



AN ARRANGED  
MARRIAGE  
MAFIA ROMANCE

# STOLEN

PERFECTLY IMPERFECT SERIES

*Touches*

NEVA ALTAJ

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## Author's note

Dear reader, there are a few Italian words mentioned in the book, so here are the translations and clarifications:

*Cara* – dear; endearment.

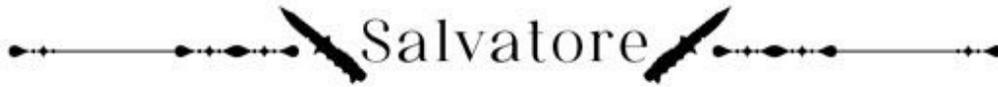
*Vita mia* – “my life”; endearment.

## Trigger Warning

**Please be aware that this book contains content that some readers may find disturbing, such as: gore, abuse, and graphic descriptions of violence and torture.**

# Prologue

*Seven years ago*



A hammer comes down onto my hand, its metal head burying into flesh that's already a swollen mess, and a fine spray of blood splatters across the table.

I wait until the worst of the pain recedes, then lift my chin and glare at the man looming above me.

"No." I bite out.

Marcello, one of the capos, watches me for a couple of seconds before he throws a glance over his shoulder at the don who is leaning against the wall to the right. It's dim in the room, no buzz or glare from the fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. The only illumination seeps from an old lamp on the corner of the table, but when the don lights his cigar, his face glows red from the flame as he nods.

Marcello turns back to me and tightens his hold around my wrist. "I think you should reconsider," he sneers and brings the hammer down heavily onto my fingers once more.

Searing pain shoots up along the length of my arm, zinging through my shoulder and sending a lightning strike straight to the back of my head. The sensation takes hold in my brain, making a home for itself inside my skull. I clench my teeth in an effort to block it out.

"Fuck you, Marcello," I rasp.

He laughs and shakes his head. "You really are something."

Marcello sets the hammer down on the table and takes a gun from his holster. I assume he'll simply shoot me in the head, but instead, he points the weapon at my leg. "I think I've fucked up your hand enough. You probably can't feel it anymore. How about this?"

Two gunshots ring out, and I roar in agony as bullets tear through flesh

and bone. Black spots blur my vision.

“Last chance, Salvatore,” he barks.

I take a deep breath, ignore the worthless bastard, and make direct eye contact with the don, who is still standing at the same spot in the dark corner. It’s too dark for me to see his eyes clearly, but with the lamp so close to my face, I’m sure he can see mine. My unharmed hand is tied to the arm of the chair, but I rotate my wrist enough to raise my middle finger at him, the rope chafing my skin.

“He won’t cave, Marcello,” the don says and turns to leave. “Just kill him and be done with it.”

Marcello waits until the door closes, then circles around the chair I’m tied to and leans down to whisper into my ear. “I’ve always hated your guts. I don’t know what the don was thinking when he let you take your father’s place two years ago. Making a twenty-four-year-old a capo, as though we’re running a fucking kindergarten or something.”

“I understand how that must unnerve you, Marcello.” I take a deep breath while the dark patches continue to cloud my vision. “Especially since I’ve made more money for the Family in my two years as a capo than you have after twenty in the same position.”

“I should leave you here to bleed out.” He spits on the floor and sends another bullet into my foot.

“That wouldn’t,” I choke out, “be wise.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I don’t die . . . you will.”

He laughs. “Yes, we shouldn’t risk it.”

Three rapid gunshots echo through the room, and I gasp as a sharp, burning pain explodes in my back. I manage one forced breath before everything fades to black.

# Chapter 1

*Present*



“Move, you idiot!”

My head snaps up as I step to the side, avoiding an elbow to my kidney, and stare at the woman in scrubs who rushes past me. She’s running toward a car that screeches to a halt a few feet in front of me in the middle of the hospital parking lot.

A teenage boy, not more than fifteen, jumps out of the driver’s side. It’s clear he’s not been to a hospital before, given he’s driven to the parking lot and not the emergency entrance. He opens the door at the same time the nurse reaches the vehicle. For a few seconds, they both stare into the back seat.

“Is that . . . the head?” the boy stutters. “Why is . . .? Mom, you said we had time.”

A woman’s moans fill the air as the boy, horrified and as white as a sheet of paper, keeps his eyes on the back seat.

“Kid! Hey!” The nurse grabs the boy’s forearm and shakes him, but he’s not responding. “Kid. Focus!” She slaps him lightly on his face. “Get inside the hospital. Find a doctor and drag them out here.”

“Aren’t . . . aren’t you a doctor?”

“I’m just a nurse. The information stated your mom was having contractions, not that she was in full-blown labor. Go. Now!” she snaps, turns toward the car and kneels down on the concrete, placing her hands on the seat in front of her. “It’s okay, Mama. Breathe for me. It’s okay. When the pain comes, I need you to push, all right? What’s your name?”

The woman in the car whimpers and says something I don’t catch, probably answering the nurse’s question, then cries out again.

“I’m Milene,” the nurse says. “You’re doing great, Jenny. Yes, breathe.

One more time, the head is already out. Just one more push, but make it count.”

The nurse looks over her shoulder at the hospital entrance, then off to the side until her gaze lands on me. “You! Suit guy!” she yells. “Come here!”

I cock my head and take in the sight of her. The first thing I notice are her eyes, but not the color. I’m too far away to see that detail. There is a mixture of panic and determination in them that captures my gaze. In any other situation, I would have ignored a similar request and walked away. Other people’s lives don’t interest me in the least. But I find myself unable to move my gaze from the girl. It takes quite a lot of determination to keep a level head in a situation like this. Slowly, I approach the car, my eyes not leaving the nurse who is, once again, focused on the woman in the car and doling out instructions. The nurse’s hair is a very light shade of blonde, and it’s gathered into a ponytail, which hangs in disarray.

“Give me your jacket,” she says without looking in my direction, as the woman in the car lets out a deep groan. “That’s it, Jenny. That’s it. I have her.”

Her voice is trembling only slightly, but it’s impossible to miss the panicked look on her face. It amazes me, how she keeps it together. And, after everything I’ve seen and done in my lifetime, not many things amaze me anymore.

Suddenly, a baby’s cry pierces the space around us.

They say a child’s first cry should melt even the coldest of hearts, but it does nothing for me. Not that I expected it would. I’ve just witnessed a new life entering the world, but it elicited exactly the same emotional response as the changing of a traffic light.

None.

I take off my jacket, intending to lay it over the car door and leave, but my gaze falls on the nurse’s face and my breath catches in my throat. She’s looking at the baby in her arms, smiling with such awe and joy it makes her face glow. It’s so unguarded and so sincere I can’t force my eyes away from her lips. I felt nothing at the supposed miracle of life, but a strange sensation suddenly tightens my chest while looking at her, and with it, a foreign feeling of . . . wanting. I squeeze the jacket in my hand, trying to decipher the

meaning of this unbidden urge to grab the girl's face and turn her to me so I might claim her smile for myself. I don't have a good name for what's overtaken me. Perhaps . . . yearning?

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of two women in white coats exiting the hospital and running in our direction. Behind them, a male nurse is pushing a gurney.

"You did great, Jenny. I'll put her on your chest. Open your shirt," the nurse says, then turns to me, her hand extended. I give her my Armani jacket and watch as she leans inside the car to cover the baby.

"Jesus, Milene." One of the doctors who'd just arrived gasps. "We'll take it from here, honey. You did great."

The blonde nurse—Milene—nods and rises up from the asphalt. Her joyful expression is replaced by confusion, as though she's only now registering what's taken place. I have an urge to grab the person responsible for extinguishing her smile and punish them for it, but there is no one to blame. It's the situation itself. Still, the need to kill someone doesn't leave me.

The young nurse heads toward the hospital entrance but stops after a few steps and leans against a parked car. With her head bent, she stares at her trembling hands which are smeared with blood, then frantically starts brushing them on the front of her scrubs. She's very young. Early twenties. Maybe twenty-two or twenty-three, at most. It was probably her first delivery, but she held herself together well and I can't help but admire her for it. When her hands are somewhat clean, she pushes off the car and resumes her trek, but stumbles. Taking a step to the side, she leans against the next car and closes her eyes.

I should leave. Just turn around, go to my car, and drive home. But I can't. It's like my whole being is focused on the blonde nurse. She seems so lost and vulnerable. So instead of doing the reasonable thing, I cover the distance between us and stand right in front of her. Suddenly, a crazy compulsion to reach out and touch her face overwhelms me but I stifle that ridiculous urge and just observe her instead. Her eyes open, and she looks up at me. Dark green.

"The jacket guy," she says and closes her eyes again. "You can leave your name and address at the information desk. I'll make sure they send your

jacket back.”

Her voice sounds steady, but her hands are still shaking, as is the rest of her body. Post-adrenaline crash. I throw a look over my shoulder. There are only thirty yards between us and the hospital entrance, but I doubt she can manage the small distance in this state. Her legs are trembling so badly I expect them to fold under her at any second. She could trip on her way back to the building and hurt herself. I’m not sure why that possibility bothers me.

I bend and scoop her small frame into my arms. A yelp of surprise escapes the girl’s lips, but she doesn’t immediately complain. She simply wraps her arms around my neck and stares back at me with wide eyes. We’re halfway to the entrance when she starts to wriggle, almost knocking me off balance.

“Put me down.” More wriggling, “I can walk, damn it.”

I continue to march forward with her in my arms as she keeps hitting my chest with her tiny fists, trying to slip from my grip. Although she can’t weigh more than a hundred pounds, her fidgeting does make the task bothersome. If she doesn’t stop, we could both end up facedown on the pavement.

I turn my head, and our noses accidentally touch. She has freckles, I notice.

“Stop,” I say, and the wriggling ceases.

She opens her mouth, as if she’s about to argue with me, but I squeeze my arms around her in warning. No one is allowed to disobey my orders. The girl closes her mouth and scrunches her nose at me but says nothing. Wise. I turn my head back toward the entrance and walk on.



“Was he hot?” Andrea, my best friend, asks.

I lodge the phone between my shoulder and cheek and take out some leftovers from the fridge to have for dinner.

“I guess,” I say and pile the food onto my plate. I haven’t eaten anything

since breakfast.

“What kind of answer is that? Was he or not?”

“He was. Tall. Expensive suit. Dark hair, a little salt-and-pepper in places. He smelled nice.” Very, very nice. I can still smell his cologne on my T-shirt.

“Gray hairs? How old was that guy?”

“Midthirties. Probably going prematurely gray.” I place the plate in the microwave, setting the timer to one minute. Not nearly enough time for the food to warm up sufficiently, but it’ll have to do. I’m too hungry to wait any longer than that.

“And he didn’t say anything? His name?”

“Nope. Just carried me inside the hospital lobby, set me down, then turned around and left.”

“Well, I can’t say that I’m surprised. You’ve always attracted weirdos.” Andrea laughs. “Is that anesthesiologist, Randy, still stalking you?”

“Yup.” I sit at the small table in the corner with my plate and dig in. “He sent me flowers again yesterday. Carnations this time. I mean, what the fuck? They’re for funerals.”

“Was there another creepy note?”

“Yeah. Something about my skin shining like moonlight. I threw up a little in my mouth.” My cat jumps onto the table, sticks his nose in my cup and laps my water. I tap him with a kitchen rag on the head. “Down, damn you!”

“Do you think that Randy guy is dangerous?” Andrea asks. “He’s been stalking you for months.”

“I don’t think so. He’ll find someone else to pester soon, hopefully. What’s going on in Chicago?” I load another heaped forkful of food into my mouth.

“I saw your brother the other day. He still thinks you’re in Illinois.”

“Good. Please make sure you don’t slip up in front of him. Angelo will flip if he finds out I’m in New York.”

“You should come back to Chicago, Milene. It’s not safe. What if someone from the New York Family finds out you’re there?” She switches to whispering. “Ajello doesn’t allow members of other Cosa Nostra Families on

his territory without approval. You know that very well.”

“I doubt the notorious Don Ajello would tire himself out over poor little me,” I mumble between bites, “and anyway, I have to finish my residency. I’ll be coming back as soon as I’m done.” The cat jumps up onto the table again, steals a piece of meat off my plate, and dashes toward the bathroom. “One of these days, I’m going to strangle this cat.”

“You’ve been saying that for weeks.” Andrea laughs.

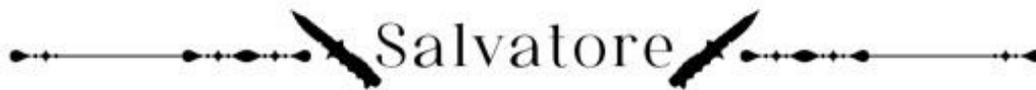
“He came home with a fucking chicken wing yesterday. And a piece of fish two days before. The neighbors will think I’ve trained him to steal food for me.” I yawn. “I’ll call you tomorrow. I can’t keep my eyes open.”

“All right. If you run into that sexy stranger again, be sure to get his number.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I cut the call and drag myself to the bed on the other side of my apartment. The whole thing is smaller than my bedroom back home, but it’s paid for with my own money, and I wouldn’t change it for the world. I haven’t told Andrea or anyone else yet, but I don’t plan on going back to Chicago. Ever.

I’m done with all the Cosa Nostra crap.



A sharp rap sounds on my office door. I look up from the laptop to see my head of security enter and nod toward the chair on the other side of the desk.

“Did you find the girl?” I ask.

“Yes. And you won’t believe this.” Nino sits down and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “She’s Milene Scardoni. The youngest sister of one of Chicago’s capos, Angelo Scardoni.”

I lean back in my chair. What an unusual turn of events. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. She’s the only Milene who works at St. Mary’s. I checked her social media as well.” He takes out his phone, scrolls through it for a couple of

seconds, then slides it across the desk toward me. “Not many photos there, but I found two where she’s with her sister. The one who married into the Bratva. They look very much alike. And I found several photos with Rossi’s sister-in-law, Andrea. It’s her, Boss.”

I pick up the phone from the desk and look down at the screen. The photo is a couple of years old. Her hair is shorter. She’s standing with another girl of about the same age. Milene is smiling, and her palm is fully extended in front of her mouth, sending a kiss toward the camera. With full lips and a tiny nose, she is beautiful. But, it's not her flawless features that attract my attention. It’s her eyes. Big, luminous green orbs that seem as though they are looking right at me, twinkling with joy and mischief. I move my thumb over the screen until I reach her lips and trace their contours.

“The sister of a Chicago capo. In my territory.” I put the phone back on the desk, but I can’t stop staring at the image. It seems so genuine, her smile. How would it feel to have someone smile at me like that?

“Do you want me to send someone to drag her in here?” Nino asks. “Or will you call Rossi so he can handle the problem himself?”

I force my eyes away from the screen, unnerved by the fact a random woman who I’ve just met has managed to invoke such an unhealthy interest. I stand up and walk toward the large window overlooking the city. Calling Luca Rossi, the Chicago don, would be the best course of action. He’ll send someone to collect her and take her back to Chicago.

“No,” I say, staring at the street below. The rain had begun an hour earlier. It started as drizzle but grew into a full-blown downpour. I wonder how much darker her hair is when it’s wet. “Put someone on her. Do you know where she lives?”

“I checked. Some dump in the suburbs.”

“Alone?”

“She has a cat.”

“I want cameras planted in her place,” I say. “Kitchen, living room, bedrooms, but not in the bathroom.”

Nino says nothing, so I turn to find him regarding me with a slightly shocked expression on his face. We’ve known each other for two decades, so it’s no wonder my request stuns him. I’m baffled by it too.

“I had a look inside from the fire escape,” he says quickly. “It’s a two hundred-square-foot studio. Just one room.”

What the hell is a capo’s sister doing, working her ass off as a nurse, living in a studio in the suburbs?

“Put two cameras to cover the whole space,” I say. “I want it done in the next twenty-four hours, and set the recordings to stream directly to my laptop. No one else is to have access.”

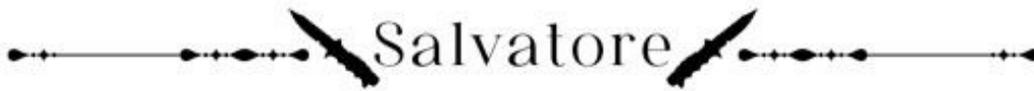
“Consider it done.” Nino gets up to leave but looks at me over his shoulder. “If I may ask, where did you unearth her?”

“In front of St. Mary’s. I was going home after a semiannual checkup.” I turn back to the window. “She called me an idiot, almost knocked me over, and then delivered a baby in the middle of a parking lot. She also confiscated my jacket in the course of this escapade.”

Nino bursts out laughing behind me. “Well, I see why you found her interesting.”

Yes. I find Milene Scardoni very interesting.

## Chapter 2



I lie back in my bed, power up the laptop, and click through to the surveillance feed from the Scardoni girl's apartment, as I have done every evening for the past week. The first evening I did it, I told myself it's just a benign interest, convinced it was just some passing fixation. I would have a quick look, turn off the feed and go to sleep. I ended up watching the whole recording. And I've done the same every damn evening since. The need to see her is too strong to ignore.

Backtracking the recording to this morning, when she would have returned from her night shift, I hit enter and play the video.

The place is a goddamned shoebox, and two cameras are enough to cover every inch. I watch Milene as she comes in, almost stumbles over the sleeping cat in the middle of the entranceway, and disappears into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, she comes out, wearing an oversized T-shirt, drags herself to bed, and slides beneath the blanket. She pulls the corner close in a comforting embrace. Not a minute later, her idiot cat jumps onto the bed. It's a muddy gray, skinny, and part of its tail seems to be missing. Did she pick it out of a dumpster? The cat prowls toward the foot of the bed, then taps and scratches Milene's feet, which are poking out from under the covers.

There is no audio, so when Milene springs up off the bed, I can only see her lips move. From the expression on her face, she's yelling. The cat dashes under the bed. Milene lies back down, but the instant she pulls the blanket up again, the cat returns. It stalks toward Milene's head, extends its front paw and bats her nose. She doesn't react, even though the cat touches her a few more times. The damn thing is persistent. Milene reaches out her hand to grab the cat around its middle, hugging it close to her side and buries her face into the pillow.

I zoom in on the video and watch her sleeping form, illuminated by the midday sunlight streaming in through the window. The cat turned around at

some point and has its head pressed against Milene's neck.

Why the hell is she living in that dump? I had Nino check her accounts. Her brother is depositing a huge sum of money every month, but she doesn't withdraw anything. She only uses her second account, the one where she receives her meager monthly paycheck. I wonder if Scardoni knows she's in New York. Probably not. I should have called Rossi the moment I found out who she was. Instead, I kept spying on her, night after night, and it became an urge. It's ridiculous. But I can't stop.

Trying to ignore the phantom pain in my left foot, I skip the recording ahead to around seven in the evening when Milene startles and sits up in her bed. She stares at the front door for a second, wraps the blanket around herself as she gets out of bed, and heads in the direction of the entrance. She's halfway there when that stupid cat dashes toward her, grabs the corner of the blanket that's dragging along the floor, and darts between her legs. Milene stumbles. The cat jumps onto the dresser and pushes a decorative basket onto the floor, along with a stack of papers and other items. Milene regards the mess at her feet, shakes her head, and proceeds toward the door.

A delivery guy holding a huge bouquet of red roses in his arms comes into view. They exchange a few words, then he leaves with the flowers, and Milene heads into the kitchen with some kind of note in her hand. She stops next to the trash can, reads it, and frowns. Rolling her eyes, she throws the note in the garbage.

I take my phone from the nightstand, send a message to Nino instructing him to find out who sent the damn flowers, and resume watching.

I follow Milene as she scrambles some eggs on the stove, drumming my fingers onto the laptop the whole time. Did she send the flowers away because she didn't like roses? The thought of some other man sending her flowers burns in the pit of my stomach. Maybe it was the color. I grab my phone again and call my secretary. When she takes the call, I let her know what I need. There are a few moments of utter silence before she quickly mumbles she'll have the florist call me right away. My phone rings five minutes later.

"Mr. Ajello. It's Diana from the flower boutique. Please let me know what you need, and I'll arrange everything for you," she chirps.

"I need flowers to be sent tomorrow morning."

“Of course. Would you like something specific? We have amazing red roses from the Netherlands and—”

“I’ll take everything you have, except red roses.”

“Oh? All of our roses except the red ones? Absolutely. Where—”

“I said everything, Diana,” I say. “Write down the address. I need them delivered at six in the morning.”

When I finish the call with the florist, I place the phone on the keyboard in front of me and stare at it. I’ve never bought flowers for anyone. So where the fuck has this insane need to do so now come from?



“Shit,” I mumble, fumbling with the deadbolt lock.

I forgot to turn on my alarm and almost slept in. The knob turns finally, and I open my front door, intending to dash down the hallway but stop at the threshold. There won’t be any running down the corridor, that’s for sure. I’ll be lucky if I manage to reach the stairway because it looks like some delivery company fucked up. Big time.

Both sides of the entire length of the hallway passage—which is around eighty feet long—are filled with huge bowls and vases, all overflowing with flowers. Each arrangement consists of a different type of flower—white roses, yellow roses, peach roses, daisies, lilies, tulips, and a bunch of others I don’t recognize. Every bouquet has a big satin bow tied around the vase in a color that matches the flowers.

“Jesus,” I mumble, staring at the sea of flowers, wondering how I’m going to reach the stairway without knocking any of them over.

“Milene!” a raspy female voice yells.

I turn my head and find my landlady standing at the top of the stairwell with her hands on her hips.

“I need you to get these out of the hallway. People need to go to work,” she continues.

“They’re not mine,” I say, looking over the explosion of colors.

“The note says they are.”

My head snaps back to the right. “The note?”

She lifts a hand holding a pink envelope. “The delivery guys said to give this to you.”

“It must be a mistake.”

“It has your name on it.”

I step into the corridor, trying my best not to knock anything over, and head toward her. I have to walk in a zigzag pattern around what must be at least a hundred vases.

“Let me see,” I say and lean over a large arrangement of white roses to grab the envelope. She’s right. It has my name on it. I glance over my shoulder, gazing at all the flowers, then slide the note from the envelope.

*Pick what you like.*

*Give away those you don’t.*

I blink. Read it again. Turn it over. There is no signature. Who the fuck buys thousands of dollars’ worth of flowers and tells the recipient to give away what they don’t like? Was it Randy? I don’t think so. Besides, the note doesn’t have a cheesy one-liner, and he always writes one. I look down the hallway again and do a quick calculation. Each of those vases must have cost a hundred bucks. Probably more. So, the total would be . . . My head snaps back to the landlady, my eyes wide. Holy. Fuck.

“I need those out of the hallway,” she grumbles and turns to leave. “You have thirty minutes.”

What the hell am I going to do with all this? And who’s the maniac who bought what looks like an entire flower shop? This is a special level of crazy.

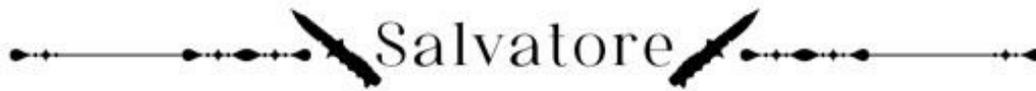
I take my phone out and call Pippa, my friend from work.

“Can you get me the phone number from one of the guys working in the hospital laundry service?” I ask.

“Laundry service?”

“Yup. I need a favor. And a truck,” I say, looking at the flowers. “A big one.”

## Chapter 3



I close my laptop and regard the man kneeling in the opposite corner of my office. Nino is holding him by the hair, yelling into his face.

“I asked, who do you work for, Octavio?” he shouts and punches the man in the face. “You ratted on us? To the DEA?”

“It wasn’t me, Nino. I swear it wasn’t me!”

“Who else is working with you, selling info?” Another blow. Two teeth fly across the office in a mess of spittle and blood, leaving red stains on the wall.

“I want a name, Octavio!” Nino keeps yelling.

I take the phone from my desk and open the surveillance app, bringing up the feed from Milene’s apartment. During the past week, I periodically began checking the live video stream over the course of the day. I still watched the entire day’s recording in the evenings, but that had ceased to provide me with a strong enough fix. I’ve developed an inexplicable need to know where she is and what she’s doing.

The screen lights up with the view of Milene’s place. She kept the white roses and daisies, and they’re on her kitchen table. I expected to find Milene watching TV or reading, which is what she usually does in the evenings when she’s not at work. Instead, I see her rushing around the room, wearing only a matching set of black lace lingerie. With my elbows on the desk, I lean forward and squeeze the phone in my hand.

Milene removes a silver dress from a hanger in the small closet and a pair of black high heels from the bottom. She puts the dress on first. It’s short, tight, and glitters like an old-style disco ball. I grip the phone in my hand even harder. The T-shirts she wears in bed hang lower than that dress. It barely covers her ass. Milene slips on the heels and shoos away the ragged feline sleeping on her coat. Picking up the jacket, she leaves the apartment.

“Nino, who’s on the Scardoni girl?” I ask.

Nino looks up, his attention shifting away from his methodical task of breaking Octavio's fingers. “It should be Pietro’s turn.”

I find Pietro’s number and call him. “Where is she?”

“Getting into a cab,” he says.

“Follow. Let me know where she goes.” I cut the call, take out my gun, and walk over to Octavio, who’s still kneeling but is only half-conscious.

“The name of the other snitch, Octavio,” I demand.

“I don’t know, Boss. I swear . . .”

I raise the gun, shoot him once at point blank range in the head, and turn to Nino. “Call maintenance. I need my office cleaned by morning. I have a meeting at eight. Did he have a family?”

“A wife.”

“Send someone with money. A hundred grand should do it. Make sure she knows what will happen if she doesn’t keep her mouth shut.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Have someone paint over that.” I nod toward the wall behind Octavio’s body. “His brains are all over it.”

“Are you going out?”

“Yes.”

“Should I send backup?”

“No,” I say and pin him with my gaze. “Don't you send anyone to follow me. I’ve already told you to lose that habit of yours.”

“I’m your chief of security. How do you expect me to do my job if you don’t let me?”

“Up to now, I’ve been pretending not to notice the guys you put on my tail. Not tonight, Nino.”

“Okay, Boss.”

As I’m heading toward the garage, Pietro calls and gives me the address of a bar downtown. When I get in my car, I check the location on my phone. Almost an hour away. Fuck. I hit the steering wheel with my palm and rev

the engine.



I lean back against the bar and lift my glass to take a sip of my drink when I notice a man in navy pants and white shirt entering. Shit.

“For God’s sake, Pip.” I groan. “Did you seriously invite Randy on our girls’ night out?”

“Of course not.” Pippa follows my gaze. “I might have mentioned it at some point. We were on the night shift together on Wednesday, but I definitely didn’t ask him to come along.”

“Fucking great.” I take a big gulp of my drink and watch Randy approach, a broad grin plastered on his dull-as-dishwater face.

“Girls! What can I get you?”

“We’re good, thanks,” I mumble.

I’ve told Randy so many times that I don’t want to go out with him, but he won’t leave me alone. If this goes on much longer, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I can’t tell him off for asking me out and sending me flowers. That would be rude. Also, he’s a doctor who’s been working at St. Mary’s for five years, and I’m just a nurse completing the residency program. If it comes down to a public confrontation, everybody will take his side. Anaesthesiologists are hard to find.

“Would you like to go see a movie next week?” he asks.

“Randy, please. I’ve already told you that I’m not going out with you.”

“I have to pee,” Pippa jumps off her chair.

“Now?” I glare at her. I don’t want to be alone with Randy.

“I really need to go. I’ll be back in five.”

The moment Pippa’s gone, Randy places his hand over mine. “Come on, Milene. Just one date.”

“No.” I pull my hand away “Can you please leave?”

“Why are you being so difficult? It’s—”

Randy stops midsentence and looks over my shoulder. At the same time, an arm wraps around my waist.

“Sorry I’m late,” a deep baritone resonates next to my ear.

My body stiffens. I recognize that voice. He only spoke one word in the parking lot, but it’s hard to forget a voice like his. I turn my head and look up. The jacket guy. I blink at him, slightly stunned. It was early evening when we met before, and I wasn’t exactly in the best mental state, so I’d failed to fully take in his appearance. This time, my attention is more focused, and I’m seeing him clearly. Black suit, with a black shirt underneath. Both surely expensive. His face is all sharp lines and edges, as if carved in hard granite. He has an aristocratic air about him. The jacket guy is seriously hot.

“Milene?” Randy asks. “Who’s your friend?”

I smile at Randy. “This is Kurt. My boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Randy asks while still staring at the jacket guy behind me. “Pippa said you broke up with him.”

“We had a fight, and I was angry, but we’re back together now.” I grin.

The arm around my waist tightens, and I find myself plastered against the muscular chest at my back.

“And we’re getting married in December,” the jacket guy says as he looks down at me. “Aren’t we, Goldie?”

Kurt and Goldie? I press my lips together, trying not to laugh. “Yup. December first.” How can he keep a straight face? “So you really need to stop asking me out, Randy. Kurt doesn’t like that one bit.”

Randy looks at the jacket guy, mumbles a sort of goodbye, and reluctantly heads toward the exit. The arm around my middle vanishes and I feel a pang of disappointment.

“Thanks for the save,” I say, reaching for my glass on the bar. “So, it’s a small world after all.”

The jacket guy regards me for a second, then moves even closer, leaning against the bar next to my stool. He has more gray than I thought, mostly at his temples, but also some up top. It’s unusual, but somehow the effect complements his face and those light brown eyes.

“Why Kurt?”

“I rewatched *Tango and Cash* yesterday. It was the first name that came to mind.” I shrug. “What’s your real name?”

“Kurt works for me just fine, Goldie.”

“Oh, a man of mystery?” I bring the glass to my lips, but it’s him I’m drinking in with my eyes. I don’t remember ever meeting a man with such a powerful presence before. He commands attention just by being in the room, and his looks seem to have little to do with it. “So, what do you do in life, Kurt?”

“You could say that I’m in management.” He tilts his head, and a strange look lights his eyes, as if he’s trying to figure me out. “And you? Delivered any more babies recently?”

“God, no. I’m still trying to process the first one.” I take a sip of my drink. “I was scared to death.”

“Yes, I could tell.”

“You could? Shit. I thought I’d hidden it quite well.”

The bartender leans in between us, asking if we need anything. I nod toward my glass for a refill while Kurt waves him off with his left hand, showing a black leather glove. Is he one of those germ-obsessed paranoids? His right hand is resting on the bar. No glove. Strange.

“Did you always want to be a nurse?” he asks.

“Yup. Since I was in third grade.”

“Why?”

“That’s a good question.” I nod. “I don’t know why. It’s something I always wanted. How about you?”

“I’m carrying on the family business. It’s what was expected.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” I drain my glass.

It was expected of me, as well. In my case, though, it meant being wedded to a husband chosen by the don. Well, not happening. My sister was lucky. Bianca ended up married to a man she adores, but there is no way I’m going back home to risk becoming a bargaining chip in the Cosa Nostra deals.

“Is that guy your ex, or something?” my mystery stranger asks, and I

shudder.

“Randy? Christ, no.” I make a disgusted face. “Just a creep from work I can’t shake off. He’s been sending me flowers and pathetic notes for months.”

“What kind of notes?”

“The last one said my hair reminds him of *sunrays*.” I snort.

His gloved hand enters my field of vision, and my breath catches as he takes a lock of my hair, wrapping it around his finger. It’s a rather intimate act, touching someone’s hair, and it should bother me. It doesn’t. Not even a little.

“Not a romantic soul, are you, Goldie?”

“No, not really, Kurt.” I say, trying to keep my voice steady while my heart races.

He’s so close I can smell his cologne. It’s the same scent as when we met in front of the hospital, very discrete and slightly spicy, and I can’t help but lean forward just a little. His facial expression remains completely neutral as he asks, “And you also don’t like flowers?”

“I have nothing against flowers. I just don’t feel comfortable getting them from creeps,” I mumble into my glass. “And it looks like I’ve somehow obtained a second one.”

“A second creep?” he asks, still playing with my hair.

“Yup. Earlier this week, someone decided to buy out the whole flower shop and left more than a hundred bouquets in front of my door.”

“It wasn’t Randy?”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t him. There was no cheesy line and no signature on the note. Randy always makes sure he signs his cards,” I say looking into his eyes. “My friend, Pippa, says I always attract strange guys.”

His head bends slightly. “You think she’s right?”

“Maybe.” I hold my breath, wondering if he’s going to kiss me. The friend in question picks just that moment to come back from the restroom and sit on the chair on my other side. Pippa always has the best timing.

“I guess it’s time for me to leave,” the jacket guy says and moves away

from the bar.

I don't want him to leave, but instead of protesting, I simply nod. "See you around."

He cocks his head to the side, keeping me a prisoner to his gaze, and brushes the back of his gloved hand down my cheek.

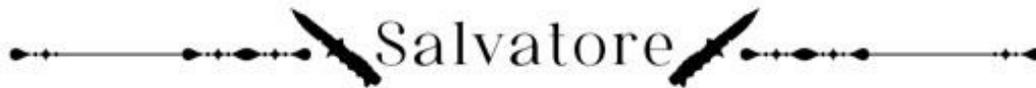
"Maybe." He lets go of my hair and turns away.

I watch as he walks away, his tall frame navigating through the crowd, which seems to part naturally, letting him through. He has a slight limp, I realize. It's very subtle. A mere variance in his footsteps that might not catch another's eye. I didn't notice it before.

I wonder whether he'll turn around, but he leaves without looking back.

"Whoa." Pippa sighs next to me. "Who was that?"

"I have no idea," I whisper.



I step inside the sparsely lit living room and look around me. The house is a disaster—clothes strewn across the living room floor and empty takeout boxes piled on the counter. The stale atmosphere clings to my airways, thick and vaguely noxious. It's as though no one has bothered to open a window in months. The place is disgusting. I walk over to the dining room table and pull out a chair. Turning it to face the front door, I sit down to wait.

Twenty minutes later, the front door opens, and Randy Philips, Milene's creep, walks inside. He doesn't notice me right away because I've turned the lights off. However, when he flicks the switch and sees me sitting in his dining room, he stops dead in his tracks.

"Hello Randy," I say.

His eyes widen, and he takes a step back. "What are you doing here? How did you get in? I'm calling the police."

"I wouldn't recommend that." I lean back in the chair. "I came to chat.

That's all."

"What do you want?" He sizes me up, then moves closer.

"I want you to forget about Milene," I say. "You don't talk to her. You don't even look at her. When she comes into a room, you turn around and leave."

"What if I decline?" He takes another step in my direction.

Randy's a big guy, a little shorter than me, but with at least fifty additional pounds. His bulk, however, comes mainly from the extra weight he's packing around his middle. He looks smug, like he's sure he can take me on. Drawing conclusions that aren't well-founded can get you killed. Most people fail to take that into account.

I see the precise moment he decides to lunge at me. Before he has a chance to do so, I get up, grab the chair, and smash it against his head. Randy crumbles and falls to his knees, palms pressed heavily against the floor. As he restores his balance and presence of mind, I reach into my jacket, take out my gun, and begin screwing the silencer onto the barrel. It won't extinguish the sound of the gunshots completely, but it'll definitely quieten them. I don't want any of the neighbors interrupting our discussion.

"I really hoped it wouldn't come to this, Randy, but you're leaving me no choice."

He looks up, and when he sees the gun, crawls backward on all fours. I aim to his left and pull the trigger, sending a bullet into the wooden flooring an inch from his hand.

"Stop," I say, and he freezes. "The only reason you're still breathing, Randy, is because I heard you're a doctor, and I have a lot of respect for medical professionals. So, I'm giving you one last chance to comply."

He nods quickly and whimpers, his eyes wide and filled with panic.

"Good. Tomorrow morning, you'll resign from your position at St. Mary's. If I ever hear that anyone catches sight of you within ten miles of the building, or Milene, your life is over. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Perfect." I aim at his leg and shoot him in the thigh.

He screams and falls to his side, pressing his hands onto the bleeding

wound. His knuckles turn white from the strain.

“Just a small reminder that I’m serious. You can call 911 when I’m gone, tell them you ran into a burglar.” I unscrew the silencer and conceal my gun, then head toward the front door. “Ten-mile radius, Randy.”

As soon as I’m in the car, I take out my phone and open the surveillance app. Milene is sitting on her sofa, eating chips and focused on a sitcom on the TV. The cat is sitting on her lap, trying to pull one of Milene’s snacks from the bowl with its paw. With her busy daily schedule, the girl needs better nutrition. Since I’ve been watching her, she’s only cooked for herself a handful of times, and only when she has a day off. Based on what I’ve seen, she’s awful at it. Other than those few instances, she’s been eating fast food. Sometimes, when she has longer shifts, she crashes when she gets home without eating a thing. If that goes on, she’ll get sick.

I send a message to Ada, my housekeeper, with instructions on what I need her to do, and place the phone in its holder next to the steering wheel, so I can watch and drive at the same time.

## Chapter 4



“Jesus fuck!” I yelp and jump over the cat who’s sleeping unaware, sprawled lengthways along the floor right in front of the entryway. I almost squished him underfoot. Again.

Shaking my head, I go to the kitchen area, my mind on leftovers from the day before, and then sleep. The night shifts are killing me. I open the fridge, reaching my hand up to the top shelf, and blink twice. I close the fridge and turn around to make sure I’m in the right apartment.

My kitchen.

My cat.

The two-day-old pile of dirty dishes, also mine. No, I didn’t walk into the wrong apartment. I open the fridge again, gawk at its contents, and take out the phone from my back pocket to call Pippa.

“Did you drop by my place while I was at work?” I ask.

“Nope.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Why?”

“I think someone broke in last night.”

“What?! Did you report it? What did they take?”

“Ahem. They didn’t take anything.” I bend to inspect the contents of the shelves, blinking several times to be certain I’m not imagining things.

“They’ve . . . stocked my fridge.”

“I’m not following.”

“Someone broke in, filled my fridge with vegetables, a ton of meat, milk, eggs, and”—I reach for the plastic container on the middle shelf and lift the lid—“home-cooked soup.”

I'm greeted with silence on the other end of the line, then the sound of giggling. "Yeah, must be little home elves. You're funny."

"I'm serious. I haven't seen a fridge this full since I left home."

"You probably stocked it yesterday and forgot. Fridges don't miraculously fill themselves."

"I'm sleep-deprived, not demented, for God's sake. I'd remember going to a store and spending half my monthly paycheck on food." I reach out to take a block of cheese from the middle shelf and turn it to get a better view. It's one of those fancy, moldy varieties. "There's even a huge package of Gorgonzola there. Posh burglars."

"You're serious?"

"Of course I'm serious." I throw the cheese back on the shelf and slam the fridge closed. "I'm calling the police."

"To tell them what?"

Shit. She has a point, they'd only laugh. "Do you think it was David?"

"Your ex? I thought he left for India with his yoga group when you two broke up. Man, that guy was super strange, and obsessed with food. I can totally imagine him sneaking into your place."

"Jesus. I was certain I got the extra keys back." I sigh and squeeze my nape. "I'm going to crash, but I'm messaging David when I wake up, and I'm changing the locks first thing tomorrow."

I cut the call and head to bed. A stray thought passes through my mind as I'm falling asleep—wasn't David a vegan?



Tilting my head to the side, I watch Milene as she gets ready for work. She brushes her hair in front of the mirror, then gathers it near the crown of her head in a high ponytail. I prefer when she wears it down. I turn my phone face down and focus on the two capos across from my desk, Cosimo and Rocco, who are arguing about hiring yet another construction company.

“Atticus works on government projects, as well,” Cosimo snaps. “They have strict internal and external audits. What if someone decides to check out all the companies they work for and combs through our documents?”

“All our contracts are solid. They won’t find anything suspicious.” Rocco shrugs.

“Oh? And if they dig deeper?” I ask. “Checking up on our investors, for example? Did you think of that, Rocco?”

“Shit,” he mumbles.

“Exactly. We’re not doing any business with Atticus.” I nod toward the door of my office. “We’re done for today.”

When they leave, I return my attention to my phone, and switch on the second camera feed. Milene is filling her lunch box with some meat she obviously grilled herself because half of it appears to be charred. I’ll need to tell Ada to get more groceries and send Alessandro to fill her fridge again next week. She changed the locks, but locked doors have never posed a problem for Alessandro. The moment she leaves her place, I power off my laptop and head to the garage.

I drive forty minutes to reach the hospital where Milene works. Parking close to the entrance, I lean back in my seat and wait. Sometime later, she comes around the corner, and I follow her with my eyes until she disappears through the wide sliding doors. I turn on the ignition, reverse, and leave the parking lot.

