn't wearing boxers so my cock sprang free. She wrapped her fingers around it, giving me a few firm strokes. She reached for her silk pants and pushed them down as well then tried to pull me down on her. I lowered myself, regarding the urgency on Anna's face.

She reached for my cock and guided it to her opening. She seemed eager to get this over with. Was she worried I'd change my mind? Nothing on this planet would have made me change my mind now. My tip slid over Anna's opening, which was slick but not nearly as wet as I wanted her, and I stifled a groan at how good the brief contact felt.

"Why the rush?" I murmured as I drew my lips across her collarbone and throat. Not that I wasn't eager to fuck Anna, but she'd already bled with two fingers so I doubted shoving my cock into her without much preparation was a wise choice. "We have all night."

"Why waste it on my first time when we could have sex multiple times?" she said with her trademark teasing smile.

I brought my hand between our bodies, stroking her sensitive flesh, my thumb drawing small circles on her clit. Anna kissed me impatiently. "I'm ready. I want this. Don't hold back just because you think you have to. Treat me like you would any other woman."

But she wasn't like any other woman.

I kissed her then followed her demands as I hooked her leg over my waist and settled between her legs, my tip pressing up to her opening. I knew this wasn't going to work but if Anna wanted something she wouldn't stop until she got it.

I shifted my hips, pushing my tip into her. Anna winced, her nails digging into my arms. Her expression pitched with pain and her body tightened not just visibly. Her walls squeezed the life out of me, which caused a mix of intense pleasure and slight discomfort for me.

"I told you so."

She scowled. "Don't be a smartass now." She pushed out a breath then shook her head. "Okay, you were right but I thought it would be easy

because your fingers already did most of the job yesterday.”

I smiled wryly. “My cock’s bigger than two fingers.”

“Yeah.”

She couldn’t pretend anymore. And I didn’t want her to. Anna still wanted to prove a point, to show me she was all woman. But now it was my turn to show her I was a man who’d make sure the girl he was with enjoyed the ride. I pulled out of her slowly.

“I know you like to have things go your way, but now it’s my turn to be in control, and you’ll follow my lead. No more arguments. You’ll do as I say for once.”

“Yes, Sir,” Anna said with a laugh.

I chuckled then pushed up on my elbows. I helped Anna into a sitting position before I slid her chemise over her head, revealing her pretty breasts. I lowered my head, catching a nipple between my lips. Anna sighed, her hand cupping my head as I worshipped her breast. Her skin was smooth and smelled marvelous. I couldn’t get enough of it, of her. Of her moans, her twitches. I licked a trace over to her other breast, giving it the same attention that I had the first.

My cock rubbed over the covers torturously, mourning the loss of Anna’s tightness, but fuck, I’d make good on my word and give Anna a marvelous time. I trailed my hand down her belly, over her brown triangle to her pussy. Her lips were slick with arousal, far more than before, and I pushed her legs apart to have better access. My lips found hers for a deep kiss as I began to scissor her slowly, really taking my time to make her feel every stroke. Anna’s eyes brimmed with desire as she locked eyes with mine. Her cheeks were flushed and she was beginning to sweat as our bodies garnered heat from our closeness. I stroked a finger over her sensitive opening, and she answered with a tilt of her head, seeking penetration. I kept teasing her, my fingers brushing her folds and her opening lightly.

Then I finally slid my middle finger into her while my other fingers pressed against her folds, massaging them. She clutched at my arms, her breathing growing more labored. I fucked her slowly, savoring the moment. I hadn’t done nearly enough of it yesterday. I lowered my mouth to her hard nipple once more, teasing it with my lips and tongue, while my thrusts sped up. Anna met me thrust for thrust, desperate for release.

I added a second finger and slowed briefly until she relaxed around me. By now Anna was close, her body taut as a bowstring as she got closer to the edge. I pressed my thumb against her clit as I thrust into her and Anna arched up, her eyes pressing shut as she cried out. I lifted my head to watch her but never slowed my fingers which slid in and out of her easily now. When Anna stilled, I stopped too, and gently pulled out my fingers. This time there was no blood. I smirked and lowered myself on top of her once more. Tracing my nose along her cheek, I sucked in her scent once more. Now she smelled even headier, sweeter, and more like me.

Almost mine.

Anna and I kissed for a few minutes, legs entangled, our sweaty bodies flush against each other. My cock was nestled between Anna's thighs, my tip sliding along Anna's clit as I shifted my hips. She moaned softly. "Try again."

I chuckled at her impatience, then shook my head. "Not yet. There's no price for rushing this, trust me. I want your body desperate for more, ready to take all of me."

"I'm ready to take all of you," she muttered stubbornly.

"What did I tell you?"

"To be a good girl and obey?"

I closed my eyes with a groan, then shook my head. "What am I supposed to do with you?"

"Take me."

I chuckled again then opened my eyes and climbed down her body until I was nestled between her spread legs. "Soon, but first..." I kissed her swollen pussy lips, then brushed her clit with the tip of my tongue. "...this."

I welcomed the subtle saltiness as I dragged my tongue over her puffy pussy. It was slightly red and sore from my finger fucking and my tip. I pressed my cheek against her inner thigh, putting my head down comfortably before I began to lick her. Anna was still sensitive from her orgasm so I took my time. This time I didn't devour her in fury. I savored her like my last meal and was rewarded with moans and even more arousal. Soon, even I couldn't hold back anymore, too desperate to finally have her.

I climbed back up, reached for a condom in my drawer, and rolled it down my cock before I lowered myself on top of Anna. "Was I good enough to be rewarded?" Anna asked.

“More than good,” I said in a low voice, then added roughly. “I want the real you. No pretense, no games. Be you when I’m in you. Give me the real Anna.”

Anna swallowed but softened further. I bent down for another kiss and shifted my hips, sliding into her. She felt like perfection, and as wet as she was her body welcomed me readily. When she tensed, I went even slower, allowing her body to adapt.

When I’d settled all the way in her, we stared at each other, our breathing labored. This felt right in a way I’d never be able to put into words.

Anna never took her eyes off me when I began to move inside of her, slow and controlled at first, but soon I held back less, letting Anna’s moans guide my movements. A few strands clung to her sweaty forehead and she clutched my biceps every time I pushed into her. Her hips rose to meet my thrusts with breathless moans that sounded like music to my ears. Soon my control began to slip and despite Anna’s moans and her eagerness I could tell she wouldn’t come again, so I let loose, really allowing myself to focus on the feel of Anna’s walls around my cock.

When I came, her hold on me tightened and I pressed my nose into her throat as I succumbed to a wave of pleasure. Anna raked her fingers through my hair, her nails scraping my scalp in a way that sent another pleasant shiver through my body even as my cock still twitched inside of her. This had been... wow.

When I stilled, Anna did too. She released a small, happy smile, sounding almost relieved, which made me chuckle in turn. I lifted my head with a sardonic smile. “Glad it’s over?”

She grinned that cheeky grin I usually despised but now found almost endearing. “Far from it.”

“Good,” I rasped. Because there was no way I could stay away from Anna now.

Chapter *Nineteen*



Santino pulled out slowly and sat back on his haunches. The condom he was wearing had blood on it, which made me feel self-conscious. For some reason, I still felt as if I had to prove myself to Santino.

He removed the condom and got up. Without a word, he left the room then I heard the sound of the bin opening and clapping shut again.

I wasn't sure what to do now. Should I get up and go to my room? We'd had sex, but did that mean I'd stay the night? Or would that make things too personal?

On the other hand, we'd had sex. Could it get any more personal than that? On a physical level, no, but emotionally, most definitely. And that was something both Santino and I didn't want... or couldn't risk. My emotions were definitely all over the place right now, but I was fairly sure Santino could handle sex without emotional detachment very well, proven by his past adventures with married women.

When Santino returned with a bottle of water, I was still perching on the edge of the bed, torn between leaving and staying.

Santino frowned. "Are you already leaving?"

I couldn't read the emotions on his face, which only added to my uncertainty. I hated this sensation. I shrugged.

Santino sank down beside me. We didn't touch. He held out the bottle. "You should fuel up on liquid."

"Why? Have you planned any athletic activities I'm not aware of?" I joked and grabbed the bottle from him before I took a deep gulp.

Santino smirked. "I had more activities planned for the night, yes." His expression didn't leave any room for guesses. Santino was still horny and ready for another round.

I cursed my sore body. I lowered the bottle slowly, considering pretending my pussy didn't feel as if it had gotten a thrashing. Eventually, I shook my head. I needed to accept my body's boundaries, even if it meant I'd have to return to my room and not enjoy this moment of closeness with Santino anymore. It was for the better anyway.

"I don't think my body can go again. I need a break."

I could feel my cheeks heat at my admittance. Annoyance at my body's betrayal rushed through me. I gave a small shrug as if it didn't matter. I pushed to my feet.

"What are you doing?" Santino asked, his brows snapping together.

"I thought..." My face heated even more. I wanted to roar in frustration. I motioned at the door. "I can return in the morning when my body's recovered."

Santino's expression said I was completely out of my mind. "You sure as fuck won't go to your room now. You'll spend the night in my bed."

"Really?" I asked, surprised, glad I could mask my relief. "Do you always have sleepovers with your affairs even if they can't go another round?"

Santino glowered and scooted back until he was propped up on his pillow. "This is different. Now get the fuck back into bed."

Different how? I wanted to ask but I kept my mouth shut. I crept back into bed and curled up on my side, watching Santino warily. He pulled me against him and I immediately snuggled into him. I didn't understand what was happening or how long it would last but I relished in the feel of Santino against me. Santino traced his palm down my spine, taking me off guard.

He could be an asshole, but right now he wasn't. Not that I didn't like his asshole self but this... this considerate version was kind of nice too.

"Is this because you took my V-card?"

“That term is complete bullshit. It makes it sound as if I’d been granted access to a VIP club.”

“It is a very exclusive club, Santino,” I said. “So far you are the only guest.”

“And that’s how it’s going to stay,” Santino snarled, completely stunning me.

“Oh?” I tilted my head.

Santino’s lips tightened and a muscle in his throat tautened. “I won’t share you. If you want to be with others, then that’s your decision, but I’ll have to leave then. I can’t stand by and watch.”

I swallowed hard. “Santino,” I said quietly. Had he forgotten about Clifford? Or did he think I’d cancel my engagement only because I’d slept with him? I couldn’t, even if part of me might consider it.

“I’m not talking about your engagement. I know you’ll marry in a few years. But right now you aren’t bound to him. And while you aren’t, I want you to be mine.”

I blinked. “You want us to be exclusive?” I hated how my heart thundered wildly at his suggestions, how butterflies danced in my belly.

“Exclusive,” Santino repeated with a laugh. “Maybe I’m old-fashioned but it used to be called faithful.”

“I thought faithful was for when people were in a real relationship with deep emotional feelings, not for what we have.”

“Dirty sex,” Santino said in a voice I couldn’t read.

I shrugged and a strange silence settled between us. I cleared my throat. “But I want you to be exclusive too. If I’m yours for now, I want you to be mine as well.”

“I’m yours,” he said in a low voice.

I forced a smile. I wasn’t sure why our conversation felt so loaded all of a sudden. “You’ll have to be my dirty secret.”

“Trust me, Anna, I’m very aware of the limitations of our bond. I have no intention to die by your father’s hands nor to be the reason for a scandal that damages the Outfit. Our bond will be confined to the bedroom.”

For some reason, that didn’t sit well with me either. What I wanted and what I could have were at odds right now.

Santino cleared his throat. “How do you feel?”

For a moment I was sure he meant emotionally, and that would have been a question I couldn’t have answered honestly but then his hand stroked

down to my abdomen.

“Not too bad. I’ll be ready for dirty deeds soon.”

I must have dozed off shortly after because when I came to myself again the sky was turning gray outside. I was still in Santino’s arms. I listened to his breathing but soon realized it didn’t sound as if he was sleeping. “You awake?”

“Can’t sleep?”

“Hmm.”

“Eagerly waiting for me to be ready for round two?” I teased. Being in Santino’s arms felt intimate and right. It scared me a little.

“More than eager.”

I laughed then lifted my head off Santino’s chest. Our faces were close, and slowly his expression came into focus. He wasn’t smiling, but his expression was softer than usual.

“Aren’t you worried about catching feelings for me if we cuddle all night?” I tried to break the moment of tenderness, worried I’d like it too much.

Santino slapped my ass lightly, making me jump. Any kind of sleepiness vanished in a blink. I raised my eyebrows.

“I really wish your mouth was sore too.”

I poked my tongue out at him. “Maybe you need to angry fuck it again like you did yesterday.”

Santino glowered. Oh, someone was in a mood. It was almost endearing how concerned he was about me. “Anna. Don’t remind me.”

I traced his pecs with a manicured finger. I smiled secretly. “Don’t tell me you feel guilty because I was a virgin.”

Santino cast his eyes up at the ceiling. “Fuck. I should have realized it. I’ve known you for years. But you didn’t act like you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“I wanted to impress you.”

Santino leveled his brown eyes on me. “You did.” He paused. “But that was a lot for a first experience.”

I bit my lip. “Yep. I learned more than I bargained for.” I giggled nervously. I hated the sound. “Especially your thumb in my butt.”

He shook his head. “Are you okay with it?”

I leaned up, grinning. “What if I said no?”

Santino didn’t smile.

“Would you apologize for fucking my mouth?”

“You know how much I hate if you talk like that.”

“I know.”

Santino growled, grabbed my hips, and threw me on my back. Then he pressed between my legs and shoved my arms up above my head, his fingers tight around my wrists. His hips pressed into me and his tip entered me. I stopped breathing, my sore flesh aching at the intrusion.

Santino stopped, his touch on my wrist becoming gentler.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

He shook his head with a low chuckle. He didn’t pull out but he didn’t enter me farther either. His thumb stroked along my pulse point as his head dipped and he snatched up my nipple between his teeth. I tensed then moaned when his tongue circled my puckered nub. For a long time, Santino’s lips and tongue lavished my breasts and only our low breathing could be heard in the room. Soon he reached between us and guided his tip back and forth over my opening and clit. I panted at the small lightning bolts of pleasure that radiated through me at the firm pressure against my sensitive nub.

I was soon slick with arousal and panting for more. Santino looked up from my breasts. “You want more?”

“All of you,” I said.

His smile widened, becoming hungrier and more possessive. He flipped us over, making me cry out in surprise as I suddenly found myself on top of him, straddling his hips. His cock pressed against my pussy, his tip digging into my belly insistently. His balls pressed against my pussy, and that felt strangely erotic too.

I straightened my back, my palms pressed against Santino’s abs as I looked down at him. “Ready to ride me?” Santino asked with a dirty grin.

My core clenched. Overplaying any nervousness I felt I raised my hips with an answering grin until Santino’s tip nestled between my folds. Santino regarded me as if I was the center of the world, as if he was all he desired and it gave me a confidence boost. I lowered myself very slowly. Santino’s tip breached my opening. I tensed briefly at the feeling of fullness and soreness.

Santino wetted his thumb and began to rub my clit, though I was aroused enough. Still, I enjoyed the sight of Santino’s strong hand giving me pleasure. I watched with half-lidded eyes as he stroked me lightly. My

nipples were almost painfully hard with lust and I reached up and began to tug at them. Santino let out a low groan that only spurred me on. I tugged and twirled at my nipples while I rotated my hips slowly and lowered myself until Santino's cock was settled all the way inside of me. I clenched and stilled, my tongue darting out to wet my dry lips.

Santino was panting, his abs constricting and his expression full of desire. His thumb rubbed my clit faster, and I clenched again.

"Let loose," Santino said. I wasn't sure what he meant, but I decided to focus on the sensations of him filling me, of his thumb circling my slick clit, of my fingers tugging at my nipples.

I didn't move my hips, only allowed my walls to clench around Santino's girth, and then my clit pulsated and the sensation coursed through my body. I cried out, clenching even more, and pinching my nipples almost painfully as I came.

"Just like that," Santino rumbled, caressing my clit gently as I came down from my high. I dropped my hands and supported myself on his chest, panting as if I'd rode in a rodeo. Santino cupped my ass cheeks and squeezed. "Now you're ready to ride me."

I was more than ready. If possible, my orgasm had made me even hornier. I felt overly stimulated and ready to come again. It was an electrifying sensation I couldn't get enough of. With my hands still pressed to his chest, I began to lift my hips slowly, letting Santino's cock slide almost all the way out of me before I sank back down. I soon picked up pace and added rotation, until Santino's expression was twisted with lust.

"I like feeling like I'm in control of you," I pressed out as I clenched around him, causing him to let out a harsh moan.

Santino gave me a look I didn't understand and his fingers on my ass cheeks tightened. I leaned down, catching his lips for a kiss. Santino cupped my head, deepening the kiss without hesitation.

I loved how Santino's pelvic rubbed my clit in this position.

This felt more intense, but also closer. For a long time, Santino and I stared at each other while my hips moved slowly.

"You said every time that followed would be fucking," I whispered harshly. "This doesn't feel like fucking yet."

A knowing gleam filled Santino's eyes before one corner of his mouth darted up in a cocky grin. "I can give you all the fucking you want, no worries."

I wasn't sure it was what I wanted, not all I wanted, but it was what I had to settle for.

Santino gripped my hips and began to thrust upward with hard deep, strokes that echoed through my body like an earthquake. It hurt and felt impossibly good at the same time.

I clasped his forearms, needing to steady myself as he slammed into me over and over again, his pecs and abs straining from the effort, his expression harsh and lustful. "Tell me if it's too much," he gritted out.

I nodded, but I wouldn't tell him, because this hard fucking, this side of Santino was safer for my heart, and that part of myself I wanted to protect more than a sore pussy.

When Santino came a few minutes later, he took me over the edge with him and I sagged down on his chest in a breathless heap. His heart beat furiously under my head and my own matched his in intensity. Santino's hands glided up from my hips to caress my back and I allowed myself to enjoy the sensation before I straightened. By now it was light outside. I glanced at the clock on Santino's nightstand.

"I need to get ready for classes."

Santino nodded.

I climbed off him. He removed the condom. "Do you want me to throw it away? I'm heading into the bathroom anyway."

"I'll put it in the bin in the kitchen."

I nodded, then grabbed my clothes from the floor and hurried toward the bathroom. When I stepped into the shower and allowed the warm water to massage my sore body, I was torn. I was ecstatic over what had happened, but at the same time, I wondered how we'd make it work. Sex without attachment. Commitment with an expiration date. Exclusivity or faithfulness?

I wanted more of what Santino and I had had, but I knew sometimes more was too much.

Chapter *Twenty*



Santino

When I typed my daily email to Dante and Valentina the morning after I'd slept with Anna, I still felt a sense of disbelief over what had happened.

We'd fucked. Twice.

I'd taken Anna's virginity and had asked her for exclusivity, how she put it. I wasn't sure what had gotten into me. I'd never cared if any of the women I'd been with had slept with others. Naturally, they'd been married after all. But with Anna? The mere idea that she might be with someone else made me want to kill the person.

Just the thought that she'd be Cliffy's one day made me want to kill the fucker now.

Part of me considered confessing everything to Dante. Not because I was trying to be noble and come clean with my Capo. I simply hoped he'd decide to cancel Anna's engagement to Clifford.

Of course, self-preservation and rationality made me opt for lying. When Anna would marry Clifford in a few years, she and I had probably long lost interest in each other. Risking her reputation and my life only because I was obsessed with her now was absolutely idiotic.

I waited in the car for her in front of her fashion school as usual but when she got into the passenger seat this time, our interaction was strained. Usually, she said something provoking and I answered in turn, but this time she only smiled tensely and I couldn't come up with something witty either. Fuck, this was the first time I acted like an idiot around a woman after sex.

I started the car, glad for the sound of the engine. We didn't talk the entire car ride. Once back in our apartment, I prepared a strong coffee for us.

Anna cleared her throat. "I don't like this. I want things to return to how they were before we had sex."

For a moment I thought she wanted us to return to not having sex, and I was most definitely not in favor of that.

Anna rolled her eyes. I supposed my expression must have given my feelings away. "Our teasing and banter. I don't want it to become awkward between us just because we're having sex regularly."

"Are we having sex regularly?"

"I hope that'll be the case. Don't you?"

I pulled her against me. "Do you even have to ask?"

She flashed me a grin. "Then everything's settled? We act like we used to but with the added bonus of regular sex?"

"Fine with me," I drawled, slipping my hand up her skirt and into her panties. I began fingering her. "Maybe we should define regular," I murmured, enjoying the feeling of Anna becoming slick around my fingers.

"Daily," she said breathlessly.

"Daily," I agreed before I hoisted her up on the table for easier access to her pussy.

After a round of sex in the kitchen, we had dinner, before we opted for a second round in the bed.

It was almost nine o'clock when we relaxed beside each other, both sweaty and exhausted from a particularly long and intense session of me taking Anna doggy style.

Anna yawned.

"Tired?"

"I didn't get much sleep last night, did I?"

"I was hoping it would be the same way tonight?"

Anna shook her head with a laugh. "I can't go another round. I'm too tired, and I need to be fit tomorrow. We're getting our first semester

assignment in resourceful fashion design. It'll account for a third of our course note."

"I'm here if you change your mind," I said as I crossed my arms behind my head.

Anna's expression shifted but I wasn't sure why. She sat up and slid to the edge of the mattress.

"What are you doing?"

She laughed as if the answer was obvious. "I'm going to bed."

I didn't say anything. I'd thought she'd spend the night and now that she didn't I felt... disappointed.

"Sleeping in the same bed will only make it awkward, right?" She laughed again.

"Probably."

"How was it with other women?"

I didn't particularly like talking about other women with Anna. It felt strangely disrespectful, which was complete bullshit considering Anna had caught me in the act. "They shared their beds with their husbands, so the topic never came up."

Anna shrugged. "I don't have a husband yet, so theoretically we could share a bed if that's something you want."

"What do you want?"

Neither of us wanted to do the first step.

"I'm fine either way."

"Me too."

Anna nodded resolutely then got up. "I suppose then I'll go to my bed. It'll make it easier to keep it simple and uncomplicated, right?"

"Right."

She picked up her bathrobe from the floor and headed for the door.

I growled, fucking tired of our games. "Stop."

She turned with cocked eyebrows. "What?"

"Get back into bed."

"Why?"

"Get. The. Fuck. Back. Into. Bed."

Anna rolled her eyes but hurried back and practically leaped under the covers. "All right. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

I extended my arm and Anna pressed against me.

“Maybe we need to discuss additional rules of our affair.” Calling it an affair didn’t sit well with me at all, but I had absolutely no clue what else to call it. We weren’t in a relationship. You couldn’t go into a relationship with a set end date. And I wasn’t the type for relationships, had never been.

“What rules?” Anna asked in a low voice that I could feel everywhere.

Even if the words hurt, I had to say them. “That we never forget that you’re Clifford’s. Not mine.”

“I won’t forget, don’t worry,” Anna said quietly. “But this can be yours, this moment, and as many nights as we can carve out until I get married.”

“Not just nights, Anna. If I start fucking you, I’ll want to do it every hour of the day.”

She gave me a warning look. “I told you I can’t go again tonight. I don’t know where you take the energy. You’re ten years older. Is this some kind of man thing?”

“It’s a me thing. I’m the perpetuum mobile in human form.”

“Could you be any more conceited?”

She shook her head with a laugh then slapped my chest.

“I can try.”

“We agreed on daily not hourly.”

“I haven’t left a lasting impression.”

She narrowed her eyes in a way I found more amusing every day. “You know that’s not true, but don’t expect me to stroke your ego.”

I sighed. “I’ve found myself a tough girl.”

Anna was silent, and I realized how that must have sounded. “This has to stop once we’re back in Chicago,” she whispered. “No matter when that is. We can’t keep this up behind my family’s back. It’s different while we’re so far away.”

“Yes,” Santino said. “Your father would kill me.”

“So we both agree this can only go on while we’re in Paris?”

“Absolutely.” I didn’t mention that I’d resign as her bodyguard the moment we were back anyway. When I’d asked Dante for this favor it had been for other reasons, but now I was glad I’d have the option to bring distance between Anna and me once we were back.

Anna bit her lower lip in a way that made my cock twitch. I raised one eyebrow.

She leaned forward, whispering, “Maybe I could go for another round if you do what you did the first time we got naughty.”

“You have to be more specific.” She couldn’t possibly mean me fucking her mouth because her reaction after that hadn’t really screamed for a repeat performance, which was why I hadn’t let her go down on me again since then.

Anna stroked my chest then lower, her nails teasing the ridges of my abs and my inner thighs in a very distracting way.

“It was kind of hot, to have you over me like that, taking my mouth, being all dominant and angry.”

Blood shot into my cock as the images from that first night flitted through my brain. “Don’t say something like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it gives me all kinds of ideas you’re not ready for.”

“I’m more than ready. I told you. I thought it was hot.”

“You disappeared in the bathroom afterward to cry.”

“You don’t know that I cried.”

“Your eyes were red and puffy. I sure as fuck won’t do something that gets that kind of reaction from you, cherie.”

Anna looked surprised. For once I hadn’t said cherie to piss her off. I’d heard the difference too.

“I like it when you call me cherie as if you mean it.”

I meant it. Had meant it before too even if I’d hidden it behind taunting and sarcasm. Anna had annoyed me a lot in the past, and still did most days, but over time I’d realized I kind of liked it.

“I mean it. I thought it was hot. I ran off into the bathroom afterward because I wanted to be more than an angry fuck.”

“You could never be just an angry fuck and you know it.” Our eyes met, and suddenly this felt too intimate. I wouldn’t have put up with as much as I did with anyone else. I cared about Anna, too fucking much, which was the main problem of my existence. Adding sex to the mix was a risk. I’d never fallen for a woman I’d slept with but I had a feeling Anna might change that, and I shouldn’t risk it. Liking her for her spunk was okay, but anything that went beyond that would be fatal.

Anna shrugged. “You’re more than an angry fuck too. I kind of like you, Santino. You give my life the necessary spice.”

I chuckled. “Ditto, cherie. Ditto.”

“So what about a repeat performance of that first naughty night?”

I shook my head with a growl and pulled her toward me for a kiss.
“How could I say no?”



Now that Santino and I had stipulated certain rules I felt much better. Of course, no one knew better than me that it was one thing to have rules and another to follow them.

Yet, I was willing to take the risk because being with Santino felt too good to give it up. And not just in the physical sense, though that was absolutely mind-blowing. I still got goose bumps and a pleasant tingling between my legs when I thought of our sex life in the last few weeks. The one time Maurice had tried to contact me, I'd told him that I was no longer on the market. Being with Santino was more than fulfilling. I couldn't imagine being with anyone else at this point.

It was the end of March and the weather had been sunny and warm the entire week, which allowed us to discover more of the city on foot when I wasn't busy with my studies.

Santino and I strolled past small groups sitting on the grass with the Eiffel Tower rising above their heads. Almost all of them were tourists or exchange students. Most Parisians avoided the area around their city's landmark.

I hadn't yet grown tired of taking a stroll down here, but even I often sought the more secluded places of the city.