This obsession I have with the girl hasn’t waned like I expected it to. In fact, it’s only intensified. At some point in the last couple of days, I’ve switched from checking the camera feed a few times per day to leaving it on constantly, except for when I’m in meetings. Even then, if the conversation goes on for more than three hours, I’ll pull it up and have a quick glance. It’s barely enough to alleviate the anxiety that builds whenever I’m unaware of her location for an extended period. Milene Scardoni, for whatever reason, has become a drug coursing through my veins. The more I get, the more I want. I need to see her again, in person. It won’t be today, but soon.

I stop at a red light a few blocks from home and check the rearview mirror. A familiar black car has been following me for the past fifteen minutes, staying in the same lane and a few vehicles back. Looks like the

wife of the Boston don has sent another one of her pets to follow me. She needs to have her men trained better, because disposing of her incompetent spies is becoming bothersome. After the traffic light switches to green, I turn right and drive for half an hour until I reach a half-constructed office building. I make another right and head into the underground garage, which should have been finished last week. Based on the boxes, painting supplies, and rolls of electric cables strewn along the walls, the completion is way behind schedule.

After parking next to the service door leading to the stairwell, I take my gun from below the seat, and leave the car. I pass a concrete pillar on my way to the stairs and enter the building, leaving the door ajar.

Less than thirty seconds later, a man in black jeans and a black T-shirt sneaks inside the garage. He keeps his back to the wall and creeps toward the service door with a gun in hand. As he reaches the threshold and presses the palm of his free hand to the doorjamb, I step out of the shadows and put a bullet in his temple. The blood sprays across the freshly painted wall, and the man's body drops to the ground. I lower my gun and, taking out my phone, approach the body.

"Yes?" a female voice answers.

"Nera. I found something of yours."

"Oh. How unfortunate." There is a short silence on the other end before she continues, "Well, I guess we're even. Should we put a stop to this situation for now? I'm having some issues here in Boston. I need to focus on that for the moment and can't exactly spend the time and effort on hunting the spies you're sending."

"Yes. That would be wise. Please pass my best wishes for a quick recovery to Don Leone."

"I will," she says, and the line goes dead.

I step over the dead body at my feet and call Nino.

"I have another of Nera Leone's spies. Send someone to dispose of the body. It's in the garage under the Brooklyn office building."

"Right away. Should we expect more?"

"No. Nera and I came to an agreement to pause spying on each other for

the time being.”

“Will we be sending a message again?” he asks.

“Yes. The head is enough this time. But wrap it in a fancy red paper. It’s her favorite color.”

“That woman always gave me the creeps.”

“You know the views Cosa Nostra has on women being in a position of power. She needs to be ruthless to put up with all of that.”

“You think she’ll uphold her promise.”

“Yes. Nera is a snake, but she won’t go back on her word. Too bad she’ll be dead soon.”

“You think someone will kill her?”

“As soon as her husband dies. She’ll keep the reins until then, but the moment the don dies, she’s done.” I put the phone away and return to my car.

## Chapter 5



"I can't wait to get home." I sigh and close my locker. "I've switched shifts with Harper for tomorrow. I'll be pulling a double."

"Why?" Pippa asks.

"She said her mother's sick and needs a visit. I couldn't very well say no."

"You're too soft sometimes. Harper never agrees to switch with anyone." She shakes her head. "Did you run into that sexy stranger again? The one from three weeks ago?"

"Nope." I wave to the girl at the reception desk as we pass.

"I can't believe he didn't ask for your number."

"Maybe he wasn't interested." I shrug. "He saw Randy pestering me, decided to help, and that was all."

"I'm still shocked Randy quit. It was so sudden."

"I heard he mentioned a family emergency and left town," I say as we pass through the exit doors. "Thank God."

Suddenly, Pippa's no longer walking in step with me. I stop and turn to find her staring at something, her eyes wide.

"Pip? Are you coming?"

"Um . . . about your mystery guy."

"What about him?"

"Looks like he might be interested after all." She smirks and nods toward the parking lot.

I follow her gaze, and the corners of my mouth twitch in an involuntary smile. Fifteen yards from us, the jacket guy is leaning against the hood of a big silver car, his arms crossed in front of him.

"Holy fuck. Is that a Bentley?" Pippa whispers in my ear as she nudges me

with her shoulder. “Go over now. Make him marry you. You’ll never have to work again.” She giggles.

I snort. What she’s suggesting is the exact thing I’ve been trying my damndest to avoid. “See you tomorrow.”

The jacket guy watches me as I walk toward him, and I find myself wishing I was wearing something a little more flattering than hospital scrubs. The midday light brings out the gray in his hair, and once again, I’m amazed at how attractive he is. Today, he’s wearing a simple gray shirt with nothing over it. His stance emphasizes his wide shoulders and bulging biceps. He’s built like a professional swimmer—toned muscle, with a narrow waist and broad chest. I reach his direct orbit and smile.

“Well, hello again, stranger. If you are still a stranger,” I say. “Just passing by?”

“Kind of.” He straightens and puts his hands in his pockets. “I was wondering if you’d like to have lunch with me.”

“I don’t usually go to lunch with men whose names I don’t know, Kurt.”

I expect him to smile at that, but instead he just returns my gaze. “Coffee?”

I wonder why he doesn’t want to share his name. I mean, he could have given me a fake name from the start. It’s not like I’d ask for his ID to confirm. Maybe he thinks I’ll find him more alluring this way? If that’s the case, he’s not entirely wrong.

“Coffee might be doable.” I shrug and motion toward the small place nearby where most of the hospital staff, including me, are at least semi-regular visitors. “There’s a café across the street.”

He nods and follows me in silence as we cross the road. We pick one of the tables on the patio, covered with a garish red and white gingham tablecloth. The jacket guy pulls a chair out for me and takes a seat at my side.

“So, are you stalking me, Kurt?”

“No,” he says. “I had some business in the neighborhood and saw you leaving the hospital as I was getting into my car.”

“What a coincidence.”

The daughter of the café owner comes to take our orders. A cappuccino

for me and a double espresso, no sugar, for him. I've always wondered how people can drink coffee without sugar.

"How's life treating you, Goldie?"

There is something unusual in the way he watches me, waiting for an answer. As if he genuinely wants to know and isn't just asking for the sake of making conversation. It may sound stupid since I've only truly exchanged a handful of words with him, but I have the impression he rarely gives his undivided attention to anyone.

"Pretty much the same," I say. "People getting stabbed. Overdoses. A bunch of broken bones. One poisoning."

"Poisoning?"

"Jealous wife. The husband was cheating." I grin. "She wasn't happy at all."

"Did he live?"

"Yup. We pumped his stomach when he came in."

"What did she use?"

"Some cocktail of kitchen chemicals." I raise an eyebrow. "You?"

"No poisonings here. Just meetings and a ton of emails."

I squint my eyes at him. Even though he looks like a businessman, with his expensive clothes and a watch that likely costs more than a year's worth of my rent, he doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd be dealing with paperwork. He holds himself in a certain way, even now when he's seemingly relaxed, and it makes me certain he's not an ordinary manager.

"You didn't just happen to be in the neighborhood, did you, Kurt?" I pick up the coffee the waitress has placed in front of me and take a sip.

"No." He leans forward, reaches over and removes the pin that's holding my hair in a bun at the nape of my neck, causing it to cascade down my back. "You have really unusual hair, Goldie."

There is nothing unusual about my hair. Except for the fact that my sister and I share its light shade, but no one else in our family does. Blonde hair is not common in the Italian community. Bianca and I are the only ones who take after our Norwegian grandmother.

He takes a few strands between his gloved fingers, lightly brushing the locks.

*Tell him to stop! He's crossing boundaries. You can't let a random stranger do that.*

I ignore the voice of reason completely and look at the strand of hair he's holding, noticing he's only using the first three digits, while the other two remain slightly rigid and bent. I wonder what happened with his hand.

"So, you were waiting for me," I say. "Why?"

"Is there anything wrong with my wanting to take a beautiful woman out to lunch?"

"That usually comes after the necessary introductions, Kurt." I smirk. "Do you have something to hide? Is there a reason why you don't want to tell me your name?"

"What could I possibly have to hide?" His gloved fingers release my hair and brush against the skin along my upper arm in the process, sending an excited shudder throughout my body.

"I don't know. Are you an ex-con? A politician with a wife and three kids at home?"

"I don't have so much as a speeding ticket to my name. No wife or kids, either."

"Why not?" I raise an eyebrow. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-four. Having a wife and kids was never something I planned."

"And do you have a set plan for everything?"

"For most things, yes." He looks into my eyes. "Would you like to apply for the wife position?"

I burst out laughing. It's not the question itself, but the way it's delivered in a completely serious tone. "Sorry, Kurt. I'm not exactly on the market. You'll have to search for a likely candidate elsewhere."

"Do you have something against marriage? Are you afraid of commitment?"

"Nope." I shake my head in bewilderment over discussing marriage with a man I've just met. "I have a well-founded fear of ending up tied to a man I

don't love. Too many bad examples in my family, I guess. At one time, my sister Bianca and I had an agreement that we'd never get married. We planned on being cat ladies, living in houses that smelled like pee." I reach for my cappuccino. "That was until she upended her half of the bargain and married a scary Russian guy. I changed my perspective on marriage for real after that."

"How so?"

"Strangely, I saw how good it could be. Those two are . . . like damn soulmates or something. I've never seen two people so fucking in love. They could be on a Hallmark card." I take a sip of my coffee. "I can't explain it. You'd have to see it to understand."

"You plan on marrying a scary Russian guy, as well?" he asks.

"Of course not." I laugh. "I don't like scary guys. What I'm saying is that I won't settle for anything less."

"And you said you weren't romantic . . ." His finger lands on my bare forearm and traces a line down to the blue veins at my wrist. I swear my heart truly skips a beat.

"Maybe I am, a little." I shrug, aware of his finger moving upward again and trying to suppress the need to simply close my eyes and enjoy his touch.

"Has that guy been bothering you again?" he asks. "The one from the bar?"

"Randy? Nope. I heard he suddenly left the city, hasn't even called. Thank God."

"Good." He nods and moves his finger to the back of my hand. "Is anything else new?"

"Other than a bunch of bizarre stuff happening? No."

"What bizarre stuff?"

"Well, I could start with me going on a date with a man whose name I don't know." I grin.

"So, this is a date?"

"You tell me."

"Maybe it is." He takes my hand, turns it palm upward, and resumes

tracing patterns on my skin. “I don’t go on many dates, so I’m not exactly sure how to classify this.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You don’t go on dates?”

“No. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been on a date. Maybe in high school.”

I double over, laughing. “You’re shitting me, right?”

He’s lying. Has to be. When a man looks like he does, there must be a ton of women lining up to throw themselves into his arms. He looks down at my hand, which slipped away from his while I was giggling, and wraps his fingers around my wrist. Pulling it closer, he continues to trace the lines with his fingertip. Love line, life line, I’m never sure which is which.

“What other bizarre stuff?” he asks.

I blink and shake my head. His touch is very light, but it still raises goose bumps on my skin. Not just my arms, either. And I certainly don’t plan on removing my hand.

“Well, there’s the flower incident. I still have no idea who sent them.”

“Yes, I remember you mentioning it. What did you do with all the flowers?”

“Asked the hospital laundry department guys to help me take them over to St. Mary’s. We brought the flowers to the rooms of long-term patients,” I say. “I kept some. I shouldn’t have since I don’t know who sent them, but they were too pretty.”

His finger moves up along my forearm. “What else?”

“My ex broke into my place last week and stocked my fridge.” I look up at him. “He says he didn’t do it, but I don’t believe him.”

David isn’t exactly a relationship type of guy. I find it super strange he’d try to get back together with an act like that, but I can’t think of anyone else who could have done it.

“Your ex?” he asks. “Were you together long?”

“With all the off-and-on periods included . . .” I think about it. “Maybe a year.”

The finger on my forearm stills for a moment.

“A year,” he says, then continues with his pattern. “That’s a long time.

Does he live nearby?"

"Yeah, but he's in India right now. A yoga retreat or something like that. He probably sent someone to handle the fridge thing for him. Why do you ask?"

"I hear India's nice. He should consider staying there. It would be good for his health."

I squint my eyes at him. "Why? Because of the tropical climate?"

His fingers move back down to my palm. "Because of the air."

God, I love this man's voice. My eyes land on his watch and, reluctantly, I pull my hand away from his. "I have to go. I have an appointment with the vet for my cat."

"I'll drop you off." He takes out his wallet and leaves fifty dollars, which is way too much money, then stands up. "What's wrong with the cat?"

"He's been puking since last night. I think he ate one of my hair ties again."

As we're crossing the street, a bunch of teenage boys rush toward us from the other side, shouting and fooling around as they often do. The jacket guy's hand lands on my hip, drawing me closer to his side, and he holds me tightly as the kids fly by in a flurry of waved arms and banter. Damn, I'm a sucker for guys with a protective streak.

"Is that normal?" he asks. "I heard dogs might eat anything, but not cats."

"I don't think so. He has issues," I say as we walk toward his car. "But at least he's stopped stealing food from the lady next door."

"Why keep the cat if he's got issues?"

"He kind of moved in without asking. I couldn't throw him out."

We reach his car, and I turn around, suddenly wondering how wise it is to get into a car with someone I barely know. As the thought hits me, he raises his hand and takes my chin between his fingers, tilting my face upward. A finger lightly brushes the skin on my cheek, and I find myself leaning into his touch. His head bends until his mouth is next to my ear, his lips making slight but electric contact.

"You are one extremely unusual creature, Goldie," he whispers into my

ear. His voice is rough and hypnotizing, sending a shiver down my spine. “And I like unusual things very much.”

His other arm wraps around my waist, and in an instant, I find myself sitting on the hood of his car, my legs astride his body.

“There’s nothing unusual about me,” I say, watching his amber eyes. He has a small scar on his forehead above his eyebrow, and I reach out to touch it. Our faces are so close that his breath brushes against my lips. If I were to lean forward a little, my lips would touch his. I move my finger from his eyebrow down the side of his face and then bury it in his hair at the back of his neck. At the same time, his finger slides upward from my chin to my bottom lip.

“I beg to differ, Goldie.” His finger vanishes from my mouth, replaced by firm lips.

The kiss is slow. Controlled. Just like him. I tighten my hand at his neck and marvel at how his lips savor mine. It’s as though he’s discovered a new and exotic land. I’ve always thought that hard and forceful kisses were the most intense. I couldn’t have been more wrong because the way he’s exploring my mouth is downright sinful. Would he make love the same way? For some reason, I don’t believe he would. His other hand reaches down to the small of my back and under my top, sliding upward along the ridges of my spine, igniting the firework flashes with each and every gentle touch.

“Come to my place,” I whisper into his mouth, not quite believing my boldness. I don’t invite strangers home, and I’ve only slept with men I’ve been dating, but here I am, inviting a nameless man into my bed to do whatever he wants with me. It’s reckless. Crazy. Why don’t I care?

He angles his head, watching me intensely. His hand is still holding my chin, his finger caressing my lower lip. “Are you sure?”

I open my mouth to say yes when a whizzing sound pierces the air as the windshield behind me shatters. I scream. The arm around my waist tightens, the hood disappears from beneath me, and I find myself pressed fully against the side of the car, my face flat against a rock-hard chest. Another shot echoes through the air. The bullet sends shards of asphalt up like sparks just to the left of us. A car screeches to a halt somewhere nearby and is closely followed by a second one. The chest vanishes, and suddenly, I’m being bundled into the back seat of a vehicle.

The jacket guy is speaking to the driver in a disturbingly even voice. “Take the girl home. Make sure you’re not followed.”

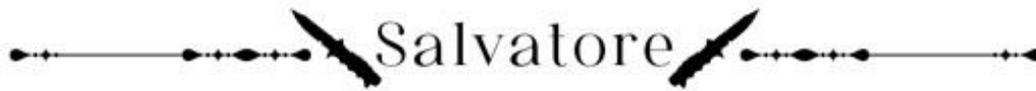
“Boss,” the driver nods toward my protector’s upper arm. “You’re bleeding.”

My eyes snap to his side, and I see the dark crimson stain spreading across his sleeve.

He ignores it completely and turns to someone who’s now standing behind him, out of my field of vision. “Find that fucking sniper.”

He throws one rapid glance at me and brings his palm down on the roof of the car. In a split second, the vehicle lunges forward, and I’m pressed to the back of the seat, feeling for the first time what it must be like to blast into space.

## Chapter 6



“You got reckless, Boss,” Nino says. “Standing there for two hours, waiting for the girl where anyone could see you. And in the middle of the day. It was only to be expected.”

“Did you find the shooter?” I ask.

“It took us most of the night, but yes. Just a gun for hire.” He looks at the bulge of the bandage beneath my sleeve. “And not a very good one.”

“Did he say who hired him?”

“Stefano worked him over pretty good, but he kept saying he doesn’t know who hired him. Could it have been Nera Leone?”

“It’s not her,” I say. The wife of the Boston don is a great schemer, but she keeps her promises. “Where are you holding the shooter?”

“In the old safe house.”

“I’ll come over later. What about the girl?”

“She went to work this morning, as usual. We have two men on her constantly, but so far nothing suspicious has occurred. I don’t think anyone other than the hitman saw her with you. She should be safe.” He looks at me pointedly. “If you keep your distance.”

He’s right. But the problem is, I don’t want to keep my distance.

\* \* \*

It takes me two hours to go over the updates on the shipments of drugs with Arturo, my underboss. I leave the operational part of the narcotics business to him, so if everything works as it should, he only needs to bring me up to speed once a week. I spend the next hour with Cosimo, Rocco, and Giancarlo—the capos in charge of our construction division. They report to

me daily. Dusk has already fallen when I head over to the safe house.

An hour later, I turn my car onto a dirt road that's hidden from prying eyes by a thicket of trees and follow the track downhill. Soon, I reach a rusty gate and flash my lights four times. A man in black tactical clothing emerges from behind a tree, unlocks the gate, and drags it open.

"Is Stefano still here?" I ask when he approaches the driver-side window.

"Yes, Boss." He nods. "How's the arm?"

"Just a graze," I say and proceed along the trail, past the overgrown bushes that sweep the side of the car. A rickety house comes into view, and I park on the gravel out front.

When I enter the safe house, I find Stefano sitting in a recliner, dressed only in his black suit pants. His chest is bare and glistens with sweat and blood, most of which appears to have dried to a dark, crusty brown. Across from him, tied to a wooden chair, sits a man in his late forties. He's still alive, but Stefano has taken him right to the edge, it seems.

"Got a little carried away, Stefano?" I ask.

"Boss." He jumps off the recliner and comes to stand next to our unfortunate guest. "Sorry. I heard he shot you, so I might have been a little rougher than normal."

Sometimes, my men are like an old maids' church choir. They love to gossip among themselves. I don't give a fuck, as long as they keep the information within the right circles. They know better than to let any news—personal or business—spread if they don't want to end up like Octavio.

I walk toward Stefano's vacated recliner, sit down, and regard the shooter. He's conscious, but unresponsive. It happens when you overdo a beating, eventually numbness and dissociation set in, and you're left with a lump of throbbing, inert flesh. Stefano should have switched tactics hours ago if he wanted results. But he's young. He'll learn.

When I took over the New York Family, I changed the way things work. I delegated most of the operational stuff—things that don't require my personal involvement—to Arturo and the capos. That left me only with high-level decision-making in terms of general business oversight. I kept a close hold on the Family stuff, however, including the handling of thieves, snitches, and outside threats.

“Cut off his hand,” I say to Stefano.

The man starts talking the moment the saw bites at the skin of his wrist two minutes later.

“The Irish!” he screams. “It was the Irish.”

“Who, specifically?” I ask.

“Patrick Fitzgerald.”

I lean back in the chair and regard the prisoner. It’s nothing new, someone’s always trying to kill me, but the Irish are becoming a serious problem. When they attacked the Bratva in Chicago four years ago, their attempt ended with half their own men dead, the leader included. It looks like they’ve set their sights on my city now. They’ll have to be dealt with, and fast.

“Did you tell the Irish I was meeting a woman?” I ask.

The shooter stares at me, then shakes his head quickly. I give Stefano a nod. He takes a knife and thrusts it into the man’s side, hopefully avoiding any vital organs. The prisoner screams.

“I . . . I might have mentioned her,” he says between whimpers.

“Did you give them her description?”

“Yes.”

I close my eyes. If the Irish think there is something between us, they might come for Milene. “What else?”

“I told them she works at the hospital.”

I open my eyes and stare at the peeling wallpaper behind him. It’s not the fact that he’s passed the information along that stuns me, but the anxiety that builds in my gut. When I think about how easily this man’s bullet could have caught Milene, it turns into full-blown rage. This bastard missed her, but the next one might not. For a few minutes I stare at the wall, making sure my features don’t betray anything of my internal turmoil.

Unfamiliar emotions wash over me. I feel like a sailor caught out on the stormy sea. I let the feelings overtake me, taking them all in. The urge to destroy rises inside me like the tide. It’s anger. Fury. An unrelenting maelstrom.

I get up, walk toward the prisoner, and take the knife from Stefano's hand. With the blade at the sniper's neck, I swipe hard, slicing his throat from ear to ear.

\* \* \*

After I leave the safe house, I get inside my car and taking out my phone, pull up the surveillance feed from Milene's place. The cat is hanging from a half-shredded curtain, evidently chasing some bug. Milene is not there. Anxiety immediately builds deep in my chest.

I call Aldo. "Where is she?"

"Still at work. I'm parked in front of the hospital, I'll let you know the moment she heads home."

"Don't let her out of your sight." I cut the call and stare into the distance. I'm not sure for how long. Eventually, I pick up the phone again and call Luca Rossi, the don of the Chicago Family.

"Mr. Rossi. We may have a problem."

"Something regarding the last construction project?" he asks.

"No. This is a personal matter," I say and lean back in my seat. "There is something of yours here. Something that shouldn't have been in my city, Mr. Rossi . . ."



"Say that again." Pippa lowers her purse and stares at me.

"Someone shot at us." I grab a bottle of water from my locker and take a sip.

"In the middle of the day? Did you call the police? And why are you so . . . unperturbed?"

It's not my first rodeo, but Pippa doesn't have to know that. "My

mysterious stranger threw me into his friend's car and sent me away. I can't say what happened afterward. The driver dropped me off and hightailed it."

"Was it a random shooting?"

"I don't know. It's possible they were aiming at the jacket guy."

"Why would someone shoot at him? You said he's just a businessman."

Yeah, I've wondered about that, too. "I'm not even sure whether they were shooting at us or if it was a stray bullet. Everything happened so fast. One moment we were kissing, and the next, the windshield behind me shattered, and then I ended up in the back of another car."

"What?" She widens her eyes at me. "You kissed him? Was it good?"

"Technically speaking, he kissed me." I grin in spite of myself. "And yup, it was good."

"Are you going to see him again?"

"I don't know. We didn't exactly have time to exchange numbers." I close the locker and lean back against it. "There is something about him. I can't put my finger on what it is exactly, but I'm attracted to him like a bee to honey. And believe me, there is nothing sweet about that guy."

"He certainly is hot."

"It's not just that. He's . . . weird, in some strangely attractive way. He was completely serious the entire time, as if we were in a business meeting, discussing stock fluctuations. But the way he looked at me . . ." I sigh. "Have you ever gone out on a date and talked nonsense to break the ice? There, outside the coffee shop, I rambled on about work while his eyes studied mine. And, Pippa, he listened to me. Not because he was being polite, but as though he really wanted to know." I close my eyes and shake my head. "I like him. Like, really like him. But I don't like being shot at. And I would have really appreciated it if he'd shared his name this time."

\* \* \*

I slide the key into the new lock, but the front door opens without me having to turn it. Did I forget to lock up this morning? I step into my apartment and freeze like a waxwork model. My brother is sitting at the

kitchen table, his arms crossed, staring at me.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Milene?” he asks through his teeth.

I cross the small space and drop heavily down on the sofa. “How did you find me?”

“How? That’s a funny story, really. Last night, Rossi called me, furious. He wanted to know what the hell my sister was doing in New York. I said it must be a mistake since my sister was in Illinois.”

Shit. How did our don find out I’m in New York? I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, then look up at Angelo. “I knew you wouldn’t let me come to New York, but St Mary’s is the best hospital. I was lucky to get the chance to work there and didn’t want to miss it. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” he snarls. “You’re fucking *sorry*?”

“I have three more months of my residency left, and then I’ll leave, I promise. Don Ajello won’t ever find out.”

Angelo regards me with his jaw pressed tight, the veins in his neck pulsing rapidly, and shakes his head. “How do you think I got your address, Milene?”

An icy chill passes down my spine as dread spreads a numb sort of panic throughout my body.

“Ajello sent your address to Rossi, Milene. Along with a copy of your residency details, showing you’ve been here nine fucking months!” He yells so loudly that my poor cat jumps from the sofa and dashes into the bathroom.

All I can do is stare at my brother, incapable of speech.

“Do you realize you’ve almost started a goddamned war?”

“But . . . I’m just working at a hospital. It’s not like I’m selling drugs on Ajello’s turf or anything. Why does it matter?”

“He’s the fucking Don of the New York Family, and you went against his specific decree. It sends the message that you don’t recognize him as an authority figure in his own region. And by extension, neither does the Chicago Family.” He slumps his shoulders and squeezes the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “You being a capo’s sister only makes the situation a hundred times worse.”

“I . . . I never saw it that way, Angelo.” I bury my hands in my hair.

“Jesus.”

He sighs and looks up at the ceiling. “Do you remember Enzo, Milene?”

“Catalina’s idiot cousin who died in an accident last year? What does Enzo have to do with anything?”

“He didn’t die in an accident. Ajello found out he came to New York for a weekend “mancation”—strip clubs, drinking, having a good time. Nothing to do with the Family business. Enzo’s body was delivered to Rossi the following day. It came in several bags, Milene.”

“Bags?” I gape at him.

“Yes. There were three. The note said it was easier for FedEx to handle smaller packages. It worked out to be cheaper.”

I wrap my arms around myself. “Is he going to kill me, too?”

“He has every right to, and no one would be able to do anything about it.” He looks at me. “But he’s demanded another compensation. Rossi agreed.”

“What kind of compensation?”

“A marriage.”

My head snaps up. “No,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry. You’ve brought this on yourself.”

“I am not getting married!” I yell while trying very hard to keep the tears at bay, but they come anyway, blurring my vision.

“There’s nothing I can do, sis.” Angelo gets up from the chair and walks toward me, crouching at my feet. “If it were just you, I could have arranged to get you out of the country or something. But it’s the whole Family on the line here.”

My brother’s right, there isn’t anything he could do. Saying no would mean war. People would die because of me and my stupidity. I knew the risk of coming to Ajello’s territory and decided to come anyway.

“I fucked up big time, didn’t I?” I sniff.

“Yes, you did. I’m sorry.”

“So, who am I arranged to marry?”

He grabs my hand and just watches me for a few seconds, then sighs in.

“Don Ajello, Milene.”

Panic explodes inside my chest. “What? I’m not marrying a man who chops people up and mails their body parts.”

“If you don’t, Ajello may attack. And, even though the Bratva will likely side with us because of Bianca, it will still be a fucking bloodbath.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Our sister’s husband is the Bratva’s enforcer. If the Russians are dragged into this, he’ll be sent to the front line. I can’t do that to Bianca.

“When?” I choke out.

“He’ll be here with the marriage officiant at noon.”

My tears flow so fast they fall like rain onto the wooden floor, each one splashing against the last.

\* \* \*

Exactly at noon, a sharp knock sounds at the door, but I remain seated and motionless on the sofa, still wearing my work scrubs. Angelo answers it.

My brother tried to convince me to change into something more appropriate, but I told him to fuck off and die. In the three hours I’ve spent on the sofa, I’ve gone through shock and disbelief, then denial and self-pity. Now? Now, I’m royally pissed off.

Angelo opens the door, and a huge bald man in his fifties marches confidently into my apartment. I can’t suppress a shudder. It could be worse. It could be much worse. My inner monologue is still repeating the thought when the bald guy moves to the side, revealing another figure. I spring to my feet in an instant. It’s the jacket guy.

My enigmatic stranger walks in as though he’s lived here all his life, and I can’t decide whether to laugh or cry. The son of a bitch knew who I was the entire time. He was probably the one who informed Ajello. Bastard.

“Milene,” my brother says and nods toward the mysterious asshole. “This is Don Salvatore Ajello.”

My jaw drops. What the fuck?

“Nice to meet you at last, Miss Scardoni,” he says in his even tone.

I stare. Blink. Then stare some more, paying no attention to what is going on around me.

“For such a tiny woman, you’ve created quite an uproar,” he adds, his words snapping me out of my stupor.

I press my lips together. The nerve he has, pretending we don’t know each other when he’s well aware that he had his tongue thoroughly inspecting my mouth not forty-eight hours earlier. I guess he’s waiting for my reply. Well, he’s not getting it.

“Milene!” Angelo nudges me with his elbow. “She’s just nervous.”

I let my lips widen in a sarcastic smile. Salvatore Ajello ignores my brother’s comment and regards me. Even though I keep on smiling, I communicate all the loathing I feel through my eyes. And there is loads of it.



My gaze is focused on the road, which comes in and out of view through the windshield as wipers periodically clear the glass of the steady rain.

Milene hasn’t said a word since I walked into her place, other than to answer “Yes” to the officiant’s question. I expected her to be surprised, but I didn’t expect this. Being ignored is a new experience for me, and the fact she’s the one doing it makes me want to hit something. Instead, I grip the steering wheel harder. It doesn’t help. I take a deep breath, trying to quell the raging fire within. Pissed. No, that’s not the exact term. Livid. I am fucking livid, even though it’s not a reasonable reaction.

A mewling sound reaches my ears from the back seat. The damn cat had completely slipped my mind until Milene left her building, holding a carrier with the dumb animal inside.

I park the car in my spot in the underground garage below my building and get out, intending to open the door for Milene, but she’s already out and opening the back door to take out the cat. Walking around the car, I open the

trunk and take out her bag as she moves to stand to my right. She grabs the handle with her free hand, wrapping her fingers around it right next to mine, and pulls, trying with all her might to take the bag from me. I keep hold until she releases the handle and huffs. As we walk toward the elevator, Milene makes sure she stays two steps behind me, and doesn't say a word.

When we reach my penthouse, I lead her across the living room and down the hallway to my bedroom and open the door. Milene stops at the threshold and casts a quick glance around the room.

"Not happening," she says and takes a step back into the hallway.

"What, exactly?"

"Me sleeping in your room."

I meet her gaze. "How do you know this is my bedroom?"

"Please." She snorts. "Massive dark wood furniture? A bed the size of a football field? It screams 'self-centered, selfish bastard.'"

"Is that how you see me?"

"Yes. Am I wrong?"

No, she isn't wrong. "And where would you like to sleep?"

"Back at my place."

"You know that's not an option."

She lifts the cat carrier and wraps her arms around it, creating a barrier between us.

Maybe I should give her some space. For now. "All right."

I exit my bedroom and head down the hallway toward the second bedroom, leaving her to follow.

"Lunch will be in the dining room at two," I say when I step inside, turning to find her watching me through narrowed eyes. "Is something wrong?"

She lowers the cat carrier to the floor, then crosses her arms and juts her chin out. "You mean, other than you making a mess of my life, Salvatore?"

A feeling of immense satisfaction passes through me upon hearing her say my name. I take two steps forward until I am standing right in front of her.

“Would you prefer I killed you?”

“Well, I can’t say it makes much of a difference.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Oh? My life might have seemed small and meaningless to you, but it was *my* life.” She chokes on the words. “Why didn’t you just tell me to leave New York? You knew who I was from the start.”

“I planned on doing that. It would have made things much easier.” I reach out and take a strand of her hair between my fingers. “However, the situation has changed.”

“Why? In what way?”

Because I’ve decided I won’t let her go anywhere. “It’s nothing you should concern yourself about now,” I say.

“Yes, let’s not overwhelm my limited brain with stuff only men can understand.” She moves her gaze to the strand of hair I’m still holding and grabs at my hand, trying to pry my fingers open. “Let go of my hair.”

“You always knew you’d end up married to someone in the Family, Milene. So, what’s the problem?”

“Well, therein lies the rub—I didn’t,” she mumbles as she keeps pulling at my fingers. “I left Chicago because I hoped I’d somehow avoid that destiny.”

I let go of her hair and take her chin, tilting her head up. Her green eyes bore into mine as her breathing picks up slightly. “You can’t run from Cosa Nostra, Milene.” I say and move my hand.

“No. I guess I can’t.” she whispers and takes a step back, escaping my hold. Grabbing the carrier again, she walks past me toward the bed and puts the cat down next to it. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I follow her with my eyes until she disappears into the bathroom, wondering if I’ve made the right decision. Maybe the Irish wouldn’t have come for Milene, and by marrying her, I’ve only made her a more lucrative target. But I wasn’t satisfied with watching her from afar anymore.

I want Milene Scardoni like I’ve never wanted anything else before.



I let the cat out of his carrier, then flop down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Calling this a disaster would be an understatement. What am I going to do? Live the rest of my life here, with him? I don't know who he is. He doesn't know me. Who the fuck still thinks arranged marriages are a good idea? It's like we've forgotten five hundred years of history and returned to the Middle Ages, for fuck's sake. Yes, I messed up. He didn't have to marry me to prove his point. He could have let me go back to Chicago, and everything would have been a bed of roses. Why the fuck did he want to marry me?

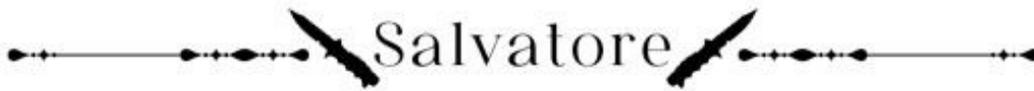
Was it some kind of a whim? We didn't even exchange rings. Maybe he just wanted to teach me a lesson? No, he has more important things to do than that. Sex? Nope, it wasn't that either because I was ready to have sex with him anyway without this shitstorm. Well, it's not going to happen now, that's for sure. Maybe he's bored, and he'll let me go when he's had enough of me.

I roll over on the bed to bury my face in the pillow and groan. He didn't do this out of boredom, and I very much doubt he'll let me go. This shit is for real.

Me. Married.

To the fucking Don of New York.

## Chapter 7



There have been some issues with one of the construction projects, so when I return to the penthouse, it's already nine in the evening. I thought I'd be agitated by not knowing what Milene was doing during the day, but having her in my home made it easier. As I pass by the kitchen, I nod to Ada, who's taking dishes out of the dishwasher, and head into my bedroom to have a shower.

When I exit my bedroom half an hour later, Ada's putting on her coat, readying to leave.

"Where is she?" I ask.

"In her room. She hasn't come out since you left, Mr. Ajello."

"Did you take her lunch?"

"Yes, but when I went in again to bring her the litter tray for the cat that she had asked for, the plate was sitting on her nightstand, untouched," Ada says. "I took her dinner at seven, but she didn't touch that, either."

"Has she eaten anything since this morning?"

"No. I offered to make something else, but she said she wasn't going to eat anything made under your roof. I've put the food in the fridge."

Grinding my teeth, I nod. "You can go, Ada."

I wait for Ada to leave and then head to Milene's room, furious as hell and with no experience as to how to deal with it. I never get mad. Annoyed, yes. Irritated, sometimes. But where that woman is concerned, every emotion jumps straight into overload. I open the door and see her sitting cross-legged on the bed, typing something on her phone.

"This childish behavior ends now!" I roar, and her head snaps up, her eyes suddenly wide. "Ada left the food in the fridge. If you don't eat something, I'm going to fucking force-feed you!"

Milene blinks, still gaping at me, and it dawns on me. Shit. I'd been so damn angry about her not eating that I completely forgot. Milene's gaze travels down my arms and the hands holding my crutches. Then, it moves lower until her eyes reach my left leg . . . where the pant leg of my sweats is tied in a knot just below the knee. It completely slipped my mind that I've never told her about my leg. As her eyes lift to meet mine, I steel myself for what I'll see there because if I find even an ounce of pity, I'm going to smash the room.

She gets up off the bed and comes over to stand before me, her chin tilted up at a slight angle. "I'd love to see you try, Salvatore." She raises her eyebrows and slams the door closed.

I stand there, staring at the door that almost hit me in the face, and feel the corner of my lips twitch slightly upward.



I walk back to the bed and sit down on the edge, trying to collect myself. It never crossed my mind that part of his leg might have been amputated.

Salvatore Ajello is always trending where gossip is concerned. Even though only a few members of our Family have met him, people love to talk. Probably because there is never enough info about him. He doesn't visit public events, and there are no pictures of him anywhere. His underboss, Arturo, acts as the "face" of the New York crime family. When anyone needs to contact the New York Cosa Nostra, they call Arturo. Never the don.

If there was a recent accident resulting in such serious injury, someone would have heard about it. The rumor mill would have run rampant for months. So, it must have happened before he became the head of the New York Family.

"Jesus," I mumble and bury my hands in my hair.

Losing a limb must be hell to deal with. I've met a few amputees during my studies and residency, and most of them had trouble adjusting to their new realities. Salvatore doesn't seem to have a problem with that. What kind

of nurse am I not to have suspected? I noticed his limp and that it had become a little more pronounced when we arrived at the penthouse, but I didn't make the connection. He probably controls the way he walks when there are other people around. I assumed it had to be an old injury or something congenital. That is if I even thought that much about it.

He's a really peculiar guy, my new husband. The way he acted so calm and unshaken that day when someone shot at us in the parking lot was truly frightening. I have a feeling not many things would shake him to his core. Except, apparently, me not wanting to eat.

I grip my phone at my side. I should call Bianca and tell her what's happened. She'll freak out. Distressing a woman who's six months pregnant isn't wise, but I'll have to tell her. Tomorrow. I'll call her tomorrow because I'm still processing this shit myself. As I scroll through my contacts list, wondering if I should call Andrea, another name comes across the screen, and I stop. Nonna Giulia. My late father's aunt is always up-to-date with the latest gossip. Being a hundred and one years old, she knows everyone in Cosa Nostra. I press the call button.

"Milene, tesoro!" she chirps on the other side.

"Hey, Nonna. How are you?"

"Sunbathing in Cancun. You cannot believe the male hotties they have here."

I snort. Nonna's a little whacky. "Listen, I wanted to ask you something. Have you ever met Salvatore Ajello? The don of the New York Family?"

"I know who Ajello is, tesoro. I'm still what you would call *compos mentis*." She snickers. "Why do you ask?"

I sigh and give her a summary of the latest events in my life. When I'm done, there is a long pause on the other end of the line before she finally answers.

"Holy fuck, Milene," she whispers.

I've never heard Nonna curse before. "So? Do you know him?"

"I knew his father. He was a capo. Salvatore took his place when his father was murdered. It was nine or ten years ago," she says. "Something happened in New York a few years later, and the whole establishment ended up dead.

The don, the underboss, five capos. Salvatore took over. I think that was six years ago.”

“You’ve never met him?”

“Once, but it was decades ago. There was a wedding and his father brought him along. Salvatore was eight, I think.”

I try to imagine Salvatore as a child but can’t make the leap. “How was he?” I ask.

“Strange,” Nonna says. “There was an accident toward the end of that day. One of the light fixtures broke free from the ceiling and fell onto a table, trapping a man beneath it. Women screamed. Blood was everywhere. People rushed around, trying to help the poor soul, but he was already dead. It was awful.”

“Dear God.”

“Salvatore was sitting at a table nearby, eating cake and observing the events, absolutely unaffected by what had happened. It was as if there wasn’t a man with a metal rod sticking out of his chest sitting not even fifteen feet away from him. At first, I thought the kid must have been in shock, but he stood up and casually walked toward the buffet table to take another piece of cake. He passed the bloody scene as though it didn’t bother him in the least,” she says. “There is something *wrong* with him, Milene. Please, be careful.”

When I end the call, I spend some time mulling over what Nonna said. I’ve already noticed Salvatore is a bit odd, so she hasn’t told me anything new. What interests me more is the fact that he became a don at what? Twenty-eight? That’s unheard of.

The cat jumps down off the bed and rubs his flank against my legs. He’s probably hungry. I forgot to tell Ada to order cat food. For now, something from the fridge will have to do, and I’ll buy some cat food tomorrow. It would be a good idea for me to eat something, too, but my stomach has shrunk, and the idea of food seems unappealing. However, I’m pretty certain Salvatore wasn’t bluffing when he said he would force me to eat. Bastard.

I take the cat in my arms and head toward the door. “Let’s go and find something to eat, Kurt.”

The first word that comes to mind as I walk through the penthouse, is “enormous.” The space must be at least four thousand square feet, maybe

more. Considering its location, this place must be worth millions. How loaded is Salvatore, I wonder. My family has money, and I became accustomed to owning expensive things quite early in life, but this is a whole new level of rich. I'm not much of an art expert, but the paintings lining the walls must have cost a fortune. Hopefully, the furniture isn't as expensive since my cat loves to sharpen his nails on the upholstery without a care in the world.

The penthouse is divided into two sections. The first one, where my room is located, seems to be a private area with two bedrooms on each side of the wide hallway. Large white double doors separate it from the common area, where the kitchen, living and dining rooms are located. Everything is immaculately kept, and the open floor plan emphasizes the vastness of the space.

I find Salvatore sitting at the breakfast bar which divides the kitchen from the living area but ignore him pointedly. Opening the door of the state-of-the-art refrigerator, I rummage through its contents, searching for something my cat might eat. I find a plastic container of meat on the middle shelf, so I open it, take a piece and touch my tongue against it, to check whether it's too spicy or too salty. It's not, so I put the cat down and grab a bowl from the stand on the counter. I place a few pieces of meat inside, removing the bone with my fingers and walk toward the corner of the kitchen to place the bowl on the floor. Instead of going to the dish, the cat jumps up on the counter and leaps onto the top of the fridge. His nose twitches once, twice, and then he sprawls on top of it.

"Damn it, Kurt!" I snap.

The cat stares haughtily at me from his spot atop the appliance.

"Kurt?" Salvatore's deep voice echoes behind me.

"Yup. I've decided it's time to name my cat since I'm keeping him."

I turn and head into the open concept dining room to get a chair, avoiding Salvatore, not wanting to know whether he's watching me or not. I'm so mad at him.

"And it has to be 'Kurt'?"

"Yes." I chose that name so I can always be reminded of what a liar my husband is.

I carry the chair into the kitchen and climb on it, intending to get Kurt down. However, the second I reach for him, he leaps across onto the counter, runs the length of it, and jumps on top of the bar in front of Salvatore. They engage in some kind of a standoff, the cat observing him with interest while he scowls at him. I open my mouth to warn Salvatore to watch his plate, but Kurt's already snagged a huge piece of food and dashed away.

"Was that . . . fish?" I ask.

"Yes. Why?"

I groan. "That upsets his stomach."

As I watch Kurt chew the piece of fish in the corner of the kitchen and think of what will await me in the litter box tomorrow, I decide I'm done for today. I take the container with the rest of the meat from the fridge and head back to my room.



Milene leaves the kitchen and walks across the living room, carrying the leftovers from lunch, obviously planning to eat them in her room. I decide that won't do. "No eating in the bedrooms."

She stops in her tracks, turns slowly and glances me with one firm, agitated look. "Ada brought me lunch and dinner there."

"But you didn't eat it, did you?" I point to the bar stool next to mine. "You eat here."

"I'm most certainly not eating at the same table as you."

I grab the back of the chair and turn it so it's facing her. "Here," I bark. Milene lifts her chin, and yet she does as I ask.

"You have control issues." She sits next to me and starts eating directly out of the container.

It amazes me how unexpectedly normal she is. If I didn't know it already, I never would have guessed that she was a Mafia princess, accustomed to luxury. She seems so ordinary, living in that dump of an apartment, working

as a nurse, and keeping that idiotic cat. Why not spend the money her brother was sending her? She keeps her nails short and unpainted, and her hair is gathered at the top of her head with a simple rubber band. I've seen it hang loose, and it's a simple cut, nothing fancy. Then, there is her face. Zero makeup. No false eyelashes. I have never come across a woman within our circle who hasn't had her hair perfectly styled, had makeup flawless and was wearing an outfit that came off the runway. Still, the woman sitting next to me in a loose T-shirt and jeans is more beautiful than any of the others. Milene Scardoni is a rare specimen.

"I need to do some shopping tomorrow," she says between bites.

"You'll take bodyguards."

"Bodyguards?" She looks up at me. "As in plural?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to a fucking supermarket. One will be enough."

"You will take the bodyguards I assign to you, or you can order online. Your choice."

"Perfect." She turns back to her food. "I'm going to buy tampons and cat food with two gorillas trailing after me."

"Four gorillas," I say.

Her head snaps up. "Four? Are you serious?"

"Don't argue with me, Milene. It won't get you anywhere. It's going to be my way, or it's not happening."

"You"—she points her fork in my face—"need professional help."

"Alessandro will be waiting for you in front of the door at nine. You'll be escorted by him. The rest of the team will follow in a second car."

"Two cars. Fucking great." She shakes her head and resumes eating.

It looks like I'm being ignored again since she keeps shoveling food into her mouth, clearly trying everything she can to avoid making eye contact with me.

"You haven't asked what happened to my leg," I say and see her fork still halfway to its destination.

"What happened to your leg?" she asks just before taking a bite of meat.

“Gunshot wound. Transtibial amputation.”

She lifts her head and looks at the bandage visible beneath the cuff of my T-shirt sleeve. “Seems like people enjoy shooting you.”

“It happens.”

“How many times so far?”

“That I've been shot at?” I reach for my glass of water. “I stopped counting. But if you mean how many times I've been hit—eight. Actually, nine, if you count this last one, but that one was just a graze.”

Milene's eyes bulge. “Holy shit. Are you trying to break a Guinness World Record or something?”

I ignore her retort. “When you married me, you became a target, too,” I say. “Do you now understand the need for four bodyguards?”

“Wonderful.” She sighs and looks at my left hand lying on the bar surface. “Gunshot wound, as well?”

So, she's noticed that I removed the glove, as I usually do before going to bed. I follow her gaze to my hand, regarding the numerous scars covering my slightly deformed fingers.

“Hammer,” I say. “The nerves in the last two fingers are damaged beyond repair. I can't feel those. The rest are mostly okay, but I have trouble with fine motor skills.”

“Why do you wear a glove?”

“I don't like being reminded of my weak spots,” I say. “My left hand is the dominant one.”

“What about your leg? Is that a weak spot, as well?”

“No. I have a top-of-the-line prosthesis and have adapted well. A textbook case. And it has been over seven years. Most of the time, I forget it's there.” I reach out to take a lock of hair that's fallen across her eyes, and tuck it behind her ear. “Does it bother you? That I'm missing part of my leg?”

“Nope.” She smiles. “But you being a lying bastard, does.”

I lean forward and take in the contours of her face. This smile doesn't compare to the way she laughed at the coffee shop two days ago. The coffee-shop smile, I liked. I don't like this one. It seems . . . angry.

Reaching for my crutches, I stand up and lean to whisper into her ear. “But I’ve never lied to you, Milene, have I?”

“Withholding the truth is the same as lying.”

“Not in my world, cara.” I place a light kiss on the exposed part of her shoulder where the T-shirt she’s wearing has slipped and head toward my bedroom.

“I have a night shift tomorrow,” she shouts after me. “I need to be at work at nine.”

“You won’t be working at the hospital anymore, Milene.”

“What! You can’t forbid me from working.”

“I just did.”

The sound of a chair scraping across the floor is followed by rapid tramping of bare feet. Just seconds later, she comes around me and stands there, blocking my path.

“Please, don’t do this,” she says through gritted teeth.

“I’m sorry, cara, but I won’t risk your safety.”

Milene’s nostrils flare, and she takes a step closer to stand right in front of me, our bodies almost touching. She tilts her chin and looks straight into my eyes.

“You’ve ruined my life,” she whispers.

I bend my head until our noses touch, just like the day we met in the parking lot. “I know.”

She doesn’t say anything. Eyes locked, we stare at each other for a long time, the tips of our noses the only point of contact between our two bodies. After what seems like an eternity, Milene turns abruptly on her heel and disappears into the guest bedroom.

## Chapter 8



I'm browsing the soap aisle when the phone in my pocket vibrates, indicating an incoming message.

**09:23 Bianca:** Angelo just told me. What the hell were you thinking, going to New York? I can't believe you lied to me! Are you okay?

I sigh and hit the microphone icon to record a voice message. Bianca and I usually text each other since she can't speak, but it would take me half an hour to type everything I want to say.

"I'm sorry for lying to you, twinkle toes. I'm okay, I guess. Still trying to come to terms with the fact that everything I've worked for is all just . . . gone. Did you know I delivered a baby in a parking lot earlier this month? It was scary, Bianca, but at the same time it was the best feeling ever. Salvatore said I can't work anymore. That controlling son of a bitch . . . Just a second." I turn to face the mountain of a man who's standing a few paces behind me. I thought Salvatore was strange, but this guy beats him by a mile. He didn't utter a single word on the way here.

"Alessandro, right? Do you mind?" I motion with my hand for him to move away. "I'm trying to have a private call here."

My bodyguard takes one step back and crosses his arms, regarding me with a piercing black gaze. I roll my eyes and continue.

"About Salvatore. I'm so mad at him!" I whisper-yell into the phone. "We'd already met. Salvatore and me. Three times. He never told me who he was, and I thought he was just a guy, you know? I only realized who he was when he came to my place to sign the marriage papers yesterday. I liked him, Bianca. I really liked him. We went on a date, kind of, and then he ended up being the fucking don of the New York Family."

I take a chocolate-scented body wash from the shelf and sniff it.

“I’m not sure what I think of him. I hate him for making me marry him and ruining everything I had planned. If I could turn back time, I would never have come here. But part of me still kind of likes him, and that’s making everything so much more frustrating.”

I put the chocolate wash back—too sweet-smelling—and pick up one with a coconut scent.

“Looks like someone’s trying to kill him, so I’m saddled with four bodyguards. Four! I’m in a fucking supermarket with four guys in dark suits trailing behind me. Jesus. Talk about taking someone’s life and turning it one-eighty in twenty-four hours. How’s Mikhail? Lena? How are you? Does your back hurt? I miss you, honey. I’m sorry for lying to you, but trust me, I’m paying for it with interest.”

I send the message and head to the cash register, with Alessandro trailing after me and another bodyguard following a few yards behind. The third is standing in a corner, observing the space. The fourth guy stayed out front by the entrance. What an overkill. What if I decide to go jogging? Would all four of them come along, snapping at my heels?

This morning, I caught Salvatore as he was leaving and told him I had to go to the hospital to hand in my resignation. He said it was already handled. Handled! As though it were a subscription to a fucking online magazine and not my life’s dream! What am I going to do now? Maybe, I could find some small private hospital to finish my residency and work there. It wouldn’t be as much of a high security risk as working in a big hospital like St. Mary’s. Yes, that would work perfectly.

\* \* \*

“No,” Salvatore says and returns to his meal.

“What? Why?”

“They wouldn’t allow bodyguards to accompany you in a hospital. Any hospital.”

“They can stay outside.”

“Not good enough.”

I put my fork down and take a deep breath. “What do you expect me to do all day long?”

“You can do whatever you want.”

“I want to work.”

“Anything except for that.”

I have this maddening urge to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. “I’ll go nuts with nothing to do. I can’t live like that.”

“I’ll give you some funds. Start a charity or something.”

“A charity?” I gape at him. “I sew wounds and insert catheters. I have no idea how charities work or how I’d even set one up.”

“Google it.”

Google it. Great. “Why did you insist on marrying me?”

“I’ve already told you. I have my reasons.”

“Will you share those reasons with me?”

He looks up at me, those piercing amber eyes sending laser beams directly into mine. I want to look away, but I can’t.

“No,” he says and goes back to his dinner once again. “We’re going to an auction next week. There is a painting I’m planning to buy. Do you have a dress?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you, Salvatore.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I said no.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say, Milene. I want you to come with me, so you’re doing so voluntarily, or I’ll be dragging you. It’s your choice.”

I grip the fork in my hand and lean forward until my face is right in front of his. “Fuck. You.” I sneer.

He watches me for a moment, then his hand shoots out and grabs my chin before I can move a muscle. “I will, cara.”

I lean away, escaping his tender hold. “Keep dreaming. You’re not coming anywhere near my pussy.”

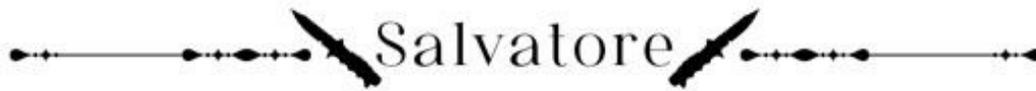
I might be wrong, but it seems like the corner of his lips curl upward a little bit. “If you don’t have a suitable dress, Alessandro will take you to buy one. I don’t want you going in that short disco-ball creation you wore at the bar. You need something that will cover your ass this time.”

“Oh? So you ogled my ass?”

“Of course I did,” he says, picks up his plate and carries it over to the dishwasher.

I watch as he walks away toward the private part of the penthouse, enjoying the view of his backside in charcoal dress pants, despite my better instincts. That ass is sexy as fuck, and it goes perfectly with his narrow waist and wide shoulders. I don’t remember ever meeting a man who wears suits the way Salvatore does, as if he were born in one. He’s seriously hot and . . . Stop, damn it! As handsome as he is, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s an asshole. I’d better remember that.

## Chapter 9



I've just finished brewing my coffee when Milene comes out of the hallway and trudges across the living room toward the kitchen. Her hair is a mess, her feet are bare, and she's carrying that defective animal under her arm like it's a purse. In the kitchen, she mumbles something as she passes by me, bound for the fridge. She opens the door and takes out a carton of milk, then crosses to the counter. The cat is still under her right arm and currently giving me the evil eye.

After the lunch yesterday, she disappeared into her room and didn't come out. Obviously, she's trying her best to avoid me. I take the tangled strand which has fallen over her face and move it away, making sure the back of my fingers brush the skin of her cheek. Milene throws me a sideways look, which I assume is meant to be angry, but the overall impression is somewhat ruined with her yawn.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

"I binge-watched the last season of *Stranger Things* last night. Finished at four and couldn't sleep."

She looks over to the coffee machine in front of her, then switches her gaze to the coffee I've prepared for myself and leans forward to inhale the scent. She tentatively reaches out to wrap her hand around the cup and slowly pulls it along the counter. Once she has the coffee in front of her, she looks at me from the corner of her eye, probably awaiting my reaction. Without breaking eye contact, she reaches for the milk and pours a bit into the coffee. My coffee. Which I drink black. Finishing up with the milk, she stretches toward a container of sugar, but it's out of her reach. Our gazes remain locked. Without taking my eyes off hers, I drag the sugar along the counter until it's in front of her. It's a screw-top, so she'll need to put the cat down.

Instead of doing so, she thrusts the scrawny animal into my arms and proceeds to open the jar. The cat looks even worse up close. Part of its left

ear is missing, and it seems like one of its eyes is looking in the wrong direction.

“This is the ugliest cat I’ve ever laid my eyes on,” I say.

Milene’s head snaps up, her eyes widening. “That was mean.”

She reaches for the cat. The damn thing picks that exact moment to wake up from its lethargic state and leaps onto the counter, scratching my wrist with its hind paw.

“It’s not Kurt’s fault. You scared him,” Milene says, takes the cup with *my* coffee and turns to leave. She takes two steps toward the living room but suddenly stops, turns on her heel, and marches back. She places the coffee on the counter, takes my right hand, and turns it to inspect the inside of my wrist.

“Do you think I’ll live?” I ask, observing the three-inch long scratch.

Milene glides the tip of her finger over my skin along the scratch and looks up at me. “Yes, unfortunately.”

I grab her around the waist with my free hand and crash her body to mine. She yelps, then presses her palms against my chest as if to push me away. Only she doesn’t. A small shudder passes through her body when I slide my palm under her T-shirt and continue up along her spine.

“Whose is this?” I ask and bend my head to bury my nose in her hair.

“What?” she breathes out.

“This is a man’s T-shirt.” It’s one of the oversized shirts I’ve noticed she likes to sleep in.

“I’m not sure. Probably David’s.”

My hand stills in the middle of her back. She’s wearing another man’s T-shirt. “What about the others? Are those his, too?”

“Some. Why?”

I grab the material of her shirt and pull the damn thing over her head.

“Hey!” She covers her naked breasts with her arms and stares at me. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Give that back.”

She won’t be wearing another man’s things ever again. I walk toward the other side of the kitchen to throw the T-shirt into the trashcan, then head

toward her bedroom.



“You can’t throw away my stuff,” I yell after Salvatore.

He ignores me and keeps walking until he reaches the door of my room, then marches inside.

“Hey!” I dash after him. “You have no business there! Salvatore!”

I find him standing in front of my closet, looking over its contents. He grabs the stack of folded T-shirts I use to sleep in from the middle shelf, crosses the room, and walks out.

“Are you crazy? Give me my clothes back. Right away!”

I’m still standing in the middle of my room with my arms pressed over my boobs when he comes back two minutes later, carrying another pile of T-shirts under his arm. Without any explanation whatsoever, he returns to the closet and lays the shirts on the shelf where mine had been.

“What is this?” I snap. “Another of your power games? You can’t go around throwing away other people’s belongings! Salvatore, are you even listening to me?”

“No.” He closes the closet doors and approaches me, holding one of the shirts he brought in his hands.

I’m just about to lay into him again when he holds up the T-shirt and pulls it down over my head.

“Arms,” he says, holding the shirt.

“You need help,” I say through clenched teeth.

Salvatore bends until our faces are at the same level. It’s ridiculous, how pretty those amber eyes of his are. Or how absolutely excited it makes me every time he pins with his piercing gaze.

“Arms, Milene.”

I press my lips together, unwrap my arms from my chest and slide them

into the sleeves he's holding out for me.

"Satisfied?" I snap.

He looks me over. The hem of his T-shirt almost reaches my knees.

"Very," he says and casually walks out of the room.

"Control freak!" I shout after him.

When I'm sure he's gone, I grab a handful of the white cotton and press it to my nose. It smells like him. There is no way I'm going to wear this maniac's clothes. I close my eyes and inhale again. What the hell am I doing? I quickly take off the T-shirt, throw it onto the floor and head into the bathroom to take a shower. I'm getting rid of every single one of those.

When I leave the bathroom twenty minutes later, however, I grab Salvatore's T-shirt off the floor and tuck it under my pillow.

## Chapter 10



I grab the remote, turn on the TV, and flop myself down onto the big couch in the middle of the living room to channel surf. Nothing catches my eye, so I leave it on the Food Network, where some guy is making homemade pasta. I grab a throw pillow to place under my head and stretch out.

Four days. I've been holed up in the penthouse for four fucking days with absolutely nothing to do, and it's really getting to me. The only people I see are Ada and Salvatore. Ada doesn't talk much. She pays me lip service occasionally to ask whether I need anything, then goes straight back to work. I hate cooking, but I was so desperate for something to do earlier I asked if she'd like any help with lunch. Ada looked at me as though I'd offered to gut the neighbor's dog. I guess she caught the sight of me frying eggs this morning when I almost set the kitchen on fire. It was an accident! I left the pan on the stove and went to chase Kurt, who was scratching his claws on the carpet in the living room.

And then, there's him. My dearest husband. The bane of my existence. All those mysterious looks he gives me. Casual touches I pretend I don't like, but secretly enjoy. The excitement that overwhelms me every time he walks through the front door in the evening. It's making me insane. I don't want to feel those things for someone who's basically smashed my life to smithereens.

Yawning, I turn down the TV volume and close my eyes. Last night I dreamed about him kissing me, then woke up abruptly and couldn't make myself go back to sleep because I kept thinking about him. It seems like my fate is to spend my life sleep-deprived. Before, it was because of work. Now, it's because of him.

"Damn you, Salvatore Ajello," I mumble into the pillow.

I've just dozed off, when I feel a light touch along my jaw, moving up the side of my face and tracing my cheek toward the lower lip. I reach out to

shoo away the cat, which enjoys toying with me while I sleep, but instead of the soft fur, my fingers wrap around a strong male hand. My eyes snap open.

“Feisty, even while sleeping,” Salvatore’s deep baritone voice booms as he looks down at my hand still holding his. I let go immediately and jump off the couch, intending to hightail it out of the room. The moment I turn away, Salvatore’s arm reaches out to grab my waist, pulling me back against his hard chest.

“Let me go,” I mumble.

The arm around my middle tightens even more. His breath is warm on the side of my neck as he bends his head to whisper into my ear. “No.”

I close my eyes and inhale deeply, trying to ignore the butterflies fluttering in the pit of my stomach. It appears my whole body is suddenly charged with electricity, simply from being near him. As I open my mouth to tell him to go to hell, his lips kiss the side of my neck, and I barely manage to stifle a sigh.

“You didn’t join me for breakfast this morning,” he says into my ear. “Are you avoiding me, Milene?”

“No,” I lie. Of course I’m avoiding him. Being attracted to a man you hate is torturous.

“Oh, but I think you are.” His grip around my waist intensifies, while his other hand moves to wrap around my neck. “Tell me, cara, does my presence affect you?”

“Yes,” I say while clenching my teeth. My skin itches all over as if a low current is steadily overwhelming my nervous system. My body is a live wire, but my head is spinning in confusion as I try hard to block out the image of him naked. “Every time I see you, I have an urge to launch a blunt object at your head.”

“So violent . . . I thought Mafia princesses were sweet-tempered by default. Demure . . .”

Salvatore’s lips continue to graze my skin, and I find it really hard to keep my composure while his soft touch tingles the fine hairs on my neck.

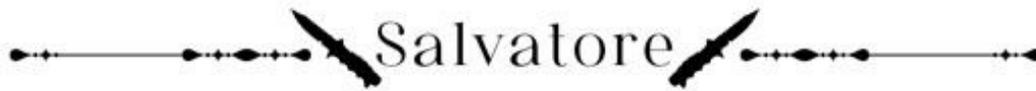
“Sorry to disappoint. You got the short end of the stick. Maybe you should send me back to the shop since you’re not satisfied with what’s under the hood.”

Suddenly, he turns me around so I'm facing him and gripping my chin, tilts my head up.

"You're not going anywhere, Milene." His lips gently brush against mine as he speaks, and I fist my hands to stop the powerful urge to pull his mouth forcefully onto mine. "Night, cara."

He releases my chin, turns away and leaves without turning back.

## Chapter 11



I lean my shoulder on the bookshelf and regard Milene. I've been doing so quite a lot in the last week. She is sprawled on the couch, watching another cooking show. My gaze travels along her body and stops at her legs which are dangling over the armrest. A pair of extremely ugly sandals with multicolored sequins adorn her ridiculously small feet. The cat is stretched out next to Milene, with its head turned toward the TV. Something is seriously wrong with that animal.

Before I moved Milene in here, I would go to the office early in the morning and usually return to the penthouse late in the evening. But now, I keep finding some idiotic reasons to leave the office and drop by my place at least twice a day, just to get a glimpse of her. Milene tries her best to ignore my presence when she sees me watching her, so I started coming upstairs for lunch every day.

"You can't cook," I say. "Why do you watch cooking shows?"

This morning when I came to breakfast, Ada approached me and asked if I would consider installing extra fire extinguishers in the kitchen. When I asked why, she said my wife offered to help her make pasta sauce yesterday and managed to start a fire in the pan because she left it to heat for too long.

"Well, I watch *Animal Planet*, too, and you don't see me chasing rabbits around or laying eggs in the sand, do you?" Milene says without taking her eyes off the screen. "Are you going to dictate what I watch now?"

"Maybe." I don't give a fuck what she watches, but I quite enjoy rattling her cage.

Milene cocks her head to the side and arches an eyebrow at me. "Is that some compulsion? Ordering people around just because and expecting them to dance to your tune?"

"It's how things work around here, Milene."

“So, you say jump and people ask how high?”

“Pretty much.”

She scrunches her nose. “Your life must be a really boring endeavor.”

Yes. I never realized just how much until she barged in and made a mess of my entire existence.

“Grab your purse,” I say.

“I don’t need a purse for lounging on the couch.”

“We’re going to have a look at one of the lots I bought.”

“Not interested. But thanks for the invite.” She throws a placating smile at me and shifts her attention back to the TV.

I straighten and walk toward the couch. Milene pretends she doesn’t notice me when I stop in front of her. I bend, grab her around the waist, and lift her onto my shoulder.

“What the fuck!” she yelps. “Put me down!”

Ignoring her protests, I head toward the front door. I want to spend time with her, and she has no say in it.

“You controlling, rude, overbearing asshat . . .” She rattles on with her insults, while she pounds on my back with her fists. It’s . . . quite amusing.

I carry her toward the elevator and get in.

“. . . absolutely no care whatsoever about other people’s wants . . .”

I hit the button for the garage.

“. . . find a therapist who’ll help you with your issues . . .”

The elevator dings when we reach the underground level. I step out and pivot toward my car as another vehicle parks next to mine, and Nino gets out.

Milene continues to babble, “. . . a fucking Neanderthal with zero . . .”

I pass my head of security—who stares at us with his mouth agape—open the passenger door, and deposit my wife onto the seat.

“Put on your seat belt, Milene.”

She tilts her face up and presses her lips together, then gives me the middle finger. I close her door and walk around the hood to get into the

driver's seat. Milene is sitting with her arms crossed, staring through the windshield at the concrete wall.

"Milene," I say.

She snorts.

Reaching over, I grab her chin and turn her head. We stare at each other for almost a minute. The defiance in her eyes turns me on so fucking much. I don't want to break her spirit because I enjoy the ways in which she tries to defy me. But she needs to understand there is a leader in every pack. And in this particular menagerie, that would be me.

"Seat belt," I whisper.

Milene exhales through her nose, reaches for the seat belt, and tries three times before she finds the buckle. She is still looking at me, her eyes boring into mine. I move my thumb to lightly brush the line of her lower lip, then lean away and start the car.



I turn around, looking over the green expanse as far as my gaze can reach. The vast field is surrounded by trees on three sides. It's beautiful.

"I thought you said you bought a lot," I say, "not half of the state."

"I bought several. I still haven't decided what I want to build on this one, so I'm acquiring all the available land. Just in case." He takes my hand and leads me back to the car. "Are you hungry?"

I expected the lot he mentioned to be somewhere in the city, but we drove two hours to reach it.

"I'm starving," I mumble, looking down at our intertwined fingers. I should pull my hand away. But I don't.

"There's a restaurant twenty minutes from here," he says as he opens the passenger door for me. "I eat there when I come this way."

"Some posh place, I presume?" I ask when he starts the car.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

I gape at him. “I’m in fucking jean shorts, Salvatore. Even if they let us in, everyone will stare.”

He gives me one of those pinning looks of his, then reaches for his phone and calls someone.

“Jonathan,” he says into the phone, “I’m coming for a lunch with my wife in fifteen minutes. We don’t want to be disturbed.”

He doesn’t wait for the person on the other end to reply, just ends the call and throws the phone onto the dash. Rude much? And what will this Jonathan guy do, anyway? I assume he’s the manager.

I shake my head and train my eyes on the road in front of us. “You have a very strange way of handling phone calls.”

“How so?”

“What happened with ‘Hello, how’s your day?’ or ‘How are you?’ You know, common courtesy.”

During the two-hour drive over here, his phone rang at least seven times. With each one, he said exactly two words: “yes” when he took the call, and then either “yes” or “no” after listening to the person on the other end of the line. He’d cut the call right afterward.

“I don’t care how they are or how their day is going, Milene.”

I turn my head and stare at him. I kind of assumed that was the case, but I didn’t expect him to be so blunt and admit it. “You are one exceptionally rude person.”

“What I am, is *uninterested*.”

“Uninterested.” I nod. He’s absolutely nuts. “About the people who work for you, or people in general?”

“In general. With one exception,” he says and levels me with that unnerving gaze of his. “You.”

I blink in confusion and quickly avert my eyes. Should I be flattered or terrified?

Probably both.

\* \* \*

“Whoa.” I stop in my tracks as we pass through the restaurant’s rear French doors.

The place is situated near the edge of a forest. It’s a big one-story colonial style mansion. What leaves me speechless, however, is a huge garden in the center, placed under an enormous iron dome covered with vines and greenery. The tables and chairs are all done in white wood, with flowerpots scattered around to create a jungle-like aesthetic. It’s magnificent. And completely empty of people, excluding the manager who greeted us at the doors.

Based on the size of the parking lot and the number of tables, the place can accommodate more than a hundred people. It’s lunch time. How come there is not even one table occupied?

Salvatore’s hand lands on the small of my back as he ushers me toward a table on the side of the garden area, set next to a lemon tree planted in a red terracotta pot. He pulls out the chair for me and takes a seat opposite.

“Is something wrong with their business?” I ask in a quiet voice.

“No. Why?”

“Well, I’m under the impression you need guests to run a restaurant business.”

“They have more customers than they can handle,” Salvatore says and takes the menus the waiter brought. “What do you want to drink?”

“Lemonade.”

“A lemonade and a mineral water,” he tells the waiter. “And tell Jonathan we’ll take a few dishes the chef already has prepared.”

The waiter nods and vanishes.

“Mineral water?” I raise an eyebrow.

“I don’t drink when I drive.” He leans over the table and reaches for my hand.

A pleasant shiver passes through me when he traces the lines on my skin in the same way as he did when we went for our “date.” And like before, I

don't remove my hand, even though I want to.

“So, if this place is usually packed, where is everyone?” I ask looking around.

“They left.”

“Left? Where to? Why would they . . .?” I snap my head back and gawk at him. “You shooed away a whole restaurant full of people?”

“You said you wouldn't be comfortable with them staring at you.” He pulls my hand closer . “Now they won't.”

My heartbeat skyrockets. That's the most fucking romantic thing a man has ever done for me.

“So, a hundred or more people had to leave in the middle of their meal because of my shorts?”

“No. They had to leave because no one gets to make you feel uncomfortable.”

I lean onto my elbows, coming up to his face with only a few inches separating us. “I didn't feel particularly comfortable with my head dangling upside down while you so graciously carried me to the car as if I was a sack of potatoes. In fact, it was a rather uncomfortable experience, Salvatore.”

“Then let me rephrase my declaration. No one, except me.”

Ugh. I roll my eyes and sit back down in my chair.

“Tell me, do you really chop people up for fun?” I ask.

It's been bugging me from the start. When Angelo told me that Salvatore sent Enzo's body back in three bags, I assumed he was some super aggressive, violent guy who did that kind of stuff in a mad rage. That's the absolute opposite of the extremely composed man who's currently watching me from the other side of the table. I have the impression that he wouldn't bat an eyelid if a fucking UFO landed in the middle of the restaurant.

“No,” Salvatore says and reaches for his water.

“I knew it.” I smirk. Of course he doesn't. I've always been good in judging person's character.

“I do it because nothing sends a stronger message than a severed head delivered to your doorstep, Milene.”

My jaw drops. I've been married off to a complete lunatic.

Salvatore cocks his head to the side and pins me with his gaze. "Are you scared of me now, cara?"

I take him in, his big body casually leaning back into the chair, those amber eyes boring into mine. After hearing that declaration, I should jump up from my chair and run away screaming. Only, I don't. Something must be wrong with me, because for some unexplainable reason, I am not scared of him.

Two waiters approach the table, carrying huge oval platters in each hand, saving me from giving Salvatore my answer. As they place them on the table, I notice both are trying really hard not to meet Salvatore's gaze. I guess that's understandable. People tend to avoid eye contact with someone they think is crazy. But what puzzles me is that neither the waiters nor the manager who greeted us when we arrived ever glanced at me. Why would they avoid looking at me? I'm a nice person.

I shake my head, take a sip of my lemonade, and cough. How many lemons did they put in, a whole pound?

"Excuse me?" I call to the nearby waiter.

He stills while arranging the plates on the table, then turns his head to Salvatore. Why would he do that?

Salvatore gives him a nod.

The waiter straightens and finally gives me his attention. "Yes, Mrs. Ajello?"

"Can I have some sugar, please?" I ask and lean my elbows on the table again, glaring at my husband who's been watching me the whole time. I wait for the waiters to leave, then raise my eyebrows. "What was that?"

"What exactly?"

"That nod. Because it looked like you were giving the waiter permission to address me."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Are you for real?"

"He's not from the Family, Milene. Therefore, he is not permitted to look

at my wife unless I allow him to.”

I have no comeback to that, so I just stare at him.

“What would you like to eat?” He nods toward the plates and the ton of food lining the table in front of me.

“I’m not picky.” I shrug and place something that looks like rice and green leaves on my plate, together with a huge piece of fish.

“Don’t you want to know what it is first? What if you don’t like it?”

“Someone took time to make these . . . whatever you call them. They cooked them and brought them over. I didn’t have to make any of this.” I stuff a spoonful of food into my mouth. “So, what’s not to like?”

“You really hate cooking.”

“Yup.” There is something that looks like fried onion rings on one of the plates. I reach out and take a piece, then yelp. They’re scorching hot.

“Let me see.” Salvatore seizes my hand and turns my palm up.

I try pulling out of his grip, but he holds my hand tightly. My heartbeat picks up, and butterflies flutter in my stomach again as he lifts my hand to his lips and places a kiss on the tips of my fingers. The moment his grip loosens, I quickly retrieve my hand and pretend I’m engrossed in my meal. Why does he keep doing that? Shouldn’t the seduction come before the marriage? He’s already forced me into marrying him, so I don’t see the point.

He can keep trying. I’m not sleeping with him. I would rather die than sleep with him. I take another bite and chew slowly while my inner devil mocks me.

*Liar, liar, pants on fire. You’ve been imagining how it would be. Wondering if he would also be controlling in bed. You’ve been ogling him in secret like he’s a candy for days, and . . .*

I put my fork next to the plate and grit my teeth. *Stop!* I yell at my internal self. That bitch has the worst taste in men. *Just . . . fucking stop.*

“Are you all right, Milene?”

My head snaps up. “Yup,” I murmur and keep shoveling the food in my mouth. “Why?”

“You had a very interesting facial expression for a moment. It seemed like . . . frustration.”

“Well, I’m forced to be with you, Salvatore. Wouldn’t you be frustrated if someone forced you to spend time with yourself?”

He leans over the table and takes my chin, making me look at him. “Is it really that awful? Spending time with me?”

No. And that’s exactly why I’m so frustrated. “Yes,” I say.

His thumb traces a line along my chin and up to my lower lip. If I saw his picture somewhere, I would have said he’s ridiculously handsome and that’s it. But the image wouldn’t be able to convey the potency of his presence in person. I quickly pull away from his touch and focus back on my meal, eating some more of the delicious food. Trying my best not to let my eyes wander to him. It doesn’t really help because even though I’m not looking at him, I can still sense his gaze on me.

Why did he insist on marrying me? I’m pretty sure I’m not his type. I mean, he’s like a walking commercial for Armani or Prada, or a similar high-end designer, in his impeccably tailored gray suit and black shirt. And that slicked back dark hair, with snow-white strands splattered here and there, which tempts me to thread my fingers through it and count the grays. I don’t know why I’m so attracted to him. I like blond guys. Chris Hemsworth. Brad Pitt. The angelic-looking type. I steal a quick glance at Salvatore and snort. He could give Satan a fucking run for his money. He’s just missing the damn horns and a pitchfork.

Suddenly, his gloved hand enters my field of vision and takes a strand of my hair that’s fallen out of my ponytail and is hanging next to my plate. He holds it between his fingers for a few seconds, then moves it behind my shoulder.

“You find something amusing, Milene?”

I put my fork down and lift my head. Salvatore is leaning over the table, his face barely inches from mine, and his unnerving eyes are staring right into my own. My breath catches. I force myself to hold his gaze while keeping my expression blank. It’s not easy.

It’s both horrifying and exciting how someone is able to ensnare a person with only a look like Salvatore does. I’m afraid that if he tried to pull me into

the depths of hell while looking at me like this, I would willingly follow. Not good. Not good at all.

“I don’t find anything amusing in this situation, Salvatore.” I sigh. “Listen, I understand. I really do. I fucked up, and you wanted to punish me for it. Nobody messes with the big bad New York Don—point taken. But let’s be honest, here. This,”—I point my finger to him, then to me—“this is not going to work. It’s better we part ways. You send me back to Chicago, saying I suck in bed, or whatever, and annul the marriage. I get out of your hair and go on with my life. And you can continue beheading people, sending their bodies around via FedEx, or whatever, without me to mess with your schedule. What do you say?”

Salvatore places his left hand at the edge of the table and tilts his head, regarding me in silence. Is he considering my proposition? Oh God, please make him say yes.

The table between us suddenly flies to the side, knocking me backward in my chair. Dishes and cutlery crash onto the cobbled ground. Pieces of food and broken glass scatter everywhere within a five-foot radius. I stare at my husband with wide eyes as he gets up and takes two casual steps until he’s standing right in front of me.

Leaning back in my chair, I tilt my head up. “That would mean no, I assume?”

“That would mean no, Milene,” he says in that cold tone, grabs me around my waist and lifts me up over his shoulder.

“Salvatore!” I yell with my head once again dangling behind his back as he carries me. “Put me down! Right now!”

He takes a couple of more steps, then stops. Thank you, Jesus, there is some sense in him after all.

“The food was excellent, Jonathan. Tell the chef we enjoyed our meal and put the damages on my account.”

“Of course, Mr. Ajello,” answers a strangled voice, and Salvatore resumes his trek through the restaurant. The fucking son of a bitch keeps walking!

“I have your shoulder lodged in my stomach,” I snap. “I’m going to puke all over your fancy suit if you don’t put me down, Salvatore.”

A ping sounds as the car door unlocks. Salvatore settles me onto the passenger seat, walks around the car, and gets behind the wheel as if everything is perfectly in order.

“If you have a mental health diagnosis, now is the time to mention it,” I say, staring at his perfect profile.

He turns his head and I find myself a prisoner of his intense gaze again. His hand shoots up and grabs my chin. I suck in a breath and stare at him as he leans close to my face.

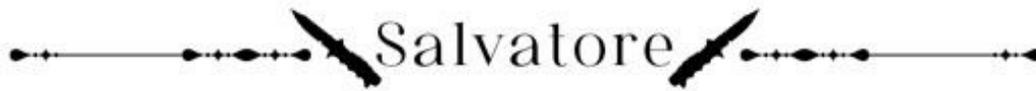
“It doesn’t really matter, cara. Because you’re stuck with me,” he says through his teeth, then crushes his mouth to mine.

It’s so angry. His kiss. My response—even angrier. I grab his neck, intending to squeeze it, but instead my hands slide upward, fingers tangling in his hair. There is not enough air in my lungs as I try to keep up, taking everything he’s giving. God, his mouth . . . so hard, but somehow soft at the same time. Teeth biting at my lower lip. His fingers, still holding my chin. It’s madness. I can’t think. I don’t want to think. When he kissed me in that parking lot it was like a sea breeze, but this is a tempest. I find myself wrapping my arms around his neck, trying to get closer to the stormy sea that is Salvatore Ajello. His other hand cups my cheek, then moves to my nape, squeezing. The lips on mine go still.

“It looks like we’re not incompatible, Milene,” he says into my mouth, then abruptly releases me and starts the car.

I fix my gaze onto the road in front of us, wondering what the hell just happened.

## Chapter 12



The huge lot where I'm planning on building a new warehouse is in the industrial district. It's far enough away from the city to provide privacy, but at the same time, close enough to the main roads not to be problematic when it comes to our distribution needs.

"I want the main warehouse in the center. Put eight or so more around it and fill them with random goods to act as a front," I say.

"Food?" Arturo asks.

"No. Something with a longer shelf life. Car parts. Tools. Furniture. Use your imagination. If someone comes poking their nose in, I don't want anything to raise their suspicions. For example, tons of rotten food."

"All right." He nods. "How much should we transfer when the warehouse is fully prepped?"

"Forty percent, max."

"Why not all?" Rocco throws in.

I turn around and look at my capo. Rocco is good with managing the operational part of our construction projects, but he's not very bright where general business is concerned. I allowed him to take over as capo two years ago when his father stepped down, but I'm not sure if it was the best decision.

"Never put all your eggs in one basket, Rocco," I say and check my watch. I need to head back, or I'll be late for the auction.

"Nino told me you assigned Alessandro as your wife's bodyguard," he says as he follows me toward our cars. "Was it because he's not attracted to women?"

I stop in my tracks and pivot so suddenly he nearly runs into me. "I don't give a fuck about who he's attracted to, Rocco. I assigned him because he'll make a damn good bodyguard."

He backs up ever so slightly. “Yes, but . . .”

“Are you questioning my decision?”

His face goes ghostly pale. “No, Boss. Of course not.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” He takes another step back. “I’m sorry, Boss.”

“Good.” I get inside my car and peel out of the lot with the accompaniment of screeching tires and the scent of burning rubber, heading out to the highway leading back to the city.

During the drive, I give Ada a quick call to ask what Milene’s doing, and she confirms my wife is in the penthouse chasing the cat. The anxiety in the pit of my stomach lessens, slightly. Still, I press harder on the gas.