I had my phone in my hand, seeking inspiration in everything. I rarely took photos of the sights themselves. I'd done that the first time I'd seen them, but now I was looking for the particular in the ordinary.

Movement on the ground near a bush caught my attention. I immediately started taking photos. One of the cities, several pigeons were picking at a fry when a rat poked its head out and attacked, wrangling the piece of food from the befuddled bird and rushed back into its bush. I lowered my finger from my phone screen but remained vigilant in case another oddity happened.

It took me a moment to realize Santino was watching me. “Other people take videos of the Eiffel Tower, you of a rat fighting a pigeon over a piece of baguette,” Santino muttered, but despite his grumpy expression, I could tell he was amused.

“One thing gets you to the most watched TikTok videos, the other not.”

Santino narrowed his eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re using this useless platform. There are only half-naked teenage girls dancing to shitty rap music on there.” He shrugged with a smirk. “I suppose that’s your crowd.”

“You know, Sonny, TikTok is algorithm-based. It says more about you than TikTok if the only videos that are suggested to you are half-naked girls.”

“I’ll let your dear brother know. It was his TikTok account I checked when I confiscated his phone last time.”

“Sure,” I said, stifling a grin. Our banter gave me life. Despite our frequent, *very frequent* sexual encounters, we still teased each other without mercy.

“I have the most gorgeous teenage girl flashing her ass cheeks at me every morning and night in a desperate attempt to seduce me, I don’t need TikTok for that.”

“Newsflash, it’s not an attempt if it’s successful.”

His answering sly grin warmed my belly more than the best hot chocolate in the city. I nudged his arm with mine, my smile widening. “I’m starving. Feed me.”

Santino gave me a very dirty look that made me wish for a less public place. “I fed you last night.”

I slapped his arm, my cheeks warming and desire flaming up my belly as I remembered how he’d taken my mouth last night, but I played oblivious. “I think I’m in the mood for a good duck paté and a salad.”

“Not what I’m in the mood for.”

Despite his words, he led me toward a small Parisian restaurant with old glass cabinets with savoy cabbage and chicory made from porcelain as

decoration. It had become a favorite of ours. The owner was quirky and a bit confused, but he spoke English—which made Santino happy—and they served the most delicious duck paté with homemade gherkins and rustic bread. We settled on a small table next to the door with a view of the lively neighborhood.

“Two glasses of champagne,” Santino said then raised his brows at the waiter. “If you haven’t drunk it yourself again.”

Last time we had lunch at the place the owner and his crew had drank all the champagne the previous evening while watching soccer so they hadn’t had any for us.

With a sheepish smile, he served us two glasses of champagne.

“Are we celebrating anything?” I asked as I picked up the glass.

“Just that life’s good right now.”

“And that you finally popped my cherry?” I whispered, smiling coyly at him.

“That was weeks ago.”

I pouted. “So it’s old news I suppose.”

He grinned. “I prefer to celebrate giving you three orgasms this morning.”

“Cheers,” I said, clinking glasses with him before I took a sip. Then a thought crossed my mind and I almost choked on laughter. “I’m pretty sure Dad won’t be happy if your expenses include champagne for giving me orgasms.”

Santino’s expression darkened at once. “When I pay for us, then it’s from my own money. That’s what a real man does when he invites a woman.”

“I really like the bad boy you, but gentleman you is pretty cute too.”

Santino grumbled something then took another sip. He didn’t even particularly like champagne and only did it because I hated drinking it alone.

“You know,” I said when we were almost done with dinner. “I have been feeling horny since the Eiffel Tower.”

“The rat did it for you?” Santino said dryly but the lustful gleam in his eyes didn’t go unnoticed.

“Oh yes, that’s my thing. Especially if they feast on fries. That’s what it was by the way, not a piece of baguette.”

“You love being right.”

“I am usually right,” I corrected. “But I love it too.”

Santino waved over the owner to pay but instead of being quick so we could do something about my horniness, he chatted with him as if he didn't have anything better to do.

I gritted my teeth. Santino was doing this as a form of punishment for all my teasing of the past.

When we left, I let my gaze stray over every halfway attractive man. “Maybe I should pick one of them to scratch my itch. They won't waste time talking.”

Santino gave me a harsh smile. “I fear that's not an option anymore.”

His possessive undertone only made me desire him more.

Still I felt like tipping the scale back in my favor so when we arrived back at our apartment, I stalked straight into my room and locked it before I took my favorite little dildo from its place in my drawer and turned it on.

Santino hammered his fist against the door. “Let me in.”

“Maybe later. I have an itch to scratch.”

“I'll take the door down.”

I walked over to the bed and stretched out on it then slid my soaked panties down. I teased my folds with the vibrating tip of my dildo, moaning softly.

“Anna, you have three more seconds before I'll kick the door in.”

I bit my lip with a smile and turned up the vibration before I pushed the head of the dildo into my pussy. I moaned. A bang sounded and the door flew open, then slammed against the wall behind it. Wooden splinters and plaster tumbled to the floor.

I cried out in surprise and sat up, my eyes wide.

Santino stepped in. “I warned you.”

His eyes darted to the dildo I was still holding and which was still half buried inside of me.

“Fuck,” he grunted.

I lay back once more. “Let's see how you explain that to our landlord.”

“You really think I give the slightest fuck about him when I see you fucking your sweet pussy with a dildo?”

I shrugged and eased the dildo slowly deeper. Santino watched me with hunger-darkened eyes. He opened his pants and pulled out his cock, which was eager to join in on the action.

My mouth watered seeing it, but I kept pleasuring myself with my toy as if I wasn't dying to feel Santino inside of me. When he began stroking himself, I lost it.

I tossed away the dildo. Santino didn't need another invitation. He charged toward the bed with a smirk and grabbed my ankles, then tugged me toward the edge of the bed before he plunged into me. I cried out and almost came right away.

I wasn't sure how long we got lost in each other like that when the bell suddenly disrupted us.

Few people rang the bell so I was a bit confused especially when it rang again. Santino slid out of me with a vigilant look. He grabbed his gun and hurried out of the bedroom.

When he returned a short while later, his expression didn't bode well. I sat up at once, fearing the worst. If my parents visited now, we'd both be doomed. My bedroom probably reeked of sex and my tousled state didn't really help.

"Who is it?" I asked as I stood, picking up my panties from the floor and righting my dress.

"Your fiancé."

Chapter *Twenty-One*



I froze. “Clifford?”

“Do you have another fiancé I’m not aware of?” Santino clipped, looking furious.

“What is he doing here?”

“Ask him. I haven’t opened the door yet to find out.”

I swallowed. I couldn’t send him away without talking to him. What if he told my parents he couldn’t reach me? Maybe I could pretend I wasn’t home? “Can you let him in while I try to make myself presentable?”

“Sure,” Santino gritted out.

Before I could say anything else, he stalked away. I slipped into the bathroom and quickly washed and put on a load of perfume to cover Santino’s scent. My hair still wasn’t as straight as I preferred it but I couldn’t do anything about it now, at least I didn’t look like I’d been banging my bodyguard.

Taking a deep breath, I emerged from the bathroom. Santino and Clifford were in the living area. Clifford stood awkwardly beside the sofa, as if he wasn’t sure it was safe to sit down. Which was understandable

given Santino's expression. He leaned against the kitchenette with a murderous look, his arms crossed.

I gave a strained smile, still completely stunned by Clifford's appearance. I'd have thought we wouldn't see each other again until I returned to Chicago for the next social gathering. My pulse was still fast. This time however for a vastly different reason than fifteen minutes ago.

I could only hope Clifford didn't realize what Santino and I had been up to. If he let something slip to his parents and they talked to mine... Paris would be over and Santino would be in major trouble.

"Hey," I said as I walked over to Clifford. We hugged briefly, which felt completely awkward, especially because Santino was watching us.

"You are here," I said unnecessarily.

"I wanted to surprise you."

"I am surprised," I said, laughing nervously.

I motioned toward our balcony. "Why don't we sit outside? The weather's still nice."

Clifford glanced at Santino then nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

Just like Clifford, I was eager to get away from Santino who looked ready to kill my fiancé. And not just that, I felt strangely guilty toward Santino. As if I were cheating on him by talking to Clifford when it should be the other way around.

"You don't look happy. Am I interrupting anything?" Clifford asked with a glance toward Santino as we sank down on the chairs outside. Because it was getting dark and only March, the temperature had dropped considerably from my stroll with Santino earlier. I shivered but rather freeze to death than bear the strained atmosphere with Santino and Clifford in one room.

"Of course not. I'm just busy with fashion school, that's all." I wasn't even that busy yet. Most of my courses so far were introductory because the Spring semester was only about to begin.

Clifford gave me a boyish smile. Maybe it was because I spent so much time with Santino but Clifford seemed too young. "That's why I came on a weekend. I thought surprising your fiancée like that was a good start to a marriage."

It probably was for a love marriage, which ours decidedly was not. The man I was close to falling in love with watched us from the sidelines and would never be my husband. And I feared that the man who'd become my

husband and I was supposed to love, would never own my heart, not in the way Santino already did. It wasn't love because I wouldn't allow myself to feel that way, but my heart was definitely beating for Santino in a way that wasn't healthy considering my planned future.

Clifford shrugged. "I suppose I was wrong. Don't worry. I'll keep myself busy until my flight leaves on Monday."

He really flew over all the way from the States for a weekend to visit me? It was kind of sweet. I couldn't help but feel guilty for not being a real fiancée. "I thought you were seeing someone and being exclusive. Isn't it weird if you come visit me?"

Though maybe she didn't mind. After all, they weren't dating and she knew he was engaged to me, which was strange in itself, but anyway.

"We decided to not see each other anymore. It got weird with you now officially in the picture. I didn't want to risk emotions getting in the way on her part. A scorned woman is a dangerous woman."

My gaze darted to Santino. With him, I didn't have to worry about word getting out. He was used to being the man in the shadows, but I could tell that he didn't like to be reminded of it. He was no longer watching us and preparing an espresso instead, but I knew he was very aware of what went on outside and he didn't like it one bit. I'd always relished in his brief moments of jealousy, but not today.

"We can have lunch tomorrow if you want. You came here all the way after all."

"A pity date?" Clifford asked, sounding as if he was joking. But he had a point. It was out of pity.

"No," I lied. "Where are you staying? Maybe I can come over so we'll have lunch in the hotel restaurant?"

"In the Four Seasons."

Of course. "We'll meet in the lobby at twelve?"

I wanted to get Clifford out of the apartment as soon as possible. It felt too awkward.

He nodded and stood with a knowing gleam in his eyes. "Good. Then let's meet there."

I wasn't really looking forward to spending the day with him, especially because I knew how pissed Santino was going to be in the next few days.

I accompanied Clifford to the door and Clifford pressed a kiss to my cheek. "I hope he won't have lunch with us."

I laughed tightly. “Don’t worry I’ll tell him to wait in the car.”

I closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’ll tell me to wait in the car? What am I, a dog you can give orders to?”

I huffed. “I had to say something. We can’t risk making Clifford suspicious.”

Santino nodded, his jaw set tight. He was angry, but I could tell that wasn’t all. He looked jealous and upset. I didn’t even want to imagine being in his stead. I would probably lose my mind if Santino was promised to a woman and would meet her for lunch, but I wasn’t sure what else to do.

“I thought he didn’t care if you fuck other men.”

I didn’t like how callous he sounded all of a sudden. “You and I have known each other for a long time. Clifford would realize that it’s more than sex.”

“Is it?”

I went over to him and touched his chest. He didn’t soften, not his body or expression. “Come on, don’t be like that. You knew I was promised to Clifford when we started sleeping with each other. It’s not a secret. I thought you preferred the no-strings-attached sex.”

Santino didn’t say anything.

I bit my lip coyly and got down to my knees in front of him. “Let me make it up to you.”

He scowled down at me. “You really think a blow job and sex is going to make everything better? I’m more than my cock.”

My heart clenched. He was so much more to me, but he couldn’t be. “You know Clifford is my fiancé. I can’t very well send him off without spending a bit of time with him after he crossed the Atlantic to be with me.”

Santino gripped my arms and pulled me to my feet. “I need to catch up on sleep.”

Without another word, he walked into his bedroom. We’d spent every night together in the last few weeks but I could sense that I wasn’t welcome in his bed tonight, so I went over to my bedroom.

Maybe it was my memory but I could still smell sex.

I sank down on the bed, feeling torn. Santino and I had only just started sleeping with each other and I could tell it had already changed how we felt about each other. Santino had become possessive and I definitely felt

emotionally attached to him. How much worse would it be in a few months from now? Or in a year?

Could we really keep risking it?



My lunch with Clifford was pleasant and surprisingly uneventful. If he noticed the lingering tension between me and Santino, he kept his thoughts to himself. I was glad. I really didn't want to discuss my complicated relationship with Santino to my fiancé.

Luckily, Clifford had a cousin who studied at Sorbonne and planned to spend the rest of the day with him. Knowing he had other people he wanted to visit in the city made me feel less obligated to spend time with him, which was good because I could only think about Santino anyway.

He had barely spoken to me all morning, treating me like he had in the past.

It bothered me, which in turn made me wonder how it would be once we were forced to return to a solely professional relationship.

On our drive back to the apartment after my lunch with Clifford, I turned to him. "What are we doing, Santino? We're supposed to have fun. If you're constantly pissed because I have to interact with Clifford then it's going to be really tough on the both of us. You know I can't ignore him. I'm not kissing him or doing anything else."

"I know," Santino gritted out.

"Then why are you being so hostile to me?"

"I'm pissed."

I widened my eyes comically. Did he think I hadn't noticed?

He sighed, his fingers around the steering wheel turning white from pressure.

"I know you have to talk to him. I know he's your fiancé and your future. I'm mostly pissed at myself because I didn't think it would bother me that much. But I really don't like the idea of sharing you."

"You aren't sharing me now."

"I guess not, but I will eventually."

“Not really,” I said quietly. “Because once I’m married, we can’t be together anymore.” I realized I no longer thought we’d stop once we were back in Chicago...

“That’s a consolation,” Santino muttered.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the window. Maybe it would be best if we stopped this now.

“I’ll try to get a grip, all right? It’ll be tough but I do my best to ignore Cliffy’s existence.”

I opened my eyes and smiled slightly. “Good, because I don’t want to give up what we have just yet.”



Despite our conversation, our relationship remained strained in the days after my meeting with Clifford. I wanted it to return to how it was.

I missed the banter and the uninhibited sex. Our last intercourse had felt just like that. Polite intercourse.

I leaned in the doorway to Santino’s room as he did push-ups. “You know, Sonny, I would have never pegged you as a pussy who lets emotions ruin a perfectly good sex life.”

I stifled a grin at the look on Santino’s face.

He pushed to his feet, his sweats hanging low on his hips and sweat glistening enticingly on his upper body. “Did you just call me pussy?”

I shrugged with a teasing smile. This felt good, safer.

Santino stalked toward me and I whirled around but before I could dash away, he slung an arm around my waist and slapped my ass hard. I gasped, but he simply lifted me up and carried me over to the bed where he draped me over his lap. Santino’s palm smashed against my ass again—even harder. I jerked with a cry, my shock-widened eyes darting up to Santino’s face. “Are you cra—?”

Santino shoved away my panties, and I moaned, my head falling forward when he slid two fingers into me. As usual, our banter had already prepped me well and my muscles welcomed him gladly.

“If I’d known this would shut you up, I would have fingerfucked you over my lap sooner.”

I hung limply over his strong legs as he eased his long fingers in and out. His other hand massaged my ass.

I breathed through my nose, my eyes falling shut.

“You won’t ever call me pussy again.”

I hummed my agreement. With Santino’s fingers hitting all the right spots, I would have agreed to anything.

Santino’s hot breath hit my skin a second before he bit my ass cheek lightly, making me moan even louder. “You can be such a good girl when you’re horny. I’ll remember that.”

“How does letting you fingerfuck me over your lap when I’m engaged to another man make me a good girl?”

Santino’s palm hit my ass hard. I jerked then cried out when he pinched my clit and I almost came. “You are only mine right now, and I want you to remember that.”

My head lolled forward once more with a weak nod as Santino’s fingers moved torturously slowly, stroking my inner walls deliciously, as he moved so deep his knuckles pressed against my clit.

“Now I want you to come hard like a good girl.”

I would have rolled my eyes if Santino hadn’t started thrusting his fingers into me at a pace that had me grab his legs and my toes digging into the floor because I was losing track of what was up and down.

“Oh god,” I gasped. “Oh god.”

I wasn’t sure I could take much more. My body was heightened to the max, my clit swollen and aching, desperate for release.

Santino smashed his palm against my ass when his fingers were buried all the way in me and his knuckles hit my clit.

I screamed as I came with a violent shudder. A string of unintelligible words, some French some Italian fell from my lips as I pressed my face against Santino’s calf and felt wetness trickle down my thighs.

Confusion filled me but I was too overwhelmed and exhausted to react on it.

Santino purred like a lion as he stroked my ass, his fingers still sliding in and out of me.

He bent down and pressed a kiss to my left then my right ass cheek before he pulled out his fingers and kissed my sensitive flesh. I moaned

again. His tongue trailed over my upper thigh.

I lifted my head, certain my hair was worse than a bird's nest. "I'm not sure I like you spanking me like a naughty schoolgirl."

Santino peered at me over my ass, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Your body does. You squirted like a good girl."

My cheeks heated. For some reason, this seemed like something unnormal to do. I'd never done that before.

"Trust me, making a girl squirt is a badge of honor every man wears proudly," Santino said, reading me as usual. Lying on his legs had become increasingly uncomfortable due to his erection digging insistently into my belly.

His smile broadened, becoming almost wolfish. "Let's see if I can earn another badge."

Santino gripped my hips and tossed me on the bed. I let out a groan, feeling boneless.

"No rest for the wicked, Cherie, I'm going to give you a real pounding now."

Santino positioned me so I was sprawled out on the bed with my face turned toward the wooden bars of the headboard.

"You better hold on tightly. This is going to be rough."

I bit my lower lip to stifle a grin. Santino propped my ass up slightly then squatted behind me. I was about to comment on the position when he slammed into me. His hands clamped down on my hips as he pistoned into me. My hands shot out, fingers desperately clinging to the bars of the bed.

"Oh holy shit," I gasped into the pillow.

Santino's thrusts hit me so deeply and filled me so entirely that stars burst before my eyes from the sensations. The slapping sounds of his thighs hitting my ass cheeks mingled with our moans. The bed vibrated, slamming against the wall over and over again. I really hoped our neighbors wouldn't call the police.

I came with a cry, my fingers clutching on to the bars and my teeth sinking into the pillow. This was almost too much. Santino didn't slow. He was angry fucking me. I'd never really understood the term, but now I did, and it was addicting.

He leaned down. "Savor every second. One day the memory of this will be the only thing that'll get you through the unfulfilling poking that Cliffy considers sex."

“Asshole,” I gritted out, trying to shove up but Santino’s thrusts kept me flat on my stomach.

“That’s right,” Santino growled, kissing me harshly. I answered his kiss with the same fervor.

I lost track of time but the soreness in my body when Santino and I had come told me we might have established a new personal record.

I rolled over on my back, sweat trickling down my chest. I was completely exhausted. A low hum rang in my body, an echo of pleasure that seemed reluctant to go. I closed my eyes, basking in this feeling. I could hear Santino move and the wet sound of the condom hitting the bin. Slowly my eyes peeled open as Santino stood next to the bed, watching me.

I gave him a lazy smile. “I like your form of punishment.”

“Glad I performed to your satisfaction.”

He didn’t return to bed and it made me wonder if he wanted me to go to my room. We still hadn’t spent the night together since Clifford’s appearance and I missed it. “Won’t you lie down? I feel like falling asleep beside you again.”

I didn’t care if admitting it weakened my position. Santino was jealous so he too must feel more for me than lust.

“You think that’s a good idea?”

It most definitely wasn’t. Nothing about this was a good idea. “I don’t care.”

Santino chuckled sardonically. He stretched out beside me and pulled me against him. “One day, I’ll regret this, but as you put it, I don’t care.”

Chapter *Twenty-Two*



Santino

This was the first time I'd face Anna's family again after we'd started our affair, or whatever we had. At this point, it was hard to say. Whatever it was was limited, and if Anna and I didn't manage to hide our less than professional relationship from her family, it would be terminated long before Anna entered the holy bond of marriage with Cliffy—by my cruel death at the hands of Valentina and Dante. I was sure they'd both join in the dismemberment for this special occasion.

"You look tense," Anna said as we waited at the airport.

One of my eyebrows twitched up. Even if she liked to pretend otherwise, her excessive cleaning spree in the last few days told me she was just as nervous about her family's visit. She'd cleaned every surface where we'd had sex in the last few months at least twice. "Don't tell. Shouldn't you be nervous too? You realize that we've both been betraying your family for the last five months?"

Anna had finished her first semester and we were supposed to fly back to Chicago for the summer, but first the Cavallaros would spend a week in Paris to celebrate Valentina's birthday.

"Betrayal is a strong word for what we have."

“What would you call it? We both gave your parents our word that there would never be anything between us.”

“They won’t find out. We agreed that we wouldn’t sleep together while they’re here.”

It would be easier to pretend we weren’t sleeping together if we kept a physical distance, but it would be hard. Anna and I had barely been able to stay away from each other these last few months. Now we’d have to go without sex for weeks, because even after the Cavallaro’s Paris visit, we’d still have to spend a few weeks in Chicago before only the two of us would return to Paris alone.

Dante, Leonas, Beatrice, and Valentina, followed by my dad, stepped into the waiting hall of Charles de Gaulle Airport.

While Anna rushed toward her family, I went over to my father to greet him. We hugged briefly before he pulled back to look at me. “Everything good?”

“Of course,” I said. Nobody knew about my affair with Anna, not even Arturo, and certainly not Dad. Though he probably still suspected something.

I wasn’t sure if Anna had shared anything with one of her friends. Speaking about something like that over the phone was definitely too dangerous so I suspected she hadn’t either. Of course, I knew she’d disclose every last detail of our affair with Sofia and Luisa as soon as she met them in person.

Dante came over to me and shook my hand. His expression didn’t show a hint of anger or hostility, so he didn’t suspect anything. We’d just have to keep it that way. “I must say I’m very satisfied with your work so far. Your daily reports were very informative.”

And mostly made-up shit. I had to leave out half of the activities Anna and I embarked on. “I’m glad.”

Valentina came over next, and even she seemed less suspicious than last time. “It’s good to see Anna so happy. Thank you for making sure she’s safe while living her dream.”

“It’s an honor,” I said.

“Why don’t you and your dad join us for dinner tonight? Dante has booked a table in the hotel’s Michelin Star restaurant and I’m sure they can make room for two more people.”

“I’d prefer to have a quiet dinner with my son tonight, if you don’t mind,” Dad said politely.

He probably just wanted to grill me on every little detail of the last few months, but I actually didn’t mind. I wanted to keep my interactions with Anna limited while we were around her family.

“Of course,” Valentina said immediately.

We split into two cars because one wasn’t enough for all of us and headed to the Four Seasons where Dante and the family would spend the week before we’d all fly back to Chicago. Anna was in a car with her mother, Bea, and my dad, while Leonas, Dante, and I rode in the other car.

“I really missed pissing you off,” Leonas said with a sly grin. Almost sixteen and still as annoying as I remembered.

“Leonas,” Dante said in a sharp tone. “Santino is Anna’s bodyguard and should be treated with the according respect.”

“As if Anna always treats him with respect.”

Dante gave me a questioning look. I shrugged, wishing I could slap Leonas over the head. “Like a teenager, she had her difficult moments but she’s grown up in the last couple of years. I can’t complain.”

An image of Anna waking me up with a very pleasant blowjob this morning came into my mind but I quickly shoved it away.

Leonas shook his head and gave me a condescending look through the rearview mirror. The little shit knew too much.

Dad and I picked a cozy restaurant only a short walking distance from the Four Seasons in case an emergency arose. But with Leonas and Dante there, Valentina, Anna, and Bea were well protected. Even if Leonas could be an annoying brat, he was a good shot and knew how to handle his knife. Still, it felt strange to let Anna out of my sight for the first time in six months. We’d spent so much time together, being apart felt alien.

“How are things between you and Anna?” Dad asked the moment we’d sat down at our table.

“Good.”

“Good how?”

“Have you come to Paris to interrogate me or because you missed me?”

“Both.”

I gave him a doubtful look. Luckily the waitress appeared at that moment with the menu cards. I took one of them with a quick merci before I scanned the wine selection.

“You didn’t even look at her.”

I raised my head. “Excuse me?”

“You didn’t even look at the waitress.”

“Of course. And I even said thanks.”

Dad nodded toward the woman who was now serving another table. “Look at her. She’s attractive. The son I remember would have checked her out.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m still that son. You make it sound as if I jumped every woman I saw. I can assure you that wasn’t the case. Maybe you should consider dipping your toes into the dating pond again if my dating life concerns you so much.”

“That’s not a joking matter.”

“Dad, if you’re worried about me, stop seeing things that aren’t there. You’ll only act suspicious and that, in turn, will make the Cavallaros suspicious and really get me in trouble.”

Dad sighed. I patted his shoulder. “Stop worrying so much. Get a life and live a little. I’ll be fine.”

It wasn’t that I was unaware of the danger I was in. If Anna let something slip, I was dead. But Anna was clever. I trusted her to protect our secret. Not just because of me, but also because she wanted to avoid the backlash too.



Santino was even more nervous about my family’s visit than me. Maybe he worried about me letting something slip but I’d learned from an early age to put on a mask in public. Now I only used that talent to put on a mask for my

family. That didn't mean I didn't feel guilty because I did, especially when I looked Mom and Dad in the eyes. But I had no other choice if I wanted to stay in Paris and protect Santino.

Maybe the lingering guilt was why I was glad when my family's visit in Paris was over and we all flew to Chicago. It felt strange being back home when so much had changed. The last few months in Paris had been freeing, exhilarating, and I'd started to take this newfound freedom for granted. Back in Chicago with its limitations, I realized the freedom I'd gotten drunk on would be taken from me in a few years. What Santino and I had in Paris was doomed.

I joined Dad in his office a couple of days after we'd all arrived in Chicago.

Mom was already there as well, standing next to Dad by the window, and it looked as if they'd been arguing. "I'd like to discuss your future with you," Dad said calmly.

I'd always assumed Mom and Dad would allow me to return to Paris for my second semester. They'd never said the opposite, but Dad's words made me doubt it, and I was terrified. I didn't want to stay in Chicago, not yet. I wanted to live a little more, enjoy more time with Santino. He and I had barely seen each other in two weeks. We hadn't shared a single kiss, much less more. My body yearned for his closeness.

"Okay," I said hesitantly. "I thought Santino and I would be returning to Paris after Bea's birthday in August?"

Mom and Dad exchanged a look that made me increasingly nervous. Mom came toward me and touched my shoulder. "If that's what you want?"

I nodded vehemently. "Of course. Why wouldn't I? I love the city and my fashion studies. It's my dream come true."

Mom touched my cheek briefly. "Your father and I had concerns in the beginning, but we have to say you proved us wrong."