Rocco’s words cross my mind as I’m waiting for the streetlight to change. He’s always been very homophobic and considers any man who doesn’t indulge in every willing pussy to be gay. I wonder if he’s right about Alessandro. I can’t remember ever seeing him with a woman, or even talking about one. In fact, for the five years he’s been working for me, I don’t think I’ve heard Alessandro Zanetti talk more than a handful of times.

When he first became part of the Family, I was suspicious. He’d obviously received military training, and I even considered the possibility that he might be an undercover cop, so Nino did a thorough check of his background. It seemed solid. A couple of years of military service, then an honorary discharge due to injury. I don’t remember the nature of the injury which Nino mentioned, but it certainly hasn’t impacted Alessandro’s abilities. From what I’ve seen, the man is in perfect physical condition. Over the years, I’ve tested him several times by assigning him to carry out terminations, just to gauge his reaction in case he was, in fact, a plant. The way he disposed of his targets using surgical precision and not a second’s hesitation, confirmed what I already suspected. Before he joined Cosa Nostra, Alessandro was a professional hitman. So, I made sure his skills wouldn’t go to waste.

\* \* \*

When Milene walks through the double doors and enters the living room, I let my eyes wander over her white stiletto heels and the white dress that hugs

her curves and emphasizes her figure. Her hair is loose, the soft curls falling to the middle of her back. She's put on makeup and looks devastatingly beautiful.

"Will this event go on all night? If that's the case, I'll need to swap these shoes for another pair with smaller heels," she states as she approaches, fumbling through her purse. "I've gotten too used to wearing sneakers."

"No."

"Thank God." She stops in front of me, lifting her eyes to mine. "Are you all right?"

"Why?"

"You have a slightly bewildered look on your face. It doesn't quite work with your controlling personality, Tore, sunshine." She smirks.

"Tore?"

"Your name's too long. It takes an age to pronounce, and by the time it's out, I've often forgotten what I wanted to say. Or do you prefer I keep on calling you Kurt? It may confuse the cat, though."

Very funny. "Tore will do," I say. "Give me your hand."

"You've already taken my life. I'm not giving you anything else."

"The hand, Milene. Left one."

She lifts her hand. I take two thick gold bands from my pocket and slide the smaller one down onto her ring finger.

Milene raises her eyebrows. "I thought we were skipping the ring part."

"We're not skipping anything, cara. The rings were late."

And I made sure the jeweler knew how I felt about that. Nino said the man will be staying in hospital for at least two weeks.

Still holding Milene's hand, I revel in the sight of the ring that marks her as mine on her delicate finger. I lift the second band so it's in front of her face.

Milene cocks her head. "You didn't strike me as the jewelry type."

I'm not. I never planned on getting married, and the idea of wearing a wedding band had never crossed my mind. Until now.

She takes the ring. “Left hand or right?”

“Right.” I want it visible at all times, not hidden under the glove. It wouldn’t fit over my deformed knuckle anyway.

Milene takes my right hand in hers and slides the ring onto my finger. When she’s about to let go, I wrap my fingers around her hand. She looks at me sideways but doesn’t pull away when I lead her to the door.

\* \* \*

As we walk into the gallery, all eyes turn toward us and follow our steps as we cross the foyer to the main room where the auction will be held. The crowd is made up of the same people who typically frequent these auctions, and this is the first time I’ve ever brought a woman with me. I’ve also never brought bodyguards. However, since Milene is with me tonight, Stefano and two other men stick to our tail.

It does not escape my notice how most of the men react to my wife. They try their best to hide it, but I see them checking her out when they think I’m not looking, so I let go of her hand and wrap my arm around her waist instead. Milene looks up at me and pushes away a lock of hair that’s fallen over her face. My eyes catch the glint of gold on her finger. The wedding band I’ve chosen seems absurdly large on her delicate hand. Something subtle might have been a better choice, but I like it the way it is.

“Is this wise?” she asks.

“What, exactly?”

“Being out in public when there are people trying to kill you?”

“Someone’s always trying to kill me, Milene. I don’t intend to hide in a hole because of that. What kind of message would it send?”

She shakes her head and sighs. “Men.”

I lead her to the row of seats at the rear, which is ordinarily reserved for me alone, and over to the last two seats on the side furthest from the door. Stefano stands behind Milene as instructed, and the other two bodyguards take their places on the left- and right-hand side of the entrance.

Milene is sitting next to me with her spine ramrod straight and her hands

clasped in her lap, seemingly uninterested. But her eyes are moving left and right, regarding various people entering the hall in silence and taking their seats. She focuses her gaze on a group of men who have just entered, mumbling something in a low voice. I tilt my head to the side to hear better.

“. . . what’s with the funeral atmosphere?” she murmurs, “Are they mourning the heaps of money they are going to spend on trinkets?”

I lean back and extend my arm along the back of Milene’s seat. It amuses me to no end how grumpy she can be sometimes.

The big screen on the opposite wall lights up and I observe my wife as the auction proceeds. As paintings are sold, with the quality and expense of each piece steadily increasing, her eyes grow wider. She flinches when the assistants bring out a large textured canvas in shades of black, gray, and red.

“That’s disturbing,” she whispers.

I shift my gaze to the painting, which shows a beheaded stag standing on top of something that looks like a pile of kitchen pots. The price tag reads twenty thousand dollars.

“Will anyone actually buy that thing?” Milene asks.

“Wait and see.”

No one bids. Not unexpected. They know they have no chance of getting it. The man who’s taking phone offers at his desk in the corner lifts his hand.

“We have one hundred thousand,” he exclaims.

“What?” Milene says. “Who would give a hundred grand to have that in their home.”

“The Chicago Bratva’s pakhan,” I say. “His wife painted it. She has one piece on offer at each auction, and he’s been buying all of them, no matter the price. Everyone else stopped bidding on her paintings some time ago.”

“People are so strange sometimes.” Milene shakes her head.

The painting I’ve chosen comes up next, a still-life piece from a lesser-known English painter from the nineteenth century. When I place my bid, Milene slowly raises one eyebrow, but refrains from commenting. Once the paintings are done, the auction proceeds, as always, with the jewelry. I usually leave at this point, but today I’ve decided to stay and take in Milene’s reaction to the pieces on offer.

I've just about concluded that she's entirely indifferent to precious metals and gemstones when an antique gold bracelet is brought out. In terms of design, it's nothing special. There are no gemstones or diamonds of any kind in it, just a solid gold circlet with discrete floral elements engraved on its surface. The only thing special about it is that it's from the twelfth century. Milene's eyes widen, and she leans forward, peering at the close-up displayed on the giant screen above the podium. She completely ignored all the diamonds, rubies, and pearls we've seen so far, but now she's gaping at the most ordinary looking piece without blinking. The note under the image shows a starting price of \$650,000. Making sure Milene can't see what I'm doing I raise my hand. My movement is barely perceptible, but the auctioneer's senses are finely tuned.

"Damn," she mumbles, still looking at the bracelet. "These people are insane."

Someone from the first row raises the bid to \$660,000. I tip my finger again, \$670,000. The man from the first row follows. I could keep going, but I'd rather head home sooner than later. I raise my hand again and mouth the amount.

"We have one million," the auctioneer declares. "Any further bids?"

"Jesus fucking Christ," Milene says, staring at the auctioneer. "I'd really like to meet the lunatic who'd pay a million dollars for a bracelet."

The auctioneer closes the bidding, and I message my banker. He's always on standby and knows to wire the money immediately and without question, regardless of the amount.

"Come on." I stand up and take Milene's hand, leading her toward the desk at the front.

"One million. Does that happen often? I mean, who does that? Art, I understand. There are people who like having that kind of stuff on their walls—your kind of crazy, you know—but come on."

She continues her bemused babbling in a quiet voice as I approach the desk to sign the papers and to confirm the painting is to be sent to my usual address. When the clerk accepts the documentation, I point to the rectangular velvet box. Once he brings it over, I take out the bracelet.

"And what if someone steals it?" Milene continues. "Is that kind of stuff

insured? One million. It's absolutely outrageous, if you ask me."

I turn and find Milene looking back at the auction room, staring at the big screen where the image of the bracelet is still being displayed.

"Where would someone wear something like that? What if . . ." She rattles on, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips.

I put the bracelet around her right wrist and fasten the clasp. It's one of those simple hook clasps. I don't think I'd be able to manage anything daintier. When I look at Milene again, she's staring at her arm, open-mouthed.

"So, that's what it takes to get you to stop talking," I say. "I'll keep it in mind."

\* \* \*

"I can't take this," Milene says the moment we're inside the penthouse.

I knew it was coming. She hadn't uttered a single word on the drive home or looked at me even once. Her attention was focused through the passenger-side window on the neon lights as we passed them by.

"It's beautiful, but I really can't. Maybe if it was worth three zeros less."

"You're keeping it." I say and head into the hallway leading to my bedroom.

"I . . . what would I do with this? It should be in a damn museum or something."

"Do whatever you want with it."

"Tore!"

Behind me, heels *clink* against the floor tiles, then Milene curses. I glance over my shoulder and catch her taking off her shoes. Given the cut of her dress and the way she's bending forward, I'm gifted with a fine view of her breasts. I tilt my head for a better angle and imagine my wife lying naked in my bed, her milky skin contrasting with the dark sheets and her pale hair tangled around her head.

"Please, be reasonable." She sighs and straightens up. "Please."

“I never do anything without a reason, Milene. You should know that by now,” I say and close my bedroom door behind me.



I regard the bracelet on the nightstand with caution, as if it were about to attack me. I’ve been staring at that thing since the moment I got into the bed, wondering what I should do with it. Where do you keep something that’s worth a million dollars? Under the mattress? Should I try to lift one of the floorboards and stash it beneath? Why the hell did Salvatore buy it? Does he expect me to wear it around the house? He’s crazy.

There must be some kind of safe in the penthouse. I take the bracelet, leave my bedroom, and walk down the hallway to knock on Salvatore’s door. Nothing. I try one more time. Nothing again. Turning on my heel, I head toward the living room.

I find Salvatore sprawled on the sofa in front of the TV, watching a game and holding a bottle of beer. Just an ordinary guy in sweatpants and a T-shirt, watching football. What a misleading picture.

“Do you have a safe?”

“Yes,” he says without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Can I put the bracelet there?”

“No.”

“No?” I march around the sofa, careful not to knock over his crutches. He removes his prosthesis in the evenings. Standing right in front of him, I cross my arms. “Why not?”

“Because I bought it for you to wear it. Not to have it be stuck in a safe.” He points the bottle toward the TV behind me. “I’m watching that.”

“Why would you buy me something like this?”

“I’ve already told you.”

“Yes, yes, you have your reasons. What are those reasons? Are you

feeling bad for making me quit my job?”

“Not particularly.” He takes a sip of his beer and looks at me. “That was for your safety.”

His hair is wet and slicked back, but a few strands have fallen across his forehead, and I have a crazy urge to reach out and move them away.

“Are you trying to lure me in, then?”

Salvatore sets the bottle down on the floor and folds his arm behind his head, watching me. His white T-shirt is stretched tightly across his chest and wide shoulders. He looks like an ad for men’s cologne.

“To lure you in?” he asks. “Why?”

“To be with you?”

“I don’t have to lure you in, Milene. We’re already married. Or did that slip your mind?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I shake my head. As I turn to leave, his arm shoots out and grabs me around the waist. He pulls me down on top of him, my face directly above his.

“Do you really believe”—he raises his left hand and brushes the back of his fingers across my cheek—“that I need to buy you jewelry to lure you in?”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my traitorous body that’s been twitching and trembling with excitement since the moment we touched. There is no way I’m answering his question, but I’m afraid he already knows the truth.

“Do you, Milene?” he tilts his head and places a light kiss on my chin.

“No.” I close my eyes.

Another kiss. A little to the right this time. “Then why did I buy it?”

I squeeze the bracelet in my hand and press it to his chest. “I have no idea.”

Salvatore’s hand covers mine, and he pries my fingers from around the gold circlet. I let go of the bracelet and open my eyes to see him toss the

million-dollar antique behind the sofa as if it were an empty soda can.

I gasp. “Are you crazy?”

“Why”—he buries his fingers in my hair, pulling my head lower until my mouth almost touches his lips—“did I buy the bracelet, Milene?”

“Because I liked it?” I whisper against his lips.

“Because you liked it,” he says as he presses his mouth to mine.

There is nothing delicate or light in his kiss. It’s hungry. Hard. Perhaps it’s even a little hostile. His hand moves down my back and under my shirt to squeeze one of my butt cheeks. I can feel his hard cock pressing upon my core. It’s so enticing that a small moan escapes my lips as wetness pools between my legs. He bites my lower lip, hard, then squeezes my ass again. I rock my hips, brushing my mound over his rock-hard length. An image of him inside of me flashes through my mind, and my panties become instantly drenched, begging to be removed.

Something falls to the floor with a thud, followed by a loud meow. I open my eyes to see Salvatore watching me. It feels so damn good, being pressed against his hard body, his arm pinning me to him. And I hate myself for enjoying it.

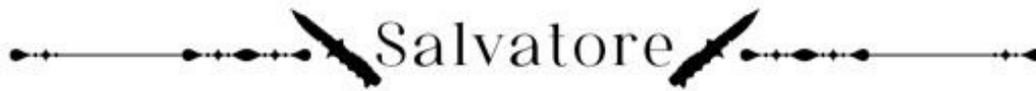
“I’d better go and get the cat before he breaks something,” I say, waiting to see if he’ll call me out on taking this opportunity to flee.

“All right.” He unwraps his arms from my body, and I immediately want to weep at the loss. “Don’t forget the bracelet.”

I nod and straighten to a sitting position. While quickly scrambling off his gorgeous body, I feel my ass brush his cock one more time.

I pick up the bracelet from the floor and dash to the kitchen to collect Kurt, undecided whether I should kiss him or strangle him for interrupting.

## Chapter 13



I take a sip of coffee while waiting for Nino and Arturo to take their seats across from my desk. “Bogdan called earlier this morning.”

“I don’t think we need more ammunition at the moment,” Nino says. “The last shipment came in two weeks ago.”

“It wasn’t about the orders. He wanted to let me know that he’d heard Fitzgerald had ordered a shitload of weapons from Dushku.”

“The Bratva won’t like that,” Arturo says. “Not after what happened four years ago between them and the Irish. If Petrov hears Dushku is selling to the Irish on the side, he won’t be happy.”

I lean back in my chair, debating whether to give Petrov a call. “The more important thing right now is what the Irish may be planning to do with all those weapons. Bogdan figures they aren’t for resale.”

“You think they’re prepping to attack us?” Arturo asks. “They don’t have enough men to inflict any serious damage.”

“Well, I don’t want any kind of damage at all, Arturo,” I say and turn to Nino. “Double the security on all locations. I want two additional soldiers with each transport. Tell the men to expect trouble. Any suspicious activity needs to be reported immediately. And put a tail on Fitzgerald. On his second-in-command, Deegan, as well.”

“All right.” He nods.

“Where are we on locating the second snitch?”

“He’s lying low. There haven’t been any leaks since we dealt with Octavio.”

My phone vibrates on the desk with an incoming message from Ada. I instructed her to report to me every two hours on what Milene is doing. The message says my wife is currently in the bathroom, trying to give the cat a

bath because the idiotic thing spent the night sleeping in the flowerpot.

“How many people knew where that takeover was happening when the DEA showed up?” I ask as I lower the phone back onto the desk.

“Around twenty,” Nino says.

“And how many of them have been with us for less than two years?”

He thinks about it for a moment. “Nine. Why?”

“They weren’t around when we made an example of the last person who blabbed about our business. If they had been, going to the authorities wouldn’t even have crossed their minds,” I say. “Split those nine into two groups and send them somewhere. Make it known that someone from Cosa Nostra will be meeting with Mendoza in person, but provide a different location for each group. Then, we wait to see where the cops show up.”

“What will we do when we catch the snitch?”

“We’ll have a little demonstration,” I say.

\* \* \*

I planned to have lunch with Rocco and the construction site’s manager, but that’s been canceled at the last moment, so I leave my tenth-floor office and take the elevator up to the penthouse. I told Ada to prepare lunch for just Milene today, but she usually makes far more food than necessary, and I’m already agitated about the fact I haven’t seen her since yesterday evening. When I get to the dining area, I find the table set for one, but instead of eating there, Milene is sitting at the breakfast bar with her phone leaning against a water bottle, watching a video.

“Is there something wrong with the table?” I ask.

“Nope.” She shakes her head and stuffs a bite of lasagna into her mouth without raising her eyes off the phone.

“So why are you eating lunch here?”

“We were always forced to eat lunch at the dining table back home, even when we were eating alone. I have trauma.”

I take a plate out of the cupboard, head over to the dining room table and

grab some food from the serving tray, then sit down on the barstool opposite Milene. She looks up at me but quickly switches her attention back to the phone. Apparently, we'll be ignoring what happened on the couch from last night.

"I found a how-to video on setting up a charity." She points her fork toward the phone. "It seems like too much bureaucracy for my taste. Isn't there anything else I could do?"

"You don't have to do anything."

She lowers her fork and shoots me an exasperated look. "I told you, I can't sit here all day."

"If it'll make you feel better, I can call some of my men, so you can insert IV needles and such."

"Ha ha." She rolls her eyes. "I'm serious."

"So am I."

Milene blinks at me, then shakes her head and mumbles something. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think she just called me batshit crazy.

"How fast can you type?" I ask.

"On the phone?"

"Laptop."

"I don't know. I've never actually timed it, but I'd say average speed. Why?"

"It'll do." I reach for the bottle of water.

She takes her phone from its resting place. "What for?"

"If you're done with lunch, go and change into something more appropriate for business." I nod at her yellow T-shirt, the name of some band emblazoned across the front. "You're coming to the office with me."

"What am I going to do in your office? Water the plants?"

"You have twenty minutes, or I'm leaving without you."



I put on a classy, navy dress I haven't worn in at least two years and look at my reflection in the mirror.

Salvatore didn't mention the couch fiasco. Good. As far as I'm concerned, it never happened. He caught me by surprise. What the fuck is wrong with me, grinding my pussy like an animal in heat against the cock of the man who destroyed my life? Who does that?

If he needs recreational sex, he can find it elsewhere because he won't be getting any from me. That . . . episode was a one-off. I have to live here, but that's all we'll do—cohabit. I'm sure he has a long list of women, all lined up and waiting to be summoned and fucked. He can do as he wants. It doesn't bother me at all. Not even a little. It will probably be some tall, sophisticated type. They can discuss art and other aristocratic shit I have no clue about. Maybe he'll take her to his auctions. Buy her million-dollar trinkets.

I grind my teeth and fasten the wide white belt that goes with the dress. I don't care. He can fuck whomever he wants. I pull the belt so tight I almost bruise my hips.

“You have twenty minutes, or I'm leaving without you,” I mumble, imitating Salvatore's abrupt tone when he issued the order to me earlier. What a control freak. If I wasn't dying of boredom, I would have told him exactly what I thought about his offer. But I've been going out of my mind in this ridiculous penthouse, and I'll do anything to escape, if only for a few hours.

The dress is a little loose around the hips, but it'll do. I quickly collect my hair in a low bun, put on my white heels, and grab my purse before rushing out of the room. It can't have been twenty minutes, but when I reach the living room, Salvatore's already leaving.

“Wait, God damn it!”

He turns and watches me approach, checking me out from head to toe.

“Does your business highness approve?” I motion with my hand down the length of my outfit.

“I approve,” he says and exits through the front door, leaving me to follow.

I’d assumed he had an office somewhere downtown, but when we get inside the elevator, he presses the button for two floors down. The doors open to reveal a wide entry hall decorated in white marble and dark wood. Immediately in front of us and close to the wall, a desk is positioned with a computer and several stacks of folders sitting on it. A woman sitting behind it jumps to her feet once she sees us exit the elevator.

“Mr. Ajello.” She nods and remains standing, staring at me with wide eyes. She’s pretty, in her late twenties, and impeccably dressed in a coral pantsuit and white shirt, which is so perfectly pressed you could cut your finger on its lapel.

To the left, there is a long hallway with several doors on each side, but Salvatore heads in the opposite direction toward the large ornate wooden door, nodding to the woman at the reception desk as he passes. He holds the door open for me, and I enter the office dominated by a massive wooden desk next to impressive floor-to-ceiling windows. The right wall is composed entirely of bookshelves, while on the other is a plush leather sofa and two matching armchairs. A painting of a sunset hangs on the wall above the sofa.

Salvatore walks around the desk to power up the laptop, then sits down on his office chair and motions for me to come over. I approach the desk, intending to take one of the two guest chairs set up before it, but he shakes his head.

“Come here.”

Raising my eyebrows, I walk around the desk. As I move to stand next to him, he grabs me around the waist and pulls me down to sit on his right thigh. I yelp and look at him in surprise, but he just rolls the chair closer to the desk while still holding me with his arm and slides the laptop in front of me.

“Open the email app,” he says.

I reach for the mouse and lean forward to search through dozens of icons scattered around the screen for the one that will open his email. The desktop is a mess and completely at odds with Salvatore’s personality. He lifts his right hand off my waist and covers mine, moving the mouse toward the upper left corner of the screen.

He clicks on the envelope icon to bring up the inbox window. “Let’s start with emails that arrived today.”

I find it rather hard to feign indifference while sitting on his lap with his arm again wrapped around my middle, but somehow, I manage to keep my cool and open the first unread email from the list.

“That’s the paperwork for another lot I’m planning to buy,” he says next to my ear. “Forward it to my lawyer. Greg Atkinson. Tell him to make sure he checks whether everything’s clean. I don’t want a repeat of the situation from February.”

“What happened in February?” I ask as I type.

“The previous owner’s illegitimate son surfaced, claiming ownership.”

I finish the email, send it, and open the next one.

“I assume you don’t have an uncle in South Africa who needs money for brain surgery.”

The arm around my waist tightens. “No,” he says, his lips lightly brushing my earlobe.

I need him to stop touching me. It’s making me crazy.

*So why don’t you tell him to stop, then? I’ll tell you why.  
Because you’re a hypocrite, Milene. You like it, just admit  
it.*

I’m not admitting it, not even to myself. *Shut up!* I tell my inner voice, mark the email as spam, and move on to the next.

“That one’s from my banker,” Salvatore says. “Forward it to Greg, as well. Tell him to make sure he reads the new contract and checks whether they’ve offered better conversion rates, as we requested. If they haven’t, he can let them know we’ll be closing all our accounts by the end of the month.”

As I type, I cast a quick glance at his gloved left hand resting next to the laptop. He probably can’t type with it, or if he can, it likely takes ages. How did he end up in a situation where someone smashed his fingers to smithereens with a hammer? Jesus, it must have hurt like a bitch.

I open the next email and skim over the list of renovation supplies and the prices listed next to each item. “You plan on redecorating?”

He doesn't strike me as a DIY guy, but why else would he need tiles, paints, and the other things listed there.

"Not exactly." He angles his head to the side and his nose ends up pressing against my neck. "Tell them we'll take the same amount as last month, except for the white metro tiles. I need triple the quantity of those, and I want a better price. Include Arturo on the CC."

I stop typing midsentence and turn to him, my eyes wide. "You're ordering drugs via email? Are you insane?"

With his finger under my chin, Salvatore gently tilts my head. My heartbeat quickens as his eyes focus on my lips.

"Maybe," he says, then lowers his hand and focuses back on the laptop again. "Let's proceed."

We spend almost four hours going through his emails before he moves my hands from the keyboard and closes the laptop. "That's enough for today."

I get up and pick up my purse off the desk, trying to ignore the sense of loss at the break in contact.

"Well, I'll head back upstairs," I say.

"Okay." He leans back in his chair. "I have to make a few calls, then I'll be up as well."

"Yup. See you later." I leave the office in haste, as though getting away from him might help suppress the crazy urge to leap back onto his lap and press my lips to his. I can't sacrifice my integrity at the altar of this maddening attraction. I want to hate him, damn it, not imagine him screwing me senseless every single night.

Fucking hell.

\* \* \*

After a long bubble bath, I spend an hour sorting through my clothes, setting the appropriate business attire to one side. If Salvatore decides that I should continue helping out with his emails, I'll need to go shopping because my pile of business-suitable clothes consist of two dresses, four blouses, and one pair of black pants. I haven't really had the opportunity to wear suits or

skirts in the past couple of years, and most of my wardrobe is jeans, shorts, and casual tops. There are a few dresses I bought on a whim and wore maybe once when I went out, but those aren't suitable, either.

I put the clothes back into the closet, shoo Kurt off my pillow, where he's been sleeping for the past hour, and head into the kitchen to grab something to eat. Hopefully, Salvatore has already eaten, and I won't run into him. Yes, I'm chickening out, but it's easier to avoid him than to resist the insane attraction I feel whenever he's close. The thing that frustrates me most is he knows exactly how his proximity affects me. He's been playing with me for days, all those "I-want-to-fuck-you" looks and stolen touches, followed by feigned indifference. And I'm not sure of the rules of this game.

Thankfully, the kitchen is empty, so I inspect the contents of the fridge. There are leftovers from lunch, but I decide to have a lighter meal and reach for the box of strawberries on the top shelf. I've almost finished washing them when I sense Salvatore behind me. I don't even have to turn to know it's him. And it has nothing to do with the fact there are only two of us in the penthouse. I have a tingling sensation at the back of my neck every time he's near. My body's strong reaction to him is unnerving.

"Those look sweet," Salvatore's velvety voice echoes next to my ear. "Can I have one?"

I take a deep breath and turn around slowly. My eyes land on the sculpted form of his bare chest, mere inches from my face, since he's wearing only sweatpants. I lift my head and catch him watching me. He must have had a shower because the scent of woody body wash clings to him. His hair is wet and in a state of complete disarray, as though he's passed his fingers through it a couple of times and considered it combed. I find it hard to believe, but he's even more sexy like this than when he's all polished and dressed in a suit. I clear my throat and lift the bowl of washed strawberries between us.

Salvatore cocks his head, then pins me with his gaze and slowly blinks. My heart rate quickens, and I barely stifle a sigh. It's ridiculous, how such a small act can make me weak in the knees. He looks down at the bowl in my hands, takes a step forward and cages me against the counter with his arms. I press my lips together, take a strawberry from the bowl and lift it to his mouth. His eyes never leave mine as he wraps his lips around the berry, sucking the tips of my fingers into his mouth in the process.

“What’s your agenda, Tore?” I ask.

“My agenda?”

“I’m not going to sleep with you, so you can stop with this seduction thing you have going on. Playing with me, walking around shirtless. It won’t work.”

“This is my home, I can do whatever I please.” He leans forward and bends his head. “And if it won’t work, does it matter whether I’m shirtless or not?”

His eyes remind me of a hawk’s, sharp and focused, with prey in their sights and preparing for the kill. He’s doing this on purpose.

“It doesn’t.” I shrug. “I’m absolutely indifferent where you’re concerned.”

One corner of his lip curls upward a little. I wouldn’t have even recognized it if I wasn’t so accustomed to seeing him with a face that’s constantly grim.

“I can’t wait to have you in my bed, Milene,” he whispers, and a shudder passes through my body.

“That will never happen. I don’t even like you.” I turn my back to him, place the bowl of strawberries on the counter, and pop one into my mouth, pretending to be focused on the cityscape visible through the window.

Salvatore’s body leans onto mine, and his hand comes to my waist. Hard lips press to the side of my neck, then teeth, biting lightly at the sensitive skin.

“Are you sure you’re indifferent toward me, cara?” he whispers and bites at my neck again.

I grab the edge of the counter and close my eyes. His mouth is now on my nape, kissing and nibbling. I need to fucking move away from him, but I can’t make myself do it.

“I’m sure,” I choke out and will my eyes to open.

“Let’s test that conviction of yours. Shall we?”

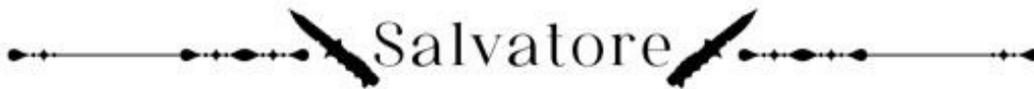
He moves his hand down my belly and inside my shorts. I take a deep breath and concentrate on the path his palm is taking. It feels so good I almost crumble.

His hand travels lower to between my legs and applies pressure onto my pussy. I suck in a breath, then exhale slowly as his fingers keep stroking me over the drenched fabric of my panties. Jesus. I close my eyes again, wondering where my composure has gone.

“Liar,” he whispers into my ear as he gently takes my earlobe between his front teeth. “Good night, Milene.”

Gently, he withdraws his hand from my shorts, and a few seconds later, I hear him leave the kitchen. Only once I am sure he’s gone do I open my eyes and bolt toward my own bedroom.

## Chapter 14



I lean my shoulder on the support column that marks the kitchen area and cross my arms over my chest, watching Milene as she stirs whatever she is cooking on the stove. Why does she keep trying when she burns everything or sets something on fire whenever she attempts cook?

“If I remember correctly, you are forbidden to approach the stove,” I say.

She sends me an exasperated look over her shoulder, then goes back to her stirring. “Kurt has diarrhea. The article I read said to feed him boiled chicken.”

“Why didn’t you ask Ada to prepare it?”

“I’m capable of boiling two pieces of meat by myself.”

“Is there a medical issue your cat doesn’t have?”

“He’s had a hard life, Tore. Stress can lead to many medical issues. It’s obvious he was bullied.”

“Bullied?”

“Of course. Didn’t you see his tail?”

“Yes.” And its eye. And ear. And it’s also missing some hair on the back. That cat looks like it survived a nuclear catastrophe.

Milene reaches for a plate and fishes out two pieces of meat—enough to feed at least five cats—from the pot and cuts them into small cubes. When she’s done, she blows on the meat for almost a minute, then places the plate on the floor in the corner. Meanwhile, the pot is still on the stove with the burner on. Shaking my head, I walk over and turn it off.

“Why are you not at work?” she asks casually as she washes her hands. Too casually. It looks like we’ll be ignoring what happened in the kitchen last night as well. I find her insistence that there is no attraction between us rather amusing. Like she thinks it’ll disappear if we pretend it’s not there.

“I needed something from here,” I say.

It’s not a lie because I do need something—my regular fix of her presence. I couldn’t wait two more hours for her to come downstairs to work on my emails. I had to see her.

Now.

“And how is your black empire holding these days?”

“Better than ever,” I say. “Why?”

She shrugs, then jumps up to sit on the counter. “I was just wondering. Why do you keep dealing in drugs? You have an enormous real estate business. Why take the risk?”

After throwing a look at the stove to make sure Milene hasn’t left anything else on the burner, I stride across the kitchen until I am standing right in front of her. Placing my hands on either side of her, I cage her against the counter. The sunrays coming through the window fall directly on her face, making her freckles even more noticeable. “Are you worried about me, Milene?”

“You get shot often,” she says. “Maybe branching out would be wise. Minimize the exposure and all that.”

I raise my hand to place it under her chin and tilt her head up. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“No.”

“No?” I lean forward until our faces are barely an inch apart.

Her lips widen in a smug smile.

Oh, how she likes to test me. I slide my hand down and wrap my fingers around her slender neck, the black of my leather glove creating such a contrast with her milky skin and pale hair.

“Tell me, Milene.” I whisper into her ear. “Aren’t you worried I might decide to drop this . . . seduction thing, as you called it, and take what I want?”

Her breathing quickens. I wish I didn’t have the glove on, so I could feel her pulse under my skin. Would it be only slightly faster than normal? Or would it be erratic?

“No. I’m not afraid of that,” she says, her lips brushing my earlobe. “Like

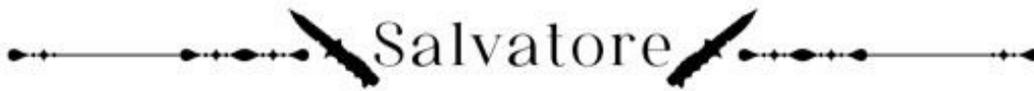
every predator out there, you revel in the thrill of the hunt. But know one thing, Salvatore. This prey will not fall into your claws willingly. Ever.”

I close my eyes and inhale her scent. “You shouldn’t have said that, cara.” I tilt my head to the side and press my lips on the soft skin of her neck. “You really . . . really shouldn’t have.”

“Why?” she breathes out.

“Because that declaration, Milene . . . is every predator’s wet dream,” I whisper into her ear, then let go of her neck and turn to leave. “I’m expecting you at the office in two hours.”

## Chapter 15



Tormenting Milene has been as satisfying as it is frustrating. While I enjoy toying with her and wondering when she'll finally succumb, the entire endeavor has turned on me because I can't get her out of my head. I don't let anything stand in the way of business, but recently, I've been thinking more about Milene than about investments and the problems which should concern me.

It's been a week since I first asked her to go with me to the office, and she's been coming every afternoon since. She's insisted on taking one of the chairs to sit on while replying to emails. I said no. She tried to argue, but when that didn't succeed, she relented and now she automatically sits on my lap once she's walked through the door. Like now.

I watch as she approaches, a perfectly neutral expression on her face. She lowers her perky ass onto my thigh and pulls the laptop closer.

"Another contract," she says. "Any comments on this, or should I forward it to Greg?"

"Just forward it."

Milene nods, sends the email and opens the next one. "A local school is asking for a donation. What should I say?"

"Just ignore it."

She turns her head and eyes me over her shoulder. "You're loaded."

"So?"

"So, you can afford a small donation."

"I can. But I don't see why I should start giving money away." I let my gaze fall from her eyes down to her chest. She's wearing a white silk blouse. The first two buttons are undone, and from beneath its sheen, the ghost of a pale pink bra is taunting me.

“Because you want to be a better person?”

“I don’t need to be a better person, Milene. I’m quite satisfied with what I am.”

“And what is that?”

I lift my eyes off her cleavage and focus on her face. Her hair is down today. I move away the blond strands to reveal the delicate skin of her neck.

“Plain bad.” I tighten my hold around her waist, enjoying the way she tenses. To unnerve her even further, I plant a light kiss at the back of her neck, brushing my lips across her soft skin. I meant what I said in the kitchen that day. She doesn’t know it yet, but she will end up in my bed very soon. “Tell them they’ll receive laptops for the high-achieving students but that I’ll be sending someone to make sure the tech actually ends up in those students’ hands. If I find out that even a single item is being used someplace else, they won’t see another cent from me ever again.”

She nods and starts typing, but her fingers tremble slightly as she does so. I kiss her neck again, a little higher this time—under her ear, and enjoy the way she shudders.

“You’re distracting me, Salvatore.”

“You need to work on your concentration,” I say and move my right hand down her thigh until I reach the hem of her skirt. “Let’s practice.”

Milene opens her mouth to say something, but as my palm slides between her legs and presses against her core, she gasps instead. I brush the tips of my fingers over the lacy material, then apply slight pressure once again.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

“Helping you.”

“With what?”

“Working on your concentration.” I push her panties to the side, feel her wetness, and gently rub her clit in a circular motion, increasing the pressure at just the right moments.

Milene doesn’t move for a while. She simply sits stone-still on my lap, then takes a deep breath and places her hands over the keyboard once again. I watch as she takes another breath, hits enter, and resumes her quiet clickety-clack against the keys.

She's pretty quick. Much faster than I'd expected. For the first time I can remember, I'm up-to-date with my correspondence. I can type, but with one hand, it's mere pecking, and it takes far too much time. I usually focus on only the most pressing matters and handle the rest via phone. I once tried typing with both my left and right hand, but the results were a mess. It took longer to fix the mistakes than it does to just use one hand to type.

"What do you want me to do with those documents Greg sent?" Milene's tone is even when she asks, but I detect a slight tremble in her voice. She's trying very hard to feign indifference and pretend my exploring fingers aren't affecting her in the least.

I bury my nose in her hair and inhale. "Leave it. I'll check them tomorrow," I say flicking my thumb over her clit.

A low whimper leaves Milene's lips. "Please, stop."

"Why?" I brush the tip of my finger along the wet lips of her pussy. "You don't like it?"

She turns around in my lap and bites her lower lip. "I don't."

"All right." I start pulling my hand away but her legs clench, trapping my hand in place. The mix of anger and confusion on her face is priceless. I wonder if she's aware her ire is misdirected. It's not me she's mad at. She's furious with herself because she's enjoying this. Her eyes move lower and come to rest on my lips.

The moment her hold of my hand loosens, I slide my hand inside her panties and tease her again. A gasp leaves her lips when I slide a finger into her. She widens her legs, her breathing quickening. Warm breath fans my face as I slide my finger in and out. A tiny mewl leaves her mouth, and my cock swells upon hearing it.

"I'm so looking forward to fucking you senseless, cara," I say, looking into her eyes.

"Dream on," she chokes out, then whimpers when I add another finger.

"I already do. I imagine myself slamming into you, wrecking your sweet pussy every fucking night." I thrust my fingers all the way in, enjoying her erratic panting. "But I only end up frustrated because you are so damn stubborn."

“I don’t like you!” she says through her teeth.

“No? Well, it looks like your pussy likes my hand quite a lot. But maybe I’m wrong.” I pull my fingers out and lift my hand off her pussy.

Milene stares at me with her teeth clenched together and her eyes wide. She looks like she’s going to combust.

Someone knocks on the door. Milene quickly turns her head away and looks back at the laptop screen.

“Enter,” I say and remove my hand from under her skirt.

Nino walks in but falters when he sees Milene sitting on my lap. I motion for him to come, and he takes a chair on the opposite side of the desk.

“We have a new development regarding the snitch,” he says. “Leaking the info worked.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“No. But he was in the group of five men.”

“Their phones are clean?” I ask.

“Yup. No way to discover who it was unless someone confesses.”

“Take all five to the old safe house and lock them in a room under video surveillance. All together. No guards inside. No food, no water.” I lean back in my chair, pulling Milene with me. “But before you do that, take the one who’s least likely to be the snitch and tell him what’s happening. Let it be known that if no one confesses by morning, all five will be dead in a ditch.”

Milene’s body tenses. Maybe I shouldn’t discuss such things in front of her. “We’ll continue tomorrow, Milene.”

She looks at Nino, then back at me before getting up and leaving the office and I can’t help but notice how pale her face is. When she closes the door behind her, I turn back to Nino.

“At least one of them must have seen the rat using the wrong phone or acting strangely, but they’ll need the incentive to remember. Put two of your men to monitor the feed. Let’s see whether they start accusing each other. The culprit might float to the surface.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“As I said, kill all five of them. There will be no rats on this ship.”

“Consider it done.”

“Tell me about Fitzgerald. Anything new on that?”

Nino’s giving me updates on Fitzgerald’s whereabouts when the phone on my desk rings loudly. I glance at the caller ID and see that it’s the security desk downstairs. For a moment I consider ignoring it, but then decide to take the call after all.

“Mr. Ajello, I wanted to inform you that your wife has just left the building.”

“What?” I spring up from the chair. “Alone?”

“Yes. I . . . should I have stopped her?”

I squeeze the receiver in my hand. “Is she still downstairs?”

“No, she successfully hailed a cab and left.”

“If you’re still there when I get down,” I sneer, “I will fucking shoot you in the head, Steven.”

I grab my phone and car keys off the desk, and head toward the door.

“Boss?” Nino calls, hurrying behind me. “What happened?”

“My wife happened,” I snap, get into the elevator with Nino on my heels, and call Milene.

“Yes?”

“Where the fuck did you go without a security detail?” I yell.

“You said you had work to do. I’m heading to Pippa’s for coffee. I’ll be home in two hours.”

“Tell the driver to turn around and get back to your bodyguards. Now, Milene!”

“I’m not taking four bodyguards to my friend’s tiny place. The taxi will drop me in front of Pippa’s building, and I’ll come straight back afterward.”

I hit the button for the garage. “Tell the driver to make that fucking U-turn!”

“Don’t yell at me, Salvatore. I’m not going anywhere risky, and I’ll be back soon. If you feel that next time I should take security, we can discuss it later and find some sort of compromise.”

Oh, I'll give her a compromise. "The address?"

"Why?"

"I'm coming to get you. Do not leave the taxi until I'm there."

"Stop overreacting. We'll talk when I return." She cuts the call. I dial her number again, but the call goes directly to her voice mail.

She hung up on me. No one fucking hangs up on me. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and head toward my car.

"Boss?" Nino speaks up behind me.

"Find me the address of Pippa something!" I get inside the vehicle, leaving the door open as I continue my conversation. "She works at St. Mary's as a nurse."

"I'll have it in five minutes," he says and stares at me. "Boss, are you all right?"

I put the key into the ignition. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were yelling the whole way here. You never yell." He nods toward my hands on the wheel. "And your hands are shaking."

Of course, my hands are shaking, I'm so full of rage it feels like I'm going to explode, and I have no idea how to process that shit.

"Find me that address. Now!" I slam the door closed, start the car and hit the gas.

I ignore the red light as I exit the garage, pressing down harder on the accelerator. The way I am acting is completely unreasonable, but I don't give a fuck. I can't stand the idea of not knowing where she is. It's gnawing at me from the inside out, like a rat in a cage. I grip the steering wheel with all my might and take a deep breath, trying to calm down. It's not working. Where the fuck is she?!



"What the hell happened?" Pippa jumps at me with questions before I'm

even inside her apartment. “Why did you resign? Where have you been for the past few weeks? I came to your place twice. I thought you’d been kidnapped.”

“Sorry, I just didn’t want to talk about it over the phone. It’s a long story.” I flop down on the sofa and, leaning back into the soft cushions, close my eyes. I’ve missed this. The ordinary world. A normal life. I spent fifteen minutes in front of the building, taking deep breaths so I could calm down enough to come upstairs.

When I left Salvatore’s office, it seemed as though the walls were suddenly closing in on me, and I couldn’t draw a breath. I couldn’t make myself go up to the penthouse. I had to get out and go somewhere, anywhere but there, so I called Pippa. I guess spending four years trying to avoid everything about Cosa Nostra has made me soft. I’ve forgotten how a lot of problems are handled. Killing five men, four of whom are innocent, is normal in our world.

“Talk!” Pippa says and sits down on the sofa next to me.

“Remember the mysterious guy?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we like each other,” I say, aware how utterly stupid the rest of the explanation will sound. “And I decided to follow your advice.”

“What? You married the guy?” She stares at me. “But you’ve known him for, like, a month!”

“We *really* like each other.” I shrug.

“Whoa, Milene. That’s . . . it’s crazy.”

Yeah. She doesn’t know the half of it.

“So, you’ve been with him this whole time? Who is he? Is that why you resigned? I . . . wow. I still can’t believe this. You never seemed like an impulsive person.”

“I realized my life had become too boring, and I should . . . you know, spice it up a bit.”

Pippa laughs and shakes her head. “Oh, you definitely spiced it up, babe. Did you at least get his name before you married the guy?”

“Yes. It’s Salvatore.”

“Italian? Nice. I can’t wait to tell the girls at work.”

A loud bang echoes against the front door, and it flies open to reveal Salvatore standing on the threshold. His lips are pressed into a pale thin line, and the darkness in his eyes shows he’s mad as hell. It’s as though tiny daggers are shooting out of his pupils, all directed at me. How on earth did he find me so fast?

“Milene,” he says with forced calmness.

I see it on his face, though. He’s ready to drag me back, by the hair if necessary. I let out a sigh. I shouldn’t have left without security, but I was freaking out. Now we’re here, and he’s going to make a scene.

“I have to go, honey,” I tell Pippa and rise off the sofa. “I just wanted to drop by and say hi, but I’ll call you, and we’ll go for coffee one afternoon. Deal?”

She looks at Salvatore, who casts a long shadow on the floor of Pippa’s apartment, and back at me. “Is everything okay? You can stay here if you want.”

“Everything is fine.” I lean in to kiss her on the cheek. “I’ll call you next week.”

I walk toward the door and lift my chin to meet my husband’s stare. He’s still waiting to pounce like a lion with its prey in sight, but I’m not backing down. “Later,” I say in a low voice.

He doesn’t say anything, just takes my hand and leads me toward the elevator.

When we get inside the car, he leans his forearms on the wheel and stares off into the distance. With both of us looking straight ahead, we sit in menacing silence for at least five minutes before he finally breaks it.

“You will never do that again,” he says and hits the steering wheel with his palm. “Never, Milene.”

I lean back in the seat and close my eyes. “I freaked out, Tore. I had to get out of that building.”

Strong fingers wrap around the back of my neck, and I open my eyes to find Salvatore’s face a couple of inches from mine.

“Why?” he asks through his teeth and slightly tightens his hold on my neck.

“Hearing someone state they’re willing to execute five people as though they’re speaking of tossing out overripe fruit, well, that may worry a person. I suppose you can understand that a little.”

“You know very well how things work in the Family, Milene.”

“Yes. Which is why I left. Or tried to, at least.”

He curses, then presses his mouth against mine in a hard and angry kiss. I gasp, both shocked and confused.

“Never. Again,” he says against my lips and again squeezes the back of my neck. “Understood?”

“Okay.” I nod.

He watches me through narrowed eyes, and I wonder if he’s going to kiss me again. But he just nods, then releases my neck and starts the engine.

## Chapter 16



“Milene!”

I spring up in the bed and blink away the sleep. Salvatore is standing in the doorway of my room, hair in disarray and shirt unbuttoned. It’s pitch dark outside.

“Dress,” he says, starting to button his shirt. “We need you on the eleventh floor.”

“What’s there?” I ask as I rush to turn on a lamp, then move to the closet to take out a pair of leggings and a T-shirt and pull them on.

“The infirmary. The Irish attacked my men while they were loading the drugs. They’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“You have an infirmary here? How many floors do you own?” I rush to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

“I own the building,” his answer reaches me.

When I return, Salvatore is still fumbling with the buttons. In the four minutes I’ve spent in the bathroom, he’s only managed to fasten the top two. I watch as he tries to do up the third, but it keeps slipping from between the fingers of his left hand, so he curses.

I walk over and shoo his hands out of the way. He stands still as a statue while I work my way down the row until the buttons are all done.

“There. All set,” I say and look up.

His eyes are fixed on mine for several long seconds. Then, he abruptly says, “Let’s go.”

When we exit the elevator on the floor below, I follow Salvatore through the door into a large room which has floor-to-ceiling white tiles. My jaw drops as I take in the sight. To the left, there are three gurneys with high-end medical equipment beside each. Toward the back, the space is separated by a

glass wall with an operating table visible inside. The wall on the right is lined with large white shelves that are stocked with medical supplies.

I expected a small room with perhaps a cart holding bandages and similar first aid items, maybe an IV stand, not a miniature hospital. As I turn toward Salvatore, baffled by everything I'm seeing, the doors to a huge service elevator located on the opposite side of the room—different to the one Salvatore and I used—open, and a group of people, more than half of them covered in blood, file out.

“Where the fuck is Ilaria?” Salvatore barks at Nino, who is half dragging Alessandro as he exits the elevator. The big guy is holding his hand against his bleeding belly. A gunshot wound?

“I'm here,” A female voice announces from somewhere. I turn to see an elegant, tall woman in her late fifties coming out of the main elevator. Her perfectly coiffured hair is sandy-blonde. She's wearing dark blue dress pants with a silky blouse and a white cashmere coat overtop. When she reaches us, she peruses me and sighs.

“I guess this is the wife. We'll do the introductions later,” the woman says, taking off her coat. She heads to the sink to scrub her hands, then takes a plastic doctor's gown from one of the drawers, snaps on a pair of gloves, and moves swiftly toward the group of wounded men.

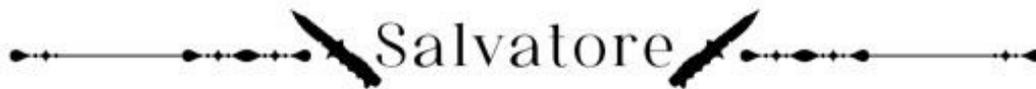
“Who's that?” I look at Salvatore and head to the sink to scrub my own hands.

“My mother,” he answers.

I stare at his back, stunned for a moment, as he walks away to join the group huddled around Alessandro. All I can do is blink rapidly as I shake my head a bit to recover from that little bombshell.

His mother?

I finish getting prepped and run toward the chaos at the other end of the room, where Salvatore's mother is already instructing Nino to take Alessandro into the small operating room.



“Hold this.” Milene grabs my hand, pulling my palm over the bundled gauze compressed onto the wound in Carmelo’s shoulder. “Damn it, Tore. You need to press harder.”

Carmelo looks at her, then at me, his eyes wide. I ignore his gawking and watch as Milene moves to Filippo and pulls up his shirt to inspect the laceration across the side of his body.

“Superficial. Do you want me to sew you up, or do you want Ilaria to do it?” she asks.

Filippo looks at me, and I shake my head. I won’t have my wife touching any other man unless it’s absolutely necessary.

“Doc can do it, Mrs. Ajello,” Filippo says quickly.

“Okay, I’ll go see if they need me in the OR.”

She stops to check the IV next to Alessandro’s bed, goes to change her gloves and the sterile coat, then heads into the small room where Ilaria is trying to dig out the bullet from Pasquale’s thigh. They fumble with his wound for twenty more minutes. Milene bandages his leg while Ilaria throws her gloves in the trash, dons a new pair, and opens the sliding door.

“Next!” Ilaria yells, then looks at Carmelo. “Long time no see, Carmelo. What do you have for me today, hmm?”

It takes two more hours for Ilaria and Milene to take care of the wounded, and by the time everyone’s been treated, it’s already eight in the morning. Due to his stomach wound, Alessandro will have to stay in the infirmary for a few days. Carmelo’s and Pasquale’s injuries are less serious, so they will be released tomorrow. The other four men were sent home as soon as they’d been treated. Seven wounded in total. I can’t wait to get my hands on Fitzgerald.

The service elevator opens, and Nino walks out, followed by two of the nurses I have on the payroll for just these types of situations. They’ll keep watch over Alessandro, Carmelo, and Pasquale until tomorrow afternoon, when another pair will take over.

“Let’s go upstairs. I’ve told Ada to prepare us something to eat.” I pass Ilaria her coat. “You can sleep in one of the guest rooms, or I can have someone drop you off.”

“No need. Cosimo will pick me up at nine. I want to check on Alessandro one more time before I go.”

“Does he need to be moved to a hospital?” I ask.

“No. He was lucky. The bullet didn’t damage any organs. I’ll drop by to check on him twice a day till Monday. He should be good to leave by then.”

I nod. “I’ll get Milene and we’ll go up.”

Ilaria looks at me as though she wants to say something but leaves without uttering a word. I turn around in search of my wife and find her changing Pasquale’s IV, chatting away as he looks at her like she’s an angel. It takes all of five seconds for me to reach her, scoop her into my arms, and carry her toward the elevator, signaling to one of the other nurses to take over.

“Tore? What are you doing?”

“I’m taking you home.”

“I was in the middle of a conversation.”

“I could see that,” I say and use my elbow to press the button for the twelfth floor. “You won’t be talking to my men unless necessary. Or any men, for that matter.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

The elevator chimes as we reach the top floor, and the doors slide open. I set Milene down, but instead of letting her exit, I press the stop button and take a step toward her, caging her within the cab by pressing my palms against the walls on either side of her head. “No talking to my men, Milene.”

“Jesus, what’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” She tries to slip free, but I grab her around her waist and pull her body to mine.

“Do. Not. Test me,” I whisper, placing my hand at the back of her head and pulling her face toward mine. “Because if I see anyone else looking at you the way Pasquale just did, I’ll end them.”

“For God’s sake, Salvatore. That’s absolutely . . .”

Pressing my mouth against hers, I swallow her words, and slide my left hand under her T-shirt. Milene gasps and stiffens for a second, but then her hands move around my neck, drawing me in.

My lips brush against hers before I pull back a hair’s breadth to look her in the eyes. “I will end him, Milene. Whoever it may be,” I say and slide my hands down the sides of her body to her thighs. I grip and lift her up, pressing her against the back wall. “Got it?”

Milene nods and wraps her legs around my waist, then moans when my hard cock presses against her sex. I don’t remember ever wanting a woman so madly that she occupies my every waking thought.

“Why is there a cat in your living room currently sharpening its claws on the Persian rug?” my mother says from somewhere behind me.

“We’re busy, Ilaria,” I say and keep attacking Milene’s lips.

“So I can see.”

Milene wriggles in my arms, so I let her down reluctantly and my eyes follow her as she exits the elevator and dashes across the hallway, past Ilaria, and into the penthouse. Damn that cat.

“You let her bring a cat here?” Ilaria asks.

I walk by her and head right toward the living area. “It’s not a cat. It’s the devil’s spawn. And, wasn’t Cosimo supposed to be meeting you?”

“He’s on his way,” Ilaria replies.

Ada set the dining table for breakfast, so I pick a chair that gives me an unobstructed view of the living room. Milene stands in front of the bookshelf with her hands on her hips, trying to coax Kurt down from the top of it. It has something that looks like a piece of sausage in its mouth.

“How old is she?” Ilaria asks and takes a seat next to me.

“Twenty-two.”

“Young. She did good down there. Is she a medical student?”

The cat leaps off the shelf and scurries under the sofa. Milene twists, crouching to look under the furniture.

“A nurse.” I reach for my coffee and take a sip.

“Why did you marry her, Salvatore? Cosimo said it was because of some agreement with the Chicago Family, but we both know no one can *make* you do anything.”

“I’m not exactly sure, Ilaria.” I tilt my head, leering at Milene’s firm ass as she continues to peer beneath the sofa. “She’s completely screwed up my brain. I’ve started acting irrationally.”

“How so?”

“She went to see a friend a few days ago. Alone. I flipped. Yelled at Nino all the way from the office to the parking lot.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I know.”

Milene finally catches a hold of the cat and carries it into the kitchen.

“You eat there!” She points at the bowl in the corner.

The cat looks at her, jumps onto the counter, and then on top of the refrigerator, where it resumes chewing on the sausage. Milene throws her hands up into the air, leaves the cat sitting on the fridge, and comes over to take a seat next to me.

“So, you never told me your mom is a surgeon.” She takes a piece of pastry from the platter in the middle of the table. “That was amazing to watch, Mrs. Ajello. Are you the one who’s always patching up Tore’s men?”

My mother’s eyebrows shoot up on hearing the nickname.

“Salvatore has a general medical practitioner for everyday stuff. They only call me when there are serious wounds,” she says and casts a sideways glance in my direction. “I don’t mind, so long as the bullets I’m digging out are not from inside my son.”

“Yeah, I hear that happens quite often.” Milene stuffs the rest of her pastry into her mouth and gets up from the table. “I’m gonna crash. Do you need me in the office this afternoon?”

“No. I have a meeting with Arturo in an hour that’ll take most of the day,” I say.

“What about sleep? We’ve been up since two.”

“Are you inviting me to join you, cara?”

Her eyes widen before she scrunches her nose at me. “You know the answer to that question.” She turns to Ilaria. “It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Ajello. I hope the next time we see each other will be under less dramatic circumstances.”

The moment Milene is out of sight, my mother crosses her arms and fixes me with her gaze. “Cara?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I’ve never heard you use an endearment for anyone.”

“There is a first time for everything.”

Ilaria’s eyes narrow. “And the two of you are not sleeping together?”

“I don’t see how that is any of your concern.”

“So, you aren’t.”

“No. Not yet.”

“You don’t do relationships, Salvatore. I very much doubt you know how to behave in one. As far as I know, you’ve only used women to fuck, so what’s so different about this girl? You two are already married. Why play roommates?”

“I’ve already taken away all of her choices in life,” I say. “When we do, eventually, sleep together, it’ll be because she’s decided to take that step.”

“What I saw happening in that elevator is not first base action.” She shakes her head. “The air around the two of you is practically buzzing with sexual energy. I have half a mind to lock you two in a room and leave.”

“She’s still mad at me.”

“For marrying her?”

“I don’t think the marriage itself bothers her that much. It’s everything else that goes with it.” I pour myself another coffee. “I made her resign from the hospital where she worked.”

“She didn’t want to leave the job?”

“No. Perhaps if the situation were different, we could have worked something out, but with the Irish on a killing spree, I can’t risk it.”

“So, you would have let her work if the Irish were out of the picture?”

“Maybe. If she’d agreed to transfer to gynecology or pediatrics. Somewhere with no adult male patients.”

“Are you telling me you’re jealous?”

“I’m not jealous.” I take a sip of coffee. “I just have an uncontrollable urge to kill any man who even looks at my wife.”

My mother watches me for a few seconds, then places her hands on the table and leans forward. “I truly hope this is a passing infatuation,” she says. “God help her, if you’re truly fixated.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Because it is. You’ve always had issues connecting with people, ever since you were a child. She’s too young to handle someone like you.”

“Ilaria, please, you make it sound like I’m a psychopath.”

My mother sighs and shifts her gaze to something behind me. Her eyes remain glued to that spot for a couple of minutes, and she appears to be deep in thought.

“You’re my child, Salvatore. I love you the way you are,” she says, then looks directly into my eyes. “But we both know you’re not what most people consider normal. If I’m right, and if you do feel something for this girl, you’ll make her life very difficult. You know you become unreasonable when you fixate on something. You’ll need to either control yourself or explain certain things to her. Otherwise, she will eventually run.”

“What is it you think I’ll do?”

The phone in her coat pings.

“I wish I knew. Your brain is wired differently, son. Remember that.” She takes out the phone and looks at the screen. “Cosimo’s here. I’ll check on Alessandro, then I’ll be gone.”

“It’s interesting that you claim to hate Cosa Nostra, yet you’re in a relationship with one of my capos.”

“Of course I hate it. You almost died because of this fucking Family,” she barks, her mask of civility slipping a little. “I still don’t know how you survived. You have no idea what waiting in that hospital hall did to me, praying for the surgeon to come out and tell me you’d live.”

“I lived, Ilaria. And that was seven years ago.”

“You did, barely, and not without consequences,” she snaps, looking down at my left leg, but quickly averting her eyes.

Losing part of my leg affected Ilaria more than me. She still hasn't quite come to terms with it. I always make sure to wear my prosthesis when she's around because the last few times she saw me without it, she left with tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She was fighting them back, but I saw all the same.

Ilaria takes her coat, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Call me if you need to talk. I'll drop by this evening to see how Alessandro is doing.”

## Chapter 17



I wake up with a tingling sensation at the base of my skull, and I'm instantly aware that someone is watching me. I don't even need to open my eyes to know it's Salvatore.

"What time is it?" I mumble.

"Three in the afternoon."

Dear God, his voice has an even more devastating impact on my half-asleep brain. Deep and sexy, it makes me want to bury myself beneath the blanket and simply take in the sound of his baritone. Not the words, but the timbre. I wonder whether his tone drops even lower when he's having sex. No, I'm not going down that rabbit hole.

I blink several times before fully opening my eyes and find Salvatore leaning his shoulder against the doorframe, the sleeves of his black shirt rolled up to the elbows, and his top two buttons undone.

"Did you check on the guys?"

"Yes. They're good." He looks at Kurt, who's curled up on the pillow above my head. "Do you know your cat sleeps with its tail over your face?"

"He's been doing that from the start. I tried to make him sleep at the foot of the bed, but it hasn't worked.

"You should try again."

"Why?"

"Because when you move into my room, I don't want the cat on my bed."

"I don't plan on moving into your room."

"But I do, Milene."

He leaves, and I press my thighs together, despising myself for wanting to spend every night in his bed.

I remember the episode in the elevator and how good it felt to be crushed against his body, his cock pressed to my pussy. Just thinking about the moan I had to stifle turns me inside out. I do my best to ignore the urge to run after him and leap into his arms. Instead, I make my way to the bathroom to wash my hair.

Lifting the handheld showerhead, I bring it down until the jet of water pulsates against my pussy, and slide a finger of my free hand inside my aching core. I let waves of pleasure overcome me, shivering with delight while imagining Salvatore before me, his finger within me instead of my own. I come with a moan.

\* \* \*

While eating a late lunch, I shoot a message to Bianca, asking what's new with her. I also try calling Andrea, but she doesn't answer. Salvatore is nowhere to be seen. He's probably either sleeping or in his office, plotting revenge on the Irish. Finished with my food, I head to the infirmary to check on the wounded men.

Nodding to the duty nurse organizing the medicine locker, I walk over to Alessandro, who is resting in bed at the furthest part of the room. He's scrolling on his phone, but when I approach, he lowers the device.

The way his eyes bore into mine is extremely unsettling. It's as if he is analyzing my every action and reaction. The look in his eyes indicates he's ready for anything and I've noticed that he does this with everyone. The way he observes people with such intense focus is unnerving.

I once met another man, a war veteran who returned from his fifth tour of duty in Afghanistan, with almost the same look in his eyes. He acted as if he was still in enemy territory, ready to fight insurgents hiding around every corner.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, checking his IV. He doesn't respond, but simply watches as I replace the saline bag and scribble a note on the chart at the foot of the bed.

"Fine," he finally says.

"Oh." I frown theatrically. "He talks."

Alessandro gifts me with another one of his dark glares, then takes his phone and continues swiping. I roll my eyes and head toward the next bed.

I'm in the middle of changing the dressing on Pasquale's thigh when the phone in my back pocket vibrates. It's probably Andrea, so I let it ring and continue bandaging the wound. As soon as the ringing stops, however, it starts again. I secure the bandage and pull out the phone. Salvatore's name lights up the screen.

"Where. Are. You?" he bites out the moment I take the call, his voice deathly quiet.

"On the eleventh floor. Why?"

He hangs up. Has something happened? I collect the medical supplies and carry them to the other side of the room. As I'm returning the unused bandages to the cupboard, the door to my right opens with a bang, and Salvatore comes inside. I've never seen him leave the penthouse in anything other than an immaculate suit or without his prosthesis, but now, he's wearing only his sweatpants and leaning on his crutches. Based on the surprised expression on Pasquale's face, this is not a normal occurrence. The moment Salvatore's eyes find me, he heads in my direction. He doesn't stop, even when he's almost in front of me, and find myself backing up until I hit the wall.

"Salvatore?" I look up into his face.

His eyes are narrowed, his breathing quick, and his nostrils flare.

"I was looking for you, and you weren't there," he says through his teeth. "You do not leave the penthouse without informing me first."

"But I'm on the floor below you."

"That doesn't matter."

"Am I a prisoner here?"

"Nope." In his eyes, there's a controlled kind of crazy. "I need to know where you are at all times."

It's silly. He's expecting me to let him know whenever I want to leave the apartment? For a moment, I think he's messing with me, but then I see his expression. He's deadly serious.

"Why?" I ask.

“I just do. Are you done here?”

“I want to check on Carmelo, as well.”

“Ilaria will be here later. She’ll make sure he’s okay. Let’s go.”

I shake my head and follow him to the elevator. When we reach the penthouse, he doesn’t say anything. There is no explanation for his strange behavior. I walk behind him as he heads into his bedroom and pause in the doorway.

Salvatore sits down on the bed and unties the knot on the left pant leg of his sweats. He pulls up the material and reaches for the prosthesis that’s leaning against the wall. It takes him a long time to put it on. Much longer than it should. Rolling on the liner sleeve is quite a feat with only one fully functioning hand because the fabric keeps slipping from his fingers. I wondered why he didn’t wear the prosthesis in the evening after he’s taken a shower. It’s probably too much trouble to do it up twice a day.

“Is something going on?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“You insisting I let you know every time I leave the penthouse. Are you expecting that the Irish may try getting inside this building?”

“This has nothing to do with the Irish.” He curses when the liner slips from his fingers again. “And no one can get inside this building.”

“Then why? Do you think I’ll run away or something?”

He doesn’t reply but continues fumbling with the prosthesis. When he puts it on he stands up and approaches me, lifting his hand to the back of my neck.

“You can try running,” he says and tilts my head up, “but I will catch you every time, Milene.”

He’s still shirtless and being so close to him is messing with my already confused mind. The guy has a fucking eight pack. How can I keep up the pretense of being indifferent when my eyes want to wander to his stomach and count each ab again to make sure? I thought that shit was a myth.

“Can you please put on a shirt?”

“No.” He takes another step forward, making me step back. The hand that’s clutching the back of my neck slides down until it stops at the small of

my back. The tiny hairs on my skin rise as goose bumps cover the length of my body.

“Tore?”

“Yes?” Another step, followed by one more, until I end up with my back against the hallway wall.

“What is it with you always cornering me?” I ask, trying to distract myself from thoughts of placing my palms flat against his chest. “Does it turn you on or something?”

“Maybe. Why don’t you check?” He takes my hand and presses it against his crotch, and I suck in air. He’s hard as a rock.

“Stop with this sexual intimidation, Salvatore,” I choke out.

“I don’t see you trying to get away.” He bends his head, watching me, then brushes his finger down my cheek. “Or letting go of my cock, for that matter.”

I gasp and quickly remove my hand.

“Tell me, Milene, if I were to put my hand down your panties right now,”—he glides his right hand along my hip toward the front, trailing his finger in a line from my navel to the waistband of my shorts—“how wet would I find you?”

I should tell him I’m dry, or turn and leave. Or ask him to stop. Instead, I bite my bottom lip and hold his gaze without blinking.

Slowly, I undo the first button of my denim cutoffs. Salvatore dips his head and presses his lips to mine, but it lasts for only a second.

“The next one, cara,” he says against my lips, and I undo one more button. This time, he takes my bottom lip between his teeth and sucks it gently, driving me mad with desire.

“Next.”

I undo the last two buttons and take a deep breath, waiting to see what he’ll do. His finger trails lower, beneath the frill at the top of my panties, and presses against the wetness there.

“Soaked. You should have told me it was this bad, Milene.” He rubs his fingers fast over my clit, and my breathing quickens. “Why are you so damn

stubborn?”

“I’m not stubborn,” I whisper. “I’m mad at you.”

“You can continue being mad at me. I don’t mind.” He braces his left hand next to my head. “Turn around and place your palms against the wall.”

*No! Remove his hand and walk away*, my brain cries. Unfortunately, my mind's ability to wield control over my body has been severed, because I find myself doing exactly as he commands. The moment I turn, he presses his body against mine, his hand slides inside my panties again, and I barely manage to keep the moan from escaping. Or maybe not, as a tiny whimper does escape through my barely parted lips.

“I quite enjoy this little game we’ve been playing.” His finger pushes, and presses, and circles, causing my already wet entrance to become even more soaked.

When he applies a little extra pressure, I grind my teeth, giving in even as I try to hold on to the last of my resistance before it ebbs away. Did I scream a little? Maybe, but the out of body experience I’m having due to his deftly skilled fingers is making it hard for me to think. Slowly circling my clit this time, applying pressure in all the right places, I’m like a puppet on his string. My breathing quickens, my heart races in my chest.

“But as with every such game, there can only be one winner in the end.” He presses onto my clit just a little harder, his movements faster, and beneath his controlled and methodical touch, the last of my resistance is quickly seeping out.

“You think you’re going to win?” I bite my lip again and press my forehead to the wall. More. I need more, but I’d rather die than confess it to him. A demon. Yes, he’s a demon, sent to torment and play me like an instrument with his infernal fingers. With every press of his fingers, I lose another piece of my mind.

“Well, that’s the thing, Milene,” he whispers into my ear and slowly moves his finger to my entrance. “I’ve already won. All that’s left is for you to accept it.”

“You haven’t won anything, Salvatore.”

“Are you sure about that, cara?” he asks and slides two fingers inside me.

I suck in a breath and moan as my eyes roll up in my head. He pushes his fingers even deeper while his other hand moves to rub my clit rapidly. His fingers curl to massage my inner wall, finding my G-spot. This time a very loud moan fills the air as pleasure overwhelms my system.

As Salvatore pinches my clit a little harder and rubs faster with both hands, I reach an orgasm like I've never experienced before. Wave after wave of spasms rack my body, drowning out all rational thoughts. It feels as if my mind fully disintegrates in that moment.

His lips brush the side of my neck. Light kisses pepper the column of my throat all the way up to my earlobe. Softly, he whispers, "That was with my fingers, Milene. Tonight, when you're trying to sleep, imagine how it would feel to have my cock inside you instead."

He slides his fingers out gently, his hand vanishes, and between breaths, he's gone as well, leaving me panting in the middle of the hallway, with my forehead and hands pressed against the wall.

\* \* \*

"Damn him," I mumble and take the phone from my nightstand, checking the time. Four a.m. Groaning, I put the phone back and bury my face in the pillow, trying to cast the memory of being pressed against the wall out of my head. No amount of mental gymnastics is successful.

I get out of bed and go to the kitchen. Maybe I should get wasted and pass out on the sofa. It wouldn't take much since I don't often drink. Three glasses of wine would do the trick.

I take out an open bottle of white wine from the fridge and walk to the cupboard next to the sink to get a glass. As I'm reaching for it, I hear Salvatore coming inside the kitchen and my hand stills on its journey toward my holy grail. A few moments later I feel a light touch against my back.

"Can't sleep?" comes the whispered words behind my ear, followed by a light kiss that makes the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention in a flash.

"No."

"Me neither." Another light kiss against my neck. "Grab two glasses. And

bring the wine.”

“Bring it where?” I utter.

“Into my bedroom,” he says and moves his lips to my shoulder, biting slightly. “I’ll behave.”

“Oh? Like you’re behaving now?”

“So stubborn.” He kisses the skin on the side of my neck. “We can talk. If that’s what you want.”

“Yes.” I grip the stems of two glasses between my fingers and lift the chilled bottle from its resting place. When I turn, I find him looking at me, a curious glint in his eyes. “Just talk, Tore.”

“Just talk, Milene.”

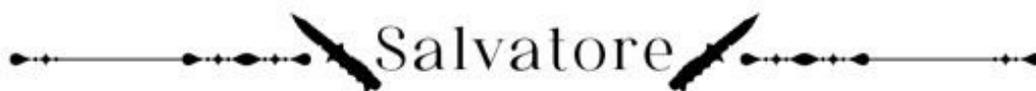
I nod and move past him into the hallway, which has taken on a new aspect since earlier events. I’m aware of his eyes on me as he follows a few steps behind. The door to his bedroom is closed, so I lean down to press the handle with my elbow and feel my T-shirt rise. I turn to find Salvatore standing right behind me, holding his finger under the hem of my shirt, ogling my ass.

“Tore! We had a deal.”

“But I haven’t laid a finger on you, Milene,” he says without lifting his eyes from my backside. “Red looks good on you, cara. I especially like the frills.”

“I’m glad you approve of my choice in underwear. Now stop it.”

I open the door and move inside his bedroom, knowing full well I haven’t come here to talk. At some point during the night, between tossing and turning while I was trying to sleep, I finally admitted to myself—I can’t resist anymore. My integrity be damned. I can’t keep going on like this because, if I do, I’m going to lose my mind.



I pass Milene, who's setting the glasses down on the dresser next to the door, sit on the edge of the bed, and lean my crutches against the wall before sprawling out on the satin sheets. Milene pours the wine, then sways her hips as she moves toward the nightstand next to me and sets down my glass. Walking around the room, she sips the Sauvignon Blanc while checking out the space. I hope she likes it, because she'll be spending every night here with me from now on.

"You really like art," she comments, standing in front of a wide landscape painting on the wall facing the bed.

"Yes."

"An expensive hobby." She takes a sip of her wine and continues perusing the rest of the paintings.

I wonder how long she'll keep on pretending we're just going to chat. We both know how this will end. My wife, I've come to realize, has an almost pathological need to stand behind her decisions, even when she knows they're wrong. From the info Nino uncovered, Milene's father was a tyrant who went to great lengths in forcing his will upon his children. She's probably compelled to do anything, even fight against herself, to maintain a semblance of control over her life. She wants me, but she's afraid it would mean she's somehow failed. I've been patient with her, letting her dance around this situation for quite some time, but it ends tonight.

"Come here, Milene."

She turns around, takes another sip and raises an eyebrow. "To your bed?"

"Yes. Come here or I'm going to chase you across this penthouse until you do."

"I'm pretty sure I can outrun you." She smirks.

"Teasing a handicapped person, cara? That doesn't suit a medical professional." I cross my arms behind my head, noticing the way her eyes rivet on my biceps.

"The only way you're handicapped is that you can't understand the meaning of the word *No*", Salvatore."

I focus on the curve of her lips for a few moments, then ask, "How about we play a little game?"

“I’m not interested in your games.”

“Afraid you’ll lose, cara?”

Her eyes snap to mine as she covers her mouth with the glass. “I’m not afraid of you, or your games,” she says. “What did you have in mind?”

No, she doesn’t seem to be afraid of me. “I’ll tell you something about yourself. If I’m right, you remove a piece of clothing.”

Milene laughs and a warm feeling spreads through my chest upon hearing it.

“And if you’re wrong?” she asks.

“I remove one of mine.”

“You don’t know me. You’ll end up naked in under five minutes.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.”

She leans her back on the wall and takes another sip of her wine, smiling. “All right.”

The gray T-shirt she has on is one of mine. I wondered if she would wear my shirts after I threw away the shit that belonged to her ex. I barely restrained myself from setting the whole closet on fire that day. The mere idea of Milene wearing something that belonged to another man nearly sends me on a murdering rampage. The sight of her in *my* clothes, however, pleases me immensely.

I move my gaze up her body until it reaches her mouth. She’s still smiling.

“You lied when you told me you don’t know why you wanted to become a nurse,” I say and watch for her reaction.

Milene’s body goes rigid, her hand holding the glass stills halfway to her mouth. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I?” I cock my head to the side. “Why not a doctor? A neurosurgeon? Cardiologist?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs and looks down at her glass.

“Lying will get you disqualified from the game, cara,” I say. “What did you see that made you want to be a nurse?”

Milene closes her eyes and leans her head against the wall. “My sister,

Bianca, was in a car accident when she was eleven. She almost died because the paramedic who came to help had no idea what he was doing.” She shakes her head. “Some idiot recorded the whole thing on a phone and posted it online. I was at a friend’s house when it happened. Her brother showed me the video. I watched the guy as he tried and failed to intubate my sister while she lay in the middle of the sidewalk. Only when the other paramedics arrived did they manage to bring her back.” She takes a deep breath and opens her eyes but keeps staring at the ceiling. “My father was driving the car when they crashed. He was drunk.”

Yes, Bruno Scardoni was an epic son of a bitch.

“So, what do you want me to take off?” Milene asks and lowers her eyes to meet mine.

“Your choice.”

She bends and reaches under the T-shirt and slowly removes her panties. When she straightens, I nod toward the piece of red lace she’s holding and extend my hand. “Those are mine now.”

Milene curves an eyebrow as she launches her panties right into my face. “You got lucky with that one. Next.”

The red lace falls onto my chest, so I deliberately lift it to my nose and inhale, enjoying the sight of surprise on Milene’s face. “You are allergic to fish,” I say and then add, “and to peanuts.”

Her lips widen in a smug smile. “That’s two misses, Tore. I eat half a jar of peanut butter a week, and we had fish at that restaurant where you made all the other guests leave. I expected you to be more attentive for someone who —” She stops in the middle of the sentence, and surprise flashes in her eyes as she comes to a realization.

“Yes, I guess I should be more attentive,” I say and remove my sweats for the fish. For the peanut butter, I take off my shirt. She only has the T-shirt left, and I’m in my boxer briefs. “Looks like we’re even at the moment.”

Milene’s eyes travel down my chest and stomach and stop at my crotch, or more specifically, the bulge there. “Playing games with me turns you on?”

“It’s not the games, Milene,” I say. “Just you.”

Her gaze snaps back to my face, those green eyes glaring into mine, lips

pressed tightly together.

“Tell me, Milene, why were you so scared of getting into a relationship with someone from Cosa Nostra?”

She blinks and quickly shifts her focus to the painting above the bed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You are a very bad liar, cara. Lie again, and you remove your T-shirt as a punishment.” I reach for my wine on the nightstand. “I noticed a very interesting thing when I went over the info Nino collected for me. This last guy you were with, David . . . he was a yoga instructor.”

“So?”

“Before him, it was some pastry chef. Before that one, a florist. Even when you were in high school, you always picked the most . . . tame partners. You never even went out on a date with anyone from our circles.”

“You had your chief of security dig out my high school crushes?” She gapes at me.

“Yes.”

Milene leaves her empty glass on the dresser behind her and grabs the board at the foot of the bed. “You had no right!” she snaps.

“Were you afraid everyone in Cosa Nostra is like your father? Terrorizing people because of his own inferiority complex?” I continue, “Or was it because you didn’t feel safe?”

“And I’m safe with you?” The corners of her lips curve upward. It’s concerning, how much that little smirk turns me on. I watch her as she climbs onto the bed, then crawls over my body to straddle my waist until her face is only inches from mine. “You think you’re better than the other men in Cosa Nostra, so I have nothing to fear? Is that it?”

“You *are* safe with me, Milene.” I take a sip of my wine and leave the glass on the nightstand. “But not because I’m better than the rest. Just the opposite, in fact.”

“Oh?”

I grab her chin and fix her with my stare. “You’re safe with me because I’m the worst it can get, cara. And no one will dare touch what is mine.”

“You missed again.” She hooks her fingers in the hem of my boxer briefs. “I was never afraid that I might get hurt if I ended up with someone from the Family.”

“What else?” I ask and regard her as she moves down my body, pulling my boxer briefs along my legs. She doesn’t flinch when she reaches the stump midway of my calf, just continues sliding them down my right leg and then throws the underwear over her shoulder.

“I was terrified by the possibility I might fall in love with someone from Cosa Nostra,” she says and crawls up my body, avoiding my now fully erect cock until she’s sitting on my stomach with her bare and completely drenched pussy pressing onto my skin.

My cock is so fucking hard it feels like it’s going to explode. “And why would that pose a problem?” I ask and lift my hand to trace the line of her lips with my finger.

“Because I don’t think I’ll survive watching a man I love die, Tore,” she whispers, looking down into my eyes.

“Well, it’s a good thing you hate me, cara. So, I guess you’re safe from the heartache.”

“Of course I hate you,” Milene says through her teeth.

I behold her sitting there on me, her blonde hair falling down her face and over her breasts. My beautiful, stubborn liar. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, and when she exhales, it sounds like a sigh of defeat. A second later, those mischievous green eyes open. Keeping a hold of my gaze, she grabs the hem of her T-shirt and pulls it off.

“Looks like it’s game over for both of us, cara,” I say and move my hand to the back of her neck, pulling her down.

“Fuck you, Salvatore,” she whispers and crashes her mouth to mine.

I roll her onto her back, my body looming over hers, and drink in the sight of her. Finally, my little hellcat has succumbed. I rarely feel satisfaction, or any kind of excitement, but this, having my wife under me, can’t compare with any other sensation I’ve ever experienced. Milene wraps her legs around my torso, pressing her warm and waiting sex against my cock. I thought I might take this slow, savor the moment, and torment her a little by making her wait. I intended to drag it out for an hour or more before purposefully

sliding my cock into her heat until it fills her completely. A rather odd plan because I've never wanted to take it slow with a woman before. For me, sex has always been a means of release. But not with her. Everything is different with my Milene.

I move my hand down her front and press my fingers onto her pussy. She's so wet, silently begging me to fuck her into the stratosphere.

My cock is already close to bursting, veins pulsing. As Milene buries her nails into my back, I lose my composure entirely. I want her to moan, scream, and pant. I want to hear her yell my name . . . I want everything, and I want it now! I remove my hand and bury my cock inside her in one thrust. Perfect. Milene gasps and squeezes her legs around me. I slide in to the hilt, marveling at the sensation of my cock filling her.

Bending my head, I move my hand to grip her nape. "Look at me."

Milene's eyes open and she stares at me, her deep and heavy breaths fanning my face.

"Who owns you, Milene?"

She presses her lips together and squints her eyes a little. I withdraw my cock till it's almost completely out of her trembling pussy. Milene's legs tighten around me, trying but failing to keep me deep inside.

"I said . . ." I tangle my hands into the hair at the back of her head. "Who owns you?"

She pants, wrapping her hands around my neck and pulling me toward her, but she doesn't utter a word. The urge to push myself all the way back in is infuriating, but I don't move an inch, enjoying the way she's begging with her eyes and her body.

I squeeze the blonde strands a little harder. "Who, Milene?"

"You!" she cries out.

"Me." I slam inside her. "Don't you ever forget that."

Her hands travel up my neck, tugging at the back of my head, and she tilts her chin to stare up into my eyes. "I'm still mad at you, Salvatore."

I slide out and slam back in, then lean to whisper into her ear, "I don't believe you."

Her hold on me tightens. Moving my hand between our bodies, I find her clit and tease it. Milene's breathing quickens. I pull out my cock slightly, then thrust all the way in, massaging her both inside and out.

"Faster," she breathes.

I place my lips at the curve of her shoulder, kissing the soft skin. "Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes."

I slide my cock out completely, replacing it with a single finger. She wraps her hands around my upper arms and buries her nails into the skin.

"What is it, cara?" I ask and add another finger. "Is something bothering you?"

Oh, the look she gives me. Frustration in its purest form. Still, she doesn't reply. Stubborn. So, fucking stubborn. I curl my finger inside of her and press onto her clit with my thumb.

Milene moans, and the hold she has around my arm tightens. "I want your cock," she says finally.

I remove my fingers from inside of her pussy and bend to gently bite that lower lip she likes to chew. "Are you still mad at me?"

"No, damn you!" she cries out, and I slam my cock inside her once again, all the way up to my balls.

I push into her, slowly at first, my eyes locked onto her face. Then faster, until the bed creaks beneath us, and the headboard bangs against the wall as our bodies rock together.