"Still," Dad said. "People are starting to wonder where you are."

"They know I'm studying abroad. Don't they understand we have to keep it a secret for safety reasons?"

"Oh, they do," Mom said with a shake of their head. "I think what concerns them more is that you've dropped from their gossip radar."

I loved Mom's honesty. She hated how judgmental some people in our world were. She'd been submitted to their cruel words at the start of her marriage to Dad too.

“If people don’t know the truth, they make up their version of it,” Dad said.

I rolled my eyes. “What kind of rumors are they spreading now?”

“That you’re pregnant with Clifford’s child and that’s the reason why you’re engaged to him. That you’re pregnant with someone else’s child. That you’ve run off with someone.”

“I’m back. If I’d run off, I wouldn’t be here, right?”

“Which is why we need to make sure you keep attending social events. And that’s why we’d like you to stay until the start of the semester.”

“Okay.” That was only two weeks more than I’d thought. That wasn’t so bad. Of course that meant Santino and I would have to stay away from each other for two months... I’d probably combust. “Is there a date for my wedding yet?”

Mom and Dad exchanged a look. “Well, while the Clarks are willing to wait, we have to make sure we don’t offend the conservatives in the Outfit. Your mother and I think a wedding in the summer after you finish your fashion school would be advisable.”

“Oh.” I swallowed. That would be in three years, which really wasn’t that soon, but at the same time sooner than I would have liked. “That sounds like a good plan. Do Clifford’s parents agree?”

“They do. Clifford will be done with his undergraduate studies by then and in law school, so they think children should have to wait a bit longer.”

I almost laughed. Was there anything Clifford and I could decide on our own?

Mom touched my shoulder. “Is that okay for you?”

“Of course.”

Three years.

That was enough to enjoy myself, my freedom, Santino.

When I walked out of the office, I texted Santino to tell him when we’d return to Paris, but I left out the part with the wedding.

Our texts were always professional, no cute emoticons or endearments, and definitely no sexting.

“I wasn’t sure we’d be returning to Paris at all,” Santino said suddenly, startling me half to death.

I whirled around with wide eyes and touched my chest. “You scared me.”

Santino's eyes burned into mine and a little shiver passed my spine. I slanted a glance at Dad's office door which was only down the corridor, and swallowed. Santino stood close, and I wanted to bridge the remaining distance between us.

"What are you doing here?"

"Your parents asked me to come over for a conversation."

"They're going to tell you about Paris."

Would they mention the wedding as well? I really hoped they'd keep it to themselves for now. I didn't want things to get tense between Santino and me again.

"I'm sure they will," Santino murmured.

I took a step back before I could do something increasingly stupid. "Maybe you can come up to my room later and tell me what they said?"

Santino cocked one eyebrow. "I think it would be a better idea if you came over to the guardhouse. I have the night shift and can't abandon my position in front of the monitors. If you come over at ten, I'll have time for a quick chat about Paris."

I stifled a smile. Did that mean he was alone in the guardhouse?

"I appreciate that," I said politely, and amusement twisted Santino's lips.

"I'm sure you do."

I turned around, trying not to be too giddy.



After a shower and a thorough shave, I put on a simple sleeveless summer dress for easy access. I didn't bother with underwear. I wasn't sure how much time we'd have so I wanted to avoid wasting time.

I headed through the underground corridor toward the guardhouse and knocked. My pulse picked up in anticipation.

Santino opened the door and motioned me in, acting professional, and as if we weren't meeting for a booty call. At least I hoped that was what it was.

He closed the door and took in my outfit. He could probably see that I wasn't wearing a bra because my nipples were already growing hard.

"As expected your parents told me we'd be returning to Paris in early September."

My face made it clear that I didn't care. I perched on the edge of the table with the monitors. "That's not why I'm here."

"No?"

I narrowed my eyes then opened my legs wide so my dress rode up, revealing I wore nothing beneath.

Santino leaned against the door with a groan. "You're going all in."

"We don't have any time to waste."

Santino chuckled. "I can't lock the door, so this is very dangerous."

"I thought you had the night shift alone?"

"I'm alone in the guard house but there are other bodyguards on the perimeter as always. My father for one."

"He wouldn't tell on you, right?"

Santino pushed away from the door and prowled closer. "Didn't we agree to stay away from each other while in Chicago?" His expression told me he had other plans.

"Do you want to stay away from me for two months?"

Santino reached me and grabbed my thighs, staring down at me with lust-hooded eyes. "Fuck no. But this is madness, Anna. If we get caught..."

I grabbed him through his clothes. "We won't."

Santino released a sharp breath then his gaze scanned the monitors. "All clear, but this will have to be quick and dirty."

I laughed. "Perfect."

I helped Santino free his cock, desperate for him.

"I don't have a condom on me," he gritted out, regret twisting his features.

"Me neither. I could ask my brother for one." I giggled, couldn't help it. Santino didn't look amused. He groaned and pressed his forehead against my shoulder.

I bit my lip. "We don't need one."

Santino raised his head with a confused expression.

"A week before my family came to Paris I went to a doctor and asked them for the pill. I've been taking it since then and they're now effective."

"You didn't tell me."

I shrugged. Somehow this felt more monumental than it should. This was just a practical matter after all... “I’m clean, obviously. And you haven’t been with anyone else since last December, right?”

“Yes, and I’ve never gone bareback.”

“Then we’re good to go.”

Santino looked almost amazed. He leaned forward and kissed my lips gently before his fingers found my opening to test my readiness. I was more than ready. Grabbing my ass cheeks, Santino dragged me toward the edge of the table before he plunged into me with one hard thrust. His lips clashed down on mine, swallowing my moan. The monitors shook with every thrust. I clung to Santino almost desperately, my legs wrapped around his hips. He jerked down the top of my dress and pinched my nipple.

I was getting closer and closer when Santino tensed. “Your brother’s in the garden.”

“He’s probably just looking for his stash of tobacco and weed that he keeps buried under the bushes. Don’t stop. I’m almost there.”

Santino’s grip on my ass tightened and he sped up even more. “You’re going to be my downfall.”

I clutched his shoulders as my release burst through me. Santino followed soon after, and it felt different than before. Intimate I couldn’t quite define.

We didn’t have much time to bask in the sensations. After a quick good-night kiss, I righted my clothes and hurried back through the corridor.

I stepped back into the hallway of our mansion and came face to face with Leonas, who was sneaking around too. He definitely smelled of weed.

“You should stop smoking that shit.”

“We all have bad habits we can’t break, right?” Leonas said with a knowing smirk.

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You and Santino are doing it,” Leonas said matter-of-factly.

I glanced around nervously and dug my nails into his forearm. “Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Leonas scoffed. “How about we go to my room before you piss your pants?”

He stalked away and I had no choice but to follow him upstairs. I had to find out if he knew more than he should.

The second we entered his room, I said, “Why would you say something like that?”

Leonas grabbed a packet of cigarettes from under his bed. “Cut the act, sis. I’m not blind or stupid.”

“If you keep doing weed, you’ll be soon,” I muttered.

Leonas sank down on the windowsill, raising his eyebrows expectantly. “Clifford approached me after his love visit in Paris.”

“What? When?” I stumbled toward him and perched beside him, my pulse speeding up.

“At a party. He asked me if I knew what was going on between you and Santino.”

The color drained from my face. If Clifford started asking questions like that, Santino and I were doomed. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him that he didn’t know what he was talking about and that you were an honorable woman. I also warned him to keep his mouth shut if he knew what was good for him.”

“Thank you.”

Leonas smiled wryly. “You’re welcome. But banging your bodyguard, sis, really?”

I slapped his arm. “Shut up. If someone finds out, Santino’s dead and I’ll be the reason for a scandal.”

“Why should it always only be me who causes a scandal?”

“Because you’re good at it, and your reputation is already in tatters.”

“Thanks for your warm words, sis,” he said as he put a cigarette in his mouth. “My reputation serves a purpose. I like it when people underestimate me. It makes beating them all the sweeter.”

I shook my head with a laugh.

“What about Clifford?”

“What about him?”

“Are you going to ditch him for Santino?”

I gave Leonas a disbelieving look and raised my hand with Clifford’s huge engagement ring. “I honor my promise.”

Leonas shrugged. “There are promises you should honor, and others you should ditch. Clifford is the latter.”

I rolled my eyes then snatched the cigarette out of his hand and took a drag. “Do you realize what kind of scandal it would cause if I didn’t marry Clifford? Our families made a deal. Our parents are counting on me.”

Leonas shrugged. “Promising you to Clifford was a mistake. The Clarks won’t ever be part of our family. You’ll always have to be careful what you say around him, even Clifford. You are a means to an end to them.”

“But so is Clifford to our family,” I argued, squinting into the darkness outside of the window.

“A shitty base for a marriage.”

“Most arranged marriages are built on a shitty base.”

“If you say so. You’re the one who’ll have to share a bed with Clifford.”

Leonas’s voice made it clear he disapproved.

“I can handle it. I can handle him.”

“If you think so. Just know that I’ll have your back no matter what.”

I swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

Leonas shrugged. “That’s what family is for. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

I didn’t say anything in turn only nodded. We opened the window and dangled our legs over the sill, staring out into the night. I knew ultimately my family would always have my back. How would it be to find myself in a marriage that wasn’t like that?

Chapter *Twenty-Three*



Santino

I'd have never thought the day would come that I was relieved to leave Chicago and return to Paris, but the sneaking around and secrecy grated on my nerve. After our quickie in the guardhouse, Anna and I had only managed to meet for sex one more time. Two rushed fucks in two months. A dismal quote. I missed touching Anna whenever I wanted, at least in the safety of our apartment. I missed spending time with her. While we were careful not to act as a couple in public in Paris, we could still be much closer than we could ever risk in Chicago.

When we landed, I could already feel a huge weight lifting off my shoulders.

"This feels like coming home," Anna said on our ride back to the apartment in our car. I touched her thigh and squeezed. In a weird way, it did. Chicago was still my home and would always be, but it also felt like a prison right now. Anna linked our fingers.

Dad had warned me to be careful before I left. He didn't know about Anna and me, but he suspected something. Holding hands in broad daylight probably wasn't being careful, even if an ocean stretched between us and the watchful eyes of the Outfit.

I squeezed her hand. We needed to be careful. There was no doubt about it. But returning to Paris had made me realize again that our togetherness was limited. I wanted to enjoy the time we had. Paris allowed me to do that, and forget about Clifford.



We sat in our favorite breakfast spot, a small café around the corner from our apartment. We had breakfast here every Sunday and spent hours people-watching.

The owners thought we were a couple. We never corrected them and eventually we started holding hands, like we did now. We'd grown careless over time, or maybe it was just that keeping a professional distance became more difficult over the years.

"I thought we could spend a few weeks in Provence this summer," Anna said one Sunday morning in early May.

"Won't we have to return to Chicago?"

As the first summer, Anna and I had returned to Chicago last summer as well, and I assumed it would be the case this summer too.

"It's our last summer in France," she said softly, her eyes strangely wistful.

Our last summer here. It hit me suddenly. Anna would be graduating next February and afterward we were expected to return to Chicago indefinitely. Fuck. I'd tried to ignore the truth, but now it glared back at me.

"It is."

"I asked my parents if I could spend at least part of it traveling through France and they agreed. We have the first three weeks of July."

"A last summer of freedom before you marry Clifford next October."

Anna's expression twisted with shock. Had she really thought I didn't know? I hadn't mentioned it because I didn't want to think about it. The idea that I'd have to give up Anna soon felt like a burning arrow in my chest.

"My parents think we shouldn't wait much longer."

I nodded. That Dante had allowed Anna to study abroad and that she was marrying an Outsider were already bitter pills to swallow for the

conservatives in the Outfit. Anna would be twenty-two next September. Time to marry in our world.

Anna glanced down at our linked hands then back up at my face. I tried to keep my expression calm, even if I felt anything but. Our time was running out and for the first time, I could practically see the sand grains trickling away in the hourglass.

“It’s still more than one year,” she said.

“Is it? How long do you want to keep us going? Have you decided on a date yet?”

Maybe I should man up and stop what we had. But I didn’t want to. Instead I waited for Anna to end things. It was her commitment to Clifford that would determine our end after all.

She hesitated, then looked away. “We don’t have to end things...”

Surprise washed through me, then triumph. Then I realized she didn’t mean it in the way I thought. “You want us to keep fucking even when you’re married to Clifford.”

Anna grimaced, then quickly shook her head. “We can’t. I... I hate that we have to talk about this. I don’t want to think about it.”

But eventually we would have to face the truth. I wondered if she’d ever considered telling her parents about us. If she’d ever considered breaking things off with Clifford while she’d lain in my arms at night, or while we’d shared a good laugh. I had spent hours awake at night imagining a future with Anna.

Anna leaned forward, her eyes pleading. “Let’s pretend I’m not marrying. Let’s just enjoy our time together. Okay?”

I took a deep breath, then nodded.

For Anna, I’d do it. I couldn’t let her go yet. Not yet.



The human brain is a powerful tool. I managed to pretend like Anna had asked me to, and so we kept enjoying our days until the summer almost like a couple.

When the first day of the summer holidays rolled around, Anna and I both briefly descended into wistfulness.

Luckily the next day, we took a plane down to Marseille for our trip to the Provence. Right when we landed, Anna and I held hands. It felt natural.

The sun was shining brightly as we headed for the rental car station at the airport.

Once we'd filled out all the paperwork and Anna had received the keys, she headed for a tiny blue Fiat Cinquecento Cabrio.

"Please tell me that isn't our vehicle." I couldn't call that thing car. It would be an insult to my Camaro and every other car with a little pride.

Anna rolled her eyes as she rounded the car as if it was a cute puppy. "It's perfect." She beamed. Fuck. I could live with that Matchbox car if it made Anna smile like that.

"I'm driving!" Anna shouted before I could head for the driver's side. I sank down on the passenger seat, watching with amusement how Anna inspected the gearshift of the Fiat. I was used to driving gear shift, but Anna had never done it. She hadn't driven much at all in the last two and a half years. If we went anywhere by car in Paris, I always drove.

Seeing my expression, hers filled with determination.

And eventually she managed to get the engine running and we pulled out of the parking lot. Anna let out a delighted laugh. "This will be a magical trip."

I chuckled and relaxed in the seat. Anna pressed the button that opened the top of the car. Her hair blew around her head wildly and she laughed again.

I reached inside her purse and grabbed a scrunchie. Anna gave me a grateful smile as I put her hair in a messy ponytail while she steered the car onto a narrow coastal road.

"I love it when you do that."

Usually I only ever held her hair back when she blew me but this felt nice too. I loved the feeling of her silky hair between my fingers. "I just don't want to drop off the cliff because your hair impairs your vision."

I couldn't see her eyes because of her huge sunglasses but I knew she was rolling her eyes.

"Don't be grumpy. This will be the summer of our life."

I knew I'd always remember this summer. The first summer Anna really felt like my woman...

... and the last.



We rented a tiny baby blue Fiat Cinquecento and rode the winding streets of the southern Provence with it until we reached our final goal, a small beach town, a former fishing village, between Nizza and Antibes. The town had two beaches, one easily accessible beach close to the promenade, and another one which could only be reached by boat or by climbing down a narrow, steep staircase that was beaten into the cliffs more than a century ago.

Santino carried our backpack as we clambered down the staircase. We could have easily afforded to rent a boat or even a yacht to reach the beach. Money was hardly an issue, but during our entire time in Paris, apart from the central and expensive apartment, Santino and I had tried to live a basic life, like a student like myself would.

I enjoyed the simplicity of it and it made me appreciate the little things all the more. I knew Santino hadn't expected me to be able to live without luxuries. Despite it being only ten in the morning, the beach was already beginning to fill up with visitors. Some only came down for a few spectacular photos for Instagram but others spread out their towels or even beach tents.

Santino and I settled on towels close to the cliffs on the right. Because this part of the beach was still in the shadows, it wasn't as populated as the rest and so Santino and I could enjoy a touch of privacy.

I got out of my beach slip then began to unhook my bikini top.

"What are you doing?" Santino growled.

"I'm doing what many French girls do when they go to the beach, I'm flashing my boobs."

Santino glanced around. Women of every age sunned topless. A couple of girls even played ping pong, their perky breasts bobbing up and down with every jump.

“I’m not sure I like other men staring at your boobs.”

I laughed and stretched out on the towel. “You’ll survive.”

I ignored the little voice that said he’d soon enough have to share me with Clifford. It wasn’t welcome right now.

“Seeing you half naked like that makes me regret my choice of shorts.”

Santino wore tight short pants that accentuated his muscled ass and his impressive junk, which was growing. He sat down close to me with a look I knew too well.

I grinned. Then my eyes registered a couple on the beach that was kissing really passionately, she actually lying on top of him. And another couple in the ocean was definitely getting it on.

Santino followed my gaze, a smirk twisting his face. “I’m really starting to love France.”

“Only took you two and a half years,” I teased.

He stretched out beside me, his head propped up on his palm. His smile promised trouble. I rolled on my side. “What?”

He scooted closer and kissed me, slow, but with purpose. I knew this kiss. My eyes fluttered, handing myself over to the sensation. Kissing Santino always gave me life. After a while, my nipples puckered and wetness gathered between my legs.

Santino pulled back slightly, his eyes trailing over my attention-seeking nipples. “Seeing them and not being able to suck them is torture.”

I bit my lip, the idea of Santino’s hot mouth around my sensitive flesh only increasing my need. I glanced along the beach to see if anyone was watching, but people were busy with themselves.

Santino scooted even closer then slid his hand between my legs, at first only resting it on my inner thigh. Then his thumb grazed my slit over the fabric and his lips claimed mine once more. While his tongue teased my mouth his thumb grazed me lightly. The simple touch and his kiss with the added thrill of being in a public place soon had me sopping wet.

My breathing grew deeper and faster. Our kiss intensified, and the static between us raised goose bumps all over my body. Santino’s finger didn’t speed up but he increased the pressure.

“I need more,” I whispered against his lips. “I need you.”

Santino nodded then pulled away and closed his eyes briefly while he tried to position his erection so it wasn't as obvious. "Let's go into the water."

I grinned and sat up. Before I stood, I quickly checked that my bikini bottoms didn't show any hints of what we'd been up to. Santino rose to his feet. If you looked at his crotch, it was still obvious that our kiss hadn't been innocent. It was a good thing that we were at the fringes of the beach.

We went into the water and Santino immediately pulled me against him. I slung my legs around his middle, then lowered myself until I could feel his erection press against me. I moaned, already so ready for him. Santino reached between us, fumbling a bit before he shoved my bikini aside and his tip pressed against my opening. I lowered myself without hesitation. As his cock stretched me, my body began to shake. Santino immediately captured my lips, swallowing my moan as I came around his cock. He pushed me down until he was sheathed all the way inside of me.

"That was quick," he growled, his lips tracing my throat.

"I was already well-prepped."

"Hmm." He lightly bit down on my shoulder. He felt impossibly hot inside of me, maybe because of the cold of the surrounding ocean.

Santino lowered us even deeper into the water so only our heads peeked out and I began to rotate my hips slowly. Soon Santino panted against my lips. I loved the taste of salt on his skin, the sound of the waves and seagulls, the bright sunshine.

Santino and I looked into each other's eyes as our bodies moved slowly together. Every stroke of Santino inside of me let the fire in my belly burn brighter. The world around us became a blur of sounds and glittering sunlight.

This time I came even harder and Santino swallowed my moans even as his own body convulsed with climax and he released into me. I closed my eyes, my sensitive inner walls sending new waves of pleasure through me as Santino came inside of me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck even tighter and put my head down on his shoulder. "I want this moment to last forever."

"It would lose meaning and intensity if it did," Santino murmured, stroking my spine.

I nodded, because that too was true. I wanted more moments like this, not relive the same moment over again, but eventually that was all I'd have.

I swallowed the sadness. We still had three weeks of vacation and then six more months in Paris before our time was up. We needed to make the most of it, soak up every moment of laughter and lust and joy.



We strode along the promenade, our arms brushing on occasion from walking so close. Suddenly, Santino's fingers brushed mine and when I didn't pull away he linked our hands and we kept walking like that. Apart from holding hands under the table in a restaurant on occasion or in the safe dark of a movie theater, we'd never risked it in public, not even thousands of miles away from home.

My eyes stung and my heart filled with a sort of fulfillment I couldn't explain. After a while I risked a glance up but Santino was wearing sunglasses and his face was the usual vigilante mask. He squeezed my hand briefly and I stifled a smile, then just enjoyed walking by his side with his hand in mine. This felt good, too good, but I didn't want fear of the future to ruin the moment. I wanted to live in the moment. This moment belonged to us, only us.

We settled at a small fish restaurant with a view of the small fishing harbor for dinner.

The waiter motioned at Santino's cell phone on the tabletop. "Do you want me to take a photo of you?"

Santino and I exchanged a look, uncertainty filling the air between us. I wanted to say yes, wanted to capture this moment in a picture so I could look at it in the future and remind myself of the utter happiness I'd felt. But a picture meant proof. Proof that could ruin both our lives. Proof of the thing without a name that was between us.

"No, thank you," I said, my voice a little rough.

The waiter seemed taken aback and gave Santino an encouraging smile. He probably thought our relationship was in trouble, that we'd had a fight. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Neither had we a relationship, nor had we fought in a while.

The waiter returned with a bottle of white wine that would go well with our meal and filled our glasses very generously.

I thanked him but was glad when he disappeared. “You know what I just realized?”

Santino shook his head with a look that gave me chills.

“We haven’t fought in a while. We’re getting along really well.”

We still exchanged our banter, especially when we were horny because it was our favorite foreplay, but a real fight? That hadn’t happened in many months. We enjoyed being together.

“We’ve become a good team.”

Team. We both knew we were more than that, but couldn’t admit to it because it couldn’t be.

“Especially between the sheets,” I added because this was safer terrain.

Chapter *Twenty-Four*



I sat in my room and stared down at my luggage. For weeks I'd pretended we still had time, had pretended the end wasn't near, but now as I stared down at my clothes neatly packed into three pieces of luggage, tears burned in my eyes. On top of my clothes rested my diplôme. I'd really finished my fashion studies in Paris, had lived my dream for three years, had tasted unbridled freedom, had fallen in love.

And tomorrow I'd return to Chicago to take up my duties again. In eight months, I'd marry Clifford. The next months in my life would be filled with wedding planning—of course Mom and Dolora had already started—and social events.

I'd have to figure out a way to find my way back into the more restricted life in Chicago. And I'd have to figure out how to fall out of love with Santino again, had to stop my belly from bustling with butterflies every time he entered a room, which still happened after almost three years of sharing a bed.

I couldn't imagine letting him go, but the more I thought about how things would be between us once we were back the more I realized I didn't have a choice. If I didn't end things between us now, I might never be able

to do it. And that wasn't an option. The future of the Outfit rested on my shoulders, and there was no way I'd disappoint my parents like that.

I pushed to my feet and went to Santino's room. He closed his suitcase when I entered and looked up.

"All done?" I asked. My voice sounded off, almost hesitant.

Santino nodded slowly, his brows drawing together as he regarded my face then a strange smile pulled at his lips. He nodded with a bitter laugh. "It's time, isn't it?"

I swallowed, not sure if he really knew what needed to happen. Could he read me this easily?

Of course. We'd spent every day and night together in the last three years. He knew every inch of my skin, had kissed and touched it all, knew every imperfection and all the places that gave me the most pleasure. But as he'd discovered my body, he'd also seen all that lay below. He knew me like no one else did, not even my family.

I searched for the right words, for something that would make this easier. "We can't keep doing this."

I couldn't even put a name on what we had because we'd never defined it. We slept together. We shared a bed and jokes, we bantered and talked seriously. Maybe we were friends with benefits, but Santino and I had never been friends. Not really, and it didn't feel like we were now. Could we become friends? Could any part of our connection survive in Chicago? Was it clever to even consider it?

"Having sex?" Santino asked in a low voice, walking closer. My body yearned for his touch as if I'd already gone without it for months. "Sharing a bed? Spending time together like a couple?"

Couple. Had he just compared us to a couple?

My heart seemed too heavy for my ribcage as if it might fall and shatter on the floor any moment.

"We always knew it couldn't last. We knew how it would end."

"You marrying Clifford?"

"Yes," I said tonelessly.

He stopped in front of me, touching my cheek. I stared at his chest, afraid to meet his gaze. I knew it would consume me whole.

"Have you ever just for a second considered following your heart? Have you ever allowed yourself to consider canceling your engagement and giving us a real chance?"

I couldn't believe what he said, couldn't believe he broke our unspoken agreement to not consider a future together. Why did he have to make this harder than it was?

Had I considered it?

Yes, of course. Every night I fell asleep in Santino's arms and every morning I woke beside him.

But I'd never allowed the idea to fester, and I wouldn't allow it now.

"No," I said firmly.

Santino nudged my face up, his brown eyes locking on mine. I steeled myself. "You're a good liar but I know you."

"You know me well, Santino, but you don't know everything, especially not my heart. First and foremost, I'm loyal to my family, and they need me to marry Clifford. I won't disappoint them."

"Marrying a bodyguard would most certainly be a disappointment."

I glared. "We always knew this couldn't be! Don't act like you were about to propose to me."

"You're right. I suppose it's a good thing then that I asked your father three years ago to let me return to the job of Enforcer after Paris. That way we won't see each other anymore. A clean cut, how you want it."

I froze. I'd thought I'd at least still see Santino, still be able to talk to him. "You never told me."

He shrugged. "Like you, I often forgot there was a time after Paris."

I forced a smile. "You never liked being my bodyguard, so now you get your wish."

Santino glanced at his watch. "We should go to sleep. Our flight leaves early."

I pressed my lips together. "Won't we spend our last night together?" I forced my lips into a coy smile, not wanting to be sappy.

Santino's expression was emotionless. "I don't think that would be wise. We should spend the night in our beds."

"You're right," I said with forced resoluteness. "A clean cut is what we need."

I turned around and returned to my bedroom, wiping my eyes brutally.



We were silent on the flight back home. Santino watched an action movie on the small seat TV and I stared out of the window. I hadn't slept much last night and felt bone-tired but my whirling thoughts kept me awake.

I hadn't seen Clifford since his impromptu surprise visit in Paris almost three years ago. We'd always missed each other with him studying a few semesters in Oxford and traveling to political events with his father, and me being gone in Paris. I had a feeling he'd avoided me. And I hadn't minded. Seeing him would have only ripped open wounds, wounds that hadn't even happened yet. Since then a lot had changed. I had changed. Santino and I had changed. We'd gotten even closer. What we had gone far beyond the physical. What we'd had...

Santino and I, we couldn't be anymore. This morning our interaction had been detached and professional.

I'd hated every second of it. It was probably for the best that he wouldn't serve as my bodyguard anymore.

I was nervous. Nervous how I'd return to my old life, how I'd manage to allow closeness with Clifford. How I'd convince everyone I was okay. Leonas was the only one who knew about Santino, but he wasn't the person to whom I'd talk about heartbreak. Because it felt like heartbreak. Falling out of love with someone took more than a conversation about a clean cut.