Milene screams and presses her palms to the board above her head as she widens her legs, panting. My hand moves up her body to wrap around her throat, and I thrust into her even deeper and harder than before. Mine. I slide out only to slam back inside. Only mine. I stare at her—into her half-closed eyes, at her mouth that's red from her biting her lips. The mouth that fascinates me so much.

"Smile at me," I bark as I rock into her.

Her eyes find mine and lock on, but her lips remain puckered. I lightly squeeze my fingers around her neck and bend my head until we're face-to-face.

“Smile. At. Me.” I pound into her—once, twice, three times. It’s like air to me, her smile. I need to see it. If I don’t, I’m going to lose my mind. “Smile, you stubborn woman.”

Milene squints her eyes at me, and then she smiles. It’s like the first ray of light after a thousand hours of a long night, piercing the darkness inside my chest and filling me with warmth. I kiss that stubborn mouth and enjoy the feel of my cock as it stretches her inner walls until her pussy spasms around my length.

She screams as I push my dick even deeper into her, and it drives me more insane. I slide out and thrust back inside, feeling her body shake. I bite her chin and graze my teeth down the side of her neck.

“I want you to smile at me every day,” I say next to her ear and slam into her again. “Every.” Slam. “Fucking.” Slam. “Day.”

“Why?” she breathes out, then moans as she comes.

Because I need it. Because every time she does, something happens inside my chest. Because it breathes air into my lungs and makes my heart race.

“Because I’m ordering you to,” I bark, staring her down.

She watches me for a few seconds, then squeezes her legs around me and bursts out laughing.

I take a deep breath and thrust into her one final time, unable to keep my orgasm at bay as I pump weeks of my frustration into her. Not for one second do I take my eyes off her smiling mouth.



“Are you okay, cara?” Salvatore reaches out and traces the back of his hand along the line of my jaw.

Nope, I am not okay. My legs are still trembling slightly, my pussy is sore, and my whole body aches all over. The best feeling ever. “I hope I’ll be able to walk tomorrow,” I say and lift my head off Salvatore’s chest to find him watching me.

I place the tip of my finger at the corner of his mouth and push upward slightly. I don't think I've ever seen Salvatore smile, so I don't understand why he seems to be fixated on me doing so. He almost "sextroyed" me for it earlier.

Salvatore bites the tip of my finger, then kisses it. "I will carry you around with me if necessary."

"Piggyback?"

"If you insist."

I imagine how his men will react and laugh. "You are such a contradiction, Tore."

"Does that pose a problem?"

"No. I kind of like your strange ways." Moving my hand upward, I thread my fingers through his hair. "When did you start to go gray?"

"A few years ago. It runs in the family."

"Your father's side?"

"No. I got it from Ilaria." He tilts his head to the side, giving me greater access to his neck. "I still remember the day she discovered the first gray hair on her head. I found her crying in the bathroom. I was sure someone had died. She was twenty-nine, I think."

I raise my eyebrows. "From what I've seen, she comes across as a very composed person."

"It's a front," he says. "She's very well versed in pretending, since she's been doing it for years. My father and her were a bad match. I'm glad she has Cosimo now. He makes her happy, which means I can't kill him if he fucks up."

He says this as though he's reading the weather report aloud. Facts. Conclusions. Zero emotions. For a second, I think he's joking, but he looks down at me, and I see in his eyes he's deadly serious.

"What happened to your father?" I ask.

"He was killed during a Family disagreement."

I sigh and lower my head back to his chest. "My father was killed, too. Four years ago."

“I know. It was the fuckup with the Bratva.”

“Yeah. He almost killed Bianca’s husband.” I shudder. “I hate Cosa Nostra.”

“You and Ilaria can set up a club.” His hand settles on my arm and he traces random patterns on my skin. “But if there was ever anyone who had his life fucked up by the Cosa Nostra, it’s Arturo.”

“The underboss?”

“Yes. His parents, along with four other people, were killed in a police raid at one of the casinos. The previous don was heavily invested in the illegal gambling business.” His hand moves down to my ass, then back up. “Arturo ended up raising his sisters. He was twenty.”

“Jesus. How old were they?”

“Five years old, twins.”

“Whoa.” I blink. “Did he have help with that, or . . . anything?”

“An aunt who came occasionally, but that was all.”

We remain silent for a long time, me staring at the wall, and Salvatore still tracing lines across my back.

“I wish I’d been born into another family,” I whisper. “A normal one.”

“I’m glad you weren’t.” He squeezes my ass and looks at me with his calculating eyes. “Because our paths wouldn’t have ever crossed.”

I place my palm on his chest and glide it up to wrap my hand around his neck. “That’s extremely selfish.”

“I know. But it’s the truth.” His other hand comes to take my chin and tilts my head. “Would you prefer I lied to you?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” I throw my leg over his middle and climb to lay atop of him, feeling his cock swell rapidly against my stomach. “Seriously?”

“You denied me for weeks.” His hand comes into my hair. “I plan on collecting everything you owe me, Milene.”

“And you think you’ll manage to get everything tonight?” I straighten up, straddling his waist.

“You’re working off the interest at this point, cara.”

“Oh? And how much do I owe you in total?” I raise an eyebrow and slide down his length. My pussy is sensitive, but I don’t really care because having his hard cock filling me, straining the parts of my body which are already tender, is worth it. It’s only a sliver from being painful, which makes it even better.

“I could have killed you when I found you in my city.” His left hand comes to my waist, and he slides it up over my stomach and breasts to once again wrap it around my throat. “I didn’t, so I’d say you owe me everything.”

A shiver runs through my body on hearing his words, and I lean forward slightly, my throat pressing onto his palm. There is something disturbingly sensual in having his hand wrapped around my neck, knowing he can feel every draw and release of my breath, and, if he wished to, he could cut off my supply of air altogether.

It should scare me. I don’t deal well with giving a man, any man, a semblance of control over me, ever. Still, for some reason, this doesn’t bother me. Maybe it’s because his touch is feather-light, his fingers barely pressing on my skin, as though he doesn’t truly want to scare me, and as if this is a game. Yes, such a contradiction—my husband. Ordering four innocent men to be executed, then offering to carry me around the apartment because I’m sore.

I press my palms on Salvatore’s chest and slowly rotate my hips. It’s my turn to tease, so I lift myself slightly and slide back down again, hard, watching him as intently as he watched me. I change my pace and shift forward so I can take even more of him inside, and he arches his hips to rock into me from below. I moan as my nails dig into his chest and ride him faster, a mixture of satisfaction and excitement washing over me. Salvatore Ajello, the most feared man in all of Cosa Nostra, is coming undone beneath me.

His arms wrap around my back, pulling me down to him. He rolls us until he’s on top again, pounding into me, neck muscles straining with the effort. He is so beautiful—in the way the exotic, dangerous animals are. The closer I get, the more likely I’ll be eaten alive.

Salvatore’s hand slides between our bodies and finds my trembling pussy. I’m already close, so when he pinches my clit and thrusts inside—hard, I scream as tremors rack my body.

“I love when you scream, cara,” he says and suddenly pulls out.

I stare at him. He did not just do that!

“You don’t have to worry about the hitmen, Salvatore,” I snarl, winding my legs around his waist and grabbing at his throat with my hand. “Because I’m going to be the one to end your life if you don’t get your cock back inside me.”

Salvatore dips his head until our noses touch. “That sinister streak of yours is sexy as fuck,” he says and slams back into me so hard, I unintentionally squeeze his neck. His eyes flare, and a growl leaves his lips. I tighten my hold on his throat a little more, smiling. Hawkish eyes watch me from above as he pulls out, only to thrust back in even harder, making me moan.

I release his neck and let my hands travel over his shoulders, wrapping my fingers around his bulging biceps. Salvatore slams into me again. I dig my nails into the skin of his arms. Another growl, and hard lips press down onto mine. I smile into Salvatore’s mouth and grip tighter, digging deeper into his flesh with my nails. Drawing my next breath, I bite his lower lip.

He completely flips. His palm slides between my breasts and around my neck, then he threads his fingers into my hair and pulls. I gasp for air while a waterfall of pleasure washes over me as he continues his powerful thrusts, making the headboard bang against the wall once more. Stars explode behind my eyelids, and I come at the same time as him.

As the waves of bliss pass through me, we’re kissing again—our breaths heavy and the surrounding air filled with the scent of our lovemaking.

I open my eyes and find Salvatore looking down at me. His fingers are still tangled in my hair. I raise my hand and move one of the black strands that has fallen over his forehead.

“That was a lot of pent-up aggression, Salvatore,” I say and brush the back of my palm down his cheek. “Where am I with my debt now?”

“Right where you were two hours ago.”

“That doesn’t sound quite fair.”

He lowers his head, leaning toward my face. “I don’t give a fuck.”

I sigh, then pull his head down until our lips touch. “So, I still owe you everything?”

“Everything, Milene,” he whispers without lifting his mouth off mine.

## Chapter 18



I ground to a halt at the threshold as I'm leaving the bathroom, staring at my bed. Empty. Milene was still sleeping when I went to take a shower, so she's probably gone to her own room to do the same. She should be here. I grind my teeth and head toward the closet.

I have a meeting with Arturo and Nino in fifteen minutes, and one thing I truly hate is being late. Once I put on my prosthesis and get dressed, I quickly head down the hallway, only to stop in front of Milene's door. The sound of a hairdryer can be heard from the other side. With a shake of my head, I continue toward the elevator but pause after a few feet. Squeezing my hands into fists, I take another step and stop again. Fuck! I turn around and head back toward Milene's room.

"Hey." She turns off the hairdryer when she sees me enter. "Do you need something?"

Yes. Her in my room. In my bed. The fact she's not there inflicts a feeling of restlessness in the back of my head which I can't shake off.

"No," I say. "I have a meeting, so I'll skip breakfast today."

"Okay." She leaves the hairdryer on the dresser and comes over. "Is something bothering you?"

"No. Why?"

"You seem . . . angry." She places her hand on my forearm and brushes it lightly.

"I don't get angry, Milene."

She arches her eyebrows. "You could have fooled me."

I grab her around the waist and pull her to me. She smiles. It's one of the smiles I like—the one where her eyes seem as though they're twinkling.

People rarely smile at me, and I don't really want them to. I just need them

to do what they're told.

Squeezing my arm more tightly around her, I smash my lips against hers, stealing that smile. It's mine. She's mine. Along with everything else she has to give. Every smile, every kiss, every moan. They're all mine.

"I can't . . . breathe," Milene mumbles against my lips.

I ease my hold slightly.

Her eyes dim a little, and she looks puzzled. Concerned, even. She brushes the back of her hand down my cheek. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Of course I am."

Milene nods, kisses the side of my chin, then steps into her walk-in closet.

"I need to take Kurt to a vet. He's been scratching his hind leg like a maniac for three days."

"If that thing brought fleas into my home, I'm going to strangle it."

"He doesn't have fleas," she throws back over her shoulder. "It looks like some kind of allergy. There's a veterinarian's office two blocks from here. I found them online. I'll call to see if they have some availability today."

"Call Nino when you know the time. He'll have the bodyguards waiting for you downstairs."

"Four?"

"Yes."

"Jesus." She sighs and shakes her head.

"Call me before you leave, and when you get back."

"Yes, *Mom*."

I grit my teeth. She doesn't understand. I don't fucking understand it, either. I only know I need her to call me. "I'll be in the office."

"I'll come by as soon as I'm done with Kurt," she says.

Arturo and Nino will be arriving in a few minutes, but instead of heading to my office, I move to stand behind Milene. She's still rummaging through her closet and grumbling something about a yellow T-shirt. I bend my head to bury my nose in her freshly washed and dried hair.

"Chocolate?" I ask.

She looks over her shoulder and smirks. “Nope. Coconut.”

“Hmm.” I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her to me. “Are you sore?”

“A little.” She gasps when I slide my hand inside her panties. “You kind of demolished my pussy last night.”

I circle her clit with the tip of my finger, teasing it with fast strokes until I feel her getting wet. Her breathing quickens, and I slowly move my finger lower and slide it inside. Milene grabs the shelf in front of her and opens her legs wider, letting out a sweet moan.

“Does this hurt?” I ask and slide my finger a little deeper.

“No,” she breathes out and grabs my wrist. “More.”

“Will you call me as we agreed?”

“Yes!”

“Good girl.” I slide my finger out, circle her clit a few more times, then push two fingers inside her in one thrust. Milene gasps and shudders as she comes.

“You see how nice it is when we agree on things?” I kiss her neck and remove my fingers from her pussy. When I leave the room, she’s still clutching the shelf while taking rapid, shallow breaths.

\* \* \*

“So, do we know who the snitch is?” I ask Nino, who’s sitting on a chair next to Arturo.

“It’s Tomaso,” he says. “The guys cornered him, and he broke after two hours.”

“Send someone to question him. I want to know who his contacts are, how they got in touch with him, and what he told them. You have”—I check my watch—“nine hours.”

“Okay.” Nino nods. “Then what?”

I look at Arturo. “I want all capos and team leaders in the old safe house at ten this evening.”

“All right. What should I tell them? What’s the occasion?”

“A demonstration of sorts.”

“No specifics?”

“No, we’ll leave it at that,” I say. “Where are we on Fitzgerald?”

“He hasn’t been leaving his lair.” Nino shakes his head. “I have two men outside his house at all times, but so far, no activity.”

I lean back in my chair, weighing our options. “I want you to nab one of Fitzgerald’s men and bring him to me. Someone close to him. Unharmred. Make sure no one notices when you grab him, I want to keep this encounter on a need-to-know basis.”

“Where should we bring him?”

“Into the safe house downtown. Do we have any other pressing matters?”

“Do you plan on going to the City Museum opening next week?” Nino asks. “If you do, I’ll have to organize the security detail.”

“No.”

“What about Rocco’s wedding? Everyone will expect to see you there.”

I’m not really in the mood for mingling with the Family, but gossip surrounding my marriage has already picked up, so I guess taking Milene to meet them is in order. “We’ll go.”

“How many bodyguards?”

If it were just me, I wouldn’t be taking any, especially to a Family wedding. “Stefano and Aldo.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“No. That’s all.”

When Nino and Arturo leave, I pick up the phone to call Milene. She messaged me two hours earlier after getting back from the veterinarian. Barely an hour later, I found myself feeling on edge. It’s idiotic. I know she’s two floors up—in the penthouse—because I called Ada to make sure she was there, and yet, I still have a powerful compulsion to check on her again.

“I was meaning to call you,” she says the moment the line connects. “Why is Ada moving all of my things to your room?”

“Because I told her to.”

“And it didn’t occur to you that maybe you should talk to me first?”

No. “I want you to move into my room, Milene.”

“You’re seriously lacking in social skills. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

She sighs. “Kurt is coming, too, just so you’re aware.”

“I’m not going to sleep in the same bed with a cat. Especially one with fleas.”

“He doesn’t have fleas. The veterinarian says he’s depressed.”

A depressed cat. “Should we sign it up for a group therapy?” I ask.

“Ha ha.”

“What do you do with a depressed cat?”

“He suggested taking in another one, so they could play.”

“No.”

“He’s suffering, Tore!”

“I said no, Milene.” Another cat and I will be the one who’s suffering.

“There’s a rescue close by. We can go have a look after lunch.”

“No. More. Cats.”

“You *are* a bad person.”

“Yes.”

“Please? Just one. You can choose.”

“We’re not taking in another cat, Milene,” I say and cut the call.



“Oh, look at the ginger one!” I grab Salvatore’s hand and pull him toward the last cage in the line. “He looks like a mini Garfield.”

“That one is a little problematic,” the lady who runs the rescue says, observing Salvatore with concern. My husband isn’t the typical clientele—stoically standing there in his charcoal Armani suit, wearing a scowl on his face while regarding the cat in question. I guess she’s right. He certainly doesn’t give the impression of someone who likes cats.

“Problematic?” I ask. “In what way?”

“No more mentally defective animals, Milene,” Salvatore grumbles. “One is enough.”

“Well, he’s a little grouchy,” the lady says. “Not very good with people.”

“Sounds exactly like you, Tore.” I place a hand on his arm. “Can we take him?”

“No.”

“But look at him! Isn’t he cute?”

“No.”

“Tore!”

He looks at the cat, then moves his gaze to glare at me. “You said we’d come here to look.”

I cock an eyebrow and smile. “I lied.”

Salvatore watches me, his eyes glued to my lips. He does that a lot. He always studies my mouth when I smile.

“Just take the damn thing, and let’s go home,” he grumbles.

\* \* \*

“Tore!” I yell from the guest bathroom. “He won’t come out from the shower stall.”

I nudge the food bowl toward the cat and coo at him, but he keeps sitting stubbornly in the corner.

Kurt came to see the new resident as soon as we arrived, hissed at him, and went back to my old bedroom. Saying things are not going as I expected would be putting it mildly. I sigh, leave the cat in the bathroom, and head

toward the dining room where Salvatore is already eating.

“We need to name him,” I say as I sit on the chair next to him. “How about Riggs? Like Mel Gibson’s character in *Lethal Weapon*.”

“I don’t particularly care for the way you name your animals.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I scoop a spoonful of mashed potatoes from a bowl on the table and drop them onto my plate.

“What’s with you and the obsession with eighties movies?”

“They made the best films back then. Want to rewatch *Escape from LA* with me?”

“I don’t watch movies, Milene.”

I lower my fork and stare at him. “You don’t watch movies? What do you do in your free time?”

“Go to a gym on the third floor. Watch a game from time to time. Sleep.”

“And . . . that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s no wonder you’re surly all the time.”

His hand shoots out and grabs at my chin, tilting my head to the side until our gazes meet. “I’m surly?”

“Extremely.”

“And watching action movies from the eighties will fix that?”

“Maybe?” I smile. “Want to try?”

His gloomy gaze moves to my lips. “We can watch a movie this weekend,” he says and lets go of my chin to return to his meal.

“Are we going to do emails after lunch?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll go to check on Alessandro first.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t need to,” I say with my mouth full. “It’ll only take a minute, and I’ll go to the office straight after.”

“I said I’ll come.”

I lower my cutlery and sigh. “Do you think I’m going to flirt with Alessandro or something?”

“No. I don’t like the idea of you alone with another man.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“Probably. I still don’t want you alone with him.”

I sigh. “I find it really hard to understand you sometimes, Salvatore.”

“I know.” He picks up his glass of water and leans back in his chair, fixing me with his gaze. “I have some business to attend to tonight and won’t be home before two a.m. I need you to call me to tell me everything is okay.”

“All right. I’ll call you before I go to sleep.”

He nods, but I notice his jaw is set in a hard line as though he’s unhappy with my answer.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No,” he says, clutching the glass in his hand as though he’s trying to break it.

“Tore?”

He sets the glass on the table, turns toward me, and squeezes the bridge of his nose. I don’t know what’s going on, but he seems unusually agitated all of a sudden. I can’t figure out why.

“I’m leaving around eight.” He looks me in the eye. “You will call me every hour while I’m not here.”

“What for?”

“To check in,” he deadpans. “So, I know everything is okay.”

I gape at him. “You want me to check in every hour? While I’m kicking back in the living room, watching a cooking show?”

“Yes.”

“Are you expecting someone to storm the building? Did they announce an imminent earthquake?” I ask.

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Because I told you to.”

“Would a text message suffice instead?”

“No. I need to hear your voice.”

Okay. We need to talk about this. I stand up and place my palms on his cheeks, looking into his eyes. “Can you explain? Please?”

His piercing light brown gaze bores into me. “I’m not sure you’ll understand, Milene.”

“Try me.”

Salvatore’s hand comes to the waistband of my jeans. He hooks his finger on a belt loop and pulls me down to sit on his thigh. I raise an eyebrow in question, waiting for him to explain, but he just watches me for a few seconds, lips pressed tightly together.

“I have . . . a problem,” he bites out the words. I already figured Salvatore didn’t tolerate weakness, and it seems very hard for him to be confessing one now.

“Do you think I’m cheating on you when you’re not around?”

“No. It doesn’t have anything to do with that.” He places the tip of his finger onto my forearm, stroking my skin lightly. “When I was in the office today, even knowing you were here, I felt compelled to call and confirm. I can’t control it, Milene. I’ve tried.”

“Is it like some kind of anxiety?”

“Yes, but ten times worse.”

“Do you have this . . . compulsion with anyone else? Your employees?”

“Just you.”

I blink at him in confusion. “Why? And why so suddenly? Have I done anything to trigger this?”

“It’s not sudden, Milene. I’ve barely managed to control it for these past weeks.” He reaches out with his other hand and strokes my cheek. “You will call me every hour. Please.”

“Will it go away?” I ask. “This compulsion.”

“I don’t think so.” His face is grim, and I see he doesn’t enjoy asking this

of me. He's right, I don't understand.

Salvatore gives the impression of a highly composed individual, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that many of his reactions have not been exactly normal. Like in the parking lot when someone shot at us. No one should be that calm and controlled under fire, but then freak out when I go to the floor below without informing him beforehand. I've also never seen him smile. He's a little odd—I knew that from the start—but this doesn't seem like a silly quirk. I think he actually has a problem, and I'm not sure he's telling me everything.

“Well, I hope it won't get worse, because I'm not letting you into the bathroom when I have to pee.” I lean forward and touch my nose to his. “How often do you need me to call you?”

He closes his eyes and brushes his nose against mine. It's such an unexpected and tender gesture, so completely at odds with his character, that it elicits a tenderness in my heart, like a warm hug comforting me from within.

“When I'm in the office, every two hours,” he says and looks at me. “But when I'm not in the building, every hour, on the hour.”

“And what do you want me to tell you when I call?”

“Whatever. Doesn't matter.”

“Okay.” I nod and stroke his hair. “What will we do when I have to go somewhere?”

“I'll be accompanying you from now on.”

“You can't always go with me, Salvatore. What if I need to visit the hairdresser? Or get a manicure? I have girlfriends. I like going for coffee with them from time to time.”

His body goes rigid. “How often?”

“Beauty salon stuff, once a month. Girl time, twice a month.”

“All right. I'll deal with that somehow.” He squeezes his hands around my waist. “But tonight . . . every hour, Milene.”

“I'll call,” I whisper. “Where are you going tonight?”

“To one of our safe houses. I have a situation to resolve.”

“Do I want to know the specifics?”

“You don’t.” He places a quick kiss on my lips. “Let’s go work on those emails.”

\* \* \*

The sound of the doorbell reaches me as I’m trying to coax Kurt out of the kitchen cupboard. He’s been hiding out in a large, stainless-steel pot for twenty minutes, and every time I’ve tried to get him out, he’s only hissed and bared his fangs. I also have two long claw marks on my forearm from when I tried to take him out.

“Ada, can you get that?” I yell over my shoulder, then turn back to the devil’s eyes before me. I will not admit defeat before this cat! Grabbing the lid from the shelf below, I put it over the pot and, with the cat still inside, take the vessel by its handles. I’ll carry Kurt to the bedroom and deposit him on the bed to avoid further injury.

Pot in hands, I turn around and come face-to-face with Salvatore’s mother.

“Ilaria.” I gulp, then smile. “How nice to see you. Would you like some coffee?”

“Sure,” she says and takes off her coat.

“Perfect, I’ll just . . . take this away.” I nod down at the pot in my hands. Kurt picks that exact moment to let out a pained meow. I groan, lower the pot to the floor and carefully remove the lid. Kurt leaps out of the pot, hisses at me again for good measure, and dashes toward the hallway. When I stand up, I find Ilaria staring at me with wide eyes. I guess she’s not accustomed to seeing people carrying cats around in stockpots.

“Desperate measures,” I murmur, setting the pot down in the sink and head toward the coffee machine. “Milk? Sugar?”

“Both.” She takes a seat at the breakfast bar.

“Salvatore’s not here,” I mention over my shoulder. “He had some business to attend to.”

“I know. I came to check on Alessandro, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Oh?” I carry the coffee over and take a seat opposite her. “About anything in particular?”

“How’s this thing between you two going?”

“By ‘thing,’ you mean the marriage?”

“Yes. Being forced to marry someone you don’t know is not every woman’s dream,” she says and looks down at her cup. “Believe me, I have experience.”

“You didn’t know Salvatore’s father until you married him?”

“No. So, you see, I can relate to you and your situation.”

“Hmm.” I take a sip of my coffee. “Salvatore and I knew each other before he decided to trap me in this marriage.”

Ilaria’s hand holding her cup of coffee stops midway to her mouth. “What?”

“Oh, he didn’t tell you?”

“No,” she whispers.

“We met a handful of times. I’m pretty sure he was stalking me. We even went on a date. A kind of date, anyway.”

She stares at me. “Salvatore doesn’t do dates.”

“He told me.” I snort. “Also, I’m not a hundred percent certain, but I think he broke into my place and filled my refrigerator with food.”

The realization came only a couple of days ago when I stumbled on Ada preparing soup. I asked why we needed soup when no one was sick, and she said it was because Salvatore had told her I liked it the last time. The only soup I’ve eaten in the past two years was the one I found in my miraculously stocked fridge. I still don’t know what to think about that revelation. It’s cute in a very bizarre way.

Ilaria keeps on staring at me for a few moments, then slowly lowers her cup. “Has he been acting . . . strangely?”

“Well, your son is a very unusual person, Ilaria, and I don’t know him well enough to gauge what behavior is ‘normal-strange’ or ‘strange-strange.’” I shrug. “He wants me to call him and check in every two hours. Would that be considered ‘strange-strange?’”

“Yes. Did he say why?”

“Because of some compulsion to know where I am at all times. Do you think it’s some kind of OCD? Like when you need to touch your wallet every few minutes to make sure it’s there, you know?”

Ilaria closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “It’s not OCD,” she says and looks at me with a grave expression on her face. “I think he . . . likes you.”

I burst out laughing. “He did force me to marry him, so yes, I assume he likes me.”

“Salvatore doesn’t like people, Milene. He respects them, or not. But he doesn’t *like* them.”

I furrow my brows in confusion. “That’s crazy. He likes his men. I saw how concerned he was when the Irish attacked, and some of them got hurt.”

“Salvatore’s men are extremely loyal to him. He respects their loyalty. Maybe even cares about them in his own way.” She leans forward and takes my hand. “But he doesn’t feel anything for anyone.”

“Of course he does.” I blink at her. “He’s not a fucking statue. Yes, he sometimes has weird reactions, but . . . he loves you. You’re his mom.”

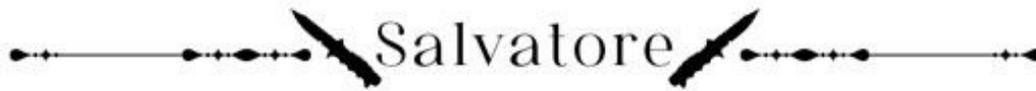
“Salvatore cares about me, yes.” Her eyes crease in a sad smile. “Will you call him, as he asked?”

“He hasn’t actually asked. It was more like a demand.” I smirk. “But he said please, so yes.”

“He said please . . .,” she mutters, then squeezes my hand. “I’m going to check on Alessandro.”

As she takes her coat and purse, I wonder if this might be the weirdest interaction I’ve ever experienced.

## Chapter 19



There are four guards in front of the safe house tonight, which is expected, considering how many people are coming.

“Boss.” They nod in unison as I pass them, the one closest to me opening the door.

Nino’s waiting by the window in the first room, nursing a drink, while Aldo and Stefano are sitting at the table in the corner but quickly rise as soon as they see me.

“Did Tomaso talk?” I ask.

“He gave us everything within the hour.” Aldo motions with his hand toward the door on the right. “Do you want to talk to him, Boss?”

“No. How badly did you rough him up?”

“Three fingers missing. Some beating. He was relatively easy to break.”

I nod and scan my surroundings. “Get me one chair in the middle of the room. Do you have pliers and heavy-duty scissors?”

Aldo looks at me with confusion in his eyes, but then collects himself. “Would gardening shears do?”

“Yes.”

The phone in my pocket vibrates. As I take it out, some of the anxiety that’s been building begins to ebb.

“Milene.”

“Riggs vomited all over the carpet.”

“What?”

“How the hell should I know, Salvatore? It looks like hair and half-digested cat food.”

“I was expressing my irritation. Not asking for the cat vomit analysis.”

“You need to work on expressing meaning through your voice. Your intonation sucks. I have to go and clean this up.” She cuts the call. Apparently, she took the fact I told her it didn’t matter what she talked about literally.

I put the phone back in my pocket and find Aldo and Stefano gaping at me. “We adopted a cat. It’s defective,” I say and turn toward the door just as Cosimo and Arturo come in. “Get that chair and bring Tomaso. Tie him nice and tight.”

\* \* \*

It takes fifteen minutes for everyone to arrive. Nino instructs them to stand along the wall opposite the chair where Tomaso is sitting, tied and gagged. After Arturo nods, signaling that all twelve people we’ve been waiting for are present, I walk over to Tomaso and turn toward the group of capos and team leaders for our ranks of soldiers.

“Tomaso here thought it was a good idea to cozy up to the authorities and leak information regarding our drug shipments,” I say, looking at the men who are standing around in utter silence.

I take off my jacket, put it over the back of the chair behind me, and roll up my shirtsleeves. “Nino, remove the gag and open his mouth. And keep it open.”

Tomaso whimpers and shakes his head left and right, trying but failing to avoid Nino’s hands. Once Nino succeeds in opening the guy’s mouth, I take the pliers and the shears off the table and stand in front of the snitch.

“People tend to forget things, so I figured it might be a good time to remind everyone what we do with snitches,” I say.

It takes me a few tries to catch Tomaso’s tongue with the pliers. When I have it in my grip, I pull it out and cut it free from his treacherous mouth with the gardening shears. Blood sprays all over the front of my white shirt as Tomaso screams. I turn around to face the group—every man staring at the screaming Tomaso—and throw the pliers, along with the still-attached pink lump of flesh, onto the floor in front of them.

“I don’t tolerate traitors,” I say. Walking around the chair until I’m

standing behind Tomaso, I place my right hand below his chin and my left one on top of his head. “Remember that.”

With those words, I force Tomaso’s mouth closed and keep it that way. He flails, choking on his own blood, and I wait until his body goes still before letting go of him.

I grab a rag off the table to wipe my hands. The blood comes easily off my right hand, but the glove on my left is completely saturated. I take it off and drop it on the ground, right into the puddle of more blood pooling beneath the dead man.

“You’re dismissed,” I say and reach for my jacket.

\* \* \*

Milene is already asleep when I get home. I lean my shoulder on the doorjamb and just watch her for what seems like hours. Would she look at me differently, if she saw me doing all those obnoxious things so I can keep this organization standing? Would she let me touch her with hands that were soaked in blood barely two hours earlier? I know she’s aware of how things are handled in Cosa Nostra, but I don’t think I can risk having her witness it. It should concern me, the fact that her opinion matters this much. I don’t give a fuck that people are calling me a monster behind my back; it goes with the job description. But not her. I grip the doorway with all my strength, ignoring the pain that shoots from my left hand all the way to my head. Never her.



I feel a light touch on my chin, followed by a finger tracing the line of my jaw. Firm lips soon find my own. I smile sleepily and turn my head toward the heat I feel at my side. Opening my eyes, I discover Salvatore looking at me as he lounges in bed.

“You talk in your sleep,” he says.

“I know.” I reach out to stroke his hair. “I hope I didn’t spill any secrets.”

“You don’t get to keep any secrets from me, Milene.” His finger moves down my neck, lower and lower. “I’ve already told you that you owe me everything.” His palm slides between my legs. “And that includes any secrets you might have.”

I smile, then gasp as his finger enters me. “You can’t demand that.”

“Yes, I can.” Another finger slides inside. “I own you. Your body. Your mind.” His thumb presses onto my clit and he teases me with his masterful fingers. “Your smile. And your secrets.”

“You don’t get to own a person.” I grab at his shoulders and ride his hand. The things he can do with his fingers defy all logic and reason.

“I don’t?” He thrusts his fingers so deep that I choke on my breath and whimper when he curls them inside me. He hits the sensitive spot on my upper wall, and I come in an instant—violently.

I’m still panting, trying to catch my breath, when he covers me with his body, pressing me into the bed.

“You weigh a ton, Salvatore,” I choke out, then gasp when his fingers are replaced by his steel-hard cock.

“Who . . .”—he slides the tip inside, but so very slowly I want to groan in frustration—“owns you, cara?”

I meet his hawkish gaze, smile, and move my hand to his neck. When I tighten my hold, Salvatore lets out a growl and thrusts his cock all the way to the hilt filling me so completely that consciousness leaves my body. It feels as if I’m flying.

“You,” I whisper and slide my palms down his back all the way to his hard ass. “And do I own you, Tore?”

He doesn’t reply immediately, just keeps pounding into me until my walls clench around his cock, and I come again from his punishing pace. Dipping his head lower, he places a kiss on my shoulder and whispers in my ear.

“I’m afraid you do, Milene.” He slams his lips to mine and thrusts into me at the same time, filling me with his hot cum.

\* \* \*

I sit up in bed and watch Salvatore as he walks toward the closet on the other side of the room, takes out a shirt, and puts it on. He has four gunshot scars on his back. One is near his shoulder, two on the left side, and another a few inches to the right of his spine. With his leg and the graze to his right bicep, the total amounts to six.

“Where are the others?” I ask.

“What?”

“Gunshot wounds.”

He turns and fumbles with the buttons on his shirt. “Right thigh and left leg.”

“Holy fuck, Salvatore. When did you get all these gunshot wounds?” I get up from the bed and take over the buttoning of his shirt.

“The one on my shoulder is from a few years back. The thigh shot was last year.” He says this like he’s reciting a grocery list. “My left leg, and the three on the back were inflicted on me during the same incident. Seven years ago.”

My fingers go still on the middle button. Three bullets in the back do not come from an ordinary gunfight. That was an execution. “Who did it?”

“The old don gave the order,” he says. “But it was one of the capos who carried it out.”

“Why?”

“The previous establishment became greedy. They decided to keep the lion’s share of the money for themselves.”

That’s insane. I couldn’t have understood correctly. “They were stealing from the Family?”

Cosa Nostra Families have a very strict way of operating, and it’s based on trust above all else. The don and capos are in charge of organizing business, but they are only entitled to part of the profits. The rest of the money is distributed to all other members, all the way down to the foot soldiers. The shares depend on the person’s position in the organization, but the don and the capos never take more than 40 percent of the total income. I don’t know how many people there are in the New York Family, but back in Chicago, there were at least a hundred.

“Yes,” he says. “And I found out.”

“So, they decided to kill you?”

“In the end, yes.” He bends his head and brushes his cheek against mine. “They tried to bring me into their little scheme first. I was a capo then, and I’d already started to build up my own construction business. It was bringing in a lot of money.”

“What happened?”

“I said no. They tried giving me an incentive to change my mind.” He reaches with his hand and traces a line along my jaw with his finger. “They were very enthusiastic in their efforts.”

“Your hand?” I ask and place my palm over the one that’s caressing my chin.

“And my leg.”

“Jesus, Tore.” I blink to keep the tears at bay. “How does anyone survive something like that?”

“Nino found me in the warehouse where I was invited for a ‘meeting.’ He has a habit of following me, even when I’ve told him not to. When I was released from the hospital, Arturo helped me lie low until I was well enough to discuss the matter with the don and the capos again.”

“What did you say to them?”

“Nothing in particular. I only demonstrated where they’d gone wrong.” He presses his lips to my fingers. “When you really intend to kill someone, you aim for the head.”

“You killed the don?”

“And all six capos.”

A shudder passes down my spine. The fact that I like a man who represents everything I wanted to run away from is hard to accept. “Tore?”

“Yes?”

“How many people have you killed?” I whisper. “Personally.”

His finger moves under my chin and raises my head. Our eyes lock. “Do you really want me to answer that question, cara?”

I stare at those amber depths and feeling like the largest hypocrite on earth, I slowly shake my head. No, I don’t want to know. But not because I’m

afraid it'll make me like him less. It's because I'm afraid I'll like him the same, whatever the answer is.

## Chapter 20



“This is hilarious,” Pippa says, looking back over her shoulder at Stefano and Vincenzo, who are trailing a few paces behind us. Two more bodyguards are following a little further back.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I sigh and turn to enter the next boutique.

“I feel like there should be a camera crew following us, as well.” She giggles. “Why would anyone need four bodyguards? You said your husband was a businessman, not the president.”

“He is a bit extreme.” I approach the dress rack and fish the phone out of my purse to call Salvatore.

“Milene.”

“About the dress for Rocco’s wedding. How about gray?” I ask, looking at a long and flowing gown. “Or should I go with something more colorful?”

“You can wear whatever you want, as long as it covers your ass.”

“Well, thank you, sugar pie, that was really helpful.” I snort and cut the line.

“You’re really into him,” Pippa comments, looking past me at the dress. “What was that, the third time you’ve called him since we started shopping?”

Actually, it was the fourth. I called him while she was in a restroom, as well.

It’s been two weeks since Salvatore asked me to call him whenever we’re not together. In the beginning, I wasn’t exactly punctual. He never commented on it or reprimanded me for being late with my “check-ins.” I think he was feeling bad for asking me to do it in the first place, but, every time I was late calling, I noticed a slight strain in his voice, as if he was on edge. After that, I decided to be more diligent with my communications.

“Yup.” I nod. “I really am.”

It's the truth. Weird or not, I enjoy spending time with Salvatore. I don't even mind his quirks. If there wasn't his continued insistence that I do not work, I wouldn't harbor any lingering resentment to the marriage, arranged or not.

"Shit," I say as I'm taking the dress to the cash register. I think I'm falling for my husband.

After a quick coffee at the mall, we drop Pippa off at her place and head home. The car enters the garage, and while I'm taking my phone out to call Salvatore and tell him I'm back, the elevator doors open, and he steps out. As I'm reaching across the back seat to collect the shopping bags that are piled next to me, the door opens, and Salvatore slides in beside me.

"Out!" he barks at the driver and Stefano in the front seat.

As soon as they exit the car, he grabs me around the waist, pulls me onto his lap, and puts his nose in my hair. I try to turn my head, but he just tightens his grip around my middle, pressing me to his body.

"Four hours, Milene," he whispers into my ear.

"I called you every hour."

"I know." He presses his face to my neck and inhales. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"A little?" I snort, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my lips to his.

"Is that a problem?"

"Not really." I shrug and kiss him. It should concern me. The thing is—I don't mind Salvatore's OCD behavior or his need to know where I am. I don't mind calling him, either, even more than every hour if that's what it takes to quell his anxiety. In fact, I kind of . . . like it. "You know, something came to my mind when Pippa and I passed a flower shop earlier."

"What?" he asks as he nips at the side of my jaw.

"You were the second creep. The one who sent me a ton of flowers."

"Yes."

I lean away and pin him with my gaze. "A hundred vases?"

"Ninety-six. That's all they had."

“One would have been more than enough.”

Salvatore watches me for a moment, then bends forward and touches his nose to mine. “It’s all or nothing with me, Milene. You should have figured that out by now.”

Yeah. I guess it is.

\* \* \*

I comb my fingers through Salvatore’s hair, watching him from my spot astride his waist as he reaches to pick up his bottle of beer from the floor. It still surprises me, seeing him so relaxed.

We’ve been lounging on the sofa in the living room for almost an hour—him watching the game and me sprawled across his chest, texting Bianca. She stopped replying to my messages about ten minutes ago, meaning Mikhail probably came home. God knows, those two can’t keep their hands off each other.

“I can’t believe you like beer,” I say.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. You always seemed more like the fine-wine type to me.” I trace the line of his jaw with the back of one finger. “It’s the suits.”

“I have nothing against wine. But it goes better with cheese than it does with football.” He tilts his head and kisses my finger. “What did your sister say? Any news from home?”

“The same. I’m still waiting for her to reply to the last text.”

Salvatore lifts his hand and traces his thumb over my bottom lip. “Ask her to pass on a message to Petrov for me.”

“To the Russian pakhan?”

“Yes. He should know that the Albanians have started to do business with the Irish.”

I type a quick text and send it to Bianca. “Anything else?”

“Nope.” He takes the phone from my hand, places it on the coffee table, and removes the throw pillows from the sofa, throwing them on the floor.

“Did the poor pillows do something to offend you?”

“Yes.” He throws the last one over the back. “They take up too much space.”

“Maybe we should shop for a larger couch.” I bend my head and plant a kiss on the side of his jaw.

“Couldn’t agree more.”

His arm comes around my waist, and he pulls me down so I’m lying on my side, pressed between his body and the back of the sofa. I reach for the waistband of my leggings and take them off, before removing Salvatore’s sweatpants and boxer briefs. I do the same with my panties, tossing them next to Salvatore’s clothes on the floor.