Maybe I could tell Luisa and Sofia... But I had practically lied to them these last three years too. I wasn't even sure why I hadn't told them anything on the few parties we'd seen each other in person. Maybe I'd thought it would make ending things easier if nobody knew. But now I wished I'd had someone who'd give me a pep talk. In the last three years, Santino had been the pep talker, mostly by telling me to stop throwing myself a pity party whenever something didn't go to plan or I got a mediocre grade, but for obvious reasons, he couldn't take up that role anymore.

"Stop fretting. Nobody will notice anything. You fooled me into believing you were experienced three years ago, and that's a remarkable

feed. You're a marvelous liar."

This wasn't the banter we'd shared before sex, this was the annoyed voice of the past.

I hated that Santino could so easily switch back to being the asshole. "Now that we're back, will you return to servicing the lonely wives in Chicago?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

Santino raised one brow. "Will you return to kissing Cliffy?"

"He's my fiancé."

The sardonic smile Santino gave me made me furious. How could he be this blasé about this? We'd been sleeping together, eating together, doing pretty much everything together for years and he didn't seem to care.

"And I'm very obviously not," he muttered. "I'm your bodyguard. As such, I'm not required to tell you about my sexual partners, or did I miss a clause in my contract?"

"You don't have a contract. You have an eternally binding oath to my father, your Capo, to protect me that you're obviously not honoring. If you were honorable, you'd at least keep watching me until I marry."

Santino's smile became dangerous. "Touché. I almost forgot that you're my Capo's daughter. But my oath isn't eternally binding, only until I get killed protecting your perky ass."

"I don't want you to get killed for me."

"Oh, Anna, I have a feeling that's not up to you to decide. You'll be my death one way or another."

I glared. "You're being melodramatic."

"I learned from the best."

I sighed and looked out of the window. We'd almost reached O'Hare. "I don't want to get used to a new bodyguard now."

What was I doing?

Santino didn't say anything.

"So you'll have a sleepover with Mrs. Clark tonight?"

Why couldn't I shut up? I had been the one who wanted to end things and now I was clinging to Santino.

"She's probably found a replacement. I'll have to find a new lonely wife to service."

"There are plenty to choose from."

"In a few years, you'll be one of them and I can be your closet lover."

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, Sonny, but if I go looking for a lover when I’m a married woman, it’ll be a younger, less jaded man.”

I hated this. But it was for the best.

I couldn’t wait for the airplane doors to open. I wanted to get away. I couldn’t take any more of this.

Mom and Dad waited at the airport and I rushed toward them. Mom hugged me too tightly and Dad scanned me from head to top as if he wanted to determine I was really in one piece. He’d done it during each of my visits. He nodded at Santino as if he was silently praising him for keeping me safe. If Dad knew half the things that Santino and I had done...

It was better if I didn’t think about it. It was over now.

Santino gave me a cool nod before he said to Dad, “I’m heading home now to catch up on sleep.”

“I’m here to protect them, go ahead,” Dad said.

Without another word, Santino walked off. I swallowed, forcing my gaze away from his leaving form. Was this our final goodbye?



Santino

Dad picked me up at the airport. One look at my face and his expression filled with concern.

I sagged into the passenger seat, feeling like someone had used me as their mental punching bag. I’d always been good at casual sex, at keeping emotions out of the mix, but Anna had shown me the limitations of my control.

“You can tell me anything, son, you know that. Do I have to worry?”

I sighed. “I suppose you don’t have to worry anymore.”

Dad tore his gaze away from the street. He was usually a very vigilant driver and didn't let anything distract him, so this meant I had to really worry him.

"Anna and I have been together for the last three years."

I could see the color drain from Dad's face, but he didn't interrupt me for which I was grateful. I needed to get this off my chest.

I needed to share this with someone. Maybe because it made it more real, made it seem like more than a figment of my imagination. Sometimes the last three years had seemed like a dream. I didn't have a single photo of Anna and me together, not a single proof, which was for the best but at the same time, it made it feel like the last three years hadn't happened, as if I was waking from a coma and life had passed me by.

"But it's over now."

Dad cleared his throat, probably trying to stop himself from giving me a tongue-lashing. "That's the right decision."

"It wasn't mine," I said.

"Anna ended things?"

"She did, because she's loyal to her family and the Outfit."

Dad pulled up in front of my apartment building but we didn't get out of the car. He regarded me silently. "You never wanted me to look for a wife for you, but there are many families who'd gladly give their daughters to you."

"You never dated seriously after Mom died."

Dad searched my eyes then touched my shoulder. "Sonny, I always feared one day you'd lose your heart to a married woman."

"See, I knew better and chose an engaged woman."

Dad didn't smile. "You have to accept Anna's decision for both your sakes."

"I know," I said. And I fucking did.



The next day, Dante asked me to come over for a final conversation about my Paris assignment. I'd already called Arturo for a meet-up in the evening

and chat about us working together again. Anna moved on with her life, and I would too.

I entered through the guard house entrance and headed through the underground corridor toward the mansion. I felt fucking anxious.

The second I entered the house, I knew why. Anna lingered in the corridor in front of Dante's office. That was definitely not a coincidence.

I strolled toward her, trying to keep my cool, but my heartbeat sped up as it always did when I saw her. She wore the last dress she'd sewed in Paris, a form-fitting, long-sleeved mini-dress with an asymmetric neckline. It was the first time I saw it on her. She looked marvelous in it.

Our eyes locked. "Ready to resign?" she said quietly.

I didn't say anything, only walked past her and knocked at the office door. Anna walked off without another word. It took all my self-control not to chase after her and kiss her.

During our meeting, Dante expressed his gratitude and satisfaction over the work I'd done in Paris. I couldn't deny it. I felt guilty for betraying my Capo, but I knew I'd do it all over again, even knowing the end result. I didn't want to miss a single moment I'd spent with Anna.

Dante browsed through a few papers on his desk, only briefly glancing up to ask, "I assume you still want to put down your position as bodyguard and return to working as an Enforcer?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I won't lie. I'd prefer to have you as Anna's bodyguard. I trust you. But I'll honor my promise, so if you want to be Enforcer, the job's yours again."

"I've actually been thinking about remaining Anna's bodyguard. That way I can keep working together with my dad."

What did I just say? Had I lost my fucking mind?

Dante gave me a small smile, no longer interested in his papers, his attention now fully on me. "I'm glad to hear that." He came around the desk and held out his hand. After rising to my feet, I shook it, knowing I'd just made a huge mistake.

"Do you need a few more days off before you work again? I realize you haven't had a real vacation in three years."

"A few days off would be great."

I needed to get a grip. Working with Anna was a fucking risk. I could only hope she'd make good on her words and keep her distance from me

because I knew I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself if she made a move.



After four days off, I stepped into the Cavallaro mansion to guard Anna. She came down the stairs and paused briefly when she spotted me before she proceeded. She stopped a few steps from me and crossed her ankles. She only ever stood like that when she was nervous. "My dad told me you haven't resigned."

"I'll stay your bodyguard for however long you need me."

Anna smiled, and fuck, my insides lit up like the tree in front of the Trump Tower in New York before Christmas.

"I'm glad," she said softly, taking a step toward me then stopping.

"We're going to work together on a professional level."

Anna nodded. "Of course. As we discussed."

"Good," I said, then glanced at my watch. "Do you have any meetings scheduled for the day?"

"Lunch with Luisa, that's it. Next week will be busier. I'll share my schedule with you via Airdrop later."

"I'd appreciate that."

Anna nodded, then motioned toward the door. She crossed her ankles again, her elegant fingers playing with a gold bracelet she'd gotten from Clifford for Christmas. His mother had handed it to Anna because he'd been away with his father. It was the first time Anna wore it since that day and it was a painful reminder of the man she actually belonged to. I'd never gifted her anything lasting because that like photos might have been proof. Every single of my presents had been perishable, flowers, food, an activity. Perishable like what we'd had.

"We should head out now. Luisa is always on time."

I led Anna to the Mercedes limousine in front of the mansion and opened the back door for her. It was the first time in three years that Anna wouldn't be riding in the front with me.

She gave me a polite smile and slipped into the back seat. I closed the door and took a deep breath before I got in.

We rode in silence for a while. It felt suffocating. My fingers on the steering wheel tightened with every passing second. Why hadn't I taken Dante up on his promise? Why was I torturing myself like this?

Did I really want to protect Anna on dates with Clifford? Or while she chose flowers for the wedding? Or tried on her wedding dress?

"Stop."

I glanced at Anna through the rearview mirror.

"Stop!" she screamed.

I swerved the car over to a diner parking lot and came to a halt. I unbuckled my belt and turned around. "What's wrong?"

Anna unbuckled her belt, leaned toward me, and grabbed my collar. Then she pulled me in for a kiss.

My body sprang to life immediately. No hesitation. No professionalism.

"I need you. Now," Anna whispered between kisses.

She tugged harder at my shirt. I angled my body around and half fell through the gap between the front seats. I climbed on top of Anna. We began tugging at our clothes, needing to feel naked skin.

Only the tinted windows protected our secret from the outside world. It was too risky but neither of us cared.

When I plunged into Anna, our bodies flush together, I knew I'd take whatever Anna was willing to give me, for however long. Maybe it would be enough.

Chapter *Twenty-Five*



After our time together in the car, I arrived at lunch with Luisa fifteen minutes late. I promised myself that the fling in the car was a one-time thing, a last goodbye.

It became clear very quickly that Santino and I couldn't stay away from each other. Our connection was like a magnetic pull neither of us could resist. Why else had he agreed to stay my bodyguard?

Only a day later, we found ourselves in the back seat of the car again. We were both breathless and my sweaty skin was sticking to the leather but I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

I was pressed up to Santino's side, relishing in the feel of his warmth and his unique scent. It was a scent I associated with safety.

"What now?" Santino asked.

"We keep doing what we did in Paris."

"In Paris we didn't have dozens of watchful eyes on our back. We could be together relatively unperturbed. Everything we do in Chicago is a risk. We won't be able to be close in public and even meeting in secret will be difficult. We can't fuck in your room. And we can't keep fucking in the car on public parking lots."

I pushed up with a teasing smile, wanting to disperse the heaviness of our conversation. I didn't want to give room for the worries that had been bugging me ever since our return to Paris had come closer and had now manifested since we were back in Chicago. "Why not? The risk will make it extra hot. I like the naughtiness of the car, and doing it in my room will be even naughtier."

Santino's eyes cut into me with their intensity. He raked his hands through my hair. "This will add another layer to our betrayal."

"Does it really matter?" I whispered. Mom and Dad would be disappointed either way if they ever found out, which they wouldn't. "Let's be each other's secret for however long we can."

"I never minded being someone's dirty secret, but I really wish I wasn't yours."

"It's all we can have."



My hands were sweaty when I entered the Clark mansion with Mom, Dad, and Leonas. Dolora celebrated her fiftieth birthday and of course, we were all invited. It was the first time I'd see Clifford again, which made me feel unreasonably anxious, especially because Dad had chosen to take Santino with us and not Enzo.

Clifford and his mother greeted us while his dad was busy talking to a couple of senators. Dolora hugged me briefly, which felt awkward, especially when her gaze cut to Santino right after. Did she think he'd give her a special birthday present?

He wouldn't.

Right?

Were we still exclusive? Or had our kind-of-break-up in Paris changed things?

The mere thought that Santino might touch another woman made me see red. Clifford stepped up in front of me, forcing my attention toward him. A brief moment of awkwardness followed, which Clifford cut short by leaning down and kissing my cheek. It was a brief peck, nothing that

screamed couple, but it still made me feel guilty because Santino had to watch it.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him walk across the room to take up position there, his eyes expression stone, but his eyes burned with jealousy.

“How are things?” Clifford asked with a polite smile. He seemed less boyish than I remembered, calmer and more confident, and not just because he was dressed in a posh suit.

“Good,” I said, accepting his extended elbow. He led me toward the buffet.

“Will he cause trouble?”

He didn’t have to elaborate, it was plainly clear whom he meant. I allowed myself the briefest glance toward Santino who was scanning the room in a professional manner.

“No, why would he?”

“Will any of the girls you dated in the last few years cause any trouble?”

“Hardly.”

“See,” I said with a firm smile. “Everything is good.”



Santino

I would have never thought I’d wish to be back in Paris. I’d missed Chicago, and I was glad to be back in my city, but being here meant I could no longer be with Anna. Now we had to sneak behind everyone’s back to catch a moment of privacy.

I’d always enjoyed the thrill of being caught. I’d gotten off on how dirty the sex felt when it was forbidden. But for some messed-up reason, I didn’t

want sex with Anna to feel dirty and forbidden. I wanted people to know that she was mine and that I fucked her.

Of course, what I wanted and what I did were two very different things, and so I stood off to the side at a party in the Clark's mansion and watched Anna. Luckily, she and Clifford weren't attached to the hip. Seeing them together always made me feel murderous. Anna was busy talking to Clifford's sisters while he was talking to another politician's daughter.

"Santino," a familiar voice said and Dolora appeared by my side. "I'm heading out into the gardens for a little stroll. Why don't you catch some fresh air as well?"

I didn't look her way. "I'm fine where I am. You need to find someone else to catch fresh air with. I'm no longer on the market."

"You have someone?"

"Yes."

The word left my lips without hesitation. Even though I knew I couldn't keep Anna in the long run, I had her now and I didn't want anyone else. For however long, I'd have her, I'd be faithful.

"Good for her," she said with a shrug then sauntered off.

I caught Anna's gaze from across the room. Of course, she'd watched me talking to Dolora. It gave me satisfaction to know that she was jealous.

She gave me a quick smile before she returned her focus to her conversation. I dragged my eyes away and noticed Clifford leaving the room. The girl he'd been talking to was gone too.

Twenty minutes later, the girl returned and a couple of minutes later Clifford followed. I headed his way when I noticed his fly was still open and a hint of makeup stained his white shirt. "How about you head to the restroom and clean up before anyone notices anything?" I growled. He glanced down at his shirt and gave me a tight smile before he left.

Anna appeared at my side with a too-bright smile. I hated those fake smiles she put on whenever she was around Clifford's family. Of course, she'd noticed how Clifford had left with that girl. I didn't like how he disrespected her openly, which didn't even make sense, considering Anna was getting it on with me as well.

Anna motioned at the French door. "I need some fresh air."

I nodded and followed her outside. When she turned to me, I knew she had other things in mind than clearing her head. She took a step closer and gave me a coy smile. "How about we get naughty in the pool house?"

“Is this to pay Clifford back or because you’re horny?”

“Does it matter?”

It did. The thought that Anna felt the kind of jealousy over Clifford that I felt for her made feel like shit. Damn it. When I didn’t say anything, she whispered, “I’m horny, okay? We haven’t had time for each other in almost a week.”

I gave her a smirk, though I was still mulling over her reasons for wanting to fuck now. “Then lead the way.”

Anna grinned before she strolled along a paved path farther from the patio. I followed her like a good bodyguard. She knew exactly where to go. Of course, I remembered the pool house too. Dolora had led me here as well.

Anna pushed down the door handle but the pool house was closed. I took out my knife and wedged it into the lock until the door popped open. Anna’s smile became downright naughty. She held out her hand and after a brief scan of our surroundings, I took it and let her lead me inside.

The place was still mostly how I remembered it. Anna didn’t hesitate and purposefully dragged me into the bedroom.

“Really? Cliffy’s bedroom?” I muttered. Anna shrugged. “He isn’t really living here anymore. I miss sharing a bed with you. This looks comfy.”

“Haven’t you tested it with Cliffy?”

I wasn’t sure why I said that when I knew Anna hadn’t been with him. I couldn’t put my jealousy aside.

“Don’t ruin the mood. We don’t know how long we have. Maybe Clifford or Dolora will need the place for their activities soon.”

I grabbed her by the hips. “I hate the thought of you using me to get back at Clifford, but I want you too much to let it stop me.”

Anna pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed me firmly, but I was still pissed. I pulled away with a harsh smile.

“Be a good girl and get on your knees.”

Anna lowered herself down onto her knees slowly, never taking her eyes off me. Did she even realize how crazy she drove me with that expression?

Anna unzipped my pants. I shoved my hand into her hair, pushing her toward my waiting cock. She parted her lip and took me into her mouth, her eyes locked on mine and that teasing smile still twisting her lips. I stared

down at her, feeling a strong sense of possessiveness I couldn't banish. Anna was mine, was meant to be mine. I gritted my teeth against a moan, my fingers tightening in Anna's hair. She trailed her tongue around my tip before she took me deep into her mouth.

I groaned, my fingers twitching. I needed more, more of Anna. I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to her feet.

I kissed her harshly, still angry, but refused to focus on it now. I reached under Anna's skirt and pushed her panties down, then pushed her down on her back before I climbed on top of her and thrust into her in one hard thrust.

Anna arched up with a moan then bit her lip, stifling the sound. "We need to be quiet, right?" She laughed.

I reached between us, finding her clit and pinched, wanting to draw out another moan.

Anna gave me an indignant look, pressing her lips tightly together. "Do you want us to get caught?"

I thrust harder into her, deeper, my fingers working faster on her. If someone found us, Dante would punish me severely. But it would be worth it.

Anna nicked the skin over my bicep in warning.

I clashed our mouths together, swallowing her next moan.

I wouldn't ruin Anna's rumor like that, not for my own selfish needs. If I wanted to stop the wedding, I'd have to figure out another way.

After sex, we righted our clothes.

Anna reapplied her lipstick. Lipstick that she'd rubbed all over my cock.

"Will you make sure Cliffy knows what happened?"

Anna threw me a confused look over her shoulder. Then her brows drew together. "Why would I?"

I didn't say anything, only closed my belt and made sure my gun holder was in place. I didn't want to return to this farce of a party and stand back while Anna schmoozed the Clarks, particularly Clifford.

Anna picked up on it of course and came toward me. She wrapped her arms around my middle. We hadn't hugged like that since Paris. I pressed a kiss against her lips, not caring if I smeared her lipstick again.

"Why are you angry?" she whispered between kisses. "You always knew I was promised to Clifford. Nothing has changed. You know we can

only be together in secret. As my bodyguard, you'll have to see me interact with Clifford. That won't change."

It would probably only get worse.

"I'm pissed because in the past it's always been me who could separate sex and emotions. I was the one who had to tell the women that it could only ever be fun and that I didn't return their feelings. It's a new experience being on the other side for once, and not a very pleasant one."

I'd just admitted that I couldn't do what needed to be done, stuff my feelings into the darkest corner of my heart and lock them.

Anna swallowed. "Santino, you're not the only one having trouble separating sex and emotions, okay? But we both know we have to fight whatever we think we're feeling." Anna looked away.

"I know that. But the longer we do this, the harder it gets. Maybe we should have followed the plan and stopped fucking once we returned to Chicago."

It was hardly more than that at this point. We couldn't go on dates anymore. We had to meet in dark corners with flimsy excuses. What had felt like something more, like... fuck... like dating in Paris now felt like a shady affair.

Anna closed her eyes. "I don't want to stop what we have, I already miss what we had and can't have in Chicago."

I leaned down and buried my nose in her hair. "Six more months, then you'll be Clifford's."

"But I'm not his yet, not *now*. I'm yours."

"Mine," I echoed. "But only for a little while."

"Isn't it better than never having what we had and still have?"

I wasn't sure.

Chapter *Twenty-Six*



Santino

Carving out time for each other was near impossible now that Anna's social responsibilities grew leading up to the wedding. In the last four weeks since our arrival in Chicago, we'd managed to fuck in the car four times and once at the party. That was it.

We rarely had time to talk. I'd have never thought I'd miss talking to a woman, but I actually missed our conversation when we lay awake in Paris the most.

After another quickie in the car on the way to a floral shop for the wedding, Anna and I allowed ourselves a few minutes of each other's company on the back seat.

"Do you have plans for the future?" Anna asked suddenly. I peered down her head where it rested against my chest.

"What kind of plans?" I'd given up making plans since things with Anna started, but even before then I'd preferred to live in the moment, which was wise considering my life choices.

Anna tilted her head to look at me. "Don't you ever want to marry and have kids? You're over thirty now."

Was she being serious? I glared. “Maybe once you’re married. As long as I’m fucking you, it seems unwise to find a wife for myself. My life’s on hold for you.”

Anna pushed up into a sitting position, her face twisting. “As if a wife would stop you from fucking me.”

“If I have a wife, I’ll be faithful.”

Anna seemed surprised. “You’ve turned several women into cheaters.”

“I didn’t turn them into anything. They were looking for fun outside of their marriage and I offered them fun.”

Anna nodded but she still looked confused. “So you’re holding off with marriage because of me?”

Was she playing dumb on purpose? My entire life had been on hold these last three years. Everything had revolved around her, her future. I rolled on top of her again. “Every fucking thing I’ve done these last few years has been because of you Anna. You are the goddamn sun I’m circling.”

Anna’s eyes softened. “You can’t put your life on hold for me. I’ll marry Clifford. I can’t be yours. Maybe you should start looking for someone to marry.”

Was that really something she wanted? Me to find someone else? I settled between her legs and slowly eased into her. Her lips parted as she exhaled.

“You’re mine for the time being. That’s enough.”

It wasn’t, and that sad fact became more apparent every passing day. I wanted Anna.



It was my evening off and I decided to meet with Arturo, canceling a dinner with Dad and Frederica last minute. I knew they’d only try to question me on my affair with Anna. I didn’t want to hear their advice. I’d given up being reasonable when Anna was concerned.

Arturo was the man for being unreasonable and when I wanted to avoid getting asked questions about my emotions.

I rode my Camaro to Arturo's place. I'd missed it while being in Paris and even now I rarely got the chance to drive it. When I pulled up in front of Arturo's place, he was already outside in the abandoned alley.

I got out and joined him. "Hey, how are you?" I clapped his shoulders, which only got me a brief aghast look and no answer.

Arturo motioned at a stack of packages waiting beside the door. I picked up one, which was surprisingly heavy. I followed Arturo, who carried a smaller box, into the back of his loft—it was really just a warehouse that he'd picked as his housing, probably because out here in the industrial district nobody listened to odd occurrences. I put the package down on the kitchen counter, all stainless steel. I wasn't sure if Arturo had ever used it for cooking. It reminded me of a morgue. "What did you order? Bricks?"

Arturo opened his package, revealing spiked dog collars and something that looked like a machine to put tags into cow ears. Mine held kettlebells. No wonder it was so heavy. "I don't suppose you order this because you're getting a dog, start working on a farm or install a home gym?"

Arturo looked up from the collar. "I have decided to switch it up a bit."

"So you raided a pet shop?"

"Humans torture animals in so many ways. I think it's fitting that I should use some of those devices to torture certain humans."

An image of Cliffy with such a collar entered my mind. "Do you have beer?"

Arturo shrugged. "Check the fridge."

I walked past him and opened the fridge. It was stocked with beer, hot dogs, mustard, and gherkins. I was always glad when it was only food and drinks I found in Arturo's fridge. I grabbed a beer, opened it and took a deep swig.

"I've been entertaining thoughts of killing Cliffy."

Arturo gave me a blank stare.

I smirked. That was Arturo. He blacked out things of no importance as soon as they'd passed his ears.

"Clifford Clark."

That finally got his attention. He grabbed a beer for himself, then leaned against the counter across from me. "What's the plan?"

I chuckled. Of course, Arturo was ready to jump into action. "I haven't crossed the line to making detailed plans yet."

“If you’ve come to me to talk about this, you obviously aren’t looking to be discouraged.”

He had a point. If I wanted someone to talk sense into me, Arturo was the wrong choice. He was too eager for blood.

“We could make it look like an accident.”

“Nobody will believe that. His family will blame the Outfit and Dante will go looking for possible suspects, and I have a feeling ultimately it’ll be linked to me.”

Not to mention that Anna would probably get suspicious. I doubted she’d be very happy with me if I killed Cliffy. She chose him. She wanted to go through with this wedding. Nobody really forced her. If she’d tell her parents she couldn’t go through with it, they wouldn’t force her. And if someone ever tried to force her, then I’d be the first to put a bullet in Clifford’s head to stop the wedding.

If Anna thought I wasn’t worth the risk, then I sure as fuck wouldn’t force her to pick me.



Santino watched me interact with Clifford like a lion on the prowl. His entire body was bursting with tension and in his eyes the desire to pulverize Clifford was unmistakable.

Clifford and I held hands and smiled into the cameras, playing the happy couple that we weren’t and would probably never be.

“A kiss for the camera?” a journalist called, and before I could react Clifford leaned down and kissed me. It was only a peck on the lips, definitely nothing indecent but longer than I would have liked, and it did

things to Santino's expression that would have alerted everyone of our relationship if anyone had paid attention.

I cleared my throat and smiled back at the camera. Guilt settled in my stomach. I felt as if I'd cheated on Santino, but he and I weren't... we couldn't be. Even if what we had now felt like a real thing, like more than just a fling, it didn't stand a chance against what lay ahead of us. I'd marry Clifford, so if anything I should feel guilty toward him because what Santino and I did was definitely more than an innocent peck on the lips.

Clifford and I held hands the entire time. With only five months until our wedding, we needed to start acting as if we were in love. Neither of our families could use nasty rumors in the press.

Eventually, I pretended I needed to go to the bathroom, but in truth I went looking for Santino whom I found in the lobby, sitting on the stairs and staring down at his phone.

"Shouldn't you be watching me?" I asked with a teasing smile as I headed toward him.

"Clifford's bodyguards are there, not to mention your father. I prefer to stay here, away from the madness."

I stopped beside him, leaning against the handrail.

"Are you mad?"

"Why would I be? Hmm?" he murmured in a deadly voice. "Because you and Cliffy are all lovey-dovey?"

"He took me by surprise. I wouldn't have kissed him."

"Why not? You're engaged and the future dream couple of Chicago."

"You knew all of this when we started sleeping together," I said quietly. It was an argument we'd had so often in recent weeks. Things were becoming more strained every day. We fought constantly, and only ever didn't argue when we had sex.

"Sleeping together. Is that all we're doing? Because if you think it is, we might as well call it fucking."

I blinked and my throat became tighter. I wasn't sure what was happening between us. Though, that wasn't true. Maybe it was bound to happen, maybe it needed to happen so our eventual goodbye wouldn't hurt quite as much. "You know there's more." I sank down beside him on the step but left a bit of a distance between us in case someone caught us.

Santino grabbed my neck, stunning me. "I know. I know what I want. I know what I feel. And you?"

I swallowed. “I have to marry Clifford. It’s for the Outfit, you know that. Don’t make me doubt my choice.”

He nodded and released me. “Maybe this is about the Outfit, or maybe it’s about something else. If you’re not doubting your choice yet, it’s probably better if you don’t bother now.”

“What do you mean?”

The door to the party swung open and we scooted apart, but not before the person saw us. Luckily it was only Sofia. Her eyes widened with surprise. “I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

I pushed to my feet. “You’re not. Our conversation is over.” I strolled over to Sofia. I could see in her expression that she worried about me. I gave her a quick smile. “Are you heading to the restroom?”