He takes my hand, lifts my fingers to his lips, gently kisses each one in turn, then proceeds to move his lips across my wrist and along my arm, sending tremors throughout my body. He does all of this very slowly, holding his lips over the spot for a few seconds before moving on, as though every kiss is meant as a statement. It’s captivating, the way he caresses my skin, because Salvatore has never seemed like a patient lover. The attraction between us has always been an explosive force, both hard and intense.

“You have no idea what you do to me, Milene,” he whispers when he reaches my shoulder, and I tremble. “No fucking idea.”

His lips meet mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck, squeezing him to me with all my strength. I don’t think he realizes how much he’s messed up my own mind. It’s scary. I don’t even know what I feel anymore. Am I in love with him? With this controlling, grouchy, closed-off man? Someone I haven’t even seen smile once in all the time I’ve known him? I’m afraid I am.

My hands travel down his neck and over his shoulders to rest on his chiseled chest, and, without breaking the kiss, I throw my leg over his waist and move so I’m seated on top of him.

“I want to make love to you,” I say into his lips and feel him go still under me. “Will you let me?”

When I open my eyes, his steady gaze is fixated on me. “Yes.”

I smile and brush my fingers over his lips. Ilaria was right. He doesn’t deal well with feelings. It’s as though he’s unable to grasp the meanings of the

various emotions and has trouble processing them. I move down his body until his cock is pressing against the wetness of my sex. Inch by inch, I take him inside me, reveling in the way he gradually fills me up. It's large, his cock. Having all of him inside me feels as though my walls are going to burst. I love that.

When he's fully in, I bend to place my lips at the center of his chest and move up to trail kisses along his neck until I reach his strong jaw. I'm rotating my hips methodically and continuously, but as delicately and as slowly as I can, just to keep him on the edge. When my mouth reaches his, I lift my hips up until only the tip of his cock remains inside. Salvatore regards me, his eyes glued to mine and his hands gripping my hips, but he doesn't move. I smile, then slam down onto his cock and simultaneously bite his lip. He inhales sharply and places his left palm lightly against my cheek while his other hand wanders to where our bodies are joined.

"I've been wondering, cara," he says and presses his thumb to my clit, making me moan.

"What?" I lean back and continue rotating my hips.

His fingers pinch my clit lightly, and I shudder but resist the need to move faster. Instead, I maintain the slow tempo, enjoying the way his hazy, lust-soaked eyes fixate on mine.

Salvatore's hands move to my ass, and he squeezes, making me whimper. In the next heartbeat, he slams into me from below so hard I gasp.

"You've never been scared of me," he says. "Why?"

I smile, as he continues to rock into me, his tempo building.

"Answer me, Milene."

"I was too mad at you to be scared!"

"That"—he thrusts his cock into me again with such force I explode in an instant like fireworks and thunder—"is the most idiotic answer I've ever heard."

## Chapter 21



Arturo has been providing updates about our business dealings in narcotics for the past hour, but my mind has been wandering. Milene went to get a manicure with her friend and called less than an hour ago from the salon, yet I got restless a mere twenty minutes later. Even though she has four bodyguards there to protect her I still find it hard to concentrate.

My phone pings with an incoming message. It's from a jeweler I placed a special request with two days ago, letting me know my order is ready to be picked up.

I somehow manage to sit through the entire meeting, then tell Arturo he's free to go. The moment he's out, I leave the office and go to my vehicle.

The store is nearby, so it takes me less than half an hour to get there and collect my purchase. When I get back into my car, I put the red velvet box on the dash in front of me. Just looking at it lessens my anxiety. I'm not sure how Milene will react when I tell her what it is. I might be pushing her too far already. It still amazes me that she's willing to deal with my shit. But still . . . that little box on the dashboard might be too much.

My eyes scan the clock on the dash. Two minutes after six. She should have called already. Anxiety rears its ugly head once again.

I squeeze the steering wheel, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. Another. And one more. If anything's happened, Stefano would have informed me. She probably lost track of time. My phone rings. I open my eyes and grab the phone.

"Tore?"

"Yes?"

"You know that crystal vase in the hallway?" Milene says in a small voice. "How much was that thing worth?"

A couple of thousand. "Not much. Why?"

She sighs. “Thank God. When I came home, Kurt was chasing Riggs, and they kind of . . . broke it. I had to clean up the broken pieces, and some of them were very small, so please make sure you don’t go barefoot there. I’m not sure if I caught every last shard. Where are you? Should I wait for you to eat dinner?”

“I had some errands to run, but I’ll be there soon.”

“Okay, I’ll—Get down, you bastard!” The sound of something crashing travels down the line. “No, not the curtains! I have to go.”

I put the phone down next to the velvet box and start the car.

\* \* \*

Walking into the penthouse, I stop at the threshold to take in the chaos in the living room. Several unraveled rolls of toilet paper are strewn across the floor, with small bits littering the furniture. It looks like a tornado hit it. A large pot, which was home to a ficus, rests on its side in the corner of the room with soil scattered around its base. One end of the curtain pole hangs halfway to the floor, the satin drapes falling off it. There are also claw marks visible along its length.

A clang comes from somewhere in the kitchen, and I turn in time to see Kurt jumping from the counter onto the breakfast bar and then to the dining room table. Milene appears a moment later, giving chase.

“Come here, damn you!” she yells and tries to grab the cat, but it jumps down and dashes toward the hallway.

Milene’s shoulders droop, and she looks up at me. “I’ll clean everything, I promise! I have no idea what’s gotten into Kurt. He’s gone insane. Running around like a banshee for almost an hour.” She comes toward me, shaking her head. “I’m trying to catch him. Maybe he’ll calm down if I put him in the bedroom for a bit.”

As she stops in front of me, I take a good look at my wife. Her white T-shirt is torn at the side. Her ponytail hangs askew, with several locks of hair dangling loose. She has claw marks on her right hand, and there are stains of an unknown origin across her front. She really looks like something the cat dragged in.

“Tore?”

I raise my hand and take her chin between my fingers, staring into her eyes. “You’re so beautiful.”

She blinks at me, looking slightly confused. “Um . . . thank you?”

The sofa is thirty feet away, but the dining table is closer. It’ll do. I grab her around the waist and lift her up, carrying her toward it.

“What are you doing?” she asks next to my ear, sounding genuinely puzzled.

When I reach the table, I set her on her feet. Grasping the tablecloth, I pull it off, making the dishes and cutlery clatter and smash noisily against the floor.

“Jeans,” I say, looking down at her.

Milene raises her eyebrows, unbuttons her jeans, and slides them off. The moment she removes her panties, I take her around the waist and sit her down on the table.

“Down.” I press my palm against her chest until she’s lying on the surface, her legs dangling over the edge. With my free hand, I pull up a chair, sit down, and lift her legs over my shoulders. “Close your eyes,” I say before grabbing her ass and tugging her toward me so I can lick her perfect pussy.

Milene moans. I lick her again slowly, kiss gently, and suck on her clit until she starts to pant. She widens her legs, so I slide a finger inside as I continue to tease her with my tongue. She’s soaked. Arching her back, she lets out a scream of pleasure. Without removing my finger, I lick her sweet spot, pressing a little harder with my tongue. Her body shivers, and I again suck her clit into my mouth.

I’ve never gone down on a woman before and never had the desire to do so, but with Milene, I want everything. I revel in the way her body reacts to each stroke and movement. I tease her pussy with my tongue for a few more minutes, and when I’m sure she’s close, I press my mouth to her clit again and suck hard, curling my finger inside of her at the same time. She comes with another rising scream, and her legs shake violently around my shoulders. I place one more kiss against the lips of her pussy and watch how her body recovers. Milene is lying back, eyes closed, her chest rising and falling in rapid tempo as though she’s trying to draw in enough air.

“Milene?” I ask and brush my palm down her naked thigh. “Are you alive, cara mia?”

“No,” she whispers, slowly rising into the sitting position and staring at me. “Move back.”

I slide the chair back and watch as she gets down off the table, kneels between my legs, and starts unbuttoning my pants.

“You don’t have to reciprocate, Milene.” I brush the back of my hand down her cheek.

She takes out my cock, which has been painfully hard since the moment I placed my mouth on her pussy, and looks up at me. “Try stopping me.” She smirks. “And see what will happen.”

With those words, she wraps her lips around the head of my cock, gripping the shaft with her slender fingers. She starts off slow, licking the sensitive underside, sucking the tip, then swallowing more of me with her hot mouth. Her pace becomes gradually faster, and I grab the back of her hair as she bobs more furiously, watching her lips as she takes me in. I try to hold back but find that I can’t. Just the sight of Milene on her knees between my legs with my cock in her mouth is more than enough to make me come, so when she squeezes me and hollows out her cheeks, I explode in her mouth.

Keeping hold of her bunched hair, I lift her head up until our eyes meet.

“Swallow,” I order.

She smirks and follows the order. The sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever witnessed.



I trace a line down Salvatore’s chest, circle my finger over his rock-hard stomach, then tilt my head to place a kiss on his shoulder. His arm tightens around my middle, pressing me closer to his body.

“Bianca texted me today.” I move my finger upward over his chest again. “Petrov sends his thanks for the intel on the Albanians.”

“I wouldn’t want to be in Dushku’s shoes right now.” He reaches with his left hand to move the hair that’s fallen over my face behind my ear, then places his hand on his stomach.

“Does it still hurt?” I ask and move my finger to his hand, tracing a line over one of the prominent scars there.

“Sometimes.”

“How many breaks?”

“They couldn’t determine.” He turns his hand and entwines his fingers with mine. “I managed to train myself to shoot with my right. Now I’m even better than I was with my left. My handwriting sucks, though.” He looks down at me. “As does my typing, which you’ve probably noticed.”

“And the leg? A gunshot wound to the calf rarely requires amputation.”

“I was shot once in the ankle and twice in the calf, from short range,” he says. “There wasn’t any chance of saving it.”

I close my eyes and bury my face in the crook of his neck. “Promise me something.”

“What?”

“Please don’t get shot again.”

“It’s not like I’m running around with a target drawn over my back, Milene.” A kiss lands at the top of my head.

“Yes, you are,” I mumble into his neck. “I asked Nino why there’s no security detail on you. He said you don’t allow it.”

“If someone is persistent enough in trying to kill me, they’ll do it. Security detail or not.”

My head snaps up. “So, what, you’ll do as you’ve been doing so far and wait for it to happen?”

“No. I’ll try my best to kill them first.”

“Then, try harder damn it!”

Hi tilts his head, regarding me with interest. “Would it bother you if I got killed?”

“Jesus fuck, Salvatore!” I snap. “Would it bother me? Are you for real?”

“Yes. I want to know.”

“You want to know.” I blink, not believing what I’m hearing. “He wants to know if it would bother me if he got killed.”

“It’s a simple question, cara.”

He needs to have his head checked. “Yeah, it would bother me.” I shake my head in frustration. “Would it bother you if I got killed?”

Salvatore’s body goes still. “Do not. Ever. Ask that. Again.”

“You started this with the idiotic questions.” I take his face between my hands. “No more gunshot wounds. Promise me.”

“I’ll try.”

I sigh and close my eyes. He’ll try. Perfect.

“Does that mean you’ll start taking security detail?”

“No.”

Of course not.

“Then deal with the Irish,” I say through my clenched teeth and press my lips to his. “I want them dead.”

“I’m already working on that.” He takes a strand of my hair and wraps it around his finger. “Why are you so bloodthirsty all of a sudden?”

I stare at him, amazed by his cluelessness. He does have a problem with realizing and processing certain things if he can’t see that I’m in love with him.

“Must be PMS.” I sigh, hoping he’ll accept my answer and not question me any more, and place my head on his chest.

Salvatore’s hand lands at my nape and slides downward, lightly brushing my skin with the tips of his fingers. I close my eyes and enjoy the sensation. I’m half-asleep when his hand halts at my neck.

“I bought you something,” he says in a serious tone. “But if you don’t like it, I’ll take it back.”

“You suck at giving presents,” I mumble into his chest.

“I know.” He buries his fingers in my hair. “Do you want to see it?”

“Did it cost a million dollars? A hint for you—if the answer is yes, you

can take it back now.”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“It’s in my jacket. I’ll be right back.”

I watch as he reaches for the crutches, rises, and heads toward the door. I use the opportunity to ogle his tight ass, clad in black boxers. Very nice indeed. Salvatore sleeps in just his underwear, something I wholeheartedly approve of. He returns a few minutes later, throws the jacket on the bed, and sits down. Taking out a red velvet box, he places it beside me on the pillow. I sit up and open the box to find a simple gold bracelet. It’s thick, yet somehow still delicate.

“It’s beautiful, but you don’t have to buy me jewelry. You know I rarely wear it. I haven’t even had the opportunity to wear that ridiculously exuberant bracelet you bought,” I say.

He stiffens beside me. “I need you to wear this one,” he says. “At all times.”

“Okay.” I shrug and open the clasp to put it on.

“It has a GPS chip inside,” he adds, and my head snaps up.



Milene remains silent at first, and then her gaze moves between me and the bracelet in her hand. “Why?”

“The calls are not enough anymore. I almost flipped out today while you were with Pippa. Barely managed to sit through a meeting because I was wondering where you were. I need to know where you are, Milene. At all times.”

“You knew where I was. I called every hour,” she says. “There were four bodyguards with me. You could have called them to check.”

I called Stefano twice. It didn’t really help. I became anxious less than

fifteen minutes later. “Alright. I’ll find a way to deal with my issues some other way.”

I’ve shocked her. It’s apparent from the way she flips her gaze between me and the bracelet.

“Can you explain those . . . issues more clearly? Please.”

I take her hand in mine and trace a circular pattern on the middle of her palm. “It starts as a slight unease—nothing special, a little discomfort, but it quickly transforms into a restlessness that’s hard to control,” I say. “Then, I become distracted. Edgy. I can’t concentrate. My brain constructs different scenarios, each worse than the last, and it’s all I can think about. I can’t block it out.”

“What scenarios, Tore?” Her eyes search mine.

Not taking my eyes off hers, I press my lips together. “You,” I say through gritted teeth. “Hurt. Or kidnapped.”

“You understand your fear is unfounded, don’t you? Especially when we’re in the same building.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I reach out and take her chin. “I need to see you, to be sure you’re really okay. If that’s not a possibility, I need to know where you are. Every fucking second.”

I don’t mention that I also have this crazy urge to touch her all the time. I can’t stand being in the same room with her without placing my hand on hers or wrapping my arm around her waist. If she’s sitting nearby, it has to be on my lap. I can’t process the idea of her being near and not having her skin against mine. It’s like dangling a bottle of water in front of a man dying of thirst. A physiological need I have to fulfill, or else I’ll go insane. I’ve been resisting that compulsion so far, and only succumb when I’m close to losing my mind. For now, that is.

Milene regards the bracelet, then meets my gaze. “So, my wearing this would help?”

“Yes.”

She sighs and offers it to me, extending her left hand. “Okay.”

I take the bracelet and fix it around her wrist. The moment it’s fastened, the feeling of restlessness building inside me dissipates almost completely.

“You’re going to wear this at all times, even when you’re in the shower or asleep. And you’ll continue calling me, as we agreed.”

“I will.”

I nod and, wrapping my arms around her middle, pull her toward me.  
“Good.”

## Chapter 22



“The bride doesn’t look excited,” I comment, looking at the dark-haired woman in her early twenties sitting next to Rocco. Instead of looking happy, she’s sitting with her head lowered and eyes focused on her hands which are folded on her lap. “Arranged marriage?”

“Kind of,” Salvatore says next to me. “Her brother has a gambling problem. He spent everything they had and then borrowed money from Rocco. He spent that, too.”

I inhale sharply. “Rocco took her as a loan repayment?”

Salvatore nods once. “Yes.”

The groom sits next to his bride, talking to a man on the other side of the table and laughing as if the marriage will be the best experience of both their lives. His arm is resting on the back of his wife’s chair. There is no missing the way she is leaning forward as if she’s trying to move away from him as much as possible.

“That’s sick,” I say.

Rocco’s handsome, so why force a woman who obviously doesn’t want to be anywhere near him into marriage? There must be a reason why she looks so . . . scared.

I move my eyes away from the newlyweds and scan the room. Yup, people are still staring at me. From the moment we arrived, I felt like some exotic animal in a zoo—people looking at us constantly. I expected some stares since it’s the first time I was meeting members of the New York Family, but I didn’t anticipate seeing fear in their eyes. Most of them have kept well away from where Salvatore and I are standing, but they haven’t stopped gawking at us. Or, more specifically, at Salvatore’s arm, which he’s kept around my waist for the entire event. No one has approached us except for Arturo. And he only came by to share some confidential information with

Salvatore.

“I like the dress,” Salvatore says and places a kiss on my bare shoulder. “Goes well with the bracelet.”

“It seemed shameful to let it lie unseen in a shoebox under the bed.”

“You’re keeping the bracelet in a shoebox? Under our bed?”

“Where the fuck should I put the million-dollar thing?” I whisper. “You won’t let me use the safe.”

“There is only one place where it deserves to be, Milene.” He traces the tip of his finger along my neck and down my arm to my wrist.

The intensity with which he looks into my eyes feels like a living thing, and a slight shiver passes me.

I’ve watched Salvatore interact with his men. He doesn’t talk much. And while he listens attentively as they speak, he also seems to keep the rest of the room in sight. This, the way he’s looking at me now, is different. It’s both alluring and frightening to be the sole focus of a man like Salvatore Ajello.

“Time for the fireworks!” someone shouts from the other part of the room.

A collective cheer fills the room, and from the corner of my eye, I see guests heading toward the exit. Salvatore doesn’t move from his spot but continues tracing my forearm with the tip of his finger. His left hand cups my cheek, thumb caressing the skin below my eye.

“You forgot to put your glove on,” I say, not taking my eyes off his, and lift my hand to cover his. At first, he was only removing it after he came home in the evenings, but now, I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen him wear it.

“I don’t forget things, Milene.”

The first explosion booms outdoors as colorful lights flash against the inside walls, the brightest of these accentuating the hard lines of Salvatore’s face.

I tilt my head to the side, leaning further into his touch. “I thought seeing your hand bothered you.”

“It does.” He bends his head and places a kiss on my neck, below my ear.

The bangs of the fireworks continue, but my heart is beating even louder.

Burying my hands in Salvatore's hair, I crush my lips against his. He takes a step forward, and then another, forcing me to move back until I'm pressed against the cold surface of the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the garden.

"Why has no one approached us this whole evening?" I ask, then shudder when I feel his hand on the inside of my thigh, inching upward.

"Because I made sure they all knew I didn't want anyone coming near you."

His hand reaches my panties and deft fingers pull them to one side, exposing me.

"Why?"

"I wasn't in the mood"—his finger teases my clit and moves to my entrance, while his amber eyes stare at me with the intensity of a bird of prey homing in on its next meal—"for sharing your attention with anyone."

"You're so unbelievably self-centered." I smile, then suck in a breath as his finger enters me.

"Yes, I am." Another finger slips inside.

I quickly glance over Salvatore's shoulder and see Aldo and Stefano standing in the opposite corner of the otherwise empty room. They are both staring at the ceiling, offering us their discretion in the process.

The fireworks are still lighting up the sky, and everyone is in the front yard, some distance beyond the window. It's dark outside, and with the bright lights in the room, anyone who looks in our direction will have a prime view.

"People will see us," I whisper, then let out a low moan when Salvatore's thumb presses on my clit.

"I don't care about people." He bites my lower lip and moves to my chin. The fingers inside me keep moving, stretching my inner walls.

"I am people, too, Tore." I breathe, then gasp when he bites my lip again.

"You are not people."

"Oh?" Tremors rock my body so hard I can barely manage words. "And what am I?"

His mouth stills. Slowly, he lifts his head and stares into my eyes.

“Mine,” he says and thrusts his fingers all the way in, hitting that spot only he has ever found. “You are mine, Milene.”

I shudder as I come, sagging against his chest for support.

Salvatore removes his hand, then grabs under my thighs and lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist and attack his sinful lips, feeling his hard cock behind the fabric of his dress pants as it presses into my core.

The sound of screeching tires somewhere outside reaches us. Salvatore’s head snaps up, and he looks over my shoulder toward the front yard, visible beyond the window.

“Stefano! Aldo!” he shouts, turns around abruptly and heads across the room, still holding me tightly. “Go through the kitchen. Aldo first.”

As Salvatore barks the orders, I stare over his shoulder at the yard through the window. Two black cars have parked at the edge of the lawn, and men with guns are getting out. Shots ring out a second later.

Salvatore lowers me to the ground and takes my chin between his fingers. “You’re going with Stefano.”

I blink at him, terrified and confused. The next moment, Stefano’s hand grips my upper arm, pulling me away.

“What . . . Tore!” I yank my arm, trying to free myself from Stefano’s hold. I’m not going anywhere without my husband.

Salvatore looks at me, then moves his gaze to Stefano and gives him a nod. “With your life, Stefano.”

“With my life, Boss,” Stefano says next to me, grabs me around the waist, and runs.

Salvatore remains standing in the same spot, watching us for a few seconds as we retreat, then reaches inside his jacket. I stare in horror as he takes out a gun and turns in the direction of the double glass doors on the opposite side of the room. The doors that lead to the front yard where, based on the screams and the sounds of gunfire, all hell just broke loose.



It's chaos.

Some of the guests are running, trying to find cover or shelter within the house. More than a dozen bodies are scattered around the lawn. I've spotted at least eleven shooters. Two are lying on the grass, probably dead already. Six are using the cars as cover, shooting at Rocco's security detail. The rest are scattered, firing randomly.

Arturo is standing at the edge of the lawn, taking out the shooters with his guns. He's the only man I know who shoots equally well with his left and right hand. Learning to aim and shoot with the non-dominant hand requires immense determination and practice, something I know from personal experience.

One of the gunmen separates from the group behind the cars and heads toward the house, hitting Rocco's man with a well-aimed bullet along the way. I raise my gun and fire off two shots in his direction. The first bullet misses, but the second gets him in the chest. He stumbles. I shoot again, this time hitting his stomach, and he ends up facedown on the grass. A bullet whizzes by my head, and I quickly step back, taking cover behind a thick stone column on my right. Five more of Rocco's people run out from the house and charge toward the shooters on the lawn, picking them off first before focusing on the group behind the cars.

The phone in my pocket vibrates once. Stefano's signal that he has Milene secured in the vehicle. The pressure in my chest loosens.

When I leave the porch and head toward the attackers' cars, most of the shooters are already dead. Rocco might be a little slow where business is concerned, but he knows how to choose his security.

The last two assailants are crouched behind one of the vehicles, hiding from Rocco's men, who are peppering them with bullets from high-powered weapons somewhere on my right. The hostiles don't notice me approaching since they're too focused on keeping their heads low and returning fire. I aim for the head of the shooter closest to me and let a bullet fly. His head snaps to the side, and he crumples instantly. The other shooter looks down at his fallen comrade, then lifts his gun to aim at me. I shoot him twice in the chest before he has time to pull the trigger. The gunfire ceases. Rocco's men scatter around to check for life among fallen people.

"Irish?" I ask as I approach Arturo while he's looking over one of the dead

shooters.

“Most likely,” he says. “How do you want this handled?”

“With the spilling of blood.” I take my phone and call Nino.

“I need twenty armed men,” I say the moment he picks up the call. “I’ll meet them in an hour at the gas station near Fitzgerald’s house.”

“They’ll be there.”

“Good.”

“Boss?” he adds. “Are you okay? Stefano called to tell me what happened.”

“Yes,” I answer. “Rocco lost three men. A dozen or so guests are wounded. A few of them seriously. At least two dead.”

“Should I call Ilaria?”

“No. This is too big of a fuckup to be covered up. Somebody’s probably already called 911. I’m leaving. Rocco will have to deal with the authorities. Call Greg. They’re going to need a lawyer here right away, before the police arrive.” I cut the call and turn to Arturo. “Go. I don’t want you here when the authorities show up.”

“You think Rocco can handle this?”

“I don’t give a fuck. He’s disposable. You’re not,” I say and head toward my car. It’s time to deal with Patrick Fitzgerald.

I’m turning on the ignition when my phone rings. Stefano’s number.

“We’re just entering the garage,” he says.

I lean back in the seat and close my eyes. She’s safe.

The sound of jostling comes from the other end of the line.

“Give me that fucking phone!” I hear Milene shout. “Jesus fuck, Salvatore! Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

“I’m fine, Milene. There’s something I have to handle. I’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

A few moments of silence follow before she speaks again. I notice her voice is shaking.

“You scared the fucking shit out of me. Don’t you dare send me away like that again,” she whispers. “Next time, you’re coming with me.”

I grind my teeth. She has no idea how hard it was to trust her safety in Stefano’s hands instead of getting her out of harm’s way myself.

“Stefano is faster than me, cara.”

“I don’t fucking care!” she snaps, and the line goes dead.

I lower the phone and stare at it. No one ever dares to hang up on me, and yet, she does it all the time. It’s strange.

\* \* \*

I park my car in Fitzgerald’s driveway and head toward the front door, where Nino is waiting.

“Fitzgerald’s not here,” he says.

“Deegan?”

“Pasquale has him in the kitchen.”

“Let’s go and chat with him,” I say and walk inside the house, avoiding the fresh array of bodies under the dim porch lights.

We’ve had people watching Fitzgerald’s house for weeks, so getting inside didn’t pose a problem. They already knew the guards’ routes and Alessandro disarmed the outdated security system in less than five minutes.

When I step inside the house, I pass the house staff, gathered together in a corner and facing the wall, some of them visibly shaking. Two of my men stand guard over them. I follow Nino toward the rear of the house.

Fitzgerald’s second-in-command is sitting at the dining table with the barrel of Pasquale’s gun pressed against his left temple. The Irishman looks up, then follows me with his eyes as I approach the table and take a seat across from him.

“Where’s Patrick?” I ask and lean back in the chair.

“I don’t know,” he snaps.

I nod at Pasquale. He lowers the gun and shoots Deegan in his thigh. The Irishman screams.

“Where is Patrick, Deegan?” I ask again.

“I don’t know!” he chokes out. “When he heard the raid had failed, he got into his car and disappeared. He’s probably in one of his safe houses.”

“Figures.” I will never understand how a coward like Fitzgerald ended up as the head of a major criminal organization. The Irish were probably in disarray when the Bratva killed off most of their leaders four years ago, and he took an open opportunity to rise fast within their ranks. “Do you know the locations of the safe houses?”

“No. Patrick never shared those with me.”

“Too bad.” I look up at Pasquale. Another gunshot pierces the air. Deegan twitches once, then slumps forward, blood pooling from the fresh hole in the side of his head.

“What should we do with the staff, Boss?” Nino asks.

“I’ll leave it to you to decide. If you think any might talk, dispose of them.” I stand up. “Tell Alessandro to burn down the house. I don’t want any evidence we were here.”

It was by accident that I found out about Alessandro Zanetti’s skills with fire. I sent him to dispose of some competition a while back, assuming he would shoot them. Instead, he tied them up inside an abandoned shack and set the thing on fire. It burned down so thoroughly and so fast the bodies couldn’t be identified.

I’m halfway to my car, with Nino at my side, when the sound of gunfire rips through the air. It’s coming from the direction of the garage to our left. Nino takes out his gun and runs toward one of our soldiers, who is already returning fire by the overhead door. It looks like some of Fitzgerald’s men decided to hide in the vehicles. Nino slips inside while I take my gun out of the holster and head to the other side of the building’s door to cover him.

A man, gun in hand, rushes out of the garage and turns to aim at one of my men changing his magazine next to the door. I send a bullet flying. The Irishman falls, blood oozing from his neck. There’s another body sprawled on

the ground a few yards back.

Inside the garage bay, Nino is crouching behind a vehicle, trying to neutralize the last two shooters, who are raining bullets in his direction from behind another car. I fire a few bullets in their direction, but they both duck. Nino straightens and runs toward the other car while one of our soldiers and I cover for him. He kills one of the foes immediately, but the last one launches toward the exit, shooting randomly. Bullets tear into him from all directions, and he falls to his knees, then topples over.

I throw my gun on the ground and take off my jacket, pressing it over the bleeding wound on my left side.



I check the time on my phone. Half past two in the morning. Where is Salvatore? He told me he needed to take care of something. That was hours ago. I open the call log and swipe over his name again. He didn't answer on the last two calls. That never happens. I half expect this one to go unanswered, too, but a sigh of relief escapes my lips when I hear his voice on the other end.

“Tore? Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” he says in a clipped tone.

“Where are you? Has something happened?”

“No. I'll be there in ten minutes.” He cuts the call.

I grip the phone tighter as my hand shakes for a moment. Taking a deep breath, I open the contact list, find Nino's number, and hit the green call button.

“Mrs. Ajello?”

“Where is he?” I bark into the phone.

“Who?”

“Don't fuck with me, Nino. Where is Salvatore, and what happened?”

A short silence falls across the line before he answers. “We’re downstairs.”

“In the office?”

“No. The infirmary.”

“Why? Did someone get shot?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus! Who is it this time? Why didn’t anyone call me, damn it?” I spin around and head toward the front door. “I’m coming down.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mrs. Ajello. Boss said he doesn’t want you here.”

I still as I’m about to turn the handle. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because it’s him who got shot.”

“What?”

“The doc is digging out the bullet.”

The phone falls from my hand, and I run out of the penthouse. I don’t wait for the elevator. Dashing, instead, down the stairwell, I run across the hallway toward Stefano at the entrance to the infirmary. When he sees me coming, he blocks the way and raises his hand as if to stop me.

“Mrs. Ajello, Boss said I can’t let anyone in.”

“Fucking, move!” I swat his hand to the side, grab for the door, and get inside, only to stop dead at the threshold.

Salvatore is sitting on one of the gurneys. Ilaria is next to him, sewing up a wound in his side. A bunch of bloody gauzes are scattered on the floor around her feet. I suck in a breath, and upon exhaling, something like a whimper leaves my mouth. Salvatore looks up at me and lets out a curse.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I yell, brushing the tears from my face and marching toward him. “Can’t someone else get shot for a change? Or is that your exclusive right?”

“Milene, calm down,” he says as Ilaria ties the last stitch.

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down, you reckless, negligent idiot.” I grab at his shoulders and continue shouting, paying no heed to Ilaria and

Nino, both of whom are standing to my left and staring at me with shocked expressions on their faces. “I’m done counting the gunshot wounds on your body! Do you understand?”

“Milene—”

“This is the last one!” I bark into his face, then burst out crying. “Promise me!”

“It was probably a ricochet. It barely went in.”

“I don’t give a fuck if it’s a bloody paintball capsule, Salvatore!” I sniff and grit my teeth. “Next time you get shot, I leave.”

His left hand grabs me at the back of my neck, and he stares at me with his nostrils flaring. “You will never say that again, do you hear me, Milene?”

“I. Will. Leave.” The words tumble out as tears continue to roll down my cheeks. I reach for him, pull his face to mine, and slam my lips to his. “Damn it, Tore.”

Someone clears their throat, and I turn my head to find Ilaria standing next to me, one hand on her hip and the other holding a roll of bandages. “If you two are done, I’d like to proceed,” she says, then looks at Salvatore. “And I’d like to join the ‘last time’ club for good measure. I’m done patching you up. Next time, find someone else. Milene, he’ll have to take antibiotics for the next ten days, can you check whether we have any in the locker?”

“No.” Salvatore grabs me by the waistband of my shorts, keeping me in place. “Nino, go check the locker.”

Nino nods and goes to rummage through the drawers while Ilaria bandages Salvatore’s wound. I caught a glimpse of it before she started, and it didn’t appear too bad. Still, I can’t make myself stop shaking. When Nino told me Salvatore had been shot, the worst of all scenarios flashed before my eyes. Even seeing he’s okay does little to quell the feeling of dread.

“I’m going to get you a shirt,” I say and turn toward the elevator, but Salvatore’s hold on my shorts tightens.

“Nino, have someone go upstairs and get me a shirt.”

Nino throws Ilaria the box of antibiotics and takes out his phone.

“I could have gotten your shirt,” I say.

Salvatore presses his lips together, then bends to whisper in my ear. “You said you were going to leave me. Until I manage to forget that, Milene, I’m not letting you out of my reach.”

“No physical activity for at least a month, Salvatore.” Ilaria states.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He gets down slowly off the gurney. “It will heal in a few days.”

“Oh, for all that’s holy.” She shakes her head and turns to me. “Please try to reason with him.”

Stefano rushes inside, carrying a white dress shirt in his hand, and offers it to Salvatore. Reluctantly, my husband finally releases his hold on me. He puts the shirt on, but when he tries to fasten the buttons, I move his hands away and take over.

“There’s no reasoning with him, Ilaria. He’s as stubborn as a mule,” I mumble as I move down through the buttons.

Only when I’m on the last one do I become aware of an eerie silence in the room. Nino and Stefano are frozen in place a few feet away, their eyes glued to my hands and the front of Salvatore’s shirt. On my other side, Ilaria’s clutching the box of antibiotics, staring at my hands in a similar fashion. I run my finger down the row of buttons on Salvatore’s shirt, wondering whether I’ve accidentally skipped a hole. I haven’t. Shaking my head, I finish the last one.

A kiss lands on my forehead. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Sure.” I nod and turn to Ilaria. “Would you like to come?”

She doesn’t reply right away. She seems too preoccupied with my hand clasped in Salvatore’s, our fingers entwined. “No . . . I have some things to do.” She looks at me, then quickly turns and heads toward a chair to take her coat and purse. Things to do at three in the morning?

“I’ll call you tomorrow. Don’t tear your stitches,” she throws the words over her shoulder, and then she’s gone. I’m not exactly sure, but I think I saw tears in her eyes before she hightailed it out of the infirmary and into the elevator, the doors of which promptly closed.

When we get to the penthouse, I head toward the kitchen. “Do you want something to eat?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll check if Ada left anything in the fridge. Do you want something in particular?”

“Yes.” Salvatore pulls on my hand and turns me toward him. “You. Get on the counter.”

I raise my eyebrows.

He takes a step toward me. “Now, Milene.”

When I don’t make a move, he takes another step forward, forcing me two steps back. And another. My back makes contact with the cabinet.

“Up.”

I grab the edge of the countertop and hoist myself up to sit.

“You’ll tear your stitches,” I say.

“I won’t. Stand up.”

Wondering what he has in mind, I do as he says, watching him all the while through narrowed eyes. He takes a step closer, places his hands on the counter, one on either side of my feet, and looks up at me.

“Take off your shorts and panties.”

He can’t be serious.

As I look on, Salvatore grips my ankles and leans forward.

“Now,” he says and bites at the denim covering my pussy.

My hands are shaking slightly as I unbutton my shorts in haste and kick them off, along with my panties. The moment I straighten back up, Salvatore buries his face between my legs. I expected him to start slow. I was wrong. He sucks on my clit with such vigor, I scream and thread my hands in his hair, squeezing at the dark strands as he licks and laps with his tongue. His right hand moves upward along my inner thigh, higher and higher.

“Stitches,” I rasp, then whimper when his tongue licks at my folds again.

“They’re on my left side,” he says as he slides his finger inside me.

My eyes roll back into my head, and my legs shake. Another finger enters me. I gasp and reach to grab the shelf on my right. Salvatore keeps licking at my pussy while his fingers move inside me, stretching my walls, once again,

sending me into a state of total bliss.

“Dear God,” I moan and throw back my head. When I feel the slightest of bites against my clit, I come so suddenly, I almost fall off the damn countertop.

“Your legs are shaking,” Salvatore says and slowly slides out his fingers.

It’s not just my legs. My fucking brain is shaking along with the rest of my body. I let go of the shelf I’ve been clutching and lower myself down to sit on the counter.

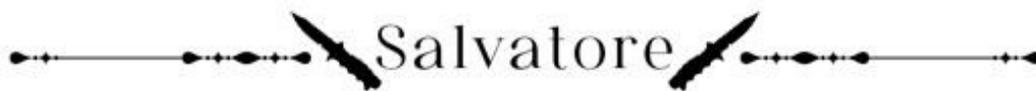
“We could have both ended up on the floor,” I say when I manage to catch my breath. “You’re insane.”

He cocks his head to the side and places his palms on my cheeks, watching me with hooded eyes. “I thought I was ‘dear,’” he says, “and ‘god.’”

I snort in exasperation. “And humble, too.” Then, I shake my head and press my mouth to his, tasting myself on him.

“No, not really.” His hands squeeze a little. “And I would never let you fall, Milene.”

“I know,” I whisper.



Milene is standing in front of the medicine locker on the other side of the room, going through the contents, and making notes on a pad of paper. Probably doing inventory. It takes great willpower to remain seated instead of going to her and bringing her back with me, so she’s by my side.

“You let her button up your shirt,” Ilaria says while changing my bandage.

“I did,” I say.

Ilaria stays silent for a few moments, fumbling with the bandage, but I know she won’t let the subject slide.

“Was it a one-time thing? You didn’t want to distress her even more

yesterday?” she asks, her tone a forced kind of casual.

“No. She’s been doing it for quite some time.”

My mother’s hands go still momentarily while dressing the wound. She looks up, an expression of shock written across her face as our gazes connect. With two unusable fingers and nerve damage to the other three, doing things that require finesse has been a problem of mine for years. A weak spot. Letting someone button up a shirt for me is something I would never have allowed. Especially in front of witnesses. And she knows it.

Ilaria’s eyes travel down, stopping on my left hand, which is gripping the edge of the gurney. She reaches out and brushes the back of my hand with the tips of her fingers.

“I forgot how bad it was,” she says.

I attempt to straighten the fingers but can’t. I went through six rounds of surgery on that hand alone. And still, it wasn’t enough. My nerves are too damaged. I hate it. Just looking at the scars, and remembering what they represent, makes me want to kill someone. I never tolerate weaknesses in others, but especially in myself.

There is a question in Ilaria’s eyes as she waits for me to respond.

“I want to feel her skin when I touch her,” I answer. “And I can’t do that if I’m wearing a glove.”

She watches me for a few moments, then whispers, “Are you in love with her, Salvatore?”

For that question, I don’t have an answer. Yet, I can’t keep my attention away from the other side of the room where Milene is still studying the medical supplies intently. She’s wearing jeans and an awful yellow T-shirt I can’t stand. Her hair is gathered into a bun at the top of her head and secured with two pencils.

“I have no idea, Ilaria,” I say. “You know I’m not good with emotional shit.”

“I do know.”

I’m getting up from the gurney, intending to leave, when Ilaria speaks again.

“What would you do if someone hurt her, Salvatore?”

I turn my head rapidly to face her, pinning her with my stare. She takes a step back, but I know it was unconsciously done. Everyone does it. Except Milene. She usually juts her chin up. Or smirks.

“If even a seed of an idea of hurting my wife formed in anyone’s head, I would smash said head open with my bare hands like it’s a fucking watermelon,” I spit out. “Next, I would take out their sick brain and squeeze it so hard the only thing left would be mush.”

My mother smiles and heads toward the medicine locker, humming to herself.

## Chapter 23



“I’m going to drop by to see Pippa later,” I throw over my shoulder and turn on the coffee machine. “I promised I’d go shopping for a dress with her afterward. They’re throwing a banquet for the hospital staff on Saturday.” There’s no returning to the residency program for me—not after the Family changed my life a couple of months back. And since the attack a month ago, Salvatore’s reasons for not letting me work as a nurse in a public hospital are more understandable.

“Do you miss it? The work,” Salvatore asks from his spot at the dining table.

“You know I do.” I shrug.

“Nino is still trying to locate where the Irish are hiding so we can wipe them out. When I’m done with Fitzgerald, we’ll figure something out.”

The cup I’m holding almost slips from my fingers. I turn around and stare at him. “What do you mean?”

“If it means that much to you, we can try to find a hospital nearby that might allow bodyguards,” he says while watching me with a grim-looking face. “Or you can take over the infirmary downstairs.”

I squeeze my lips together, then smile. “Thank you.”

Salvatore nods. “About that shopping spree. How long?”

“Three hours. Maybe four.”

He glares at me for a few moments, lips pressed into a thin line, then nods. I take my cup of coffee to the table, sit myself down on Salvatore’s right thigh, and reach for the basket of breakfast pastries. His right arm comes to rest around my waist, and he continues eating.

Sitting on Salvatore’s lap during meals was a little strange in the beginning, but I’ve gotten used to it. It started a month ago, right after the

skirmish with the Irish. At first, he would insist I sit on his lap when we were having breakfast. Then it was dinner, as well. Now, it's every meal. When I asked him why, he said that he still hadn't forgotten that I told him I was going to leave if he got shot again, and this was my punishment. It doesn't seem like a punishment. In fact, I quite enjoy being so close to him in this way. His explanation was transparent bullshit, of course. Salvatore has problems recognizing his own feelings, so it's no wonder he has equal difficulty in expressing them.

"You'll call me every hour," he says and squeezes my waist.

"You know I will." I place a kiss at the corner of his tightly pressed lips.

"Don't forget, Milene."

I sigh, take his face between my palms, and tilt his head. "How about we make it thirty minutes? Would that make it easier for you?"

He just watches me in that unusual way of his, as though he wants to absorb me into himself through his eyes.

"Thirty minutes it is, then." I smile and kiss him. "You need to start talking about these things, Tore. I can't always guess when something's bothering you."

"You've been doing well so far."

There is a sound of something crashing to the floor, followed by angry mewling as Riggs runs out of the kitchen and dashes across the living space. A second later, Kurt lunges after Riggs at breakneck speed, but he loses traction on the polished floor and ends up sliding across the hallway on his side, hitting the wall at the end with his butt.

"That cat needs a brain transplant," Salvatore deadpans, and I burst out laughing.

"If that was your attempt at making a joke, you need to work on your delivery."

"You're laughing, aren't you?"

"Yeah,"—I snort—"but only because you're mine, and I don't want to discourage you."

He arches an eyebrow.

“You can’t deliver a joke with the same intonation you use for death threats, Salvatore.” I place one more kiss on his mouth, grab another pastry from the basket, and stand up. “I’ll call you. Promise.”

\* \* \*

“I really don’t see how this is necessary,” Pippa grumbles as we reach the perfume store. “It was fun the first few times, but now it feels weird.”

I glance over my shoulder. Alessandro’s walking a few paces behind us, looking dangerous in a dark suit, his earpiece visible. I wonder where he finds suits in his size. The guy is at least six and a half feet tall and has the muscle mass of a medium-sized mountain. Vincenzo is standing near the cash register at the opposite corner of the store with his hands clasped behind his back. Two more bodyguards are by the entrance, one out front, and the other inside.

“Ignore them.” I shrug.

“I need to go to the restroom,” Pippa says. “I’ll catch up with you.”

“Again? Your bladder’s the size of a peanut.”

“I’m on a detox program. Liquid food for the next seven days. It sucks.” She dashes to the exit.

I walk toward the men’s section and pass a shelf with the sign “New Arrivals” near the middle of the store. I reach for a bottle of cologne to take a sniff. Nope, too strong. Salvatore wouldn’t like it. I’m putting the bottle back when the sound of a gunshot pierces the air.

The bottle slips from my hands, crashing to the floor, as I stare at the bodyguard who was positioned outside the entrance. He’s spread-eagled on the ground, blood pooling all around him. A huge male body materializes in front of me at the same moment another shot rings out. Rooted to my spot, I stare at Alessandro’s back, which is obstructing my view of the entrance, and try hard to get enough air into my lungs. It doesn’t work. All I can manage are quick, sharp breaths. I can’t see anything, but based on the proximity of the bangs, I know it’s Alessandro’s gun firing. Once, twice . . . seven times. The sound mixes with the noise of other shots, and it seems as though gunfire is raging all around us. People are screaming. My heartbeat skyrockets and I

frantically look around for Pippa. Where is she?

“Vincenzo,” Alessandro says. “The door. Cover us.”

Vincenzo leaves his spot behind the shelf to our left, runs toward the entrance, and continues returning fire.

“Take off your shoes,” Alessandro’s deep voice says as he changes the magazine in his gun and resumes shooting.

The moment I have my heels off, his fingers wrap around my wrist and move my hand to the waistband of his pants at his back.

“Hold on. Walk behind me,” he commands in an even voice. “We’re leaving.”

The sleeve of his jacket has ridden up, revealing a leather bracelet around his wrist. At the knot where the leather string is tied, there’s a small silver pendant in the shape of a teddy bear with a pink bow atop its head.

“Milene.”

I firmly grab his belt, and his hand vanishes from view.

Alessandro walks toward the exit. One step. I follow, holding on for dear life and staying as close to him as possible. Several more gunshots. I wince with each boom. Another step. One more round of firing. He changes the magazine again. Two more steps. We stop at the door, and my eyes fall to the prone body on the ground to my right. The bodyguard’s eyes are open but glazed over. I realize for the first time how young he looks. There’s a hole in the side of his neck which is oozing blood, and a few more on his chest. I press my lips together, trying to keep the tears from falling.

“Vincenzo.” Alessandro’s voice. “Behind Milene. Cover our backs.”

We step out of the store, Alessandro first, with me following. Vincenzo comes out after us, his back pressed to mine, holding his gun at the ready.

A shot rings out, shattering the store’s window to our left. Another one follows. Alessandro keeps walking down the aisle, firing off bullets ahead of us. His left sleeve is wet. When I lower my gaze, I see blood dripping down his hand and onto the white tiled floor. Bodies lay scattered around us. There must be at least twenty. My eyes flit over each one, afraid I’ll find Pippa among them. It’s only men, however, and some of them still have their weapons in hand. Police sirens blare from the street outside, but they seem

distant and somehow otherworldly.

“That’s all of them,” Alessandro declares as if he’s discussing the weather. “Let’s go to the car.”

Suddenly, Vincenzo’s arm wraps around my waist, and he tugs me toward him. I gasp as my hand slips from Alessandro’s belt. He spins around as Vincenzo lifts his gun and sends five bullets into the big man’s chest. I scream as Alessandro drops to the floor.

“Move.” Vincenzo painfully grips my upper arm and drags me backward to an emergency exit, my eyes glued to Alessandro’s unmoving form.

\* \* \*

“You piece of shit!” I yell as Vincenzo keeps on dragging me. We’re in the underground parking lot and heading for a black van parked at the far side of the dimly lit garage.

“Shut the fuck up, or I’m going to silence you with my fist.” He squeezes my arm harder and jerks me along.

The van’s side door slides open to reveal two men.

“Where are the others?” the huge bald guy next to the door asks.

“Gone,” Vincenzo says, grabs me by the hair, and pushes me inside.

“What do you mean, gone? We had twenty-five people!”

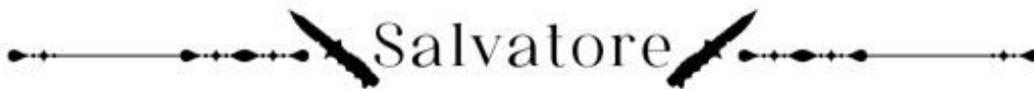
“Zanetti killed them all.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you kill the bastard?”

“I had to at the end,” Vincenzo snaps. “I was paid to get the woman out. Not to help a bunch of idiots who are incapable of taking out one man.”

“Fucking coward,” the bald guy spits out, raises a gun, and shoots Vincenzo in the face.

The sliding door closes with a firm click as the engine comes to life.



# Salvatore

The phone on my desk rings while I'm in a meeting with Cosimo. The moment I see Alessandro's name, a feeling of dread forms in the pit of my stomach. He could be calling me to approve a change of route because Milene decided to go somewhere else after the mall, but I somehow know that's not it.

"What happened?" I bark into the phone.

"The Irish attacked us while we were at the mall," Alessandro says. His breathing is labored, wheezing. "I managed to neutralize them, but before we reached the car, Vincenzo grabbed your wife and pumped half a magazine into me."

I squeeze the cell in my hand. "Where did he take her?"

"I don't know." Alessandro coughs. "I was wearing a bulletproof vest, but I passed out from the impact. They're gone."

"Get out of there and call someone to pick you up." I cut the line and look at Cosimo. "Leave. Send Nino here. Right now."

I open the GPS tracking software on my laptop and stare at the red dot that shows Milene's location. The signal is moving along the highway. They're taking her out of the city.

\* \* \*

"They won't touch her, Boss," Nino says. "It's you they want."

"I know," I say and continue staring at the red dot flashing on the screen. I haven't taken my eyes off it since the moment I opened the tracking app, as if it will disappear if I so much as blink. Something dark and hungry for destruction awakened inside my chest when Alessandro called. An abyss of darkness grows with every passing second, yearning for slaughter. A black hole ready to swallow the entire universe. They dared to take my Milene. Oh, how they will pay.

The pulsing dot stops. My heart skips a beat. A minute later, the phone on my desk rings. I grab the phone and take the call.

“Ajello,” the voice on the other side says. “I heard you lost something.”

“Where is my wife, Patrick?”

He laughs. “Oh, wouldn’t you love to know?”

“Where. Is. She?”

“Get into your car and drive south. Someone will call you with further instructions. When you reach the destination, we’ll make a trade. You for her,” he says. “If you are not alone, I’ll tell my men to snap her neck.”

The call disconnects.

“Take thirty men,” I say to Nino. “They’re holding Milene somewhere west of the city, probably in the industrial zone. You can get the exact coordinates off this. Take it with you.” I nod toward the laptop.

“I can have them ready to go with you in ten minutes.”

“They won’t be coming with me. You’ll take the men directly to wherever Milene is and find cover close by. I’ll call you when I get there. Patrick will probably lead me around in circles for a while to make sure no one’s following, so you’ll be there before I arrive.” I pin him with my stare. “Don’t even think about sending anyone after me,” I whisper.

“But, Boss . . .”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I snarl and strike the desk in front of me with my palm. “I will kill anyone who follows me, and I will end you too for disobeying orders! Do you understand?”

Nino grinds his teeth. “It’s a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap.” I put the phone in my pocket and take the car keys off the desk. “When I get there, wait twenty minutes, and then you and the men can go in with guns blazing. Not a second sooner, Nino.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“They won’t. Not right away, at least. I want them focused on me, not on Milene, while you storm the place.” I get up and walk around the desk until I’m right in front Nino. “Whatever you find when you go in, you will get Milene out first. Only when she’s safe are you are allowed to come back for

me. Nod if you understand.”

He stares at me with wide eyes.

“Fucking nod!” I yell into his face.

Nino closes his eyes and nods.

“Good.” I turn and leave the office.

## Chapter 24



The van door slides open to reveal bright daylight. A hand wraps around my upper arm, dragging me outside. I squint at the sun, my eyes having become accustomed to the gloominess of the van. I try to see the place they've brought me to. A big metal hangar that looks like some kind of a warehouse looms a few feet in front of me. It could be anywhere. I don't manage to see more because one of the men, the bald hulk, ushers me toward the building. Stones and other debris press sharply into the skin of my bare soles.

What will they do to me? If they planned on killing me, they would have done it already. I cast a glance down at my tied hands and the gold band around my left wrist. Salvatore's OCD is going to save my life. He'll send someone to get me out. I just need to stay alive until they get here.

The inside of the warehouse is nearly empty, with only a few random pieces of furniture scattered around. In the far-right corner, there are a few mismatched chairs next to a long Formica coffee table. Eight men are sitting around it, drinking and laughing. I quickly drop my head to keep my eyes fixed on the hard ground between my feet. The guy holding me drags me toward the wall on the left and pushes me to the ground. With my hands tied, I don't manage to soften the fall, and land hard on my shoulder, my nose against the damp and dirty floor.

"Don't fucking move," the bald guy barks and crosses his arms in front of his chest, looking in the direction of the wide sliding doors they've left open.

Looks like we're waiting for someone. Probably the head of the Irish clan. I wiggle into a sitting position and lean my back against the wall, turning so I can see the entrance.

\* \* \*

It must have been two or three hours since I've been brought into the warehouse. I can't be sure since I don't have a watch. I've spent most of that time on the cold floor, looking around, searching for a way out. Nothing has come of it. The bald guy keeping guard over me hasn't said a word.

When I wasn't looking for an opportunity to escape, I thought about the three men who died for me today. I didn't know the two bodyguards who remained at the store's door very well. I can't even remember their names, and it's eating me up inside. How can I not remember their names? I think about Alessandro. He might have been a big sullen grouch, but he saved my life today, probably several times, only to end up dead because of it. I wish the bald guy hadn't shot Vincenzo. That fucking traitor deserved a much more painful death.

What do they plan to do with me? Are they going to ask for a ransom? Why haven't they done something already? Other than maybe a few missing strands of hair, some cuts to my feet, and bruises on my arms from being manhandled, I'm pretty well intact, at least on the outside. At one point, I thought I might be gang-raped over a rusty oil can, but aside from the dirty jokes I've heard from the men around the table, I've been largely ignored. Obviously, I'm a pawn in a much larger game. Is that a good thing? Will they get more money from Salvatore if I'm unharmed?

A phone in the bald guy's pocket rings. He takes it out, listening to the person on the other end for a while. Then, he looks over at the men who are gathered around the coffee table, watching some videos on someone's phone and laughing.

"He's here," the bald hulk barks. The men jump off their chairs and rush to pick up their weapons resting against a wall nearby.

A large silver car pulls through the open doors. One of the men runs over and shuts the warehouse door behind the vehicle while the other seven stand in front of the car, their guns pointed toward it. The driver-side door opens and Salvatore steps out. I fumble my way up from my spot on the floor, intending to run to him, but the bald guy wraps his meaty hand around my upper arm, holding me firmly in place.

Salvatore closes the car door and looks around, paying no heed to the men pointing their guns directly at him. It's as though he's entered a 7-Eleven to buy a fucking carton of milk. I hold my breath, waiting for his men to barge

in. Nothing happens. What the fuck? Why is there no one with him?

His gaze reaches me and stops. His eyes move down my body. I can only imagine what he must be thinking as he sees my tangled hair and the scratches on my left cheek that I obtained when the bald Irishman pushed me roughly to the ground. His eyes roam over my stained powder blue dress and finally down to my bare feet. The men around yell at Salvatore to raise his hands, but he ignores them. His gaze travels back up my body until it reaches my eyes, where it remains fixed. Three of the Irishmen circle behind him, their guns trained on Salvatore's back. They're still shouting.

Two of the men grab Salvatore's biceps and drag him to the chair at the center of the huge space. And he lets them. What the hell is going on? Where the fuck is his backup? They have the GPS coordinates from my bracelet, so why has Salvatore come alone, damn it? I watch in horror as they push him down onto the chair, and a short stocky man proceeds to tie Salvatore's hands behind his back.

Salvatore doesn't try to resist and says nothing. He just sits in the chair and stares directly at me.

\* \* \*

The stocky guy pulls his fist back again and punches Salvatore in the stomach once more. I stifle a whimper and close my eyes for an instant as his fist makes contact.

"I think we should keep him alive for at least a few days," one of the men standing by the wall says and laughs. "Until everyone gets their turn."

When the stocky guy swings his fist again, I pull on my arm in an effort to get away, but the bald Irishman holding me tightens his grip. He'd moved me so I was standing in Salvatore's line of sight. The only thing I can do is watch as another blow hits home.

Since the moment Salvatore entered ten minutes earlier, the Irish have focused all their attention on him, leaving me on the sidelines with the heavy-set bald man. I was bait, used to get Salvatore here.

He hasn't uttered a word since he arrived. Not when they dragged him to the chair in the middle of the room and tied him to it, and not while they've

been hitting him. He just sits there in silence and watches me—his piercing eyes never leaving mine.

The stocky guy hits him again, this time on the chin, and Salvatore's head snaps abruptly to the side. I try to blink back tears, but they fall anyway. Some trickle down my cheeks to land on my ruined dress. They're going to kill him, and he knew that the moment he stepped inside the warehouse. Still, he came. Salvatore takes a deep breath, lifts his head and returns his eyes to mine. I sniff and tug at my arm again, trying to lurch forward, but the hand holding me only tightens. I'm powerless against its vice-like grip.

The wide metal doors on the right slide open and a car moves inside, coming to a halt close to the chair where Salvatore is bound. The driver gets out and opens one of the back doors. A man in a navy suit emerges. He throws a look in my direction, then shifts his gaze to Salvatore as a wicked smile spreads across his lips.

"You know," he says as he walks toward Salvatore. "If anyone had told me a woman would be your downfall, I'd have laughed them out of the room. I wonder what's so special about her."

Salvatore's eyes leave mine and focus on the man in the suit. "Patrick," he says in an even voice. "How nice of you to join us. I expected you to hunker down in your hole and let the others do your job for you, as is your usual style."

What the fuck is he doing? Why is he provoking the Irish leader?

"Always so composed." Patrick shakes his head and looks at me over his shoulder. "Will you maintain composure when I start playing with your wife? She is a pretty thing, I'll give you that."

"I had an interesting chat with one of your men," Salvatore continues. "I wasn't aware you had a gambling problem, Patrick. Do your people know you're spending the organization's money like water?"

Patrick's head turns rapidly back to Salvatore, and he backhands him. "Shut the fuck up!"

Salvatore spits blood on the floor, then looks up. "Two million is a lot of money to lose, Patrick."

I gulp, and tears stream from my eyes as I realize what he's doing. Damn you, Salvatore. He is trying to make Patrick focus on him instead of me.

“I planned on toying with you for a while before killing you,” Patrick says. “But perhaps I’ve changed my mind.”

As he reaches inside his jacket, the sound of gunfire erupts outside. The sliding doors open, and men with guns rush inside, shooting with accuracy at the Irish. I recognize Carmelo and Aldo among them. The windows on the other side of the warehouse shatter under the gunfire, and the Irish mob suddenly slides into disarray, running this way and that, seemingly unprepared for any such intrusion. My captor vanishes from view, his bald head moving toward the open doors, gun in hand. I turn to Salvatore, who’s still tied to the chair, directly in the crossfire, and run toward him.

“What are you doing! Get down!” he shouts as I reach him. I ignore his yelling and go around to the back of the chair. My hands are tied at the front, so I should be able to release him, but when I reach for his wrists, cold panic rises inside me. They didn’t use rope the way they did with me. Both of Salvatore’s hands are handcuffed to the back of the chair. A metal chair. Bolted to the floor.

“Milene! Get the fuck down!”

From all around us comes the sound of shouting and gunfire, but it appears most of the gunfire is taking place around the doors. I take a deep breath, move around to face Salvatore, and hook my tied hands around his neck. I climb onto his lap, straddling him, my back toward the doors and the shots being fired around us.

“Milene! What the fuck?! Get down!” he snarls, shaking his body, trying to throw me off, but I plaster my chest to him and squeeze my arms around his head, pressing it to my chest.

“Damn it, Milene, I’m going to fucking kill you! Get off me and lie on the floor!” he yells at the top of his lungs. “Right now!”

“You’re a damn magnet for bullets, Salvatore.” I kiss his hair and tighten my grip. “And I’m pretty sure you’ve already used up your nine lives, so you’re not getting shot again today.”

His chest rises and falls. Several bullets whizz somewhere close to my head and hit the table further back in the room, sending it toppling to the concrete floor. Salvatore’s body starts to shake in my embrace.

“Vita mia,” he whispers. “Please. Get down.”

Another bullet ricochets off the floor to our right, and I press myself more tightly to him. His body is shaking as though he has a fever. “I love you, Tore,” I say into his ear.

“Milene.” His eyes are red. “I’m going to bite you. With all my strength.” The gunfire still rages, but I hear now how his voice trembles. “It’s going to hurt, Milene. Very much. Get. Off. Me.”

I smile. “Be my guest. I’m not moving.”

Bullets hit something over our heads and part of the metal construction comes crashing down behind us, sending dust and shards of debris into the air. Salvatore’s breathing becomes erratic, his chest rising and falling at a maddening speed. As I watch, a tear rolls down his cheek.

“Please,” he whispers.

“No,” I say, and squeeze my arms around him, tucking his head into the crook of my neck. He thrashes around again, and I barely manage to keep myself from falling off his lap.

More yelling and gunshots reach my ears, the sounds lasting a couple of seconds more before the action quiets. Soon after, only voices and rapid footfalls can be heard. Nino jumps down to the warehouse floor through a large broken window at the back and runs toward us, with Pasquale and another man following. As I watch them over Salvatore’s head, Nino and Pasquale stop abruptly and raise their guns in our direction. My eyes widen because, for an instant, I think they might actually shoot at us. Before they’re able to pull the triggers, a gunshot explodes somewhere behind me, and pain erupts in my arm.

I stifle a scream and almost faint on the spot as I stare at the big red hole in my arm oozing blood. It’s different to see a wound on my own body, and no amount of experience could have prepared me for it.

“Nino!” Salvatore yells, staring at my arm and the blood pouring from the wound. He’s breathing hard, and when he looks up at me, there’s a crazed look in his eyes.

Nino comes running, presses a bundle of material that looks like someone’s shirt onto my arm, and I scream.

“To a hospital,” Salvatore barks. “Now, Nino!”

“What about you, Boss?” Nino asks as he gathers me up in his arms.

“If you don’t get my wife to a hospital in under five minutes, Nino, I will fucking end you! Carmelo, go with them and take Pasquale. Fucking now!” he shouts.

Nino nods and carries me out, running toward an SUV parked outside.



It takes forty minutes for Stefano to find the keys to the handcuffs and release me. Forty fucking minutes of me sitting there while Milene loses blood. Shot. Because of me.

A sound of a phone ringing comes from my left.

“It’s Nino,” Stefano says and passes me his phone.

My hand is shaking as I take the device and stare at the screen. It’s an arm wound. It shouldn’t be serious unless the bullet hit an artery. The shaking of my hand intensifies, and I manage to hit the answer button only on the third try. I position the phone next to my ear and close my eyes.

“Nino?”

“She’s going to be okay.”

I grab the back of the chair and exhale. “How bad?”

“Some muscle damage that should heal fine.”

“She’s expected to have a full recovery? No consequences?”

“They’ll release her tomorrow. Your wife is okay, Boss.”

I cut the call, then turn to look at the bodies of the Irish men strewn all around. Most of them are dead, but there are others still alive, whimpering or panting. Turning my head to the side, I fix my gaze on the man Aldo is holding pressed onto the hood of a car. Fucking Patrick Fitzgerald! He was hiding in his car while the gunfire was raging, and then tried to shoot me when everyone lowered their guard. Only, the bullet hit my wife.

“A knife,” I say without taking my eyes off the Irish mob leader with only

a few hundred heartbeats remaining in his pathetic life.

Someone presses the handle of a knife onto my outstretched hand. I take a step forward, bend, and grab the first groaning Irishman I see by his hair. Fitzgerald is staring at me, eyes wide, and I keep my gaze on him as I press the knife to the side of the man's neck and draw the blade across his throat. Warm blood flows over my hand. The warehouse, which was brimming with shouts and noise, goes silent.

I let the body fall at my feet, step over it, and walk toward the next man. This one is passed out, but he's still breathing. I grab him by the hair, too, and press the blade to his Adam's apple.

A strangled sound leaves Patrick's lips as he tracks my hand with his eyes and watches the blood spray over my arm and shirtfront. When I let the body fall and take another step toward him, Patrick looks up. I take a further step and proceed with creating a path of dead Irishmen, not taking my eyes off his. The terror on his face is delicious. He knows I'm saving the best for last. I smile and take another step. Oh, how I will enjoy filleting the man who hurt the only thing in this world I love.

\* \* \*

I enter the small private hospital that treats my men when Ilaria can't care for them in the infirmary, and turn toward the hallway on the left. Two nurses at the main desk stand up abruptly, but when I don't acknowledge them, they sit back down. There's a piercing pain in my left side. Patrick's goon probably broke one of my ribs, but I ignore it and keep walking, with Stefano following a few paces behind.

I don't remember ever being as scared as I was when I saw blood pouring from Milene's arm. It was as if someone had lodged a knife in my stomach and dragged it upward, opening my chest.

People who see me pass step aside, staring at the blood still covering my arms and hands. It's a good thing I wore a black shirt for the occasion. It means they can't see the blood soaked into that, as well.

The doctor who usually treats my men looks up from the chart in his hand and rushes toward me. "Mr. Ajello! What—"

“Back off,” I snap, turn around the corner, and rush down the long hallway toward the door at the end, where Carmelo and Nino stand guard.

“Open the door,” I say.

“Boss. You may want to wash the blood off first.” Nino nods toward my hands. “She may freak out if she sees you like that.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “Find me a shirt.”

It takes me five minutes to scrub my hands and arms. The black T-shirt Nino brought for me hides the stains on my chest, which I didn’t bother cleaning. When I throw open the door to Milene’s room, I’m in a semi-presentable state. Outwardly, at least.

“Tore!” Milene sits up in bed and swings her legs over the side.

I grab the metal cart standing at the foot of the bed and squeeze the edge with all my strength.

“Don’t you dare get down from that bed,” I whisper, eyes focused on the bandage around her upper arm and the IV stand next to the bed. She could have died. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. It doesn’t work.

I grip the frame of the cart harder. There’s a shitload of something inexplicable building up inside me, and it feels as though I’m going to explode like a fucking supernova.

“How could you do it?” I ask quietly, then switch to yelling. “How the fuck could you do that! I wanted to die on that chair, knowing you were in the direct line of fire, waiting for a bullet to hit you! Because of me!” I squeeze the cart and launch the thing at the wall behind me. “You. Cannot. Do. That!”

“Tore—”

“No!” I snarl. “Never! Never, Milene! I can’t . . . I can’t bear even the thought of what could have happened! How the fuck do you expect me to deal with this? You, getting hurt, for me? You will never do that again!” I bury my hands in my hair and pull. “Fuck!”

Milene cocks her head and watches me. Apparently coming to some mysterious conclusion, she slides down off the bed and takes the IV pole in her hand. With it at her side, she comes to stand next to me.

I take a deep breath, then exhale and grab her by the back of her neck.  
“Never, *vita mia*,” I whisper.

“Did you have a doctor check you out?” she asks.

“No.”

Her right eyebrow lifts in one perfect arch. “Why?”

“I was busy.”

“Busy with what?”

Killing the Irish and freaking out. Not that I plan on telling her that.  
“Doesn’t matter.”

She sighs. “You look awful, baby.”

“I know.”

She places her palm on my cheek and pulls me down for a kiss. “Let’s find someone to have a look at your lip. And your eye. Your face is a mess.”

“The fuck with my face.”

“Can I have a hug?”

“No.”

Milene blinks in confusion. “Why the hell not?”

“I’m afraid I’m going to hurt your arm.” My gaze moves down to the bandage, then I quickly avert my eyes and place a kiss on her forehead. “I can’t bear to even look at it.”

“Tore . . .”

“I was so scared, Milene,” I whisper again, tracing the line of her eyebrow with the tip of my finger. “I don’t think I’ve ever experienced anything like that before. It’s like I jumped off a cliff and watched the earth rise up to meet me, just waiting for the impact.” My finger travels down until it stops on her bottom lip. “I’ll get a fucking aneurysm because of you.”

Milene leans against me, wraps her hand round my neck and tilts her head up. “A kiss. Then a hug.”

I narrow my eyes and grab her face between my palms and press my lips hard against hers. The pressure in my chest builds, my heart beating so fast it feels like it might burst out. I press her harder to my body, careful not to hurt

her arm.

“You don’t understand, Milene,” I say into her mouth.

“Of course I do.” She smiles and looks right into my eyes. “I love you, too, Tore.”

## Chapter 25

*Six weeks later*



A door clicks open and then bangs closed.

“Milene!”

I let go of the curtain I was in the process of hanging and turn to see Salvatore marching across the living room toward me.

“Standing on a coffee table? Really?” He grabs me around the waist and lowers me onto the floor. “You could have broken your neck! That thing is two hundred years old. It could have collapsed underneath you.”

I roll my eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I’m serious. I’m going to go completely gray in a year because of you.”

“Oh, don’t you dare blame me for your gray hairs.” I press my hands to his hair, combing my fingers through it, and savoring the moment. “You came to me like this. Very dashing, I must admit.”

“You know very well you’re responsible for half the grays.” He squeezes me around the waist and nods toward the half-hung curtain. “New ones again?”

I cringe. “Yup. I hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“I hate those cats.”

“I saw you scratching Kurt behind his ear this morning.” I rise up on my toes and kiss him. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. If you find a way to convince me to keep my mouth shut, that is.”

“All right.” He scoops me up and carries me to the bedroom, where he throws me on the bed and sits down to remove his prosthesis.

“You know, I was thinking,” I say as I place my chin on his shoulder and

wrap my arms around him from behind, unbuttoning his shirt. “How would you feel about getting a dog?”

Salvatore’s body goes so utterly still that I pause in my task and arch my neck to find him staring at the wall.

“If you bring another animal in here, I’ll kill someone, Milene.”

“Please?” I take his chin between my fingers and turn his head toward mine. “It can be some small breed and—Why are you keeping your eyes closed?”

“No reason.”

“Salvatore Ajello, open your eyes. Right now.”

He sighs. Opens his eyes.

“Pretty please?” I ask and smile widely.

His gaze travels to my mouth, then he reaches with his hand to trace the line of my lips with the tip of his finger.

“I want a psychological evaluation from a licensed animal psychologist, on paper, before it sets its paw in here.”

I squeal in delight and kiss the tip of his finger.

“You’re doing it on purpose,” he says, without taking his eyes off my lips.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You know very well what your smile does to me, and you’re using it shamelessly.” His finger stills at the middle of my bottom lip. “I wonder if you are aware of what a weapon you are wielding.”

“It’s just a smile. Not a weapon.”

“And a gun is just a piece of metal. It can still take a life in a second, if used properly.” He takes my chin between his fingers and leans in, pressing his lips to the corner of my mouth. “You should be very careful with that smile, *vita mia*. People may end up dead because of it.”

“Smiles don’t kill, Salvatore.”

“Yours does. Try giving one of the smiles that belong to me to someone else and watch the river of blood ensue.”

“Such a poet, my husband.” I smile against his lips. “Maybe I should stop

smiling, then. I don't want to risk killing someone by accident."

The hand holding my chin tightens. "You will never stop smiling, Milene," he says. "If anything, or anyone, ever makes your smile falter, even a fraction, I'll destroy them."

"So vicious." I smirk and drop down onto the bed, pulling him with me. "Would you mind destroying my pussy instead?"

The corners of Salvatore's lips curl upward. It's not exactly a smile, but it's close. His hands travel down my body pulling down my shorts and panties.

"I would like that very much."

The moment our clothes are off, he lies on top of me, and buries himself inside me. I gasp from the sudden intrusion but recover and wind my legs around his waist, opening myself even more. Salvatore doesn't move but watches my face as my pussy pulsates with need. I lift my pelvis slightly, wriggling my hips, trying to coax him to move, but he remains motionless, with his huge cock lodged inside me, stretching me in ecstasy.

His hand slides between our bodies, down my chest, then along my stomach until he reaches my pussy. A shudder passes through me when he moves his finger between my folds and presses it against my touch-hungry clit. I pass my fingers through his thick hair and bite at the side of his chin. The pressure between my legs builds as he keeps teasing me with his finger, and I want to scream from the need to have him move inside me. Still, the devil stays stone-still.

"Salvatore!" I snap, then whimper when he pinches my clit.

"Yes, Milene?" He bites my lip.

"Stop torturing me."

"All right." He removes his hand, and I scream in frustration.

"You are a dead man," I say through my teeth.

"Make up your mind, cara." He bends his head to lick my neck, then slides his cock inside me. "Is this what you want?"

I squeeze my legs around his waist and tighten my hold on the hair at the back of his neck, then tilt my head to the side and bury my teeth into his biceps. "Yes."

I feel him swell inside me. Threading his fingers in my hair, he slides out only to slam back inside with such force he pushes me all the way up the bed, and my head almost hits the headboard. It probably would have, if he hadn't had a protective hand ready in place.

"Always planning in advance," I breathe, then moan when he slams into me again.

"Of course." Another thrust. "Did you think I would ever let you get hurt?"

I open my mouth to say no, but his next forward motion forces his cock so deep inside I choke on my own breath. My walls spasm, and I move my hand to place it at his throat, using a little pressure. Fingers in my hair curl into a fist. Salvatore's hand moves down my thigh, pulls my leg up and to the side, and he thrusts deeper into me. His lips trail kisses along my jaw toward my mouth until they finally reach mine. I take his lower lip between my teeth and bite. The pounding intensifies. I put a bit more pressure into my bite until I taste the metallic tang of blood. Salvatore goes into a frenzy.

The bed screeches under me, headboard banging against the wall in time with his pounding. It's like we're in the middle of a damn earthquake, and I'm being ruthlessly—bang—beautifully—bang—destroyed.

I scream as I come, white stars exploding behind my eyelids as Salvatore keeps on driving into me. His enormous cock assaults my pussy until he finds his own release, and the heat of him pours inside me. He thrusts one last time. The sound of breaking wood fills the room.

\* \* \*

I lift my head from Salvatore's chest and trace the line of his eyebrow with my pinkie, then let it travel down and along his chin. "I can't believe you broke the fucking bed."

"It was old," he says and turns his head to the side to plant a kiss against the tips of my fingers.

There's a long horizontal crack along the entire length of the headboard. With the decorative curlicues along its sides, it certainly does appear ancient. "How old, exactly?"

“A hundred years, or something like that.”

I gape at him. “You destroyed a fucking antique. Barbarian.”

“You curse too much, Milene.”

“No shit?” I laugh. “We’re getting a new bed from Target.”

“We are not buying a bed at Target.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Snobbish much?”

“I am,” he says and takes my chin between his fingers. “But you love me anyway.”

It’s a statement. Delivered in his even tone, the one he uses when ordering people around. However, there is a question in those light brown eyes that watch me so intently.

“But I love you anyway, Tore.” I smile.

His gaze moves to my lips and stays there. “I love you, too.”

My breath catches. His eyes move back to mine as his other hand comes to stroke my ear. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it’s not easy. Being loved by me.”

I bite my bottom lip and take a deep breath. “You’re wrong.” I know he loves me, but it’s different when he says it. That he’s reached the point where he can utter those three little words means more than the sentiment itself. “Being loved by you, is the best fucking feeling in the world.”

His lips press against mine. “Are you sore?” he whispers.

“Oh, you are *not* getting your barbarian cock anywhere near my pussy within the next twenty-four hours, at least, Salvatore.”

“What about my mouth?”

I smirk and kiss him again. “That might be a possibility.”

He rolls us until he’s on top of me again, and my eyes follow him as he moves down my body, trailing light, airy kisses along the way. When he reaches my pussy, he brushes it with the tip of his finger, then replaces that with his lips through a kiss.

Salvatore’s phone rings on the nightstand. I grab the bedsheet with my hands and moan as he sucks on my clit and slides a finger inside me. The

phone keeps on ringing.

“Tore.”

“What?” he mumbles into my pussy, then resumes the pressure of his lips and tongue, his five-o’clock shadow scratching against me and turning me on even more.

“Do you want to take that? It might be important if they’re calling at eleven at night.”

“Look at the caller,” he says and squeezes my clit lightly between his lips, making me shudder.

I reach over and feel around the nightstand for the phone, grab it, and look at the screen.

“It’s Arturo.”

“Take the call and put him on speakerphone.”

I lift my head from the pillow and narrow my eyes at him, then bury my fingers into his hair and tug on it until he returns my stare. “You are not taking business calls with your face buried between my legs, Salvatore.”

“Put him on speakerphone, Milene.” He slides another finger inside me as he resumes licking my pussy.

“Unbelievable,” I mumble and hit the speakerphone button to take the call.

“Boss,” Arturo’s voice fills the room. “We have a problem.”

“Be quick,” Salvatore says between the motions of his tongue.

“Rocco killed another one of his men assigned as his wife’s bodyguard. He said the guy was flirting with her.”

“He said the same for the previous one.” Another lick. “And the one before.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what to do.”

Placing his hand on my thigh, Salvatore opens my legs wider and blows a hot breath against my wetness. I stifle a moan as my body shakes.

“Tell Alessandro I want him in my office tomorrow at nine.” Salvatore barks, removing his fingers from inside me, and moving his body upward so he can enter me with his cock. I grab his firm ass with both hands as he

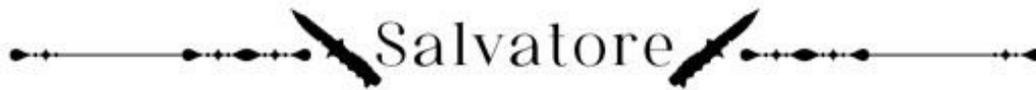
pushes himself in, enjoying every inch of him, as I always do.

“What about Rocco?” Arturo’s voice continues from the phone. “I can try reasoning with him, but maybe it would be for the best if—”

I groan, grab the phone, and launch it toward the other side of the room where it shatters against the wall.

Salvatore stops in midthrust. “I liked that phone.”

“No more multitasking,” I breathe, then push my tongue into his waiting mouth.



I watch Alessandro as he enters my office and comes to stand on the other side of my desk, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Are you gay?” I ask.

He blinks at me. I think this is the first time I’ve seen Alessandro Zanetti look confused.

“No.”

I lean back in my chair. “You’re being transferred to one of my capos. You’ll work as a bodyguard to his wife. While you’re there, if anyone asks, you *are* gay.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s pathologically jealous, and he’s already killed the previous three men assigned to that position. He thinks you’re gay anyway, so I hope it’ll make things easier.”

“All right.” He nods. “Which capo?”

The phone on my desk vibrates.

“Rocco Pisano,” I say and read Nino’s name on the screen. “You can go. Arturo will give you the details.”

“Yes, Boss.”

As Alessandro turns to leave, I catch a glimpse of the expression on his face. He's smiling.

"Yes," I say into the phone.

"Boss. Arturo's sister is missing." Nino's grave voice says from the other end.

"Which one?"

"Asya. She and Sienna snuck out and went to a bar last night. Sienna returned home around midnight. Asya never came back."

"Phone?"

"Found in the bushes some distance from the bar, along with her purse," he says, "I'm here with Arturo. There is no sign of his sister, but . . ."

"But?"

"One of the guys found blood in the snow, Boss. Her glasses were next to it."

Shit. "Send me the address. I'm coming."

I grab my car keys off the desk and leave the office. As I am walking toward the elevator, I pass by Alessandro who's talking on his phone with someone. His tone is low, but I still manage to catch one sentence.

"Felix," Alessandro says into the phone, "It's Az. I need you to do something for me."

# Epilogue

*Two years later*



I can't believe he did it again.

The elevator pings open. Paying no heed to Salvatore's secretary who is gaping at me from behind her desk, I march across the office foyer toward the big ornate door on the right.

"Mrs. Ajello?"

I stop and throw a look over my shoulder. "Yes, Ginger?"

"Is everything . . . okay?" the secretary asks, her eyes going from my tangled hair, over Salvatore's gray T-shirt which I'm wearing, to my bare feet.

"Of course it is." I grin widely, grab the knob and enter my husband's office.

With hands on my hips and a scowl on my face, I walk around his desk and come to a stop next to him. Salvatore looks up from the laptop, then leans back in his chair.

"Did you sleep well, *vita mia*?"

I narrow my eyes at him and point at the small bundle he's holding on his chest. "Stop stealing my baby."

From the moment we came home from the hospital a month ago, Salvatore has been using every opportunity he can to sneak into the nursery, take Mia and carry her around with him everywhere. His explanation—she likes sleeping in his arms better than in the bed. And if it wasn't enough, he's been the one holding her while she's awake too. All. The. Time.

Salvatore cocks his head and does that thing with his eyes, the one when he pins me with his gaze and slowly blinks. Damn, it still makes me weak in the knees.

“You had her to yourself for nine months, Milene,” he says in that grave tone that makes even the most bizarre statement sound absolutely solid. “It’s my turn now.”

“She was inside my belly, Salvatore. It doesn’t count.”

“In my book, it does.”

I sigh and take his face between my palms. “What’s going on? And don’t tell me ‘nothing,’ because I know you all too well. So, spill it.”

He holds my gaze for a long moment, then closes his eyes. “I’m afraid she won’t love me.”

“What?” I tighten my hold on his cheeks and shake his head slightly. “Of course she’ll love you, baby. You’re her dad.”

Salvatore’s eyes open and even though he doesn’t say anything, I see worry deep inside his amber depths.

“She *will* love you,” I say again and press my lips to his. “She’ll fucking adore you. Like I do.”

“You promise?” he whispers into my mouth.

“I promise.” I reach out and place my hand on our daughter’s head, brushing back the short blond strands. “Just look at her. She already loves you unconditionally.”

He looks down at the baby sleeping on his chest. Mia’s eyes flutter open and a moment later two amber gazes collide.

And then, my husband smiles.



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Thanks so much for reading Milene's and Salvatore's story! I hope you'll consider leaving a review, letting the other readers know what you thought of *Stolen Touches*. Even if it's just one short sentence, it makes a huge difference. Reviews help authors find new readers, and help other readers find new books to love!

The next book in the series is *Fractured Souls*, which follows Pavel and Asya. This is an age gap story. You can preorder it on Amazon ([click here](#)).

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## About The Author

Neva Altaj writes steamy contemporary mafia romance about damaged antiheroes and strong heroines who fall for them. She has a soft spot for crazy jealous, possessive alphas who are willing to burn the world to the ground for their woman. Her stories are full of heat and unexpected turns, and a happily-ever-after is guaranteed every time.

Neva loves to hear from her readers, so feel free to reach out:

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