“Uhhh,” she said, glancing at Santino, obviously still unsure what she saw. Santino and I hadn’t been overly intimate but I guess whatever had passed between us had given us away to Sofia. “Yeah. What about you?”

“I need to go to the restroom too.” We linked arms and headed for the guest bathroom where we both squeezed into the room. Sofia waited for me to close the door before she said, “Okay, how long has this been going on?”

I smiled apologetically, though I felt a bit like crying after my argument with Santino. “Since Paris.”

Sofia blew out her breath. “From the beginning.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh Anna. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It would have been too dangerous over the phone.”

“What about the times we met at parties?”

I shrugged, feeling awful. “I just... I didn’t want to tell you about something that didn’t really mean anything.”

Sofia gave me a look that made it clear she thought I was completely insane.

Steps sounded right in front of the door and we fell silent. This was a good reminder that this was the Clark’s house. We weren’t safe here, especially not with a topic as sensitive as this.

“Can we meet for brunch tomorrow?” I asked.

“Of course. Danilo will be busy with meeting anyway. But no more lies, all right?”

I hugged her. “I promise.”



Sofia came over the next morning. Danilo had a meeting with Dad in his office so we could drive to the restaurant together. I was glad that she would be in town for a few more days. I needed her support. I'd considered asking Luisa to join us but it would have been too overwhelming to brave both their questions at the same time. I'd meet with her another time to talk about Santino. She was busy with her wedding preparations anyway, so I didn't want to burden her with my Santino problems.

Sofia and I went to brunch in my favorite place where they served the best Belgian waffles. Of course, Santino drove us there so the ride to the restaurant passed in silence, except for the occasional professional interaction between Santino and Sofia's bodyguard who sat shotgun.

Santino was clever enough to give us some room and settled far from our table next to the entrance of the bistro.

I nipped at my black coffee and picked at my fruit salad. Next week I'd go wedding dress shopping, so I didn't want to risk gaining weight. Not to mention that I rarely felt very hungry anymore. The stress with Santino and the upcoming wedding were taking their toll.

Sofia watched me over her waffles then slanted a quick look at Santino who sat at a table with her bodyguard across the room to give us privacy.

"Do you really think you can go through with the wedding?"

Every day I was a little less sure I could, but we were only five months away from the wedding. The location was booked, the invitations had been sent out, catering was booked, even the flowers, cake, and decorations. The only thing missing was my wedding dress, which I'd avoided shopping for so far.

Canceling the wedding now would cause a major backlash. The Clarks would be majorly offended and possibly take it out on the Outfit. Even if their options for revenge were limited, I didn't want to cause my family or the Outfit any problems. Not to mention that Santino and I would have to admit to our relationship. Dad and Mom would be very displeased to say the very least.

Sofia sighed. "That's too long a pause, Anna."

"I have to. I can't back out now. Clifford isn't bad. He's good-looking, intelligent, driven. Those are all good qualities I'll appreciate in a marriage."

"Maybe. Or maybe you'll resent him because he cost you the love of your life."

I rolled my eyes. "That's a bit melodramatic. I never said I was in love with Santino. We slept together these last three years but we aren't in a real relationship." Then I shrugged. "Maybe Clifford will divorce me after a few years, then I'm free."

"I doubt he'll risk his career by having a divorce early on, and entering a marriage and hoping for a quick divorce is not a good option. And Santino will probably be married by then as well."

The thought of Santino marrying someone cut me. Of course, I wanted him to be happy but losing him to another woman was incredibly painful. Still, I couldn't keep holding him back. That wouldn't be fair toward him.

Sofia sighed. "Think about it. Don't rush into things because of a wrong understanding of duty. Your parents would understand."

I raised an eyebrow. "You really think my parents would be understanding when I told them Santino and I have been getting it on for years behind their backs?"

Sofia let out a choked laugh. "They'll probably be a bit angry, especially toward Santino."

"I'm not sure I want to risk it all. Who says Santino and I would even be happy if we could be together? There's no guarantee. It would be selfish of me to risk a huge scandal for the small chance that Santino and I are meant to be."

Sofia shrugged, still not convinced. "Maybe then your feelings for him really aren't strong enough and it's for the best if you give him the chance to move on, so you too can move on with Clifford."

Chapter *Twenty-Seven*



Santino stayed in the car in front of the store when I went to my first appointment in the bridal store with Mom, Sofia, and Luisa. Only Sofia's bodyguard joined us inside because Danilo was always particularly vigilant.

"I thought you'd design your own dress," Sofia said when I browsed through the dresses on display.

I'd always thought so too, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't feel inspired in the slightest.

Mom joined me and motioned at a beautiful classic dress with lace. "I think you'd look beautiful in this."

It was actually one of my favorites from the dresses I'd seen so far.

"I'll try it on."

Thirty minutes later we emerged from the bridal store, and I'd chosen the dress Mom had suggested. It was beautiful, elegant, and made me feel beautiful.

The vendor had asked me "If I felt the dress."

I wasn't sure what she meant. It was pretty and would make people admire me. But was I overwhelmed by feelings when I put it on?

No. Not that I'd expected it. This wedding wasn't about emotions, and I'd long given up hope that it could be.

Santino and I never talked about the wedding gown or the wedding. Since our last argument, we'd ignored the matter altogether, but even our sexual encounters had become few and far between. This felt like a drawn-out break-up that was hurting us both.



I went to my last appointment in the store alone. This was my second to last fitting, and I just didn't feel like sharing it with Mom or anyone else. I hated when everyone looked at my face and expected to see something that wouldn't be there.

Santino waited in the front of the store. The fitting took place in a separate changing room in the back.

When the vendor had helped me put the dress on, I asked her to leave me for a bit. I couldn't stand her constant chattering. I knew she meant well, and would probably be just what an excited, happy bride needed but I wanted quiet.

I stared at myself in the mirror in the changing room. The seamstress had done a marvelous job. The dress fit me perfectly. I smoothed my fingers over the corset part. I tried to imagine myself going down the aisle toward Clifford that day, but my mind always changed the man waiting at the front to Santino. I hated my brain for playing with me like that.

I could hear heavy steps.

The door swung open and Santino stepped into the changing room. He and I both froze. His eyes took me in from head to toe.

"You're not supposed to see me," I snapped as he closed the door behind his back, closing us in.

He raised one sardonic eyebrow. "I'm not the bridegroom."

"Right." I shrugged. My throat became tight. A feeling I wanted to get rid of as soon as possible. "Still. I want this to be a surprise for everyone on my wedding day."

His eyes consumed me in a way that made me feel impossibly hot. “You look beautiful but you should have designed your dress. You’re far too talented to wear someone else’s design.”

Surprise washed over me. This was the nicest thing Santino had said to me in weeks and it hit me right in the feels. I was still self-conscious about my fashion designs, especially something as important as a wedding dress.

“It would have taken too much time. And I don’t think Clifford would have noticed the difference.”

He leaned against the door and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I would. Your designs always have a special touch. Sophisticated sexiness.”

I let out a laugh. “Sophisticated sexiness? I never thought the day would come that my brooding, sarcastic bodyguard talks like that.”

“I never thought the day would come that you’d pick out the dress for your wedding to Cliffy.”

Silence spread between us like a suffocating layer of ash after a volcano eruption. “Why not?” My voice was strangely tight.

His gaze seemed to undress me. My own eyes traveled over his muscled chest. My body erupted with goose bumps and a familiar heat gathered between my legs. I focused on my body’s reaction to him, desperately trying to ignore my heart. I desired Santino. Desire was easy to handle. Easy to satisfy. So much easier than a heart’s longing.

I didn’t want to want Santino. He’d been meant as a way to have fun before marriage. An uncomplicated and safe way to enjoy myself.

And damn had I enjoyed myself.

Santino gave me a slow, confident smile that suggested he knew exactly what I was thinking. It was the smile that always made me weak in the knees and annoyed me endlessly at the same time. Only Santino could do that.

“Do you want a few last orgasms before you’ll have to experience mediocre coitus with Cliffy?”

His words stung, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of showing it. Maybe he was pissed that I was marrying Clifford. But I’d never lied to him. He’d known the rules of our bond from the start. Or maybe it was his way of coping with this impossible situation that was taking a toll on both of us.

“You would really fuck another man’s bride in her wedding dress?”

Santino pushed away from the door and stalked toward me. My insides tightened with desire at the fire in his eyes. “I’ve done far worse, Cheri.”

Santino’s French was still horrid and I knew he kept it that way to annoy me. “I don’t doubt it.”

He stopped right in front of me and stared down at me. He reached beneath my short dress hem until he found my panties. I’d asked the seamstress to shorten the dress in the front a bit to make it a bit more individual, now it gave Santino better access.

I clamped up. “Santino, I need to wear these panties on my wedding day.”

His smile became sinfully challenging. “And you don’t want poor Cliffy to pull down panties that your lust for me has tainted before? Give them a good wash. He won’t know.”

I glared.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t insult Cliffy like that.”

“If it were up to you, you’d put a bullet in his head.”

“If it were up to me,” he murmured as he got down on one knee. He grabbed my panties and slowly pulled them down, his eyes daring me to say stop.

Instead, I helped him by lifting my feet. He neatly folded the flimsy piece of clothing and put it down on the ground beside him. Then he reached under my dress again, gripping my ass and his head dove under the skirt. His tongue dove between my folds.

I sank my teeth into my lower lip, my hands coming to rest on his head through the layers of my skirt. The vendor wouldn’t come back unless I asked her but this was still risky, pure madness, and felt wrong on a level I couldn’t put into words.

I watched myself in the mirror, the hazy lust in my eyes, my heaving chest and rosy cheeks. Then my gaze dropped to Santino’s half-hidden form—hidden beneath my wedding dress. A bitter smile twisted my mouth. Many years ago, I’d condemned Santino and the cheating wives for what they did, and today I let Santino eat me out in my wedding dress, only one month before my wedding. Was I really that different?

Maybe he hadn’t cared if I had other men before our wedding but I doubted he’d be happy to find out I’d fucked another man in the panties and dress I’d chosen for our wedding. I shoved the thought aside. I didn’t want to think about it now.

Santino graced my clit with his teeth, making me gasp. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about Cliffy while I lick your pussy.”

Not in the way he suggested. I’d probably imagine Santino for the rest of my life when Clifford and I were intimate.

“Don’t stop,” I said softly, almost pleadingly.

Santino breathed out before he slipped his tongue along my slit once more. We didn’t talk anymore and Santino’s mouth and tongue were almost careful and reverent in their exploration. This felt like a goodbye. Would every sex feel like goodbye now? Every touch soaked in wistfulness?

Santino’s finger brushed my lower lips apart while his lips cupped my clit gently. Only the tip of his finger teased my opening, slowly circling it. I clung to his head desperately, but never took my eyes off my reflection.

“Santino,” I whispered. He answered my breathy plea with a deep thrust of his finger and soon established a slow, steady rhythm that matched his lips around my clit.

“Please,” I whispered. I’d never begged for an orgasm, and this felt like I was asking for much more.

Santino slipped a second finger into me at the same time as he sucked my clit hard.

I came with a small shudder, my hips rocking slightly.

“This wasn’t the firework I’d planned,” Santino said as he pulled out from under my dress. His hair was disheveled, his lips shiny and face red from lack of oxygen.

Santino stood then leaned down to press a kiss to my lips, allowing me to taste myself. I began to sink down to give back but Santino’s hands on my arms stopped me.

My brows pulled together.

“I’ll make a mess of your dress, and I think we should stop now. Fuck, you’re almost married and in this dress, you might as well already be.”

“I’m not married yet, Santino. Clifford and I always had an agreement that everything that happened before we married wasn’t cheating. He had plenty of girls, so he definitely can’t be angry at me for being with you.”

Santino shook his head, his dark eyes fixing me. “I could never share you if you’d been promised to me. I’d burn up with jealousy. I’d have to kill every man who touched you.”

“But in four weeks, you’ll share me with Clifford.” I wasn’t sure why I said it. I’d never meant to become a cheater, and I didn’t think I had it in

me. Maybe if Clifford agreed on an open relationship where we both had other partners, but cheating?

Santino shook his head again. “No, I won’t.”

“No?”

“This will stop once you’re married, Anna. Maybe even before then if I can stop wanting you more than air. I can’t fucking do this anymore. You want Clifford. That’s fine. You try to do what’s best for your family, and I’ll do what’s best for me. Clifford has his own bodyguards and your father agreed to pick someone else for your additional protection.”

“You won’t be my bodyguard anymore?” Cold settled in my bones and a panic I couldn’t explain. Somehow I’d hoped he’d keep guarding me because he’d given up his job as Enforcer for me. I’d been naive and maybe tried to protect my heart from the harsh reality of our future.

“No.”

The word echoed between us. Santino stared into my eyes, and I could feel his determination but also a deep ache I only knew too well.

I nodded and touched his shoulders. We looked at each other. “You’re right. Maybe we should stop now.”

“We should.” Santino took a step back and my chest constricted so tightly, I was worried I’d faint.

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the lump in my throat. “I need to get ready now.”

Santino nodded, his expression becoming the one I remembered from the past. A little condescending and hard. “Don’t forget to give your panties a good wash before the wedding.”

I reacted in turn. “I’m sure Clifford won’t mind if I don’t wear any underwear.”

Santino turned and left.

The door fell shut behind him. I grabbed the mirror frame, needing to steady myself. I felt like a hole had opened up in front of me and wanted to suck me in. I had half a mind to let it.



An invisible barrier had built between Santino and me since our conversation in the bridal store a week ago. We hadn't slept together again. We'd kept the distance we'd agreed on but so far I didn't long any less for him. A week was too little time to forget what we'd had. I focused on my annoyance toward him.

Santino walked a couple of steps behind me. I couldn't even look at him. I felt guilty because he had to accompany me to a lunch with Clifford, but at the same time angry because he wanted me to feel guilty. He blamed me for something that he'd known from the very start. I'd never lied to him. We both knew our relationship had an expiration date. Three weeks. Or maybe it had already expired. It definitely felt that way.

I stepped into the restaurant. Clifford and two bodyguards were already there.

"Of course, Cliffy needs two guards to protect his pampered ass," Santino muttered under his breath.

His words put fuel to the fire of my anger at him, at myself, at the situation, even at Clifford. I turned to him, hissing, "Stop insulting Clifford. Grow up and get over your hurt pride. I'm going to marry him, accept it and move on."

Santino's expression became stone, but his eyes sent another stab of guilt through me before they too became hard and cold.

He nodded once. "I'll be over in the corner doing my job."

With a stiff smile, I walked over to Clifford and greeted him with a quick peck on the cheek before he could kiss me on the lips, then sat down across from him.

His blue eyes flitted between me and Santino. "Everything all right?"

"Of course. My bodyguard is only counting the days until he'll be freed of me. He hates the job."

Clifford narrowed his eyes in thought. "You're a very good liar, but he carries his emotions on the sleeve. Will he cause problems?"

My smile became thinner. "You can stop asking me that. I told you he won't. Let's talk about the reason for this meeting."

"There have arisen some safety concerns regarding the wedding, so we might have to switch the location to prevent an incident."

My mouth fell open. "You want to switch locations three weeks before our wedding?"

“It’s necessary. My father is very concerned for his, and possibly my safety.”

“Is that the reason for the two guards?”

He nodded.

I leaned forward. “Is this because of your father’s pro-choice stance?”

“It is. He got several threats on his life since then and because I stand by him on this, I got them too.”

“You’re marrying into the mob. This wedding will be safe, don’t worry. My father has arranged the highest security measures possible.”

“Still, the location has been public knowledge for a long time. A last-minute change will make possible attack plans even more difficult.”

“If someone wants to kill your father and you, they won’t pick a mob wedding for that. Even a fanatic will pick a more successful option.”

“It would be a very public statement.”

“Any time someone attacks you or him will be a public statement.”

I caught Santino moving across the room. He was running like a madman, his gun drawn.

Our eyes met and in his, I caught pure determination but also blank fear. A shot tore through the room, and blood splattered my face. Santino collided with me, tearing me to the ground, toppling over my chair. I landed on the floor, my ears and head ringing from the impact. Santino shielded me with his body, completely covering me and trying to drag me away.

More shots rang out. Santino hissed.

I was disoriented, confused. Warmth spread on my stomach and thigh. For a second I wondered if I’d peed my pants from fear, but I wasn’t that scared. I was... I didn’t even know.

Santino kept dragging me away and firing. My ears rang painfully. I glanced down and saw my white blouse completely red.

Had I been shot? Then I saw Santino’s shirt, which was soaked with blood.

Another shot rang out and he jerked again and groaned. Blood now dripped from a shot in his shoulder as well. With a grunt, he shoved up and aimed at something.

A man with several shot wounds hiding behind the bar. He fired and the man’s head jerked back before he fell to the floor dead.

Santino breathed heavily. Slowly he turned to me, his face ashen and eyes slightly unfocused. “Are you hurt?” he rasped.

I shook my head, trying to sit up but Santino shoved me back down. Then had to support his weight on one arm, obviously too weak to straighten. “Stay down in case there are more.”

“You need an ambulance! You’re shot!”

He smiled wryly. “I told you I’d die protecting you.”

“Don’t say that!” I whispered harshly. More blood was dripping down on me. He didn’t look good.

“Give a dying man a last kiss so I can pretend you are mine?”

“Santino,” I croaked, but he silenced me with his lips on mine. I cupped his cheeks, kissing him back but then he slowly slipped from my grip and fell to his side.

“Santino?” I shouted, kneeling beside him. I shook him but he didn’t move.

“We called an ambulance,” one of the guards said. The other was still shielding Clifford and pressing down on a wound in his shoulder.

I only half-listened. I picked up my phone and dialed Dad’s mobile, my fingers leaving bloody marks on my screen.

The second Dad picked up, I began talking, “Dad, Santino was shot. Several times. It doesn’t look good.”

“Where are you? Are you safe?” Dad asked. In the background, I could hear him move. “Valentina, alert every guard!”

“Santino was shot, Dad.”

“Calm down, Anna. Are you safe?” Mom talked in the background, and an engine sounded.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I’m at the Lincoln Café.”

“Stay put, I’ll send the men closest to you over.”

“Dad, I think Santino is dying,” I whispered softly as I stroked Santino’s unruly dark hair. His face was so very still, no anger, no frustration, no joy or love.

“We’ll be there soon. Stay on the phone with me, all right?”

Dad’s voice was calm and controlled.

“Okay,” I said quietly, clutching the phone harder to my ear.

“Help him, he looks worse than I do,” Clifford muttered.

One of his bodyguards kneeled beside Santino and felt for his pulse, then bunched up a cloth napkin and pressed it down on a wound in Santino’s back.

I just sat there and stroked Santino's face as he lay on his side almost peacefully.

Time seemed to still. Sirens disrupted the quiet. And then strong hands gripped me. It was one of our men who tried to pull me up. "I'm staying!" I growled like a feral cat.

He nodded and positioned himself next to me. Paramedics fell to their knees beside Santino, shoving me aside. I crawled back a bit but didn't leave as if my presence could hold him here.

"Anna," Dad said. I looked up as he bent over me, grabbing my arms and pulling me up. He scanned me and kissed my cheek. Then Mom took me in her arms. "Let's get you home."

"No. I need to stay with him."

Dad moved to Santino and that's when I saw Enzo kneeling beside Santino's head as the paramedics tried to resuscitate him. Mom's arms around me tightened. Enzo stroked Santino's hair like I had done. My heart broke. The paramedics put Santino on a stretcher and Enzo didn't leave his side as they carried him out.

I followed at a slower pace, Mom's arm still around me. Several Outfit soldiers were swarming the area by now. Dad was talking to Clifford and his bodyguards while two other paramedics took care of Clifford's shoulder.

"Can we follow them to the hospital?" I asked Mom as the ambulance raced away.

Mom's expression was kind. "Sweetheart, we should get you home first and make sure you're all right. After you've cleaned up, we'll visit Santino, okay?"

Dad appeared at our side. He waved a black limousine forward and it drove toward us. "Drive home. No stops. Straight home. I'll be home as soon as I've talked to everyone involved."

"If you visit Santino, I want to come with you, please."

Dad nodded and kissed my cheek before he ushered Mom and me into the limousine.

The drive passed in a blur and when we stepped into our mansion, Leonas immediately headed our way. He had two guns in his holster. "Bea's in the library with Riccardo and Rocco. The area was quiet."

Leonas pulled me into a hug and scanned me from head to toe. "I wanted to come too but Dad wanted me to guard Bea with RJ and Riccardo." I nodded, sinking into him. "What about Santino?"

His eyes burned into mine. My throat clogged up. What I wanted to say couldn't be said in front of Mom.

Leonas wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "I'll take her to her room, Mom. Can you check on Bea, she's freaking out."

Mom hesitated but I leaned into Leonas, taking the choice from her. He half dragged me upstairs because my legs felt too heavy to lift. We stepped into my room and Leonas closed the door. I caught sight of myself in my vanity mirror. My face was covered with blood splatters. I wasn't sure if they were Clifford's from his shoulder wound or Santino's. But the blood soaking my white blouse...that was all Santino's.

"Toilet!" I croaked. Leonas dragged me into the bathroom and held my hair as I threw up into the toilet.

When I stopped retching, he flushed the toilet.

"That's the first time I'm doing this for you. Usually it's Rocco puking his guts out after too much alcohol and pot."

I smiled weakly as I took the wet washcloth from him and washed my face. I didn't bother getting up. Leonas sank down across from me with his back against the bathtub. "Anna, what happened?"

I told him, my voice breaking as I came to the part with Santino lying lifelessly on the gurney. Leonas reached for me and I pressed up to him, letting him hug me.

"He's a strong and stubborn motherfucker. He won't die."

I shuddered. "He risked his life for me."

"That's his job, Anna. Don't feel guilty. Not about that. Feel guilty about making the poor guy fall in love with you and marrying someone else."

I glowered. "That's a low blow."

Leonas smirked. "I prefer you angry to crying, sis. Channel that anger."

"You think I shouldn't marry Clifford?"

"I think the Outfit shouldn't get in bed with politics, and neither should you. But I know I'm the only one in this family who thinks like that. I won't tell you what to do, but you should make up your mind before you see Santino the next time so he can move on. Don't tag him along until the last day."

I swallowed hard. I should have let go of Santino long before. I knew part of him had always hoped I'd choose him and maybe I'd played on that, but I simply had been too weak to be without him.

Leonas was right. I couldn't keep doing this. Santino needed to live for himself. He couldn't keep protecting me and waiting on me. He needed to find someone who deserved him more than I did. I'd been selfish for too long. If he survived, I'd finally give him free even if it crushed my heart.

Chapter *Twenty-Eight*



I wiped over my eyes and nodded resolutely. I got ready and drove to the hospital with Mom and Leonas. I didn't dare consider Santino not making it. He was strong. Nothing could stop him.

Mom took my hand and squeezed. "He did what he was meant to do. I'll forever be grateful for that."

She almost made it sound as if she wouldn't be able to tell him that herself. The closer we got to the hospital, the stronger my fear became. I swallowed, tears springing into my eyes.

Leonas sent me a worried look. "He's going to be fine."

When we arrived in the hospital, we were ushered toward a waiting area where people sat while their loved ones were in surgery. Enzo sat in one of the uncomfortable, baby blue plastic chairs, his arms propped up on his thighs and his head hanging low. Beside him sat a girl I assumed was Santino's younger sister Frederica. She had her arms wrapped around herself and was staring at the door that led toward the operating rooms. I hovered uncertainly in the entry. Mom headed straight for Enzo and sat down beside him, putting her hand on his shoulder. He peered up through bleary eyes. I took a resolute breath and walked toward them, then sank

down in the vacant chair beside Frederica. She was dressed in the outfit all Novices had to wear, a white veil and black frock. She must have been in the final stages before taking her final vow. I'd never met her, but from the stories Santino had shared on occasion she seemed familiar.

She only briefly glanced my way but her eyes were vacant, staring through me. I acted on impulse and took her hand, squeezing it. It felt strange giving a nun comfort, but I reminded myself that she was human like me. A piece of a cross peeked out from her other hand.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

She finally looked at me. "For what?"

"Santino is in there because of me, because he wanted to protect me."

"Santino lives for his job, for you." She said the last part almost inaudibly and my heart clenched tightly. What was I doing?

The door swung open and a doctor stepped out. Enzo got up at once and headed for the man. The rest of us followed a few steps behind.

"He's stable. We had to remove his spleen and he suffered internal bleeding. We're monitoring him closely."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Mom gave me a relieved smile.

Enzo and Frederica disappeared in the corridor leading to the waking room. I wanted to go with them, wanted to be there when Santino woke, but nobody knew of our bond, except for Frederica perhaps if I hadn't misjudged her cryptic words. Maybe her status as a nun had made Santino comfortable to share our bond with her, though he'd never spoken kindly of her goal to become a nun.

I wasn't sure what to do now. Mom talked with the doctor quietly, probably making sure that Santino got the very best treatment possible. The Outfit took care of theirs.

I wanted to see Santino so badly. I didn't want to leave without seeing him. I couldn't. When Mom was done talking to the doctor, she returned to my side. She squeezed my shoulder. "He'll be fine."

I nodded numbly. I couldn't explain the bad feeling I had.

"Come on, let's go home."

I hesitated. Mom's brows drew together. "There's nothing we can do for him or his family right now. They are at his side. He needs his loved ones, that's the most important thing right now."

I felt sick and guilty. Santino loved me. I knew it with every fiber of my being. And I loved him, but sometimes love wasn't enough. Sometimes we

had to make the hard choice for the good of someone else.

Mom and I turned.

“Anna!” Frederica called.

I turned to her.

“Maybe you should be there too. I know how important guarding you was for Santino. He’s known you so so long.”

Surprise crossed Mom’s face then switched to a touched expression. Mom nodded, squeezed my hand once more, and I hurried toward Frederica.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I’m doing this for Santino, Anna. I know you and him are on a very destructive path.”

I didn’t say anything, because what was there to say? She’d spoken the truth. And it didn’t matter why she allowed me to see Santino, only that she did.

When I entered Santino’s room, beeping machines and an antiseptic smell hit me. Enzo sat by Santino’s side.

I froze when I saw Santino. He looked terribly pale. Two transfusions flowed down into his arms, and machines monitored his bodily functions. His tall form dwarfed the bed but at the same time, he seemed to disappear into the mattress. It was a paradox I couldn’t explain myself.

I approached the bed slowly and touched his hand. I didn’t know what to say, what to do.

Enzo looked at me and shame washed over me. He knew too. Silent accusation lingered in his eyes, and I knew it wasn’t because Santino had taken a bullet for me.

“I’m sorry for what happened.”

“But not sorry for the thing you should be sorry for,” Enzo said coolly.

I stiffened. Enzo had always been kind to me, had made jokes and even played with me when I was younger. However, his loyalties lay with Santino as they should.

“Dad, Santino is as much at fault as Anna. He could have ended things. He’s an adult who has to take responsibility for his actions.”

Enzo shook his head, looking tiredly down at his son. “No. His heart wouldn’t let him.”

I stepped back from the bed, away from Santino. He was right.

“We shouldn’t discuss this now. We don’t know how much Santino can hear,” Frederica admonished.

“Your fiancé is in this hospital as well. Maybe you should see how he’s doing,” Enzo said.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I hope Santino wakes soon. I won’t bother you or him again.”

I turned on my heel and left. Enzo was right. Leonas was right. I had to be strong and let him go. Santino wouldn’t end things between us, not even once I was married despite what he’d said. He’d be my lover and slowly wither under the bitterness sharing me with Clifford would cause him. Our bond would become more and more toxic until all the beauty that it had held in the beginning would have died.

Mom waited for me in the waiting area and her expression became worried when she saw me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Santino will hopefully wake soon, and I should probably go to Clifford. I hear he’s here too.”

Mom definitely knew something was the matter but she didn’t prod. Mom had always honored my boundaries and knew I’d eventually come to her if I wanted to talk. It had always been like that—except for my bond with Santino. I wondered if I’d ever be able to talk to her about it, maybe in a few years when I was married and years would soften the blow of this shocking truth.

Together we asked around until a helpful nurse led us toward the room where Clifford was treated. Our two bodyguards stayed in front of the door with Mom and Clifford’s two bodyguards as I slipped into the room.

Clifford was alone in the room. He perched on the edge of the bed, staring down at his bare feet. His upper body was bare but a bandage covered his left chest, shoulder, and arm, which was fastened in front of his chest. He looked up through his unruly blond hair. I hadn’t even noticed that he wore it longer again. Then he smiled strangely. “Another person in my life whose second choice I am.”

I sank down beside him. Because we were alone, I didn’t bother kissing him, and I wondered when having to kiss him would eventually turn to wanting to kiss him. “What are you talking about?”

“Dad’s outside in front of the hospital with his first love, publicity, giving a press conference, talking how shocked and shaken he is about the attack, Mom is with her therapist because she couldn’t handle the trauma.”

He let out a derisive laugh. “And you were with your bodyguard, the man you’d rather marry.”

“That’s not true,” I said faintly.

“You don’t have to lie to me. I hate liars. I’m surrounded by them.”

“How are you feeling?” I motioned at his arm.

“The pain meds are decent. The two bullets only did moderate damage.”

He met my gaze and again smiled strangely. “Now I got shot. I wonder if this will give me the street credit to make you see me as a man.”

“I see you as a man,” I protested.

“We only have two and a half weeks until the wedding.”

He was right. Two and a half weeks. I’d always rounded up it up to three weeks in my head because it seemed less daunting.

“I know. Everything’s prepared. Dad is probably already upping protection. Are you worried you won’t fit into your suit because of the bandages?”

“Do you want to marry me?”

“We agreed on it. Our parents set everything up. Hundreds of guests were invited.”

“I know. But do you want to marry me?”

“What about you? Am I the woman of your dreams?”

Clifford shook his head without hesitation. “You are gorgeous and intelligent, but I have a feeling you have a manipulative streak and you are a very good liar which is never a good base for a marriage.”

Ouch. Of course, he was right. If I wanted something I could be manipulative, and that I was a good liar was out of the question. Both were helpful talents in a world as harsh as the mafia, especially if you were a Capo’s daughter, but they weren’t very helpful in a marriage.

He continued unfazed, “But I enter our marriage without baggage.”

“Don’t worry about my baggage.” I hopped off the bed. “Do you need anything?”

Clifford seemed to find my question strange. “You’re the first person who asked. My father only told me how we had to handle the situation. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I hesitated. “I’ll try to be a good wife, Clifford.”

“And I’ll try to be a good husband. Maybe next time I’ll take a bullet for you.”

I gave him a tight smile, my thoughts drifting back to the man who had taken not just one but three bullets for me.

I left. I didn't allow my thought to linger on Santino. We all would do what was best for the future of our families and the Outfit.



When Mom woke me the next morning, I knew something bad had happened.

“What is it?” I asked, stumbling out of bed, sleepy and disoriented. I’d dreamed I was back in Paris, lying in Santino’s arms.

Mom touched my shoulder, her eyes softening. “Santino suffered a sepsis and they had to put him in an artificial coma.”

My whole world shattered. “Will he be all right?”

“The doctors can’t say right now. They’re doing their best.”

I felt hollow, especially because my body could still feel his ghost touch from my dream. “I should go see him.”

Mom touched my arm. “Enzo called to inform us about Santino’s state and he asked to give him and his family space. He wanted me to tell you that you should focus on wedding preparations as that’s what Santino would have wanted.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “He’s probably right.”

Santino’s family wanted me to give Santino free, to move on. I had to honor their wish. They knew Santino, and if my visit would only cause him turmoil and endanger him waking up then I had to be selfless. Santino deserved happiness.



Santino

I was disoriented as shit when I opened my eyes. My vision was murky and my surroundings unfamiliar, but I recognized the sound of a hospital, the familiar beeping I'd heard when I'd visited fellow Made Men after they'd gotten injured on the job.

"Sonny," Dad said. I turned my head slowly. He sat beside me, looking as shit as I felt. His gray-brown beard had crossed the border to scruffy. Behind him Frederica rose from a chair, her nun frock wrinkled and she wasn't wearing her veil for once.

"Hey Dad, hey Freddy, you look as shitty as I feel." Hearing my own voice made me wince. It was rough and scratchy, as if I hadn't used it in a long time.

Frederica approached my bed and kissed my forehead as if I were a small kid. When she didn't correct me for not using her official new nun name, I knew things were bad.

I searched the rest of the room. "Where's Anna? Is she safe?"

Dad looked down at his hands. His fingernails could use a trimming too. "Not here. She's perfectly safe, don't worry about her."

I tried to sit up but my body punished the attempt with a wave of nausea and dizziness.

"I have to see her," I got out. "Now."

I'd tell her every fucking thing I felt for her, how when my life had flashed before my eyes, every moment had been one I'd spent with her, and when I'd dreamed about my future when I'd been drugged it had been at her side. I wouldn't let her marry Clifford. I didn't care if I had to kill him but she wouldn't marry him. She wouldn't marry anyone but me. I didn't

care how long I'd have to talk to her to get it into her stubborn head but eventually she'd agree.

Dad and Frederica exchanged a look, one I hated and rarely was on the receiving end of, *pity*.

"What's going on?" I asked. My throat was impossibly scratchy and dry. Even after a bad night of partying, I'd never felt like this. I reached for my throat and felt a bandage around my throat. I froze. "Was I in a coma?"

Dad nodded. "You suffered sepsis shortly after your surgery. You had several bullet wounds. They had to remove your spleen."

I forced my body into a sitting position even though I almost passed out. Dad stood and quickly adjusted the bed so I could lean against the cushions. "How long was I gone?"

Dad sighed. Judging from his beard and nails, it was definitely more than a week, maybe even close to two. Fuck.

"Dad?"

"Two weeks and two days."

I blinked. "What day is it?"

Dad wasn't stupid. He knew what I was asking. Frederica stepped up to the bed and put her hand on mine. "Today's Anna's wedding day."

I tried to swing my legs out of bed, almost ripping the IV out of my hand and fell forward when another wave of dizziness crashed down on me. Dad caught me, or I would have faceplanted.

"What are you doing? You only just woke. You need to stay in bed!"

"I have to stop the wedding. I don't care if I have to rush down the aisle and pull Anna away before she can say I do, but I have to stop her from marrying him."

"It's three in the afternoon, Santino," Frederica said gently.

It took my befuddled brain a moment to process her words. I'd memorized the wedding schedule because of the safety details. The ceremony had been scheduled for two p.m. Anna was already married.

I shook my head slowly and sank back against the pillows. "Fuck." I closed my eyes. "Fuck."

"You'll find someone else," Frederica said.

"I want her. You wouldn't understand. God can't really leave you so you don't really have to worry about getting your heart ripped out."

Frederica nodded but she still touched my hand.

“Sorry,” I gritted out. I tried to stand once more. “Maybe it’s not too late for an annulation.”

“Son, Anna chose Clifford. She’s not worth fighting for.”

I didn’t want to believe it. Maybe Dad was right. Anna had chosen Clifford over me, or rather she thought she needed to do the virtuous thing and do her duty to the Outfit and her family. But one thing was sure, she hadn’t chosen me.

“We’ll find you a good wife,” Dad assured me.

“I don’t need a wife.”

“Don’t covet someone else’s wife,” Frederica reminded me.

I had no trouble being the second man, the occasional lover. With other women, it hadn’t been a problem in the past. With Anna? The mere idea that Clifford would touch her made me raving mad.

I stood. Dad had to grip my arm to steady me. “I’ll kill him. That’ll solve the problem. Not a sin if I’m coveting a widow.”

“Not if you made her a widow in the first place,” Frederica said.

“Anything you do against this marriage now will lead to severe punishment, Sonny. Dante won’t take it kindly if you do something stupid.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

“She doesn’t deserve you. You deserve someone who chooses you!” Dad shouted.

Chapter *Twenty-Nine*

Valentina

“I’ll check on Anna one more time,” I told Dante. He squeezed my hand briefly, a rare public display of affection, which meant all the more because of its rarity. I could tell that he was slightly nervous. For a father to give his daughter away in marriage was a major step, and for someone as protective as Dante in particular.

“Talk her out of it,” Leonas muttered under his breath.

Dante gave him a warning look.

Leonas had made his opinion blatantly clear. He thought it was a mistake to marry Anna off to Clifford. He and Dante had butted heads on several occasions because of it. He’d been against the marriage from the start. At first, I’d thought on principle to oppose Dante’s decision. As most sons in our world, he tried to rebel against his dad’s authority, at least in private.

I shook my head at him. Now wasn’t the time or place for him to express himself. I knew boys, contradicted their fathers on principle, but he needed to know his boundaries. He was already eighteen and had to learn to accept his father’s decisions.

I turned and headed to the side door before I slipped into the hallway behind it that led to the room where Anna could gather herself one more time before the ceremony.

Sofia left the room. As one of Anna’s best friends, she’d helped Anna get ready. Worry flooded me when I saw her expression. She quickly smoothed it when she spotted me, but I’d seen the concern on hers.

“Sofia,” I said with a small smile. “What’s the matter? Is Anna feeling unwell?”

“No, no,” Sofia said quickly. “She’s perfectly fine. Just a tad worried about Santino still. She feels guilty.”

Of course, this was about Santino. I’d felt increasingly strange vibes between him and Anna since their return to Chicago.

Anna had been very close-lipped which had made me even more suspicious. Something had happened between them, but they both knew better than to show it. I hadn’t mentioned my concerns to Dante. He would have interrogated Santino and possibly drawn conclusions that would have cost the latter his life.

Over the years, I’d sometimes questioned my decision to have Santino guard Anna. He’d done his duty and done it well, but I knew I wasn’t privy to everything that had happened.

As a mother, it was a bitter pill to swallow that your daughter didn’t confide in you. It made me doubt myself and my relationship with Anna. I’d always thought we had a very close bond. Maybe I was being too sensitive, which was probably linked to my oldest daughter becoming a wife today.

“Santino did his duty,” I told Sofia.

Sofia nodded, but I could tell my words made no impact. I hoped Anna had shared whatever bothered her with her friend.

“I’ll go to Anna now, and your husband is probably already looking for you.”

Sofia gave me a quick smile before she lifted the hem of the green bridesmaid dress and hurried back to church.

I headed toward the door at the end of the hallway and knocked.

It took almost a minute for Anna to answer. “Come in!”

I slipped in, my heart beating faster upon seeing Anna in her wedding dress. She was impossibly beautiful. But then my eyes landed on her face, and it was off. She was smiling at me, but it was a smile I never wanted to see from my daughter, especially on her wedding day.

It was forced and careful.

“You look beautiful,” I said slowly as I closed the door so we could talk in private.

“Thank you. The dress is very beautiful.”

“It’s stunning.”

I'd been a bit disappointed when Anna had chosen not to design her own dress, nor the bridesmaid dresses. She had so much talent and it would have made her special day even more special.

I walked up to Anna's side and touched her shoulder. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

Anna gave me an amused look. "Please don't give me the talk, Mom. It's a little too late for that."

I gave a quick laugh. I wasn't caught up in some old-fashioned fantasy that Anna hadn't made certain experiences while she was abroad. I actually hoped she had, considering Clifford hadn't held back either. "I know. That's not what I meant. Maybe you have something else you want to talk about."

Anna's expression didn't give anything away. She reminded me of Dante in that moment. She could be hot-headed and stubborn like myself, but when it really mattered, she became Dante. Her expression softened at the look on my face. She shouldn't be the one feeling like she needed to console me. "I'll be fine, Mom. Today I'll do my duty like every member of our family has always done."

We'd raised both Anna and Leonas with a strong sense of duty and responsibility. Anna had accepted it outwardly, determined to do us proud. Leonas was more vocal with his protest, and often fought against any kind of rule. With Bea, we'd allowed more freedom, and I sometimes wondered if we should have done the same with Leonas and Anna.

But duty was such a big part of our existence...

"I want you to be happy, more than anything."

"When you agreed to marry Dad, you didn't think you could be happy."

I laughed. "Don't use my story as yours." I paused. "I wasn't emotionally drawn to anyone else. That's a big difference."

Anna gave me a curious look. "Neither am I. I don't have feelings for anyone. I'm sure Clifford and I will find a mutual understanding that'll make our life agreeable."

"Spoken like a true politician's wife."

"I practiced."

I nodded but felt even sadder after Anna's words. Anna was such a passionate woman. I wasn't sure the confines she was agreeing to in a marriage with Clifford would really suit her. "I met Sofia in the hallway. She told me you still feel guilty because of Santino."

"I can't help it but I can handle it, Mom," Anna said smoothly.

I sighed. "I'll always be on your side, Anna. No matter what. I know you feel like you can't share certain things with me, but nothing you could do or say would make me love you any less. From the second you made me a mom, my love for you has been unconditional and it'll always be."

"Mom. I can't cry now." She hugged me briefly. "I'll be fine. But thank you." She didn't release me immediately. "I love you too."

I swallowed, wanting to say so much more, but Anna was right. I shouldn't make her cry. A knock sounded.

"Come in," Anna said, sounding more composed than I felt.

Dante poked his head in, looking mildly concerned when he found Anna and me close together, and the hot feeling in my eyes probably didn't go unnoticed either.

"The ceremony is about to start. Is everything okay here?"

His eyes searched mine, trying to find a silent answer to his question. I stepped back from Anna. He finally registered Anna's dress and took another step in. For anyone who didn't know him, it would look as if he wasn't touched by the sight, but his eyes told me a different story. Anna was a gorgeous bride. She was how I'd imagined her. The only thing missing was that she was in love. It was something I'd always wished for her, but our world made it impossibly difficult.

"Everything is fine," Anna assured him with the smile she only had for him. It reminded me of her little girl smiles.

"You look very beautiful."

"You should go now, or this wedding won't ever start," she told me with a teasing smile.

"I'd like another quick word with your mother," Dante said.

I gave her a quick peck on the cheek before I followed Dante outside. He closed the door, then gave me a searching look. "What is the matter, Val? I don't like the look on your face."

"This is a mistake. I can feel it."

Dante raised one eyebrow. "Val, you suggested a bond with the Clarks, and I think it's a good move."

I nodded slowly, because back then I'd been convinced of it, and I still considered a connection to the political elite of Chicago an advantageous move, but I couldn't see Anna in a bond with Clifford.

"Did Anna say anything? Doesn't she want to go through with the bond?"

“No, no, she didn’t say anything.”

I wished she had. We wouldn’t have forced her if she’d ever opposed the marriage.

Dante took my hand. “You should return to your seat, Val.”

He probably thought I was being emotional because today marked the day I’d really have to let Anna go, accept that she was grown up and no longer our little girl, but it wasn’t that, at least *not only that*.

“Do you want me to accompany you back to your seat?”

I huffed. “I’m fine. I’m not sick, only worried and emotional.”

Dante kissed my lips, something he would have never done if we were in public. We protected something that was too precious to share it with people, who in great parts, weren’t friends. “Go ahead.”

I headed back toward the church where I sank down beside Bea and Leonas. The latter raised his eyebrows in silent question. He reminded me more of Dante every day, even if their personalities were different, albeit not as different as Leonas liked to pretend. Soon after, the music began playing.

Clifford waited at the front, a pleasant expression on his face. He, like men in our world, had been raised to keep a mask in public, albeit for different reasons, and his was less hostile. As a politician, he wanted to appear approachable, not foreboding like Made Man, but despite this, I could sense the high barriers he’d built around himself. Anna had mentioned it once, that she feared he’d never lower them for her either because in his family nobody did. We considered our family our safe place, but Clifford didn’t.

When Anna walked down the aisle toward Clifford with the public smile I detested my worry only increased. Clifford and Anna’s eyes briefly met when Dante handed her over to him. The public smiles never wavered.

I rubbed my wedding ring as I listened to the priest, feeling more and more uneasy. Anna’s face didn’t give anything away. She looked stunning and her smile was what everyone expected from a bride on her wedding day, but I knew her too well. True happiness didn’t reflect in her eyes.

I tried to catch Anna’s eyes, to once again let her know with my expression that I was fine with whatever she decided. But she didn’t look my way, maybe because she knew what she’d see and didn’t want to be weakened in her resolve.

Clifford didn't hesitate when the priest asked him. His yes carried conviction. I didn't know him well enough to gauge the truth behind his demeanor. When it was Anna's turn to pick up Clifford's ring, I wanted to speak up, to stop this bond, but this was Anna's decision, and I'd support her no matter what.

Chapter *Thirty*



When Mom and Dad left, I took a moment to gather myself. Mom's words circled in my brain. She wanted me to be happy. I'd never doubted it, even when Mom and Dad had decided to promise me to Clifford many years ago.

Would I be happy with Clifford?

Maybe.

Maybe I could have been happy with him if I hadn't been stupid enough to think I could keep emotions out of the mix when I slept with Santino.

Forgetting Santino? Right this second, I couldn't see that ever happening. Maybe the memories would eventually fade. Or they'd be magnified by the frustrations of my daily life with Clifford.

"Get a grip," I growled.

This was for the Outfit and my family.

Canceling the wedding now? A scandal of ridiculous proportions would ensue. And how could I possibly explain that I'd waited this long to change my mind. There was no going back now.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to leave the room. Dad was waiting for me at the end of the narrow hallway. He smiled when I walked

toward him. I could see pride in his expression, something I'd always aspired for no matter my age.

I arrived by his side and smiled in turn. He bent down to kiss my temple. "You are very gorgeous. You know I'm always only a call away if you need help."

I chuckled. "I don't think you'll have to worry about Clifford being the abusive type. He and I will figure out a mutual understanding to live in peace."

Dad's brows drew together. "Your mother would say that's something I could have said before I married her."

"And it still worked out."

"It did," Dad agreed quietly. His eyes searched mine before he asked. "Ready?"

I nodded quickly before my courage could leave me.

Dad held out his arm and we headed toward the wide double doors. The moment we stepped through them, I held my head high and smiled coolly. The nervousness I'd expected didn't come. No jittery or fluttering belly. I was calm, almost eerily so. I felt detached, as if it wasn't me about to marry.

Surprise flashed on many people's face at my choice of dress. It wasn't the classic piece many had expected. Mrs. Clark looked positively offended as if a skirt-line ending above the knee might as well end the world.

I got a strange kick out of it.

Clifford looked posh in his dark suit and smiled mildly. It was impossible to gauge his feelings regarding the dress. He'd not only grown into his tall frame and wasn't as lanky anymore, he'd also learned to mask his emotions. He wasn't the quirky boy anymore, but he wasn't Santino. My eyes searched the church quickly as if Santino might have miraculously woken from his coma and come here. And for what, really? He'd hate every moment of the ceremony and I'd wish every second of it that he'd stop the damn thing.

I shoved those thoughts aside and turned my focus on Clifford when I arrived at the front and Dad handed me over to him. Clifford lightly closed his hand around mine. It felt softer than Santino, not roughened by years of weight training and gun handling. And his touch was unfamiliar. I couldn't help but wonder how it would be tonight but the thought of actually being intimate with me let me panic briefly and so I shoved it aside as well.

"You look beautiful," Clifford said appreciatively.

“Thank you. You look good in your suit.”

We turned toward the priest, and I tried to shake off the uncomfortable feeling our short exchange had given me. This kind of public pleasantness might very well be the way we’d interact in private too. Maybe I could stand it for a year or two, but eventually I’d explode. I had a temperament that simply couldn’t always be tamed. A fact Santino loved about me.

Clifford glanced my way and I smiled quickly.

Bea carried the cushion with the rings toward us, looking absolutely adorable with her blonde hair in French braids, and in a cute mint-colored dress. The priest fixed me with his old eyes and motioned at the cushion. I picked up the ring.

When Clifford said yes, loud and clear, I tensed, realizing it would be my turn next. I pushed the ring on his finger and cold settled in my bones. I avoided his eyes, not sure I could keep up the lie.

It was my turn and I watched with trepidation as Clifford picked up my ring from the cushion.

The priest nodded then fixed me with his gaze again.

“Will you Anna Cavallaro take Clifford Maximo Clark to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Clifford gave me a smile. It was nice. He was nice. He was also ambitious and intelligent. He was everything I should want. I swallowed. I should say yes.

I glanced at my parents. I loved them so much. I wanted to make them proud, but I also needed to follow my heart. Dad’s expression shifted as if he could see something on my face.

God. This would be the scandal of the year.

But Mom’s eyes anchored me. They were full of understanding. They gave me permission to follow my heart before it was too late.

And then another thought rushed through my head. What if Santino didn’t want me anymore? I’d led him around for so long...

And what if he never woke?

It didn’t matter. I didn’t love Clifford, and I never would. I couldn’t live a life like that.

The priest repeated his question, a hint of impatience tinging his words.

I opened my mouth. “No.”

“She won’t,” Mom said at the same time, her clear voice echoing in the church.

Chapter *Thirty-One*



Silence reigned in church. Everyone stared at me and Mom.

I couldn't believe Mom would have stopped the wedding if I hadn't said no. Or maybe she'd seen on my face that I was about to say no and wanted to show her support.

A boulder seemed to fall off my shoulders and I couldn't help but smile, for the first time today, in earnest.

Then my eyes met Clifford's and guilt crushed down on me. He still held the wedding ring but slowly lowered his hand and then dropped it to his side, balling his hand to a fist.

"I'm sorry, Clifford. So sorry. I should have said something sooner, but I really thought I could go through with marrying you."

He smiled bitterly. "You make it sound as if I'm a punishment."

"No! That's not how I meant it but I'm in love with someone else."

"Of course. Santino."

I swallowed. The shocked whispers were picking up around us.

"You don't have feelings for me, and I'm sure it won't reflect badly on you that our wedding got canceled. I thought being left at the altar would look better in your CV than a divorce, especially with conservative voters,"

I said with a teasing smile, but Clifford didn't smile. He looked dead serious and so did his parents.

"Couldn't you have decided this before our wedding day?" he asked. "I thought Santino was only a fling."

He was meant to be only a fling. But he was everything. I should have realized it sooner and been brave enough to act on my feelings. After all, I'd visited him every day despite Enzo's disapproving gaze and had spent almost every moment worrying about him and not my wedding.

"Excuse me," Clifford said in a clipped voice. "My father requires my presence. I assume he needs to brief me on how we can destroy your family in the most public way."

I didn't get the chance to say more because we walked off. My heart sank. The Clarks would undoubtedly cause major trouble, unless we stopped them. Judging by Dad's calculating expression, he was already trying to come up with a plan.

I wished I could help him but my mind was a mess. Mom appeared at my side and ushered me through the side entrance, and then back into the room where I'd waited before.

"I can't believe you stopped the wedding," I whispered with a stunned giggle.

Mom shook her head as if she couldn't believe it either. "Your father isn't happy with us, and I can't even blame him. He'll have many sleepless nights trying to figure out a way out of the mess."

I nodded. Despite my guilt, a relieved smile once again tugged at my lips. I wanted to dance in joy. I'd never felt more relieved in my life, as if suddenly the future held promise again.

"The look on your face is the one of a happy bride," Mom said with a small smile, touching my cheek.

I bit my lip. I could hardly contain my happiness, even if today marked the day my reputation would be shredded. Maybe things wouldn't be as bad because many Made Men had been against a bond with a politician. Still, they probably wouldn't be happy with how things had gone down.

"I know this is because of Santino, and I want you to know that I don't approve of your bond. I stopped this wedding because I knew you'd be unhappy in it."

"Is it really so bad that Santino and I have feelings for each other? He took several bullets for me, Mom. He would do everything for me. You

shouldn't be angry at him. I'm the one who put him through hell."

Mom pursed her lips. "We'll see."

Santino was well respected, especially among the soldiers. I knew he'd eventually win Mom over as well. Dad, however... I was anxious about facing him. "Does Dad suspect anything?"

"About you and Santino? Even if he didn't want to suspect anything before, he'll certainly come to his own conclusions now, and a failed wedding always makes people assume there's someone else."

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect the Outfit from the waves I've caused, okay?"

Mom kissed my temple. "We'll all handle it together as a family. Now wait here while I try to talk to your father."

I nodded quickly, and Mom left.

I stared at myself in the mirror. I glowed. Glowed like a bride should on her wedding day. Glowed because my wedding had been canceled.

The door swung open and I expected Dad or Leonas, but Sofia and Luisa slipped in, their faces slack with shock.

I gave my best friends a sheepish smile.

"What the hell just happened there?" Sofia shouted.

Luisa seemed incapable to find words.

I shrugged but a relieved grin split my face. I couldn't put into words how glad I was that I wasn't going to marry Clifford, which was totally unfair toward him.

"Mom had something against me marrying Clifford, and I couldn't go through with it either."

Sofia widened her eyes comically. "Anna! The press is all over this. Tomorrow everyone will be talking about this."

"It's bad, isn't it?" I asked, but I couldn't feel regret. Guilt for bringing this down on Mom and Dad? Yes. But not regret.

I should have put a stop to my bond with Clifford a long time ago. I'd clung to our arranged marriage out of some misguided sense of duty, wanting to be the good, virtuous daughter everyone thought I was.

Luisa touched my arm. "You really love Santino, don't you?"

I bit my lip. I'd never said it to him and hardly dared to admit it to myself. "Yes."

"I mean, if he'd been present, it could have been straight out of a romantic comedy. With him in the hospital in a coma, it has potential as a

drama though.”

I shook my head at my movie-loving, romantic friend. “I bet the Clarks aren’t laughing, Luisa,” I said with a small laugh.

Sofia snorted. “They didn’t look very amused, that’s true.”

Luisa nodded with a worried look. “Maximo Clark will make sure the Outfit and your family pay for this public humiliation. He isn’t someone who presents the other cheek.”

I nodded, worried. “Maybe I can straighten things with Clifford. I need to talk to him in private.”

Sofia gave me a doubtful look. “Maybe you should let your father handle it. This might be an instance where only threats work.”

A knock sounded and a second later Leonas poked his head in. He gave me a sly smile that made me want to hug and punch him.

“We should probably leave. This is family business,” Luisa said to Sofia. After hugging me, they slipped out, leaving me alone with my brother who still smiled broadly.

He sauntered over to me and patted my shoulder. “Thanks, Sis.”

“What for?”

“For making all my past wrongdoings look like a piece of cake.”

I grimaced. “That bad?”

“Pretty bad, yeah. I mean, it could have been worse if you’d killed Clifford to evade marrying him, or if you’d been caught banging Santino in a cupboard during the wedding party, but otherwise you really picked the worst possible moment to decide you couldn’t stand Clifford.”

“You really know how to lift my mood,” I muttered.

“I’m trying,” he said with a smirk, but I could see tension in his eyes. Leonas always pretended he cared about nothing, but our family and the Outfit meant a lot to him, and I might have hurt both today.

I swallowed, guilt weighing heavy on me. “It’s not even that I can’t stand Clifford. He isn’t bad. He’s nice, with a great career ahead of him.”

Leonas made a face as if he doubted it. “Only if voters give him pity votes after today, but being left at the altar doesn’t really scream tough future leader of the state.”

Had I really ruined Clifford’s career today? I didn’t want to believe it. “He’s really ambitious and clever. He’ll turn today into a great story and advantage for him.”

“Whatever. I don’t give a fuck about him, but we should really rack our brains how to make sure the Outfit leaves this shitshow as the winner.”

“I’m surprised you think we can still win after the mess I made.”

Leonas shrugged. “We might have to fight dirty, but that’s all the more fun.”

Chapter *Thirty-Two*

Dante

Over the years, my wife had surprised, and even shocked me on several occasions, a feat few people managed.

Today my daughter and wife both had given me the greatest shock of my life, and not just me.

I knew they hadn't agreed on making such a public affair out of it, but they both shared a boisterous temperament that sometimes chose unfortunate moments to burst through.

"Valentina, what is going on?" I muttered under my breath. The shocked silence was quickly turning into disbelieving whispers. I needed to get the situation under control before it escalated even more.

"I'm sorry, Dante. I couldn't let Anna marry Clifford. She wouldn't have been happy."

I stood with a tight smile.

Maximo Clark looked ready to explode and his wife was already fanning herself with the wedding program in a very attention-seeking way.

I cleared my throat audibly, then waited for silence to descend in church. "We must ask you to leave now. We have matters to settle and this wedding won't happen."

Then I turned my focus on the Clarks. Maximo was motioning for his son to come toward them. Valentina in turn was already rushing toward Anna who still stood in the front with a wide-eyed look.

I didn't allow my frustration to grab the reins. I had to handle Maximo and Clifford first. They could cause a scandal I didn't have the necessary

patience for. Once that was done, I'd deal with my erratic wife and daughter. I had a feeling there was more at play here.

A suspicion had festered in me ever since I'd seen Anna at Santino's side when he'd been shot, but I'd chosen to distrust my instinct, because I didn't like what they were telling me.



Valentina and I had always thought by arranging a marriage with Clifford, we'd make sure Anna had more freedom than other girls in our world. We'd taken our own marriage as reassurance. Our love had developed with time, and we'd thought Anna would make the same experience.

If I'd known she was in love with Santino, I would have canceled the wedding myself. Any bond was bound to fail if one of the parties entered it while being in love with someone else. My marriage to Valentina had almost crumpled because I'd clung to my love to my late wife, no matter how hopeless that love was.

Anna's love wasn't hopeless. Or hadn't been. Right this moment, my emotions were too complicated to decide about Santino's fate.

I stepped into the small room where Anna had gone. Her expression turned apologetic the moment her gaze met mine, but before the change, I'd seen the blatant relief and joy on her face. Joy over having stopped the wedding.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I know I caused a mess."

"You did," I agreed.

She swallowed, wringing her hands in front of her body. She cast her gaze up to the ceiling. "I've tried to convince myself every day in the last few weeks, months even, that marrying Clifford would be okay. That I could do it, that I had to do it out of my duty for the Outfit and not to disappoint you and Mom, but today the only thing I could think about while standing beside Clifford at the altar was how Santino was doing and that I wanted to be by his side. If I'd gone through with the wedding, I'd eventually have tried to escape it and caused an even bigger scandal."

A divorce for a Capo's daughter would have caused major waves.

If Anna had filed for one at some point, many of my soldiers would have asked me to forbid her from going through with it. I would have stood up for Anna of course, because her happiness was ultimately my main goal, but it would have created unnecessary conflict in the Outfit.

“Are you very disappointed?” she asked.

“Yes.” I was disappointed. In her, but mostly in me, for not having seen what was happening long before. I prided myself on my insight into human nature, and it was what had guaranteed my position as Capo over the years, but with my own daughter, I had failed to see the signs. “I’m disappointed because you didn’t tell me about your doubts before, that you didn’t discuss your decision with your mother and me, and instead suffered through the doubt by yourself only for it to overwhelm you today, in the most inopportune moment.”

“I didn’t want to burden you or Mom. I know you prefer to handle things on your own too. You’re always dutiful and I wanted to be like that too.”

I shook my head. I tried to be dutiful, but in the past, I’d on occasion shoved my duty to the Outfit aside for Valentina. My love for my family had always and would always trump my sense of duty. It was my biggest failure as a Capo and my greatest pride as a husband and father. Today Valentina had chosen her love for our daughter too, and I knew she’d do it again. That’s why I’d never ask her to apologize, and she wouldn’t. “Being dutiful is admirable but not for the sake of your happiness, Anna. Your mother and I wanted you to be happy, to live a life filled with freedoms a bond in our world couldn’t give you.”

Anna frowned. “That’s all? I thought it was to strengthen the Outfit.”

“Indeed. That was what we’d hoped for. But we could have strengthened the Outfit by a bond with the Corsican Union too, for the price of risking your safety. I’d have never considered it.”

“I know,” Anna said with a small smile. “I know you and Mom meant well when you agreed to the engagement. You even asked me and back when I said yes, I really thought I’d have no trouble to go through with it, but then...” She trailed off, obviously considering what she should tell me, but she needn’t worry.

Today the scales fell from my eyes. I’d chosen ignorance too long, wanted to cling to an image of Anna that didn’t reflect the truth. Anna

wasn't a little girl anymore. She was a grown woman. "Then you fell in love with Santino."

Anger expanded in my chest, forcing me to take a deep breath to keep my calm.

Anna sighed. She came toward me and wrapped her arms around my middle. I hugged her back and felt her relax as if she'd worried I'd shove her away in my anger. Anger that wasn't even directed at her, but even if it were. Anger would never stop me from showing affection to Anna. I couldn't imagine her doing anything that would make me shove her away.

"What about him? Does he have feelings for you?" I asked, my voice tightly controlled.

Anna pursed her lips. "You worry he played with me? That he led me on?"

I worried about a lot of things now that I knew Anna and Santino's relationship had been a far cry from professional. "Santino has known you for a long time, and it could have been easy for him to steer a young girl's infatuation in a direction that would benefit him."

Anna's expression turned offended. "Do you really think I'd be that naive and stupid?"

"You are anything but stupid," I said firmly. "But naivete comes with young age and your mother and I always worried that your strong empathy would be a hindrance in our world."

"Dad, I'm good at reading people, maybe that makes me an empath but trust me when I say that I've used it to my advantage in the past too. I'm not the good girl you think I am. If anyone has been played then it's Santino. I gave him a tough time, really."

I narrowed my eyes. "How long has this been going on between you and Santino?" I didn't want to put a name to it, and if I was being honest, I wasn't sure if I had any intention to let it become anything worth having a name. Anna's feelings aside, the fact remained that Santino was my soldier, one I'd entrusted with my daughter's safety, and he'd betrayed me in the most personal way I could imagine. I didn't feel inclined to forgive him for this transgression.

"It started in Paris," she said. "I've been having feelings for Santino long before but he's always ignored my flirting."

"So he knew your feelings toward him when he agreed to live with you in Paris unsupervised."

Anna's expression twisted with realization, then regret over having said too much. Anna was clever and could certainly evade an unpleasant truth without an actual lie, but I had decades of experience on her when it came to manipulation and coercion. One day she'd be as good as me, maybe even better, but right now she still needed to realize that she didn't know everything there was.

"He did. But he'd never had any intention to give in to my advances that's why he could say with full confidence that he could protect me in France. He was sure of it. He didn't lie."

I smiled bitterly. "I admire your attempt to protect Santino but I fail to see how his behavior doesn't constitute betrayal. If he suspected you had feelings for him, he should have told me during our conversation before I allowed you to leave. I am his Capo and your father, it should have fallen upon me to decide if I was willing to entrust him with your safety despite your feelings for him, and I would have definitely said no. I'm left with no other conclusion but that Santino already harbored feelings for you and had every intention to pursue them and that was why he omitted to tell me about the risk a shared trip to Paris would pose."

Anna pulled away. I could see that she was weighing her options. I'd suspected that there was more to the story that she didn't want to share. Her hesitation told me I was right and that she tried to decide if divulging more of the truth would help Santino or not. I had to admit it made me furious to see Anna cherry-picking what truth she wanted to tell me. As a father, you didn't want to be lied to.

"You too have lied to me for years, and I think it's time for you to be honest with me. You aren't protecting anyone by omitting part of the truth. It'll only make me assume the worst option, and that's definitely not a version that's in favor of Santino. Don't I deserve the truth?"

Anna closed her eyes briefly. "I'm not even sure I'm protecting Santino by not telling you what happened before Paris, because I acted like a real..." She searched for the right word, then shrugged. "Bitch. Sorry Dad, there's really no other way to put it."

Valentina had always taken more offense at curse words than me. Yet, hearing Anna call herself by a term that would have me punish anyone else severely if they used it for any of my daughters or my wife still made me cringe inwardly.

"Let me be the judge," I said neutrally.

Anna nodded but I still caught her hesitation. “I blackmailed Santino, or he wouldn’t have come to Paris. He didn’t want to, trust me, but he had no choice.”

“I assume what you had on him must have been a major betrayal or he wouldn’t have chosen the risk of being alone with you in Paris.”

Anna flushed. “Well, it wasn’t really a betrayal of you, Dad. I caught Santino with Mrs. Alfera.”

I raised my brows. It wasn’t uncommon for men to cheat on their wives, and word about that often reached my ears. It was something that was tolerated in our world, naturally, as we were a male-oriented world. I wasn’t naive so I’d always known that many women weren’t faithful either, only more clever to keep it hidden. In a world of arranged marriages and unfaithful husbands, it was only natural that wives would look for attention elsewhere. But I expected my soldiers not to sleep with another Made Man’s wife. It added conflict to the Outfit that I found absolutely unnecessary. “Was that all?” I asked, my instinct telling me that Anna hadn’t yet divulged all there was to me.

Anna made a face. “Well, I also caught him with Mrs. Clark.”

I shook my head. “While this is troubling behavior when it comes to the good of the Outfit, I find it even more concerning when it comes to him being the man you obviously have feelings for.”

Anna deserved to be respected and cherished. A man that considered cheating a valid hobby wasn’t someone I considered capable of either.

“Santino has been faithful since we started... dating.” Anna’s cheeks turned red, and I decided that I preferred the term dating to whatever else she might have called it.

I nodded. “I understand. Still, I have to say that Santino’s behavior requires a punishment.”

“Santino’s protected me with his life. He’s in a coma because he protected me. No matter what you might think of him, or his behavior in the past, he’s the man who’d do everything for me. I don’t have a single doubt about that.”

I wished I could share her conviction, but Santino and I had a lot to discuss before I could decide about his future—once his health allowed it naturally. I’d give him a fair chance to defend himself, for Anna and for Enzo.

Anna pressed her cheek against my chest. “Dad, please don’t punish Santino, not for loving me.”

“As you described it, there are plenty of other misconducts I can punish him for.”

“Dad!” Anna said with a pout. She, like her mother, had a miraculous talent to get her will. I’d long given up fighting it. “Promise you won’t punish Santino too badly. Please.”

I kissed the top of her head. “I can’t promise anything yet, but I’ll certainly keep in mind that your well-being is on the line as well. For now, we have to wait for Santino to get better.”

“I hope he wakes soon.”

I hadn’t told her the news about him waking up yet, had thought it more prudent to talk to her before her mind was occupied with Santino. “He did wake. Enzo sent me a message a few minutes ago.”

Anna’s eyes grew huge in disbelief then pure happiness reflected on her face. For a father to see this kind of emotion on their child’s face because of a man they should punish harshly was a nightmare. It wouldn’t be the first time the women in my life made me blur the lines of what should be done for the sake of the Outfit. Yet, I still wasn’t convinced Santino was someone I wanted around Anna.

“Can I see him? Please, Dad, I need to see him and tell him that I didn’t marry Clifford. He probably thinks I’m already married.”

“All right.”

Anna hollered in joy, throwing her arms around me. Despite my intention to hold on to my anger, her happiness filled me with relief. I patted her back, then pulled back and said sternly. “You can visit, but I’ll need to talk to him. And after that, we all need to figure out a solution with the Clarks.”

Anna bit her lip. “They’ll want to ruin us, I suppose.”

“Maximo Clark most definitely, but I can handle him. It won’t be pleasant, though. Maybe Santino can be of help. That way he can prove to me that he’s willing to atone for his betrayal.”

Chapter *Thirty-Three*



Santino

“She doesn’t deserve you. You deserve someone who chooses you!” Dad shouted.

The door swung open and Anna stumbled in, dressed in a wedding dress. Some of her mascara was smudged and her cheeks were flushed.

She froze when she spotted me. I sank down on the bed, my legs suddenly too weak to carry me. Fuck. I’d never been a fucking weakling.

She didn’t move from her spot in the doorway. “You’re really awake.”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. I missed your wedding.”

She stepped in. “I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

I frowned, hope blooming in me. “You couldn’t what?”

“I couldn’t say yes. I knew it would have been better for the Outfit and that I was being selfish, but I couldn’t say yes to Clifford. I’m not married.”

“You left Clifford at the altar on your wedding day and dashed off in your dress like a runaway bride?” I smirked, but my insides were exploding with emotions. Fuck. Anna had chosen me.

Anna rolled her eyes and huffed. She still hadn’t moved from her spot in the doorway.

“Why couldn’t you marry him?”

Anna gave me a pleading look. "You know why."

I had absolutely no intention of making this easy on her. Not after what she'd put me through. "Enlighten me."

"Because of you, Sonny. Because I love you even if you annoy me more than any other person ever does."

I chuckled and opened my arms. Anna rushed over to me and half fell into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my middle, hugging me tightly. It took me a moment to realize what Anna had said. She'd admitted her love to me. I pulled away a few inches, scanning her face.

Dad cleared his throat. Both he and Frederica watched us in embarrassment. "We'll give you some time to talk."

Dad stepped back, exchanging a look with Frederica before the two of them left the room and closed the door.

I ran my hand over Anna's hair. She must have had it in an updo for the wedding but most of the pins had fallen out by now. "I'm sorry it took me so long to cancel the wedding. I should have done it much sooner."

"You should have. Of course you picked the worst possible moment. I'm sure your father is already planning my beheading."

Not that I cared. Knowing that Anna could finally be mine was worth an early grave.

She lifted her head, her eyes soft and actually glassy. "I thought I'd lose you. I was terrified. The idea that you might not be there anymore... I couldn't bear it."

"I'm alive, and I have no intention of dying anytime soon."

"Ever," she said firmly.

"I definitely intend to die before you, because I sure as fuck don't want to live without you."

Anna shook her head with a small smile. "This is macabre."

I cupped her cheek and pulled her in for a kiss, wanting to taste her without the fear of getting caught, without the knowledge that our togetherness was doomed to be temporary. There was no expiration date for our love anymore. No wedding that hung over our heads like a Damocles sword.



I wasn't sure how much time had passed, not nearly enough when a knock rang out.

"I fear this might be my mother," Anna said with an apologetic smile.

Valentina came in as if on cue. She was still dressed in a dark green evening gown, with an elegant updo and high heels. She was dressed to celebrate her daughter's wedding, but instead, she visited me in the hospital for what I knew would be a very unpleasant conversation.

Valentina's face made her displeasure very clear. I couldn't believe that she'd stopped the wedding alongside Anna. One thing was sure, she hadn't done it because she wanted Anna and me together.

"Let me have a word with Santino," she said, and her voice was pure steel, not brooking an argument.

"Mom."

"Anna," Valentina said sharply. "You and Santino have been playing your father and me for a long time, and I think it's my right to talk to Santino now. I want to hear his take on things."

I gave Anna an encouraging smile. I was a big boy. I could handle her mom.

Anna slinked out but not before giving her mother a pleading look. I doubted it made much of an impression.

I had to admit, I would have preferred a confrontation with Dante at this point. Valentina looked like a lioness determined to protect her cubs and she had every intention of ripping me apart.

"Did you lie?"

I raised my eyebrows, trying to figure out which instance she was referring to.

"When I talked to you shortly before we flew to Paris, you said you had absolutely no interest in my daughter and only saw her as a job. Were you lying? Did you already have an affair with my daughter at that point? Maybe even before she was of age?"

"There was nothing between me and Anna before she turned eighteen," I said immediately, which was mostly true. "And it was my determination

to keep a professional relationship with her, so I didn't lie that day."

"But you knew she was interested in you, and you weren't completely disinterested."

My first instinct was to lie, and I probably would have done it if the thought that Valentina might become my mother-in-law one day hadn't crossed my mind.

If Dante didn't kill me for sleeping with his daughter and ruin the bond with the Clarks. I didn't want to start a possible family bond with a lie. "Yes, I did. But I was sure I was strong enough to stay professional."

"You weren't," Valentina said in a clipped voice.

"Anna is a very strong-willed woman. She knows what she wants and how to get it."

"So you're saying you couldn't possibly have resisted her advances and you're not at fault?"

"Oh it's my fault. I fell in love with Anna, and I pursued her once I realized it. I enjoyed the time we got to spend together in Paris and I hated the idea of her marrying Clifford."

"You love my daughter?"

"I love her more than anything. If I'd woken in time, I would have stopped the wedding myself. Hell, I would have pushed Clifford aside and married her myself."

Valentina regarded me in silence for a moment before she gave a satisfied nod. Then a small smile spread on her face. "If my husband doesn't kill you, I'm sure I can eventually make peace with you."

"Thanks?"

The door opened again but this time it was Dad. The tension in his body told me he wasn't alone. He gave Valentina a quick nod in greeting before he moved to my side and sank down in the chair that he'd occupied for countless hours in the last few weeks. Dante stepped in after him. I stifled a groan.

Valentina headed toward her husband and whispered something in his ear before she slipped out. Dante's expression was absolutely unreadable.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Dante said as he stepped into the room. "Give me a moment with your son."

Dad didn't budge. I'd never seen him refuse a direct order from his Capo. I touched his arm. "Grab a coffee. You look like hell."

Dad rose from his chair but still didn't leave.

Dante didn't say anything, but his jaw tightened.

"Dad, I'll be fine."

Dad stepped back and slowly walked toward the door. Dante nodded at him, then said, "I'm a man of honor, Enzo. I have no intention of harming your son."

Some of the tension left Dad, and after another glance at me, he finally left.

"The last few weeks were enlightening. And the last few days in particular so."

I had to stifle a grin. I really wished I'd witnessed Anna saying no in church. That was my biggest regret right now.

Dante narrowed his eyes as if he could see my excitement.

"How long has this been going on?" Dante asked in a voice I'd heard during interrogations before. I was treading on thin ice, but I had no intention to deny my feelings for his daughter.

"I never touched her before she was of age."

"So you waited for her birthday to touch her?"

"No, I never intended to extend our relationship past professional but Paris changed things."

If I had to die for this love, then I'd do even that. I wanted Anna. I'd downplayed my feelings for this woman for too long. I'd taken several bullets for her and I didn't regret a single one, nor would I ever regret a single moment with her. I'd dreamed of them while I'd been in a coma, if you could call it dreaming or hallucinations, and those precious moments had helped me pull through. I'd wanted to add more memories with her to my life.

"I'd like to know what happened. No more lies, and I should tell you that I already talked to Anna."

He was trying to put me in a corner, and make me worry about what Anna might have shared. Anna could keep a secret, if she deemed it safer to do so, but her mind worked quite different from mine. She might very well have decided that sharing everything would be the safer option for me.

I looked Dante in the eye. "I won't share intimate details with you."

"And I'll thank you for that," Dante drawled, but I didn't miss the threatening undertone. I couldn't blame him. If Anna were my daughter and I had found out about her bodyguard doing the deed with her, I would

probably have smashed his face in. I was lucky Dante was controlled, though this might only mean a later but harsher punishment for me.

“Anna and I share a special bond. She’s a woman that doesn’t take shit. She doesn’t shy back from telling me a harsh truth or telling me that I’m full of shit.”

“I’m sure she’s had plenty of opportunities to do so.”

I wasn’t sure if Dante had meant it as a joke. His voice had been hard and dry but for some reason I thought he’d actually been a tad ironic.

“Plenty,” I agreed with a grin, remembering all the times Anna had given me fire for something I’d done. She’d never backed down. “She made me realize what my life had been missing. I needed a woman with a spine of steel and confidence and goals of her own. A woman who wouldn’t take shit from me. I know Anna won’t ever let me treat her badly and I’d never do it. She’s a woman that makes me want to worship her and that’s truly a new experience for me. I can’t imagine being with anyone else, and I haven’t been since we set foot in Paris. Anna is the only woman I want to be with. I want her to be mine, truly and openly. I want everyone in the Outfit to know she belongs to me.”

Dante walked over to the window, a contemplative look on his face. “You realize that would equal marriage.”

I smiled. “Oh yes.” I couldn’t wait to finally bang a married woman I was actually supposed to bang. I didn’t voice my very inappropriate thoughts and decided to keep them for Anna on our wedding night. I couldn’t wait for her surely fiery reaction and the amazing sex afterward. “I want to marry her.”

Dante’s expression didn’t look very forthcoming. This was probably a bit too soon, and definitely too much for him to stomach considering Anna’s wedding to Clifford had failed only today.

“Our family is based on trust. You realize you aren’t off to a great start if you intend to become part of it. You’ve been lying to me and my wife for years.”

“I know. And believe me, I wished the situation would have been different. I’d hated every moment of secrecy, of pretending Anna was nothing but a job when she was my everything. I’d never understood why my dad hadn’t even dated a woman years after my mother’s death, why he refuses to this day to marry again. I hadn’t understood the love he’d felt toward my mother and that he still feels for her. But now that I have Anna, I

understand what it means to lose someone you love. When I'd thought Anna would marry Clifford out of duty to the Outfit, I'd been sure I could never fall for another woman again."

I paused, realizing that Dante too had lost his first wife and had then married Valentina. Had I put my foot in my mouth again? Anna would say it was my biggest talent, and I was starting to believe she was right.

Dante was watching me intently, his cold blue eyes making me feel very on the spot. I rarely gave a shit what other people thought of me. But Dante held Anna's and my future in his hands. "You and Anna could have run off together while you were in France. It would have taken a while for me to become suspicious and by then you could have found a hiding place."

I couldn't help but laugh. Anna would never leave her family, not even for me, and I'd never ask her to do it. And I wouldn't leave my dad and sister either. Our family had already suffered enough and I wouldn't add to that. Not to mention that I was absolutely loyal to the Outfit. "That was never an option," I said firmly. "Anna and I have one big thing in common, our love for our family, and our pride for the Outfit."

I could tell that Dante believed me and that my answer had mollified him the tiniest bit. Maybe he'd been worried that I was ripping Anna away from him and the family.

"I want to keep doing my duty to the Outfit. I'd never run. And I want to become part of your family. No matter what you ask of me, I'll do it. I'll prove my loyalty to you, Anna, and the Outfit over and over again if I have to."

"I expect nothing less," Dante said. "First, you can help me contain the damage that was caused today. I think your past endeavors might be helpful in this regard."

Anna must have told her father about my affair with Dolora. "Maybe."

Chapter *Thirty-Four*



“Maybe you can talk sense into him,” Enzo greeted me when I stepped into Santino’s hospital room two days after my wedding blew up.

Santino was trying to pull a hoodie over his head but his bandages and the injuries covered by it made it difficult. I handed Enzo a cup of coffee, which I’d brought him yesterday as well. “What’s going on?”

“Santino decided to release himself from the hospital against the explicit orders of the doctors.”

Santino finally managed to shove one arm into a sleeve and gave his father an annoyed look. “Santino is a grownup and prefers to heal at home.”

I headed over to him and gave him a peck. Kissing him in front of others still felt strange but at the same time so wonderfully freeing. “Isn’t it too risky?”

Santino waved me off. “I can handle it.”

I helped him into his hoodie, knowing full well it was useless to argue with him if he’d made up his mind. He was stubborn as a mule.

“Not to mention that Dante requires my help to contain the scandal Anna and her mother caused,” he said with a wink at me.

“Excuse me? You were involved in the scandal too.”

“But I would have chosen a better moment to stop the wedding.”

“I doubt it,” Enzo and I said simultaneously. We exchanged a look and smile. My heart expanded, glad he and I were finally making peace.

“What do you mean, my dad needs you?” I asked. Dad hadn’t mentioned anything to me, which probably meant it was risky or something he considered dishonorable.

But the Clarks were furious and refused to talk so we needed to act. Clifford had ignored all of my calls and texts.

Santino gave me a grim smile. “I’ll help him handle the Clarks.”

Enzo’s expression pinched with disapproval.

“How?” I asked. “You can’t kill all of them.”

Santino lightly pinched my butt. Luckily the angle hid it from Enzo or I would have died from embarrassment. I slanted Santino a warning look, which he answered with a smirk. “I could, but I won’t.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“The photos you took when you caught me with Dolora Clark, I downloaded them to my cloud in case I ever needed them.”

“Perv.”

He smirked but quickly became serious again.

Realization widened my eyes. “You’re going to blackmail her?”

He nodded. “She’ll do anything to prevent that scandal.”

“But she doesn’t strike me as a woman who holds enough power over her husband to talk him out of plotting revenge.”

“She isn’t, but I’ll try my luck.”

“If she can’t convince Maximo we can still blackmail him with the photos. He can’t risk a divorce at this point in his career, especially one following such a scandal.”

“You’re as cunning as you are gorgeous.”

“And you’re prone to causing scandals.”

“As are you, cherie.” He shrugged, then pulled me against him and kissed me again. “Let me talk to Dolora now.”

Enzo excused himself, obviously uncomfortable with Santino’s display of affection. My cheeks heated. I cleared my throat.

“Don’t let me stop you. If my dad thinks the plan is worth pursuing, then we should give it a try.”

“You aren’t jealous, right?”

I made a face. “Please. You can either play in the Champions League, or in the village cup.”

“Life in Europe left its scars. I won’t ever get used to your soccer references, and I’m not entirely sure they are accurate.”

He glanced at his watch. “I need to head to the country club where Dolora spends most of her afternoons now.”

“You want to drive yourself?”

He kissed me again. “I’m a big boy, Anna.”

“At least take your dad with you.” I still hated that Santino had banged Clifford’s mom but at least it could now save our asses. Who would have ever thought Santino’s homewrecking ways would ever be so useful?



Santino

Dolora left the country club. All of the Clarks were members, of course. It was an hour after her usual departure time and I’d almost run out of patience. Not to mention that my wounds hurt like a bitch and I hadn’t taken nearly enough painkillers. I parked in my car right at the curb in the hopes to catch her attention. Her eyes registered my car then me and she quickly looked around in worry. I rolled down the window and leaned out. “We need to talk.”

She rushed toward me and almost jumped in. “You can’t just come here. If someone sees us together, there’s hell to pay. I had to hide in the restrooms because of you.”

I started the car and drove us to the parking lot of a nearby Starbucks. “How did I do that?”

“You caused a scandal and now everyone’s talking behind my back. I can’t even show my face in the club without people giving me condescending smiles. I simply couldn’t bear it anymore.”

“I suppose then you wouldn’t want to have another scandal on your hand.”

She froze. “What are you talking about?”

“I need you to convince your husband to keep his connections to the Outfit, and talk him out of any revenge plots he might be dreaming up right now.”

“I can’t do that.”

I showed her the photos of us on my phone. Her blue eyes widened. “I’ll be ruined if this comes out. Maximo won’t forgive me if I ruin his career with something like that.”

It was kind of fitting that he’d worry more about his career than his marriage. I suppose that ship had sailed a long time ago.

“Then talk to him and make him see reason.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“You got in bed with a mobster, Dolora.”

She pursed her lips. “Maximo doesn’t listen to me. I won’t be able to convince him.”

“Try your best.”

She gave me a pleading look but I simply stared back. She closed her eyes, then nodded.

Two days later, she called to tell me that her husband wouldn’t listen. That meant we had to convince him ourselves.



Dante, Leonas, and I waited in an Outfit restaurant for the Clarks to arrive. With a minute to spare, Maximo, Clifford, and Dolora entered the restaurant. Their bodyguards stayed outside on their orders. They obviously wanted fewer ears to listen in.

Maximo’s expression made it plainly clear that he didn’t want anything to do with us. Clifford seemed surprisingly blasé about the situation. He’d never seemed awfully invested in his bond to Anna anyway. Now that he

wasn't going to marry her anymore, I found him much more tolerable. I suppose his opinion of me hadn't improved though.

Dante got up with a businesslike smile. "You made it."

As if they'd had a choice. Maximo ignored Dante's outstretched hand and sank down on the chair across from him. "I hope this won't take too long. I have another call with my lawyers."

If he thought that would impress anyone here, he still didn't understand what a deal with the devil meant. Only Dolora looked thoroughly spooked, which made me feel almost sorry for her. But again, she slept with a mobster so she could have foreseen repercussions.

"I'm sure we can settle the matter quickly and to both our satisfaction," Dante drawled. I had to stifle a smile.

He pushed the printed-out photos across the table. I wasn't proud of my actions, especially because Anna had caught me. My feelings for her had changed me, but now that my Casanova ways were our ticket to blackmail the Clarks I couldn't really regret my actions. Clifford's face twisted with disgust then anger. He shook his head and stepped back. He probably recognized his bed, which in hindsight had been a really awful place to get it on, but Dolora had chosen it, and he was her son, not mine.

Maximo's jaw tightened and his face turned red. He glanced at his wife, who looked like she wanted to disappear.

"It was a one-time thing, Maximo," she said. A lie, no doubt. Dolora hadn't been hesitant about her actions when she'd flirted with me. Not to mention that she had a second phone, which most people used for their secret lovers. "I was hurt because you'd picked your intern to cheat on me and needed to feel validated."

"This isn't about me," he growled, glancing at Dante warily. Of course, my Capo would be filing this information away for later use. "Who picks the bodyguard of their son's fiancée?"

"And uses his bed," Clifford muttered.

"That was our son's bed?"

Of course, Maximo wouldn't recognize it. I doubted he spent very much time in his kids' rooms or with them. He seemed like someone who had kids because they looked better on his CV and made good extras on campaign photos.

She shrugged.

“On my birthday, Mom?” Clifford asked with a disgusted shake of his head.

“It was a difficult time for me.”

“What about discretion? You and Dad always told me extramarital activities needed to be handled with care.”

“They do. Your mother obviously forgot.”

Dante watched with a look of cold calculation. We had the Clarks. He knew it.

“I have no intention to make your extramarital activities public,” he drawled. “If we can come to an agreement.”

Maximo motioned at me. “It was probably you who set up that guy to fuck my wife.”

“I can assure you that I believe in the sanctity of marriage and won’t set up my men to encourage cheating.”

Maximo snorted. “Stop it. We both know you don’t have any morals.”

Dante’s expression became even colder. “I have more than you, it seems.”

“What do you want? It wasn’t my son who broke the deal. It was your daughter.”

“Indeed, but that doesn’t have to be the end of our cooperation. I’m sure we can find another option. We have many beautiful girls who’re of marriageable age,” Dante said diplomatically, but I could tell he was running out of patience. If I’d been in his stead, I would have thrown Maximo Clark from the closest bridge by now. Something about that man simply set my teeth on edge. He appeared far more relatable and pleasant in his campaigns. His campaign managers must be true magicians.

Maximo pushed to his feet, which was another act of disrespectfulness. “We don’t want you to throw Clifford a bone as if he’s a dog.”

I had a joke about the dog Clifford on my lips and had difficulties reining myself in. Instead I growled, “Sit down. The conversation isn’t over.”

Maximo flushed, but I didn’t miss the brief expression of satisfaction that flitted across Clifford’s face. Maximo sank back down.

“It’s a way to protect a bond we’d both benefit from,” Dante said.

“I’m not so sure we would benefit from this bond. My son doesn’t need another scandal.”

Dante looked at Leonas, who had listened in silence so far, but like his father, he'd filed everything away for later use. Anna definitely shared their cunning.

"I could marry one of your daughters," Leonas suggested with a shrug. "I bet you can spare one of them."

Maximo Clark's skin turned an even darker shade of red, which I hadn't thought possible, but in his eyes, I could see he was considering it.

I didn't listen to rumors very often but I knew one of the Clark twins had been involved in an unpleasant incident that had made some smaller waves in the press.

Maximo exchanged a look with his wife then Clifford, but the latter seemed less than enthused about the suggestion. Maximo, on the other hand, seemed relieved to have found a way to dispose of his scandalous offspring. "When would you suggest a wedding?"

Chapter *Thirty-Five*



“You really want to throw yourself in front of the bus for me? You were always against a bond with the Clarks and now you want to marry the bad Clark twin?”

Leonas smirked. “I was against it, am still against it, but the situation is different now. You’d have to play the politician’s wife, leaving our life behind in parts, but if I marry a Clark twin, she will have to bow to our way of living.”

“Charlotte doesn’t look as if she likes to bow to someone.”

Leonas had a dark smile on his face. “Depends on the rumors you listen to.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nobody will be happy with this bond.”

“Maybe Bad Clark will be glad to be rid of her family.”

“Her name’s Charlotte.”

I’d only exchanged a few meaningless pleasantries with Clifford’s sisters in the past, so I didn’t know them—except for the occasional pieces of gossip.

“I can’t distinguish them. They look pretty much the same and their names are almost clones of each other.”

They used to look identical but since Charlotte changed her style it was easy to tell them apart. “You can be a dick.”

“Today I’m the hero who saves the day.”

I shook my head. “Are you really sure about this? I doubt the Clarks will be very happy if another wedding bursts into flames because a Cavallaro decides, he doesn’t want the bond.”

“Sis, I have one advantage over you.”

I made a doubtful face.

“I’m not in love with someone else, and I won’t ever be. This heart is as cold as ice.”

“You are full of shit.” I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “But thanks for throwing yourself in front of the bus for me.”

Leonas shrugged. “For you and for the Outfit. It’s better if I’m the one caught in a bond with Outsiders. That way I can control how it goes.”

I shook my head with a smile. Leonas was already planning ahead, for when he had more of a say in the Outfit, though Dad had already given him more and more responsibilities. The conservatives were gaining momentum, especially among the young Made Men and Leonas had good standing among them. Many never wanted a bond with Outsiders, nothing that extended over bribing them, which was why many didn’t condemn me for choosing not to marry Clifford. It was like Leonas had said. I would have had to leave the Outfit in parts to become part of Clifford’s world. The same wouldn’t happen now that Leonas would marry Charlotte. She would have to submit to our world and rules, or be swallowed whole by it.



The sound of an engine carried into the living room where I sat with Bea, waiting for Santino to arrive.

Bea’s face lit up. “Is that Santino?”

I nodded, feeling overjoyed. I had only caught glimpses of him in the last two weeks since his release from the hospital. Mom and Dad had demanded we keep our distance while they handle the Clarks and the first waves of the scandal die down. It had been hard not to talk to him or see

him, especially now that we no longer had to hide, at least from our families. The public was still unaware of our relationship, though that would probably change tonight. Dad too knew that nobody would believe it if we told them that Santino and I had found our love after the failed wedding, and luckily he wanted to handle the matter offensively.

I pushed to my feet, grinning, and hurried into the lobby. The bell rang and I was about to open the door when Dad's voice rang out, "Let me."

I turned. He strode toward me with a stern look.

"Dad, is this really necessary? Why couldn't Santino come in through the guardhouse entrance and pick me up like he did in the past?"

"Because this time he doesn't pick you up as your bodyguard. He's here to pick you up for a date, and that requires him waiting at the door and greeting your parents."

"You won't send a chaperone along, right?"

Dad didn't say anything as he walked past me.

"We spent three years alone in Paris," I reminded him.

Dad opened the door and greeted Santino with a stern expression. Mom headed for us as well.

"Not you, too, Mom, please."

She touched my shoulder as she passed. "We have certain rules, and even if you and Santino did a detour around them for a while, this'll change now."

I rolled my eyes. I was twenty-two, and had practically dated Santino three and a half years. It was too late to protect my virtue. And nobody in the Outfit would believe Santino and I had only just started seeing each other. They would put two and two together as soon as we appeared in public and link my broken engagement to Santino.

Mom and Dad barred my view of the entryway and Santino. I approached them to make sure they didn't give him a too hard time. My eyes widened in surprise when I saw Mom accepting a gorgeous flower bouquet from Santino who gave her a charming smile before he handed Dad a bottle of what looked like a very fine bottle of Barolo. I stifled a smile. Mom finally stepped back so I could take her place. She rubbed my back with a knowing smile.

My eyes met Santino's and he quickly scanned my outfit. It was a dress I'd worn in Saint Tropez. I'd had to modify my outfit for the colder fall

weather in Chicago though, and added a cropped blazer and over-knee boots.

“Saint Tropez,” Santino said without hesitation, then threw a glance at my dad, who raised one eyebrow.

“Remembering gives you bonus points, but where are my flowers?” I asked with a teasing smile.

Dad shook his head with a small smile before he bestowed another warning look on Santino.

“I knew you’d ask,” Santino said and bent down to pick up another beautiful bouquet of flowers, roses and another beautiful flower with many small petals that I didn’t know in reds and oranges. I took the flowers from him, resisting the urge to kiss him. I didn’t want Dad to see it.

He was still angry at Santino, and probably would have punished him harshly if it wasn’t for the fact that I loved him. Santino was on a sort of probation so to speak, with a possible punishment still hovering over his head, and he could no longer work as my bodyguard. His dad had taken the job for now until Dad had found a suitable replacement for Santino.

Steps rang out and Leonas appeared, dressed in a black dress shirt, black pants and black Budapest shoes.

My face fell. “Oh no. Don’t tell me he’s going to be our chaperone.”

“Indeed, sis,” Leonas said. “And I’ll take my job seriously.”

I gave Dad a disbelieving look. “Dad.”

“Santino isn’t the only one who has to regain lost trust. I expect you back at home at eleven.”

“Eleven?” It was already seven. “Dad, I’m twenty-two.”

Dad tilted his head. “And Santino is a man you’re not married to, so you and him shouldn’t be going on a date at all.”

I pressed my lips together. Mom and Dad weren’t very conservative. He did this as a sort of punishment for me.

I took a deep breath and stood on my tiptoes to kiss his cheeks. “Thanks for allowing us to spend time together.”

He nodded then exchanged a look with Leonas before he disappeared from view. I turned to Santino with a smile, unable to hold it back. I had missed him so much in the last few weeks. But now that nothing stood in our way, not a coma, a wedding or Dad’s word, I wanted to spend every second with him. My mind and body yearned for him. I only needed to

figure out a way to get rid of Leonas so Santino and I could really enjoy each other in every sense of the word.



Santino

I didn't have to be a mind reader to know what Anna was thinking. It was probably the same thing I'd been thinking the moment I'd seen her in the tight dress and boots. Fuck, I'd missed her so much. My injuries still hurt like hell but I sure as hell wouldn't let that stop me from taking Anna tonight.

What might, however, stop me was Leonas. His shit-eating smirk didn't bode well.

"So where are you taking us for dinner?" he asked. "I hope I'm not underdressed for the occasion."

As if he and his parents didn't know exactly where I was going to take Anna. Dante wanted to know every detail of our date to anticipate how the press and the Outfit would find out and might react. I didn't mind, or rather I wouldn't disagree. I was already more than grateful that he hadn't put a bullet in my head the moment he'd found out about Anna and me. I supposed me almost dying for Anna had made the difference. Or maybe the ring I'd give Anna later.

I gave Leonas a hard smile. "I should have given you a good thrashing years ago."

Leonas opened his arms. "You can try to give me one now."

I extended my hand for Anna to take and led her toward my Camaro. After I'd helped her into the passenger seat, I turned to Leonas once more. "I'd rather stay far away from your ass."

“Works for me.”

I got in behind the steering wheel and took Anna’s hand before I started the engine.

“This is the first time I have ridden in your Camaro.”

“It’s taken way too long.” I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it.

Leonas made a buzzer noise. “I have to remind you that my duty as chaperone for the evening will be to limit your public displays of affection, so don’t use them all up now.”

“This isn’t public,” Anna hissed.

“You should also reconsider your tone toward the person who might decide to have a very long cigarette break later today.”

I shook my head with a chuckle. “What is it with you Cavallaros and blackmail?”

“It’s in our DNA,” Leonas said.

Anna laughed. “Oh shut up. Let me at least pretend you aren’t here.”

Anna and I ate at a fine dining restaurant that was owned by the Outfit and that served traditional cuisine from Roma. Leonas did indeed give us some space and settled at the bar to chat with the owner while Anna and I settled in a cozy nook. The staff had been briefed about our appearance so it didn’t come as a shock, but some of the guests threw us curious looks. Our dinner would make the rounds and be the main gossip in the next few weeks, but it wasn’t as if there hadn’t already been certain speculations. My reputation as a sort of Casanova was widely known among the women in the Outfit.

“I love it that we don’t have to hide anymore,” Anna said. She took a sip from her Pinot Grigio, looking relaxed and happy. It was one of my favorite expressions on her face. That and her lust-twisted face, which I’d try to see tonight.

“I’m glad that your parents are willing to consider a mere bodyguard for you. Many parents in their stead would want a better match.”

“What could be better than someone who makes me happy and who’s willing to risk his life for me?”

“So you wouldn’t mind being married to a soldier?”

Anna pursed her lips. “I don’t need an Underboss, Captain, or Capo to feel validated. I want a man who loves me, that’s all.”

“And this man in front of you loves you with every inch of his scarred body.”

“I love you too.”

I squeezed her hand. I couldn't wait to be alone with her. Maybe now would have been a good moment to pop the question but I didn't want to do it in public. I wanted it to be only Anna and me.

It was nine-forty when the three of us left the restaurant together. Leonas motioned at a bar across the street. “I'm going to have a drink. Pick me up in an hour, so we make it home in time.”

I clapped his hand. “Thanks.”

Anna hugged her brother. “You're the best.”

“Yeah, yeah. Clean the back seat before I have to sit on it, all right?”

She hit his shoulder and he sauntered across the street with a wave. I took her hand and gently pushed her toward the car. “Get in. We don't have much time.”

“We have an hour,” Anna said with a laugh as she sagged down on the passenger seat.

“That's not nearly enough to make up for lost time,” I murmured. I hit the gas, determined to find a good parking spot for us as soon as possible. I turned into the parking lot of a restaurant that had closed for renovations recently. Except for dim lights close by the house to prevent break-ins, the lot was dark. I hit the brakes and turned off the engine so the lights went out.

Anna giggled. “You're awfully eager. How will you manage to do anything in this narrow space with your injuries?”

She had a point. I was lithe for my tall frame but with my wounds, I wouldn't be able to contort myself enough. “Damn.”

Anna looked around.

“We'll make it work,” I gritted out and shoved my seat all the way back then moved the backrest into a half-lying position. Anna turned to me and immediately began to work on my zipper, freeing my cock, and then her lips already closed around my tip, making me hiss through my teeth. I wasn't the only one eager for this. I weaved my fingers through Anna's hair, wishing I could see her but the dark was our friend.

Anna took me deeper and deeper into her mouth until I really had to focus on not coming too soon. Fuck, I was still in bad shape.

“Stop,” I grunted, and tugged at her hair lightly then harder when she didn't stop. She released me and her mouth found mine for a messy kiss. I shoved open the door but didn't stop kissing her, simply couldn't stop.

Finally, I tore myself away and got out of the car. I walked around the hood and opened Anna's door. I grabbed her legs and pulled them out of the car so her ass rested on the edge of the seat. I got down on my knees on the cold asphalt, not to pop the question but to worship Anna's pussy. My body ached but I ignored it. Nothing would stop me from what I'd wanted to do for weeks. I reached under her dress and pulled down her panties then lowered my head. My lips found her inner thigh then slowly trailed inward until I brushed her slick folds. Anna answered with a moan, her fingers grabbing on to my hair. I didn't tease, didn't play. I dove right in, sucking her clit into my mouth. We didn't have much time and I wanted to give Anna as much pleasure as possible.

She cried out and pressed her pussy harder against my face. I pushed two fingers into Anna's pussy and she rewarded me with a quick orgasm. "Let's switch places."

Anna got up and I took her place then turned her around and pulled her down my lap. We both groaned when I filled her completely. For a moment, we allowed ourselves to relish in the sensation before I gripped Anna's hips and began to guide her movements as she rode me with her back to me. I reached for her clit, pressing my fingers against it. Anna moaned loudly. If someone was in the parking lot, or even just walked by, they'd definitely hear it but I didn't care. It was my favorite sound in the world. Nothing else mattered. Soon our movements became erratic, hungrier, desperate for each other's release. I held back, waiting for Anna to topple over the cliff first and when she finally did, all tension slipped away and I lost myself in her.

She sagged backward, leaning against my chest. I pressed a breathless kiss to her cheek. We quickly cleaned up and righted our clothes before I pulled Anna down on my lap and wrapped my arms around her.

"I don't want to stop this even when we're married," she whispered.

"Having sex? I can assure you that won't stop even when we're old and gray."

Her body vibrated with laughter. "No, Sonny, the sneaky sex in parking lots, the stolen kisses and bathroom quickies."

"They don't have to stop."

Anna nodded then motioned at her wristwatch. "We need to go."

We picked up Leonas five minutes later and headed back to the Cavallaro mansion. I still hadn't asked Anna to marry me. It hadn't felt

right, but as I pulled up in front of the mansion, I knew exactly the right time and place to pop the question.

I held Anna's hand as we walked to the front door. Leonas trailed a couple of steps back as if he could sense that I had something planned. He'd been surprisingly tolerable on the ride back home anyway, not asking any annoying questions. Dante and Val both opened the door for us.

"Can I come in for a sec?" I asked, feeling nervous.

Dante locked gazes with mine and his brows drew together then he gave a small nod. Did he know what I had planned, and approved? Or was I reading more into it because I knew this was a risky move so soon after Anna's failed wedding. But her parents had been left in the dark for too long, they deserved to be part of our journey from now on. But who said she wouldn't say no to me too? That woman had dumped Clifford in front of a priest and hundreds of guests.

Anna tilted her head in curiosity. Dante, Val, and Leonas stood off to the side, but they too had an air of expectancy surrounding them.

I cleared my throat and took both of Anna's hands in mine before I got down on my knee.

Anna's lips formed an O, and her parents and brother exchanged looks. I took the engagement ring I'd bought only yesterday from my pocket and presented it to Anna. "My heart never wanted to keep you a secret because it knew all the time that you were the woman for me. You rein me in but never made me feel caught. Your sharp humor and even sharper tongue keep me on my toes. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you become my wife?"

My heart hammered in my chest as I waited for Anna to say something. Her gaze briefly darted to her parents and in that second it took for Dante to nod and Val to smile my pulse reached concerning levels. My wounds ached with every heartbeat, but I suffered gladly for Anna's answer.

She smiled down at me and squeezed my hand. "Yes, definitely yes. And this time I'll say yes in church too."

I shoved to my feet and wrapped my arms around her for a kiss, overwhelmed by relief, then I put the ring on Anna's finger. And for the first time, she felt officially mine.

Chapter *Thirty-Six*



“And?” Mom asked with a small smile. “Are you nervous?”

Mom had asked me the same question on the day of my canceled wedding to Clifford and I’d said “no” without hesitation. Today the situation was very different. My belly was bustling with nerves, my heart racing. “Yes.”

I wasn’t nervous because I doubted my decision to marry Santino. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind. I loved Santino and he loved me. He’d drive me up the wall until eternity and I would keep pushing all his buttons, and the knowledge made me ridiculously happy. My lack of nervousness at my canceled wedding should have been a warning sign. I’d felt eerily calm. It wasn’t the calm that came from certainty. I’d been protecting myself by burying my emotions. I hadn’t cared in that moment because it was the only way to go through with the wedding.

Mom touched my cheek. “I can tell it’s the good kind of nervousness.”

I grinned. “Oh yes.”

Mom nodded. “Today I’ll watch you go down the aisle with a good feeling.”

“And Dad?” I asked. Dad had always appreciated Santino—as my bodyguard and until he’d found out that he and I had been getting it on.

“Your dad likes Santino more than Clifford, that’s for sure, but he’ll definitely have to make up for going behind his back for so long. That’s not something your father tolerates. Asking for your hand in front of us was the first step and he’s been proving himself every day since.”

“But I went behind your backs as well, so not only Santino is to blame.”

“Oh, don’t worry, sweetheart. You have a lot to make up for as well.”

I kissed her cheek. I’d been trying to be as open as possible with my parents in the eight months since Santino had asked me for my hand. “I won’t lie to you again.” Then I grinned. “And I’m sure you’ll soon have enough to worry about with Leonas.”

Mom sighed. “We’ll see.” She glanced at her elegant gold watch. “We have to hurry. It’s almost time.”

She helped me slip on my dress.

Mom shook her head with a look of admiration. “This dress is absolutely stunning. I’m glad you decided to design your own wedding dress this time.”

“This time meant enough to me that I wanted to put in the effort.”

“And last time you probably knew deep down that you wouldn’t go through with the wedding in the end.”

I nodded, deep down I’d probably always known it.

I loved everything about the dress. I’d found inspiration in nature like I often did with my recent designs. For my wedding dress, I’d taken inspiration from a calla lily. I’d looked at the beautiful flower for days as I’d drawn my gown and then touched the silky flowers until I’d found the right silk fabric to mimic the feel of the petals.

My dress was like an upside-down calla lily. The skirt was shorter in the front and the back had a slightly pointed train like the petal of the flower. The dress looked as smooth as the petal, and felt even smoother to the touch, but not quite as clean as silk. There was a velvety quality to it. But my favorite part was the gentle color progression. It was a subtle ombre effect with the train of the dress being white and then on level with my knees a shift became slowly visible to the eye from pearlescent white to a subtle bluish hue. I’d found a rare cultivation of the calla with a white-blue color gradient and immediately fallen in love. My bodice was a subdued light blue with silver threads and lace. I had chosen white gold jewelry, with

the earrings and the pendant in the shape of a calla lily. The blue of the dress accentuated the blue of my eyes, and my shoes, too, had a subtle color shift from white to blue. My bridal bouquet was a tightly bound bouquet consisting only of white calla lilies.

It was out of the ordinary and would certainly cause a bit of a stir. But I wanted to make a statement. As I'd told Santino once, I didn't want to follow a trend. I wanted to create one.



When I met Dad in front of the double doors of the church, his expression was tender. “Today you look like the Anna I love the most.”

Tears sprang into my eyes. “Dad, don't make me cry!”

I squeezed his arm hard and pressed a light kiss to his cheek. “I love you too, and today I feel like the Anna I like the most. I feel like myself.”

“Then it's worth it.”

I gave him a grateful smile. His support meant a lot to me. I wanted to please Dad. He was a role model for me and his continued support even after I didn't go through with the wedding to Clifford had only elevated my love and admiration for him.

“Ready?” he asked quietly.

“Today, I am.”

The doors swung open and Dad and I stepped into the nave.

My eyes zeroed in on Santino and nothing else mattered anymore. All other sounds around me faded to the background. My heartbeat pounded in my ears and I had to stifle a wide grin, but my smile was definitely wider than I usually allowed it to be in public.

Santino looked marvelous in a slim-fit blue linen suit with a white dress shirt and a white calla lily in his breast pocket. He wasn't wearing a tie or bowtie. I'd asked him not to because I knew he hated it. His eyes never left mine and everything fell into place.

When I arrived at Santino's side, he pressed a short kiss against my lips, breaking protocol—another reason why I loved him.

I didn't care if others approved of our love or how we displayed it.

We linked hands as we faced the priest. It was another priest. I didn't want any part of my almost wedding with Clifford to spoil this day.

This time my "I do" came without hesitation and it filled the big church with its certainty.

Santino slipped the ring of his late mother onto my finger and I could see in his face how much this meant to him. His dad had given it to him shortly after our engagement because Frederica had no need for it. I really wish I'd met Santino's mom.

"You may kiss the bride."

Santino cupped my cheeks and lowered his lips to mine.

I couldn't believe we were finally allowed to be with each other, that we finally had the blessing of our families. Maybe we could have gotten it before if we'd tried. If I'd had the bravery to say no to my wedding with Clifford sooner, but maybe the long journey to be together made us appreciate each other and our bond so much more.

Hand in hand, we passed our clapping guests. Bea walked in front of us, throwing white rose petals onto the floor. Sofia and Luisa gave me a thumbs up, and even Frederica smiled brightly at me. Mom was crying, something I'd never seen in public and she quickly wiped her eyes and gave Dad an embarrassed smile. He rubbed her arm. Leonas winked at me. It would be his turn next.

Outside, dark clouds were pulling up and the occasional raindrop burst on my bare arms. "I hope it doesn't rain, then we can't do our reception outside."

Santino squeezed my hand. "It doesn't matter if it rains or storms, nothing can ruin this day."

I bit my lip. "But we've planned our reception around good weather as was predicted by the forecast. We need sunshine."

"Nah. Forever with you is all I need," he murmured before his lips found mine again and I closed my eyes.

Soft rain drizzled down on us but I smiled against his lips. "Forever."

THE END

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Cora is the *USA Today* Bestselling author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with her baby daughter, a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn't spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.